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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 24 April 2017

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Rough Sleeping

1. **Mr Gavin Shuker** (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of trends in the number of homeless people sleeping rough since 2010. [909759]

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): One person sleeping on the streets is one too many, which is why we committed ourselves to spending more than £550 million to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping in England. That includes supporting 84 projects through our £50 million homelessness prevention programme, an end-to-end approach to tackling homelessness and rough sleeping.

Mr Shuker: Since joining the House in 2010, I have seen with my own eyes the incredible increase in the number of people sleeping rough on our streets. I have seen it in my constituency and in places that I have visited around the country, and, indeed, I see it on the doorsteps of Westminster itself when we arrive and leave for votes. Can the Secretary of State tell me what changed in 2010?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman may know that the number of statutory homelessness acceptances is below its peak—less than half its peak in 2003—but of course there is much more to be done, especially, as he pointed out, when it comes to rough sleeping. I have seen it as well: I have seen it throughout the country, and I have seen it here at Westminster. As he may also know, I said a great deal about this issue at the Crisis 50th anniversary conference. I said, for instance:

“Ending rough sleeping is within our gift. It is something we can do. It is something we must do. And, working together, it is something we are going to do.”

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): Many people fear that the general election may result in a delay in the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Bill. Will the Secretary of State tell us what progress has been made so far? Given that the Bill has cross-party support, can the work not continue during the election period?

Sajid Javid: Let me take this opportunity to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on all the work that he did to present that Bill and to get it through Parliament. It has still to complete one final parliamentary stage—about which we are very confident—but we have already started work with local authorities to ensure that it comes into force straight away.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): In my home borough of Westminster—which includes Westminster station, where, as has been mentioned, we see rough sleepers—the level of rough sleeping has soared. The Westminster council area alone contains a third of all the rough sleepers in London. The council has just cut—indeed slashed—its rough sleeping budget. Does the Secretary of State believe that that will help or hinder efforts to reduce rough sleeping?

Sajid Javid: We are providing more funds for councils throughout the country, including Westminster council, to combat rough sleeping. For example, we have provided £100 million to deliver 2,000 independent living units, as well as a £20 million rough sleeping grant. However, as I said earlier, I want to do more, and the Government are determined to do more. A few weeks ago, I went to Finland to see what it has done for itself with the Housing First project. I think that we can learn lessons from others, and make sure that we do more at home.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): Since 2015 I have led a range of homelessness roundtables in Bath, bringing together charities such as the Genesis Trust, Developing Health & Independence and Julian House, all of which have received Government funding. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the integration of services is critical to solving this problem, and that residents of Bath should back my plan in order to help to solve it?

Sajid Javid: I very much agree with my hon. Friend, and I commend the work that he has done locally, which is very well known, in trying to bring those services together. I am pleased to be able to tell him that Swindon, Wiltshire, Bath and North Somerset councils will benefit from some £259,000 in rough sleeping grant to help promote integration.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): The scale of rough sleeping and homelessness in Britain today shames us all. In a country as decent and well off as ours, it is not inevitable. However, the level has more than doubled since 2010 as a direct result of decisions made by Conservative Ministers.

There are very few simple rules in politics, but this is one: with a Labour Government homelessness falls, and under the Tories it goes up. On 8 June, people will ask themselves, “Do we really want more of the same?” Let me say to the Secretary of State that, with a new national mission, he need not go to Finland. Will he, before the election, commit his party to matching our Labour commitment and backing our Labour plans to end rough sleeping by the end of the next Parliament?

Sajid Javid: I know the right hon. Gentleman, and I know that he cares deeply about this issue, as do Conservative Members. He should not play party politics with it, because it is a very serious issue that unites

everyone in the House. We all want to see an end to rough sleeping, but he knows as well as I do that its causes are complex. They are not just economic; there are mental health problems, and addiction problems. We do have lessons to learn from abroad, but I am sure that if the right hon. Gentleman works with us—if we work together—we can all unite in ending rough sleeping for good.

John Healey: This is precisely about politics: it is precisely about the political decisions made over the last seven years that have made the causes of homelessness so much worse. Rapidly rising homelessness is just the tip of the iceberg on seven years of failure on housing: rough sleeping doubled, home ownership down, house building falling, private renters ignored, housing benefits bills ballooning, and now the lowest level of new affordable homes to rent and buy for 24 years. No wonder Labour is ahead in the polls on housing. After seven years of failure, the Tories have no plan to fix the housing crisis. Is that not why people now desperately need a new deal on housing led by a new Labour Government?

Sajid Javid: I thought that if anyone was going to raise the opinion polls today, it would be a Conservative Member, but the right hon. Gentleman continues to surprise us all. I say to him again: let us work together on rough sleeping. It is very easy for Labour to make a commitment to end rough sleeping without having any plans, any initiative, or anything in hand to show what they would actually do about it. We have got the ideas, and we have new ideas, for example the Housing First concept which we are trialling already—right now—in Liverpool. The right hon. Gentleman has the opportunity to work with us if he really means it.

Small Businesses

2. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to ensure that local councils support small businesses. [909760]

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): We have doubled the level of small business rate relief to 100% and made it permanent. This means that around 600,000 small businesses will pay no business rates at all. At Budget, we also announced a £300 million discretionary fund so that councils can provide additional support to businesses facing increased bills.

Rachael Maskell: York's economy is being damaged by sharp business rate increases due to the revaluations. While the exemption from paying the full business rates has risen from £12,000 to £15,000, business rate increases have rocketed far beyond that in York. This is totally unfair, and small businesses in the city, previously exempt, are now desperate. Some are facing a 600% increase in their rateable value, including The Slip Inn, and no one knows how the new relief funds will even be distributed—total chaos! Can the Secretary of State say why the business rate burden is falling harder on smaller businesses and if he will urgently review the exemption level?

Sajid Javid: Overall, businesses in the north have seen on average a fall through the revaluation process.

Rachael Maskell: What about York?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady talks about York. Since 2010 York has had a 74% fall in unemployment. That is because York has a Conservative-led council working with a Conservative Government. If the Labour party gets its anti-business agenda and hikes up taxes on businesses throughout the country, we know what the result will be.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Is the Secretary of State aware that many Labour-controlled councils are still pursuing anti-car policies? Will he remind them of recommendation 9 of the Mary Portas retail review, which stated that free and available but controlled parking should be made available to high street shoppers?

Sajid Javid: As always, my right hon. Friend makes a very good point about anti-car policies coming from Labour councils. Where councils have worked with businesses and taken a pro-car policy, especially on parking, that has helped local businesses, and Labour can learn a lesson from that.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): Given the great concern expressed by small businesses up and down the country about their ability to pay the business rate rises, I am going to give the Secretary of State another chance. What reassurance can he give small business owners who are concerned about the impact of rate rises that they will not be paying higher rates over the next few years than online and large retailers such as Sports Direct?

Sajid Javid: I can tell the hon. Lady two things. First, I point her to the package my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced at the Budget: £435 million of additional help for small businesses with rates, including the £300 million discretionary fund, for which there will be absolutely no delay because of the general election. It is going ahead exactly as planned. Indeed, the Government have already confirmed the final allocations for all local authorities, and local authorities are free to start using that scheme and helping local businesses.

Secondly, I point the hon. Lady to what my right hon. Friend the Chancellor said in the Budget speech. He said that

“in the medium term...we have to find a better way of taxing the digital part of the economy—the part that does not use bricks and mortar”—[*Official Report*, 8 March 2017; Vol. 622, c. 812.], and that we also need to look at the frequency of the revaluation process.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Many small businesses in Bury will see a fall in their business rates as a result of the revaluation, but because of phasing it will be some years before they receive the full benefit. Will my right hon. Friend look again at what can be done to speed up the introduction so that they can feel the full benefit sooner?

Sajid Javid: We have also put in place the transitional relief scheme, which is worth more than £3 billion and will help businesses across the country, including in my hon. Friend's constituency. That will certainly speed up the introduction.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): During the last Communities and Local Government questions, I asked the Secretary of State to engage with me and with councillors on Belfast City Council to determine how best we could grow business there through a city deal. He kindly agreed to do this, but sadly events have overtaken our arrangements. Given the commitment that he has made to spreading city deals throughout the devolved regions, will he assure us that he would like to see that theme continuing in the Department for Communities and Local Government?

Sajid Javid: I would be very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman before Parliament is prorogued.

Supported Housing

3. **Lucy Allan** (Telford) (Con): What estimate he has made of levels of funding for supported housing in each of the next five years. [909761]

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): In September 2016, we announced the extension of the local housing allowance exemption for supported housing until April 2019. We have recently consulted on a reformed funding model for supported housing. We are not doing this to save money; we want to get the right model to deliver improvements in quality and in value for money.

Lucy Allan: Telford has some excellent supported housing schemes, many of which I have visited, including Rose Manor in Ketley and Vicarage Grove in Dawley. However, supported housing costs can often be higher than the local housing allowance rate. How will the Government's reforms address that concern?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Last September, we announced that we would devolve funding to local authorities so that providers could, when necessary, reflect the higher average costs of supported accommodation. This would give local authorities an enhanced role in commissioning supported housing in their area.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware of the Select Committee inquiry into funding proposals for supported housing. Will he give me an assurance that he will reflect carefully on the overwhelming evidence that we have received, which shows that the local housing allowance rates are not an appropriate basis on which to devise a funding scheme for supported housing?

Sajid Javid: I can tell the Chair of the Select Committee that the Government hugely value the role that supported housing plays in helping vulnerable people. I take seriously what the Committee has to say, and I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), has given evidence to its inquiry. I will look at this matter carefully, because I want to ensure that the final model incentivises providers to continue to provide this important type of housing.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I very much welcome the Government's commitment to the supported housing project and the extra moneys that

have been devolved to local authorities for that purpose. However, the local housing allowance cap significantly favours London over the regions. For example, 99% of tenancies in my region will require a top-up from the fund, whereas only 3% of tenancies in London will do so. Would the Secretary of State be prepared to look again at this matter, to ensure that we have a system of supported housing that works for everyone?

Sajid Javid: I know that my hon. Friend takes a strong interest in these matters, including in his role as a member of the Select Committee. I have listened to him carefully, and others made a similar point during the consultation process. I can assure him that we will look at all the responses carefully and ensure that the final system works for everyone.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The Select Committee inquiry has received evidence that the Government's approach to supported housing is causing many providers to put new schemes on hold and resulting in some pulling out of providing supported housing altogether. When will the Secretary of State accept that his policy is damaging the provision of housing for our most vulnerable residents, and when will he commit to providing the funding and certainty that the sector needs if it is to provide the supported homes that we need?

Sajid Javid: It is important that we take a careful look at this policy, precisely because we all want to see a sustainable model that will result in providers providing enough of this type of home. That is exactly what this policy is designed to do, and when we come out with the final policy, that is what it will achieve.

Assured Shorthold Tenancies

4. **Will Quince** (Colchester) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage landlords to offer longer assured shorthold tenancies. [909762]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): On 18 April, 20 leading members of the British Property Federation pledged to offer three-year tenancies in build-for-rent developments, and leading housing associations have made a similar pledge. We hope that will encourage a shift in the market towards more landlords offering longer tenancies.

Will Quince: Thousands of renters in Colchester and across the country will welcome that news, but does the Minister agree that landlords are only half the issue? In fact, getting mortgage lenders, 50% of which at the moment do not lend on more than a year's assured shorthold tenancy, to change that policy will be the key to unlocking longer tenancies for the future.

Gavin Barwell: My hon. Friend is right to raise the issue of security for people in the private rented sector, and he is also right to identify the issue of lending. Since the Government introduced their model tenancy agreement, which has appropriate break clauses, there is no longer any impediment to landlord customers submitting longer tenancies. The majority now permit tenancies of up to two to three years.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): If the Minister had visited Cambridge recently, he would have seen the manifestation of the housing crisis in the number of people sleeping on the streets, which so depresses residents and those people. When I recently visited Wintercomfort, one of the leading charities, it told me that landlords are increasingly unwilling to let to people on housing benefit because of insecure employment. Does he agree that cracking down on insecure employment would help us to tackle the housing crisis?

Gavin Barwell: I had the opportunity to visit Cambridge very recently, and I share the hon. Gentleman's diagnosis of the problem: we desperately need to build more homes in this country to give people more choice. He is also right about our employment market, but it is the policies of this Government that have driven record levels of employment, and it is the national living wage that is increasing people's spending power.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Both landlords and tenants often mistakenly believe that a tenancy has to be six months or a year renewable, when of course there is no legal impediment to people having longer tenancies, and in some cases they do. One reason why longer tenancies do not happen is that landlords often find it difficult to recover possession if they need to occupy the house themselves or if the tenant fails to pay their rent. Will the Minister consider encouraging landlords to provide longer tenancies by making it easier for them to recover occupation?

Gavin Barwell: My hon. Friend is right that we need to ensure that, when a tenant behaves antisocially or is in rent arrears, landlords can regain possession, but the fundamental pressure we face at the moment is in giving the increasing number of families in the private rented sector the security they need. Reforming our housing market, increasing supply and bringing in these new build-to-rent schemes that will offer longer tenancies is a key reform.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Labour councils like Newham, Redbridge, Greenwich and my own borough of Hammersmith and Fulham are doing a fantastic job of cracking down on rogue landlords. If the Minister actually cares about private tenants, why is he blocking borough-wide private sector licensing schemes? Is his party still the slum landlord's friend?

Gavin Barwell: The suggestion that Conservative Members do not care about these issues is as ridiculous as it is insulting. The work of Labour councils to which the shadow Minister refers is often being funded by this Government. He is factually wrong to suggest that this Government are blocking borough-wide selective licensing, and I point out the many reforms that we are introducing—we are banning letting agent fees and insisting on client money protection—that were not in place when the shadow Housing Minister, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), was running this Department.

Supported Housing

5. **Heidi Allen** (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): When his Department plans to announce its new funding model for supported housing. [909763]

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): We are committed to protecting and boosting the supply of supported housing, and since 2011 we have delivered 23,000 new supported homes in England. My hon. Friend will know that we recently consulted on a reformed funding model, and we are now keen to press on with that reform as soon as possible.

Heidi Allen: I will probe a little further on emergency short-term accommodation, such as women's refuges. Does the Secretary of State agree that a totally separate funding stream is essential to honouring our ambition that no victim be turned away from accessing critical support services by 2020?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend highlights an important point. We have been working with the sector to develop options to ensure that providers of short-term accommodation continue to receive the appropriate funding. That might be through a different funding mechanism from the one we have today, but it is vital that supported housing receives the protection it deserves, and it will.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State knows that he has let down elderly people in this country. It is not just supported housing or funding but the fact that, in constituencies such as mine, we have a magic wand whereby suddenly student accommodation rises like daisies in the spring. But when it comes to accommodation for elderly people who desperately need it, because we have an ageing population, he has got nowhere in what he has achieved.

Sajid Javid: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman just missed what I said: since 2011, 23,000 units of specialised and general housing have been delivered for vulnerable people, and we have provided another £400 million for specialist homes throughout the country. That kind of action makes results, and he should welcome it.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): In evidence to a joint Select Committee inquiry, David Orr of the National Housing Federation said that the local housing allowance was

“not a competent starting point”

for a funding model. Is the Secretary of State wedded to LHA as a starting point, or is he considering some other option?

Sajid Javid: We have just had a consultation on supported housing, which is now closed. We received a number of representations and we want to consider them carefully, but whatever the final model is, it will be designed to be sustainable for the long term and provide the supported housing we need.

Alison Thewliss: I look forward to hearing the Government's response on that, and it would be useful to get a date on that issue. On the different types of supported accommodation being consulted on, does the Secretary of State recognise that placing an arbitrary limit on the length of time somebody is in short-term accommodation could have a detrimental effect on their life chances thereafter if they are forced to leave that

supported accommodation too soon? Will he allow flexibility in the system, so that organisations such as Emmaus and Blue Triangle in my constituency can keep people for as long as they need to be there?

Sajid Javid: As part of the review and the response to the consultation, we are considering exactly the point the hon. Lady raises: the terms of access to short-term accommodation.

Social Housing Rent Arrears

6. **Anna Turley** (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): What estimate he has made of the number of social housing households in rent arrears in England. [909764]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): In 2015-16, about 685,000 socially renting households were either in arrears or had been in the previous 12 months, which represents 25% of households in that sector.

Anna Turley: That seems a huge number: nearly a quarter of people in social housing in rent arrears. In one ward of my constituency, nearly half of our social housing tenants—46% of them—are in rent arrears. One single mum has seen her rent jump from £8 to £70 a week because of the benefit cap, and the bedroom tax is still wreaking devastation. Is this not a damning indictment of seven years of Tory assault on Britain's struggling families?

Gavin Barwell: In 2011-12, the first year in which the data were collected, the figure was 23.5%, so the current figure is similar to what we inherited from the Labour Government. On the benefit cap, Conservative Members believe very clearly that it is completely wrong for out-of-work households to receive support far in excess of that which their working neighbours earn when they go out to work. Discretionary housing payments are in order and the level is actually falling—in 2013-14, we were talking about 30% of households—so the figure is moving in the right direction, and the hon. Lady is wrong to oppose the fundamental welfare reforms we need to make sure that the system is fair.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Those tenants in the social housing sector who do not keep up with their rent payments are, of course, in danger of becoming homeless. Will my hon. Friend pay tribute to councils such as Kettering Borough Council, of which I am a member, that make it an absolute priority to help people in those situations and stop them becoming homeless in the first place? In the first five months of this year, Kettering Borough Council has helped 78 households stay in their current accommodation.

Gavin Barwell: I am happy to pay tribute to the work that Kettering Borough Council has done, and I reassure my hon. Friend that the Ministry of Justice's protocol for social landlords stresses the value of preventive measures in respect of rent arrears and advises landlords to deploy alternatives to eviction wherever possible.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): Has the Minister had discussions with his colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions about universal credit and the impact it is having on many of my constituents who are not being paid for weeks and sometimes months on end and are therefore going into arrears? That is in addition to

being hit by the bedroom tax and other benefit changes. Has he had these discussions, or will he do so, because what is going on in my constituency is a disgrace?

Gavin Barwell: We have had discussions with DWP colleagues, and I make two brief points to the hon. Gentleman. First, universal credit advances are available for new claims, and those should be taken up. Secondly, DWP research shows that after four months the proportion of universal credit claimants who were in arrears at the start of their claims had fallen by a third. So there is an initial problem, and the advance claims are there to cope with that, but over time the situation is improving.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): One in three people in Northern Ireland, and a lesser number on the UK mainland, are just a pay cheque away from homelessness. What steps have been taken to help those who are on the cusp of homelessness due to the benefits system to hold on to their tenancies?

Gavin Barwell: The Government have significantly increased the discretionary housing payments that are available to local authorities to assist those affected by welfare reform changes. The whole emphasis of the policy on which the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), is working is to try to shift the approach to emphasise prevention. That way, we will prevent people from becoming statutorily homeless in the first place, rather than just providing help at the point of crisis.

Parking Reform

7. **Maria Caulfield** (Lewes) (Con): What assessment his Department has made of the implications for his policies of the consultation of May 2015 entitled "Parking reform: tackling unfair practices". [909766]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): The Government are committed to reforming unfair parking practices. We have already taken steps to tackle rogue and unfair practices by private parking operators, including by banning wheel clamping and towing. The Department published a summary of the responses to its discussion paper on private parking in 2016, and I am considering the points that were raised.

Maria Caulfield: I thank the Minister for his response. In Lewes in my constituency, the discrepancy between parking on public and private land is causing huge problems and hefty fines for drivers. I am thinking particularly of the area in the town centre behind Laura Ashley, where if someone stops for two minutes they will receive a £60 penalty. Will the Minister bring forward the recommendations from the consultation to end such unfair practice?

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend is a strong campaigner for her constituents and raises an important point: people need clarity on where they can and cannot park. I recognise the anger felt by her constituents, and we will certainly look carefully at what she says, as we prepare our response to the consultation.

Pubs

8. **William Wragg** (Hazel Grove) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of (a) the community right to bid scheme and (b) other Government initiatives to protect and support local pubs. [909767]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Andrew Percy): So far, 2,000 pubs have been listed as assets of community value. That listing provides communities with the time to bid for a pub if it comes on to the market. We are supporting the process further, with £3.6 million, through the “More than a pub” programme.

William Wragg: The Northumberland Arms in Marple Bridge is a much-loved local pub, and members of the local community hope to reopen it using the community right-to-bid scheme. Will my hon. Friend the Minister lend every possible support to their effort and consider joining us for a celebratory pint when it reopens? Indeed, we could make it a double celebration, should the good people of Marple Bridge see fit to return me to the House.

Andrew Percy: It is unthinkable that the people of Hazel Grove will not return my hon. Friend to the House, given his work on their behalf these past two and a bit years. I would be delighted to join him, with the whole ministerial team, to celebrate the community pub he mentions—so long as he is buying the pints, of course.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): The Minister has failed to mention what my office has been told by the Department, which is that the Neighbourhood Planning Bill is set to fall, so the change to pub protection it contains will not be made. Will he assure the House that that is not the case? That wonderful decision was supported on both sides of the House, and we need to make sure that the change goes through.

Andrew Percy: My understanding is that we hope to complete the passage of that legislation before the Dissolution of Parliament. The change the hon. Gentleman refers to has been broadly welcomed by very many people, including, of course, the hon. Gentleman, who campaigned for it.

Affordable Homes

9. **Mr David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): What assessment he has made of trends in the number of affordable homes to (a) rent and (b) buy since 2010. [909768]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): Since April 2010, we have delivered on average more than 50,800 affordable homes per year, 36,300 of which were affordable homes for rent. Under the previous Government, the annual average was only 42,900, of which only 28,700 were homes for rent.

Mr Hanson: I am expecting several Members of Parliament and Ministers to visit Delyn constituency in the next few weeks. Will the Minister come with me to Flint, where he will see a Labour council building council houses for rent? This social housing is supported

by the Welsh Assembly, with more than 600 in one constituency alone. Why can he not match that in England?

Gavin Barwell: As I just said and contrary to what the shadow Housing Minister said, higher levels of affordable housing are being delivered under this Government than were delivered under the previous Labour Government. Nevertheless, if the right hon. Gentleman's local council is delivering new council homes, I am glad to hear it. We want more homes of every kind. In Croydon, it was a Conservative council that started to build council housing again, after a Labour council had failed to do so.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Will my hon. Friend join me in welcoming the fact that almost 2,000 new houses are currently being built in Crawley's Forge Wood neighbourhood? There is a complete mix of units, including council, social-rented and low-cost housing.

Gavin Barwell: I warmly welcome what my hon. Friend has to say and his support for building the homes that we so desperately need in this country. Contrary to what we often hear from the shadow Front-Bench team, there is a widespread consensus across the country that we desperately need to build more homes of every kind to tackle the housing crisis that has been building in this country for the past 30 or 40 years.

18. [909777] **Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The right-to-buy scheme has led to a devastating erosion of social housing stock, with 40% of ex-council houses now in the hands of private landlords. With public money going straight into the pockets of those landlords, will the Secretary of State tell the House how much the right-to-buy scheme has cost the public purse?

Gavin Barwell: The right-to-buy scheme has helped nearly 2 million hard-working people own their own home in this country. Since we reinvigorated the right-to-buy scheme in 2012, we have made it a condition that, for each home that is sold, we replace it with a new affordable home. That is the right policy as we help people who have the aspiration to buy their home, but we also make sure that the rented homes are replaced. That is what people will get from a Conservative Government.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): Luton's housing waiting list is now three times higher than it was in the 1970s, when I was vice-chair of the council's housing committee. The housing stock has halved in that time from compulsory sales. Is it not the truth that only a Labour Government led by my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) will save Britain's housing situation and make sure that people in Luton can have a decent home?

Gavin Barwell: People can look back at the record of the last Labour Government—how many council homes were built between 1997 and 2010? What level of house building did we inherit from the Labour Government in 2010? The truth is that house building in this country has been increasing under this Government. Certainly, there is still further to go, but we are the party that is committed to building more homes for people to buy, more homes for people to rent privately and more

affordable homes for people to rent. If we want a solution to the housing crisis, this is the party that is offering it.

Housing Market

10. **Stephen Hammond** (Wimbledon) (Con): What discussions he has had with the housing association sector on rent-setting policy post-2020 since the publication of “Fixing our broken housing market” on 7 February 2017. [909769]

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): My Department regularly meets housing associations to discuss how we can help keep rents affordable and increase the supply of new homes. Our housing White Paper has been welcomed by the sector and we look forward to many more productive discussions in the coming years.

Stephen Hammond: I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer. Indeed, the housing White Paper has been welcomed by housing associations. Does he agree that the future rent policy should not only guarantee affordability, but offer long-term certainty for housing associations, so that they do deliver the homes that we need?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I do agree with my hon. Friend. It is an excellent point. Housing associations currently account for roughly a third of total housing supply, and we do want a situation in which they can borrow even more against that future income to build even more homes. That is something that it is in the housing White Paper, and we intend to build on it.

Mr Speaker: Craig Williams is not here, but Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck is.

Adult Social Care Funding

12. **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): What steps he is taking to tackle regional variations in adult social care funding. [909771]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): Adult social care funding is distributed according to the relative need of the different areas using a well-established formula. Most of the £4.5 billion funding for social care announced at the 2015 spending review and in the spring Budget takes into account councils’ ability to raise money through the social care precept.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I thank the Minister for his response, but I am sorry to say that he is wrong. The formula is broken. South Tyneside Council is the third hardest hit council in the country with a low council tax base, demand for adult social care higher than average and hospital services under threat from this Government’s forced sustainability and transformation plans. Is it not true that this Government, who created the social care crisis, cannot solve it and our constituents are suffering as a result?

Mr Jones: The hon. Lady’s assessment is completely wrong. Councils will have access to £9.25 billion of extra funding over the next three years. On the money that is coming directly from the Government, it absolutely takes into account a local area’s ability to raise council

tax, so areas such as that of the hon. Lady will receive more in funding from the Government than some other areas. She does not have any reason to talk about council tax because it doubled during the Labour Government. Since 2010, it has gone down by 9%.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The Minister’s answer on the former point is absolutely right, but does he also accept that another variable, perhaps of greater practical concern, is the variation in the willingness of the health sector to work jointly with local authorities to maximise the integration of the funds? Local authorities are well used to joint working and democratic accountability, but I am afraid that there is not often the same history in clinical commissioning groups and other health institutions. What will he do about that in a future new Government?

Mr Jones: I have great respect for my hon. Friend, who has considerable knowledge in this area. He is absolutely right: we need to ensure that health and social care works far more collegiately and that harder work is done to ensure that services are integrated. We are determined to do that at a national level with this Department working with the Department of Health, and it is what we expect to see delivered at a local level for local people.

21. [909781] **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): As the Minister has recognised, the social care precept means that funding available for social care is increasingly dependent on a local authority’s tax base. In 2017-18, the precept will generate £9 million in additional funding in Sheffield, compared with more than £31 million for Surrey. Does the Minister think that that is fair?

Mr Jones: The hon. Gentleman should look at the allocations for the £4.5 billion of social care funding coming to local authorities directly from the Government. That absolutely takes into account the fact that certain places can raise far more in council tax and from the social care precept than areas such as his own. That is reflected in the allocations, and I wish that he would recognise that.

Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): Many care homes up and down the country are reliant on care workers from the EU; estimates suggest that there are about 100,000 workers. What meetings does the Secretary of State have with the care sector to reassure them that, when Britain leaves the EU, care homes will be adequately staffed with appropriately trained care workers?

Mr Jones: The hon. Lady makes a very important point and I can reassure her that my hon. Friend the Minister who is responsible for these matters in the Department of Health has met care providers, as has my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and as have I. This is an extremely important situation and we must ensure that we have enough care workers to support the most vulnerable in our society.

Northern Powerhouse

13. **Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the northern powerhouse. [909772]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Andrew Percy):

The northern powerhouse is central to our plans for an economy that works for all. During these past few months, we have published the northern powerhouse strategy, launched the second northern powerhouse investment portfolio, allocated more than £500 million of local growth investment, launched the £400 million northern powerhouse investment fund, committed tens of millions to cultural investment in the north and, of course, supported 17 enterprise zones across the north that are in turn providing employment for 9,000 people.

Jason McCartney: With regional growth fund money and local enterprise partnership funding helping local businesses in my Colne Valley constituency achieve record levels of employment, will the Minister ensure that the northern powerhouse investment fund builds on that success and that we power the powerhouse for many years to come?

Andrew Percy: Absolutely. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work he does in promoting the local economy. In total, the Leeds city region, which includes his area, has received £694 million of Government funding for local growth funds and the new £400 million investment fund is there specifically to support small and medium-sized businesses across the north that want to grow and expand.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The north-east should be the powerhouse for our country's manufacturing and exporting renaissance, with a workforce who take pride in making and building things. Why, then, do the so-called industrial strategy and the so-called northern powerhouse do so little to invest in the jobs and infrastructure that the north-east needs?

Andrew Percy: One of the reasons people in the north of England have lost their faith in the Labour party is that it never has anything positive to say about the north of England. All Labour does is talk down the north and talk down people. Look at what is actually happening in the north-east: £379 million of direct Government investment in the north-east and record employment levels. The hon. Lady might not want to talk up Newcastle, but I will, because it is leading this country's economic recovery.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): On that note, Lancashire County Council has continually blocked an enterprise zone and business park in Morecambe and Lunesdale. Since the M6 link road opened up, we have been crying out for that. The Secretary of State himself has come down to see it. Would the Minister like to come during the election campaign and listen to the businesses that want that enterprise zone or business park?

Andrew Percy: I would be delighted to take up that invitation. I plan to visit many constituencies across the north during the election period, and I will of course visit my hon. Friend's constituency. The Secretary of State has already visited. Enterprise zones have made a real difference to the economy of the north and, as I said, 9,000 jobs have been provided in them, so I will certainly visit.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): The *Manchester Evening News* reported at the weekend pressure from Conservative Back Benchers to scrap HS2 to fund the Brexit bill. Will the Minister confirm that HS2 to Manchester will go ahead, to time and to the budget that has been outlined?

Andrew Percy: There has been no change to the Government's policy on HS2. I remind the hon. Gentleman that, in addition, there is £13 billion of other investment. Over the next two years, particularly on the trans-Pennine line, there will be new rail, new carriages and new services—a whole new passenger experience. There will be over £2 billion of investment in that important transpennine route under the Government. The northern rail franchise will operate on an improvement basis, unlike the no-improvement basis when it was run by the Labour party.

Local Housing Provision

15. **Stuart Andrew (Pudsey) (Con):** What plans he has to introduce an alternative method of estimating the number of homes a local area may need. [909774]

16. **Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con):** What plans he has to introduce an alternative method of estimating the number of homes a local area may need. [909775]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): It is essential that local plans start with an honest assessment of housing need in the area. As we set out in our housing White Paper, we will introduce a standardised approach to assessing housing need to ensure that that is the case.

Stuart Andrew: The methodology used by Leeds City Council has brought about an excessive 70,000 housing target, which has threatened swathes of green-belt and greenfield sites in my constituency. If the alternative method proves my community's suspicion that the target is excessive, will that override the current target and help to save these important green lungs in my constituency?

Gavin Barwell: The methodology will reveal the real level of housing need in Leeds. Local authorities across the country choose to build more homes than are needed because they have an ambition to grow. There is a legitimate debate to be had about that, but my hon. Friend's constituents should have a clear understanding of what the relevant need is. I should add that the housing White Paper makes it clear that green-belt land should be released only in exceptional circumstances when all other options for meeting housing need have been explored.

Andrew Stephenson: Pendle has lots of brownfield sites, and many homes that have been granted planning permission have not yet been built because of the depressed property market, leading to low demand. How can we ensure that low demand in areas such as Pendle is better reflected in housing targets?

Gavin Barwell: That is exactly the purpose of the new methodology that we plan to introduce. The level of housing need for which we plan should reflect the real market demand for housing in an area.

Park Homes

17. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What recent representations he has received on amending park homes legislation. [909776]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): In the past year, we have received representations from park home residents as well as members of the all-party parliamentary group. Our call for evidence reviewing the legislation was published on 12 April, and addressed key concerns, including charges, site management and harassment.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Will the Minister remove the temptation that prompts those park owners who have neither the social nor managerial skills to make a success of it to maximise sales revenue commission by bullying residents to secure a higher turnover of residents?

Gavin Barwell: Bullying and harassment are not acceptable in any form, which is why we introduced the Mobile Homes Act 2013, which gives local authorities greater power. We shall obviously listen to the response to the call for evidence to see whether further action is required to stop the kind of behaviour that my right hon. Friend described.

Construction Industry

19. **Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): What plans he has to encourage new methods of building in the construction industry. [909779]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): Our White Paper sets out measures to increase the use of modern methods of construction in house building. Those methods offer a huge opportunity, both to speed up the building of homes and to improve the quality of the build.

Steve Double: Cornwall council recently granted planning approval for a garden village at West Carclaze in St Austell. The vision for the development is to build the highest-quality sustainable homes with modern construction methods. Does the Minister agree that it is vital that the site developers are held to that vision, and what support can he give to ensure that that happens?

Gavin Barwell: My hon. Friend is an outstanding advocate for his community. I would be very happy to meet him to talk about how the Government can assist with the infrastructure required and the mix of housing as the proposed scheme goes through the planning process.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Rushden Lakes development in my constituency is being built using modern construction methods and is creating hundreds of jobs. An extension to it, approved unanimously by East Northamptonshire Council, was submitted to the Secretary of State for approval on 4 April. The council is concerned that the general election might mean that there is not enough time to approve the extension. What is the position on that?

Gavin Barwell: The Government are now in purdah, so further decisions cannot be taken. The new Government can obviously look at this issue straight away. It is to the

credit of my hon. Friend and his council that their part of the country is determined to build the homes that we so desperately need.

High Streets

20. **Karl McCartney** (Lincoln) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support high streets. [909780]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Andrew Percy): We are supporting our high streets to thrive as consumer habits change. We have introduced the biggest ever cut in business rates, worth £6.6 billion, and launched the high street pledge and digital high street pilot in Gloucestershire. We are also celebrating our high streets through the hugely successful Great British High Street awards, which Members on both sides of the House supported.

Karl McCartney: Although Lincoln's Sincil Street—a much treasured traditional shopping area just off our High Street—is full of first-class independent shops, they are all losing customers by the day due to large-scale regeneration works. I, and many others, believe that the valuation office should reduce business rates for the shops directly affected during this period, and that their landlord, the Lincolnshire Co-op, should discount their rent, especially as it has caused the shortfall. What does my right hon. Friend—sorry, my hon. Friend—think the valuation office should do?

Andrew Percy: I am sure it is just a matter of time.

Businesses are fully entitled to make a case for a temporary reduction in their rateable value. As a fellow Lincolnshire MP, I know Sincil Street very well. I advise my hon. Friend's businesses to contact the local valuation office to discuss whether the rateable values can be amended at all.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): As the Minister is well aware, there has been a significant increase in begging on Scunthorpe High Street over the past three years. The police, the local authorities and the courts between them do not seem to be able to roll up their sleeves and sort out the problem, despite trying hard in many different ways. What are the Government going to do to ensure that the right powers are in the right place to tackle the issue?

Andrew Percy: May I begin by congratulating the hon. Gentleman on his marathon success yesterday? For such a young man, he did it in such an interesting time; he deserves full credit for it. He raises an issue that I am fully aware of in Scunthorpe, which is a town centre that is on its way back. I am happy to discuss with him further what we can do across Government to help to deal with the problem.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Traders in Cleethorpes High Street and elsewhere in the resort are concerned following a decision by North East Lincolnshire council, which is Labour controlled, to close a number of public toilets and refuse to repair others. That is having a very detrimental effect. I know that my hon. Friend, as the coastal communities Minister, would want to look favourably on future funding requests so that these amenities can be improved.

Andrew Percy: It is a delight to get a question from my other neighbour. Across northern Lincolnshire more generally, we have seen the council in north Lincolnshire actually open new public toilets. We recently allocated £20 million to northern powerhouse projects through the coastal communities fund. There will be a further round of bidding in October. If the local coastal community team wants to come forward with a proposal that includes that, we will, of course, look at it.

Domestic Violence Refuges

22. **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What recent assessment the Government have made of the adequacy of the availability of domestic violence refuges for women. [909782]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): Refuges provide vital support for victims of domestic abuse. Since 2014, we have invested more than £33 million in services, including refuges, to support victims of domestic abuse. We expect local areas to assess their need and provide services and support to meet that need.

Vicky Foxcroft: I have one refuge for women in my area. With 17% of specialist refuges in England lost since 2010, what are the Government doing to protect this vital lifeline for women and children?

Mr Jones: The Government take this issue extremely seriously. No person should be turned away from the support they need. We announced in February that 76 projects across the country will receive a share of £20 million to support victims of domestic abuse, creating 2,200 extra bed spaces and giving support to more than 19,000 victims. That includes additional funding to the hon. Lady's area of Lewisham.

Topical Questions

T1. [909749] **Mr Andrew Turner** (Isle of Wight) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): In the past few weeks, we have set out our plans to crack down on rogue landlords, we have launched 12 new enterprise zones, we have unveiled a £40 million cash boost for Britain's coastal communities and we have listened to some of the concerns voiced about our business rates revaluation, responding with a £435 million package. However, contrary to previous promises, I can no longer expect to deliver 100% business rates retention by the end of this Parliament—simply because the end of this Parliament will now come round rather sooner than I had previously thought.

Mr Turner: Isle of Wight Council welcomes the award of £9.5 million specifically for transport improvements. Another priority for the council is to develop a back-office hub to improve services and cut costs. What more can the Government do to assist with that aim?

Sajid Javid: First, may I tell my hon. Friend that I enjoyed my visit to his beautiful and sunny constituency last week? The idea of this back-office hub, which I heard about from the local Conservative group, is a very good one. It highlights the fact that Conservative councils cost you less but deliver you more, so if local people want to see that, they should vote Conservative in the local elections throughout the country on 4 May.

T2. [909750] **Mr Stephen Hepburn** (Jarrow) (Lab): The Minister will know that, since 2010, the Tories have stolen 40% of South Tyneside Council's grant and 46% of Gateshead Council's grant. The victims of this crime are obviously the hard-working people in the area. Would the Minister like to take this opportunity to apologise to them for this shabby Conservative crime?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting question, seeing as his party is still on the manifesto from the last election, where it said there would not be one more penny for local government. That said, as the hon. Gentleman has heard, we are providing additional access to £9.25 billion—for example, for adult social care—during the next three years, and his area will certainly benefit from that.

T3. [909751] **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Kettering is a wonderful place to live, but some rural parts of the borough are blighted by inappropriate and illegal development by Gypsies and Travellers. This is especially galling when many commuters in Kettering do far more travelling than so-called Travellers ever do. If there were a planning policy for black people or white people, there would rightly be outrage in this country. Why do we have special planning provisions for Gypsies and Travellers?

Sajid Javid: First, I agree with my hon. Friend that Kettering is, indeed, a wonderful place. I do understand that unauthorised encampments can cause real distress for local communities. He will know that, since 2010, the Government have made a number of changes that are designed to help with illegal and unauthorised encampments, but I do agree that more can be done, and I would be more than happy to sit down with him and to listen to what ideas he has.

T4. [909752] **Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware of the Select Committee's two reports into social care. Rightly, a lot of attention was given to funding, but also to the situation of the care workers who provide this important service. The Committee heard that nearly half of workers leave within a year of getting a job, half are on zero-hours contracts, many do not get paid for travelling time, in contradiction to the minimum wage legislation, and 27% do not get any training in dementia before they go out to deal with people with that condition. Is there not now a case for developing a well-paid and well-trained workforce, utilising Unison's ethical care charter as a basis?

Sajid Javid: I welcome the Select Committee's work in this important area, and I will listen carefully to the final research it comes up with. The hon. Gentleman

will know, first, that more funding is helpful, and the local government Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), referred to that earlier. However, there also need to be longer term changes that make the whole sector more sustainable, and that includes skills.

T5. [909753] **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): I am pleased that parishes and town councils in my constituency are getting on with their neighbourhood plans. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Cornwall Council must address these community-driven priorities to open up more options for local people who face difficulties in finding suitable housing?

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): I am delighted to hear of the work my hon. Friend has been doing to promote neighbourhood planning in her constituency. She is a powerful champion for South East Cornwall. She is absolutely right that Cornwall County Council needs to work with these neighbourhood plans to help local communities deliver the visions they have set out.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. As I call the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), perhaps I may congratulate the hon. Lady, as she is one of several Members who magnificently ran the marathon yesterday. She may be feeling a tad tired today, but not too tired to stand up and ask her question. We are grateful to the hon. Lady.

T9. [909757] **Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am eminently glad that my question is on the Order Paper today and I do not have to bob, because that might just be beyond me.

The rise in hate crimes following the UK's vote to leave the EU has shocked us all, and the rhetoric from this Tory Government on immigration will do nothing to assist integration and cohesion. What discussions have the UK Government had with Ministers from the Scottish Government regarding the Casey report? Will the Secretary of State commit now to making sure that the policies in his party's manifesto will not seek to divide people along these lines?

Sajid Javid: First, Mr Speaker, I join you in congratulating the hon. Lady on what she achieved yesterday, as well as all the people who raised so much money for so many good causes.

The issue that the hon. Lady raises is an important one. We are taking the Casey review very seriously. It shows the need for a new integration strategy to make sure that we do everything we can, working together across this House, including with people in Scotland and other parts of the UK, to make sure that we bring this nation together and reduce the number of people who face isolation.

T6. [909754] **Sir Nicholas Soames** (Mid Sussex) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that he intends to increase the weight given to made neighbourhood plans, and will he indicate that the same weight will be given to an emerging five-year land supply?

Gavin Barwell: I am happy to confirm that the written ministerial statement that is enlarged on in the White Paper is exactly designed to ensure that neighbourhood

plans are not overruled when the local authority does not demonstrate that it has a five-year land supply. In addition, the White Paper contains proposals to help councils to demonstrate that they have a five-year land supply in order to uphold the plans that they have worked hard to produce.

T10. [909758] **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Sheffield City Council is leading the way in building much-needed affordable housing through its innovative Sheffield Housing Company partnership, but across the country the number of affordable homes built last year fell to the lowest in 24 years. Sheffield is doing its bit; why are the Government failing so badly to address the country's housing crisis?

Sajid Javid: We are investing record amounts in affordable housing. Since 2010, more than 310,000 units have been created throughout the country. If the hon. Gentleman wants to know what failure on affordable housing looks like, he need only look at the previous Labour Government, who saw a fall of 410,000 units in social housing for rent.

T7. [909755] **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): The housing White Paper has greater expectations of local authorities. How is the Minister going to keep them building?

Gavin Barwell: Local authorities have a number of key roles: first, to produce a local plan that is based on an honest assessment of the level of need; and secondly, then to deliver that plan—the new housing delivery test is key in that regard. Thirdly, looking back when we did build enough homes in this country, local authorities played a crucial role in building themselves. We want to support local authorities in doing that, either through the housing revenue account or through the local housing company model that the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) referred to.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Surely the Secretary of State is aware of the damage being done to local communities by the cuts in local government spending. This has affected children's centres, leading to their closure, and cut down on youth services. These services are at the very heart of our communities. What is the Minister going to do to put that right?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman will know that every council throughout the country has had to find efficiencies so that we can balance the books of our country and build a stronger economy. Some local authorities have done that well—mainly Conservative-led authorities—and Labour authorities have absolutely failed in it. So if people want to see more services being delivered for less, they should vote Conservative on 4 May.

T8. [909756] **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): As the Secretary of State will know, thousands of new homes are being built across north Northamptonshire. What commitment can he give to local people in my constituency that, across the board, infrastructure and public services will keep up with those new homes being built?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend makes a very important point about how having the right infrastructure can help local people to accept more housing. He will know that local councils can already put obligations on developers to deliver certain infrastructure, and he will know about the community infrastructure levy, which can also help. I would like to highlight the new £2.3 billion housing infrastructure fund, which he can use locally in Corby. He should make an application to my Department to do that.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): Despite a very strong objection from Historic England, which, like me, is concerned about the impact on the 12th-century St John the Baptist church in Adel, disgracefully, Labour councillors voted for a controversial plan for 100 homes to be built opposite the church. Will the Secretary of State acknowledge that the planning system does not allow local communities to have enough say against unwanted developments?

Gavin Barwell: Our planning system is built on a high level of community involvement at every stage. Local councils should work with communities in developing their local plan—an issue raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) in relation to Leeds City Council. Constituents also have the opportunity to make representations on planning applications and on appeals, but I am sorry that in this case it appears that the city council did not listen to their concerns.

Amanda Solloway (Derby North) (Con): In Derby we are looking at alternative methods of helping those people who are sleeping rough, including an app that will direct funds to agencies such as the Padley Centre. Does my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State agree that such initiatives can help tackle the issues of rough sleeping?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I wholeheartedly I agree with my hon. Friend. It is our ambition—I know that she shares it—to end rough sleeping in our country, and those kinds of new ideas can make a real difference.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Following last week's successful and important meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on leasehold and commonhold reform about unfair and unreasonable abuses of leasehold, what are the Government's plans to do something about them?

Sajid Javid: First, may I commend my hon. Friend on his work to highlight abuses? I know that he shares my concern about where houses are sold on leasehold. That is an unacceptable practice and we will do something about it.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): The leader of the Conservative group in Eastleigh has questioned the methodology behind the plan for an extra 10,000 homes, which could threaten 400-year-old ancient woodland. Without a local plan, and when ancient woodland is under threat, how can housing numbers be verified?

Gavin Barwell: I hope that the housing White Paper will help my hon. Friend, who is passionate about protecting ancient woodland in her constituency, in two

regards. First, the new standard methodology will give a much clearer indication of the real level of housing need in her area. Secondly, we propose to increase the protections of ancient woodland, which is a precious resource that we have inherited from previous generations and that cannot be easily replaced. It is right that we strengthen the protection.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy), for the fantastic news that North Devon is to receive two coastal communities grants totalling more than £2 million: £500,000 for the museum in Barnstaple and £1.5 million for the new water sports centre in Ilfracombe, which he will kindly visit soon. Will he join me in congratulating those in the community who have helped to make this happen, and does he agree that North Devon gets this sort of recognition only when it has a Conservative MP and a Conservative Government?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Andrew Percy): I am obviously going to agree with my hon. Friend's latter point. I also pay tribute to him for the work he has done in advocating both of those projects. The latest allocation of coastal community grants funded a whole host of projects across the south-west, proving that if they want that investment to continue, residents of the south-west will have to vote Conservative in the forthcoming general election.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State be Nottinghamshire's Robin Hood to Labour's King John and ensure that parts of Nottinghamshire, including my Bassetlaw constituents, are never forced against their will to join the Sheffield city mayoral region, and that the historical counties of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire will be safe under a Conservative Government?

Andrew Percy: It is of course a matter for the Sheffield city region to determine who it consults and what the proposals will be. We obviously have to apply the statutory test, so I am unable to say anything about that in detail, other than that it is really important that residents in Bassetlaw and Derbyshire make their views known as part of the consultation undertaken by the city region.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con) *rose*—

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I am happy to take two further questions, if each of them consists of only one sentence.

Fiona Bruce: I thank the Secretary of State for his strong expression of concern regarding unfair leasehold titles, which affect my Congleton constituency; will he confirm that he is addressing this issue for those who have already bought, and, for the future buyer, will he look at imposing requirements on the right-to-buy conditions so that such properties can be bought only under freehold or fair leasehold terms?

Mr Speaker: I am sure that there were a few commas and semicolons in there.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend has done a great deal of work in this area. She will know that it is a particular problem in the north-west, and I can confirm that we are looking at all the issues very carefully.

Mark Pawsey: Will the Secretary of State consider imposing a requirement on developers of large industrial sites to provide some units for smaller businesses, to meet the shortage that currently exists in my constituency?

Sajid Javid: I point my hon. Friend to some of the changes set out in our recent White Paper. They are designed to make sure that local plans take account of all needs, including the needs of businesses.

Air Quality Strategy

3.40 pm

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the publication date of the Government's air quality strategy.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Andrea Leadsom): The Government are committed to making sure that ours is the first generation to leave the environment in a better state than we found it. As part of that, I am deeply committed personally to the importance of ensuring that we have clean air. Since 2011, the Government have announced more than £2 billion to help bus operators to upgrade their fleets, to support the development and take-up of low-emission vehicles, to reduce pollution from vehicles such as refuse trucks and fire engines, and to promote the development of clean alternative fuels. In addition, in the autumn statement we announced a further £290 million to support electric vehicles, low-emission buses and taxis, and alternative fuels.

Our actions have enabled the UK to make significant progress on improving its air quality since 2010. We now have lower emissions of the five key pollutants: volatile organic compounds, sulphur dioxide, ammonia, particulates, and nitrogen oxides. However, because of the failure of Euro vehicle emission standards to deliver expected improvements in air quality, the UK is among 17 European countries, including France and Germany, that are not yet meeting EU emissions targets for nitrogen dioxide in parts of some towns and cities.

We are taking strong action to remedy that. Since last November, my Department has worked jointly with the Department for Transport to update the Government's national air quality plan for nitrogen dioxide. We have updated the analytical base for the plan to reflect new evidence following the Volkswagen scandal and the failure of the EU's regulatory regime to deliver expected improvements on emissions. The plan adapts to these new circumstances by setting out a framework for action.

Following long-standing precedent, we have entered the period of sensitivity that precedes elections. In accordance with the guidance covering both local and general elections, the propriety and ethics team in the Cabinet Office has told us that it would not be appropriate to launch the consultation and publish the air quality plan during this time. The Government have therefore applied to the High Court for a short extension of the deadline for publishing the national air quality plan for nitrogen dioxide, in order to comply with pre-election propriety rules. The Government seek to publish a draft plan by 30 June and a final plan by 15 September. The application will be considered by the Court.

Sue Hayman: Nearly 40 million people in Britain live in areas with illegal levels of air pollution. Two thousand schools and nurseries are close to roads with damaging levels of fumes, and NHS experts estimate that poor air quality contributes to 40,000 premature deaths every year. The situation has gone from bad to worse on this Government's watch, and has escalated into what the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee calls a "public health emergency". Does the Secretary of State agree that this is indeed a public health emergency?

Given the gravity of the situation and the fact that the Secretary of State has known about today's High Court deadline for months, why did she choose to request a further delay to the publication of her air quality plan at 7 o'clock on Friday night? Will she clarify whether she had in fact already applied for an extension before the election was called? It is unacceptable for her to hide behind the election to delay publishing her plans. Cabinet Office rules are clear that purdah is not an excuse to delay acting on vital public health matters. Will she confirm that the plans are ready for publication? If she agrees that this is a public health emergency, why the delay?

Are not the Government doing everything that they can to avoid scrutiny because they are missing their own commitments, have no strategy and yet again want to kick this issue into the long grass? How can we trust the right hon. Lady's Government to maintain air quality standards after we leave the EU when they have done everything possible to avoid scrutiny on existing standards and had to be dragged through the courts?

If the Government fail to publish their plan today, within the first 30 days of a Labour Administration, we will. Only a Labour Government will legislate for a new clean air Act setting out how to tackle the air pollution that damages the lives of millions, but this Conservative Government continue shamefully to shirk their legal responsibilities and are putting the health of millions at risk.

Andrea Leadsom: I think that all Members right across this House agree that air quality is a significant concern. I have already set out some of the strong actions that this Government have taken, in spending £2 billion since 2011, to try to improve the situation.

The hon. Lady is exactly right: we have our draft air quality plan for NO₂ ready. She asked why we have a late extension, and I can absolutely explain that to her: in the course of developing our draft plan, it became clear that local authorities would have to play a central role in delivering the final air quality plan, so the Government initially sought to defer publication of the plan and the launch of the consultation on it until after the purdah period for local authority elections. Since that application was lodged, the Prime Minister has called a general election, and a further period of purdah commenced on 21 April. As the hon. Lady will know, Governments normally seek to avoid launching consultation exercises during purdah periods. It is absolutely vital that we get this done, and our intention is to publish the plan on 30 June. She says that a Labour Administration would publish such a plan within 30 days, but that would actually be later than the date on which this Government intend to publish it.

I want to make it very clear that we have now entered a period during which we are strongly advised not to publish consultations. We are therefore trying to put in place a very short extension, which we do not believe will make a difference to the implementation of our plans, while at the same time safeguarding our democracy.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I urge the Secretary of State, along with all Ministers, to work on the air quality plan with the very greatest urgency after the general election, because we have waited a very long time for it. Many of the problems with diesel actually

started under the previous Government, and we need to clean that up. A scrappage scheme—for not only our diesel cars, but buses, taxis and many other forms of public transport in our inner cities—is absolutely essential if we are to clean up air quality, especially in our inner cities.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is, of course, exactly right. We have now been working on this specific plan for several years. We published a consultation for clean air zones in 2015. The fact that emissions from diesel vehicles have far exceeded what was expected has been extremely difficult. The EU regulatory regime did not show effectively what the real levels of emissions were, and this Government have pushed for improvements to the assessment. We have been planning the draft air quality plan for a consideration length of time, and we will publish it just as soon as we can.

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) for securing this urgent question on the Government's air quality strategy. I agree with her concerns entirely.

This is not a political issue. All our constituents need to breathe, and they want an air quality plan based on good scientific evidence to ensure that people no longer have to breathe toxic air in their communities. The Government have had a five-month window to address illegal air quality in relation to the strategy. Does the Secretary of State agree that hiding behind a general election cannot be an excuse for failing to address what is, as she has just mentioned, a vital health issue? She has said that it is "vital" to get this through, so why the delay?

Andrea Leadsom: I can only repeat that I absolutely agree with Members that this is a vital issue. We have spent the past five months looking very carefully at the real world, as well as laboratory tests, to find out actual emissions so that we have the right consultation. We do not expect any delay due to propriety rules to lead to a delay in implementation. We are seeking a very short delay to preserve our democracy, in accordance with guidance from the Cabinet Office propriety and ethics team.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that there is growing concern about emissions that can damage health and lungs in particular? Will she make it a high priority to limit soot and smoke from public service vehicles, on which she has most influence?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is exactly right to raise this issue. The Government have invested a huge amount in retrofitting buses and taxis. Other measures include limiting medium combustion plants, which I was very proud to put in place when I was Energy Secretary, to try to reduce other emissions. My right hon. Friend is exactly right that we need to tackle a number of different emissions. This plan deals with nitrogen dioxide emissions and we will publish it as soon as we can.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Opposition Members will monitor carefully whether such pre-election sensitivity applies to the announcements

or consultations that the Government welcome to the same extent as to ones that cause them embarrassment. Once the UK leaves the EU and the Commission is no longer able to levy fines on the UK Government for failing to act with due speed on the premature deaths of 40,000 people a year that are caused by toxic air, who does the Government expect will be levying fines and initiating cases against the Government for air quality breaches?

Andrea Leadsom: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that this is a very significant and serious issue, but I find his suggestion that the threat of EU fines is the only reason why the Government might be motivated to deal with it rather distasteful. We absolutely intend to deal with the issue to ensure that the air is cleaner for the people of our country and that we are the generation who leaves our environment in a better state than we found it.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is not just people but sensitive landscapes, such as the nationally designated area of outstanding natural beauty of the Chilterns, that should be protected? Such areas should also be positively recognised for their role in the battle against poor air quality, including by harnessing the potential of our trees and ancient woodland.

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend, who always speaks very strongly for the Chilterns. She is right to do so as it is a beautiful area. Air quality is of course vital not only for humans, but for our lovely landscapes. Preserving the contribution made by our trees, peat lands and so on is a very important priority.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): Southampton is one of the 10 cities threatened with an infraction under the air quality regulations. It is also one of five cities, under the Government's December plans, to introduce clean air zones, and Southampton's local authority has been really assiduous in moving forward with its plans. While it has received grants, it has also put in a great deal of its own money. Is it the Secretary of State's advice that the city council should now go easy on its plans because the Government cannot get their own together?

Andrea Leadsom: I was in full agreement with the hon. Gentleman until that last bit. Of course not. I was going to praise the work of Southampton City Council, which has received significant Government funding for its clean air programmes. It is doing a good job and should continue to do so. To be clear, as things stand, clean air zones can be implemented by any local authority. It should therefore be in the interests of all local authorities to do whatever they can to improve air quality for their local communities.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): Should not the air quality plan be seen in the wider context of the environment and tax changes? Is it not the case that the Government are in a more difficult position than they would be otherwise because of the legacy of the wrong-headed tax changes made by Labour? As a result of the ridiculous tax changes made under Gordon Brown, we more than doubled the number of diesel cars and increased the number of diesel vans to 3 million.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. It is interesting that several of Gordon Brown's and Tony Blair's advisers have come out in recent months to say that they were wrong to encourage the uptake of diesel vehicles to the extent that they did. Even the shadow International Trade Secretary has admitted that

"there's absolutely no question that the decision we took"—
on diesel—

"was the wrong decision."

This Government, as ever, are trying to clean up the mess that was started by Labour.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Emissions from industry are a major contributory factor in poor air quality, but great strides could be made to improve air quality in areas such as Teesside if the Government backed carbon capture and storage. We have been promised a Tory policy on that since the Tories ditched the funding two years ago. When will we get it?

Andrea Leadsom: As a former Energy Minister, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we have always been clear about the fact that carbon capture and storage will play a part in our future plans, but that has no impact on the NO₂ plan that we are talking about today.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): The Secretary of State has clearly set out the reasons for the delay, but in the intervening time, may I encourage her to strengthen our policies to encourage people to get out of their cars altogether? May I also urge her to read an article in this week's edition of *The BMJ* that clearly sets out the growing evidence of the benefits of active commuting, particularly by bicycle? Will she encourage us to get Britain cycling?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is right to raise that issue. The Government are a huge supporter of sustainable transport projects. We have invested £224 million in cycling since 2013, and £600 million in the delivery of transport projects across 77 local authorities through the local sustainable transport fund. As my hon. Friend says, we must do everything that we can to protect the quality of the air in our cities, and that includes changing the way in which people travel.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Having already congratulated the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), I am now delighted to congratulate the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) on his successful completion of the marathon yesterday. Despite that, he has sprung to his feet very impressively.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

The Secretary of State and other DEFRA Ministers will be well aware of the challenges facing Camelford, in my constituency, which was recently subjected to an air quality assessment, and which is in the very early stages of being granted a bypass. I hope that the Secretary of State will support me, and the local community, in our bid for a new bypass in Camelford.

Andrea Leadsom: I would love to be able to offer my hon. Friend a new bypass, but unfortunately that is outside my powers. I wish him luck with it, and I, too, congratulate him on his amazing achievement yesterday.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): If the present rate continues, there will be seven more dead people in Slough by the date on which the Secretary of State publishes the air quality plan. The whole point of *purdah* is that announcements should not be made unless they are significant in the context of urgent health issues. Is this not an urgent health issue? What will the Secretary of State say to the families of those seven people who will die before she even publishes?

Andrea Leadsom: As the right hon. Lady says, poor air quality is a public health issue. That is why we are taking urgent action, and we will ensure that a short delay in the timetable will not result in a delay in the implementation of the plan. By doing that, we will tackle this public health issue as quickly as possible without prejudicing our democratic process.

The need to safeguard public health is one example of a possible exceptional circumstance in which consultations could be published during *purdah*. However, that would generally apply only in the event of an unexpected public health emergency—such as, for example, contaminated food—which needed to be dealt with instantly, and this instance does not fall into that category.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Can the Government confirm that their approach to this issue remains technology-neutral, and that, in the context of hydrogen specifically, they will do what is necessary to ensure that we do not fall behind, for instance, Germany and California when it comes to cleaning up this terrible problem?

Andrea Leadsom: I can confirm that we are technology-neutral, and as part of our industrial strategy we are consulting on how to become a world leader in ultra-low emission vehicles of all types. There is a very good story to tell there; there is more to be done, but we are making good progress.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Air quality standards are breached regularly in my constituency from Chiswick, to Brentford, Isleworth and through to Hounslow. Do my constituents not deserve better on this issue, especially as the Government want to push ahead with runway 3 at Heathrow, which will only make the problem significantly worse?

Andrea Leadsom: I met the Mayor of London in my first week in office to discuss clean air, because the hon. Lady is right that it is a huge priority in all of our cities but particularly London, where there is rightly a huge focus on it. The Mayor is implementing the excellent work of my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) when he was the Mayor of London, and that continuity should continue to be a cross-party co-operation to solve what is a very serious issue for all of us.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my sadness at the lack of contrition displayed on the Opposition Benches,

given that Labour's unquestioned adoption of policy in the early part of the last decade resulted in a massive increase in the number of diesel vehicles, making the air in places such as Westbury in my constituency considerably more toxic?

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. A number of advisers and, indeed, serving Members on the Labour Benches now admit that their decision to promote diesel between 2000 and 2008 was not the right decision. The decision to promote diesel was a great shame, because we are now trying to deal with some of the consequences of that. It is important that we have cross-party co-operation to try to make sure that we tackle what is a very significant issue.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): As we all know, air pollution contributes to the premature deaths of tens of thousands of people, but do I take it from the Secretary of State's previous answer that she thinks air pollution is only a public health issue and is not categorically a public health emergency?

Andrea Leadsom: Clean air is a top priority for this Government. We have been working on our new proposals for the last five months and are ready to go with them. We are now seeking a very short deferral to meet the propriety rules around purdah, but we do not expect that that will delay the implementation of our plans to deal with what is a very significant and urgent concern.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I wore an air quality monitor as part of the Environmental Audit Committee inquiry into air emissions. It showed that the Mill Hill Broadway bus station had levels of pollution as high as Oxford Street's, which is a huge concern for my constituents. Does the Secretary of State share my concern that some directly elected mayors will use this as an opportunity to introduce congestion charges on motorists who were told to buy diesel vehicles, not use that money for air quality, and in addition take money from DEFRA for addressing the same problem?

Andrea Leadsom: The Prime Minister has made it very clear that this Government are on the side of ordinary working families and businesses. She has said that we are very conscious of the fact that past Governments have encouraged people to buy diesel cars and that we need to take that into account when looking at what we do in the future.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I, in the nicest possible way, put the Secretary of State right on this? She has had to be dragged to the House to make this statement and has been putting off major decisions for the future on important issues right across her Department, but may I put the record straight just on the facts? My constituents will not understand when children are being poisoned now, when pregnant women are being poisoned now and when pedestrians and cyclists are being poisoned that she is making some obscure reference to purdah to stop us doing something about it. I remind her that it is two years since the Volkswagen scandal broke, and she has done nothing in those two years.

Andrea Leadsom: In truth, what this Government did was to lead the EU in sorting out the emissions calculations, to make sure that they were accurate. A few years ago,

the EU's wrong-headed emissions assessments relating to the VW cheating were just that: they were wrong. Subsequently, this Government have led the way in pressing for better calculations and assessments. We have been working extremely hard to get our plans ready, and this will be a very short deferral to comply with propriety rules. We will publish our plan as soon as possible after the general election, after which we do not believe there will be any delay in implementation. That will take place in the shortest possible time, because this is a very important issue.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): You will want to know, Mr Speaker, that on Friday, I launched the new double-decker fleet for the X3 bus service that runs from Salisbury to Bournemouth via God's own towns of Ringwood and Fordingbridge. The fleet combines convenience and comfort with lower emissions than those from the lawnmower that I pushed round my garden on Saturday evening. If the Secretary of State wants to break the unrelieved tedium of the purdah of which she has spoken over the next few weeks, I recommend that she joins me in breathing deeply the fresh air of the Avon valley on the X3 service.

Mr Speaker: It is always of interest to learn about the right hon. Gentleman's domestic activities and to discover that, to his great credit, despite the receipt of his knighthood, he remains truly a man of the people. I am only sorry that we do not have photographs of him pushing his lawnmower around, but I suspect that it is only a matter of time.

Andrea Leadsom: I hope that my right hon. Friend has an electric lawnmower to go with his electric buses. He will be aware that, in the autumn statement, the Chancellor announced £150 million to support low-emissions buses and taxis—including support for retrofitting buses and for boosting the UK retrofit industry—to ensure that wherever I go in the country, I will be able to breathe deeply and enjoy the non-fumes from new, low-emission vehicles. This is incredibly important and it is this Government who are taking action.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The Secretary of State might have met the Mayor of London, but it is he who is taking action on air quality while her Government sit on their hands. Does she agree with Sadiq Khan that this is the biggest environmental crisis of our time? If so, will the Government review one of their worst environmental decisions—to build a third runway at Heathrow?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is exactly wrong to say that this Government have not taken action. I have given countless examples of how we are taking action. We have recently issued more than £3.5 million of grants to particular councils for particular projects. It is this Government who are taking action. As I have made clear, we have seen significant reductions in all five of the major pollutants in recent years. In answer to the hon. Gentleman's point about the expansion of Heathrow, that will take place only provided that the air quality can be ensured—

Andy Slaughter: That is never going to happen.

Andrea Leadsom: Well, those plans have not yet come forward.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that pollution is a serious problem, but that for the Mayor of London to demonise the drivers of diesel cars and to use pollution concerns as a smokescreen for fleecing motorists through more taxes is not the answer, particularly as Transport for London figures show that diesel cars represent 10% of the problem? The Mayor should be dealing with 100% of the problem, not just 10%.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is exactly right to say that all councils that have air quality problems will need to tackle them and to deal with 100% of the problem. As the Prime Minister has said, a number of people were encouraged to buy diesel cars by the last Labour Government, and we want to take those people's needs into account so that we do not end up penalising them for decisions that they took in good faith.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The latest figures show that new cars are failing to filter out polluted air, and that the air inside them can be up to 10 times more toxic than the air on the footpath because the ventilation in the cars is not working correctly. The Secretary of State has given us a timescale for the consultation process and the comeback from it. Can she give us an idea of when the legislation will come to this House for endorsement?

Andrea Leadsom: The timetable we have set out to account for purdah is that we will publish our plans on 30 June, with a final plan by 15 September. Legislation will come into place as soon as possible afterwards, but we will be able to start straightaway on the work that needs to be done to come to comply with that plan.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP) *rose*—

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I call Carol Monaghan.

Carol Monaghan: Good choice, Mr Speaker. Electric vehicles will reduce emissions in our city centres and improve urban air quality. Without support for renewables,

however, any air quality plan simply shifts pollution from urban to rural areas because such electric vehicles need to be plugged into the grid to charge. Does the Secretary of State agree that support for renewables is key when we consider future electric vehicles and should be included in any air quality plan?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sure the hon. Lady would agree that this Government have done more to support renewables than most others. We have a good track record on boosting renewable electricity generation, and we want and expect to see the majority of recharging taking place at home at night, after the peak in electricity demand. Home recharging should be supported by workplace recharging for commuters and fleets, with a targeted amount of public infrastructure where it will be most used, but I am sure she will also be delighted that in the 2016 autumn statement the Chancellor announced a further £290 million to support electric vehicles, low-emission buses and taxis and alternative fuels.

Patrick Grady: Unfortunately, Glasgow is still something of an air pollution hotspot. Byres Road in my constituency and Hope Street in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) are both particularly affected. There is a city action plan, and we hope if and when the Scottish National party takes control of the city next week, or the week after, it will bring a breath of fresh air. Does the Secretary of State welcome the action of local campaign groups such as Action Hillhead and the Glasgow University climate action society both in raising awareness and in encouraging people to take local action to improve air quality in their area?

Andrea Leadsom: I am always delighted to welcome the actions of local voluntary bodies to try to change the way people travel and to encourage the take-up of good, healthy cycling and all the rest. Why not walking where we can, too? Poor air quality is often the result of people needing to use their own vehicles, vans and so on. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that air quality policy is a devolved matter, so our plan is a shared plan between all four nations of the United Kingdom. We will all be publishing that as soon as we can.

Points of Order

4.12 pm

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You will be aware that I requested an urgent question following the discovery at my advice surgery last Friday that the Home Office hotline for MPs had been due to shut that day at 5 pm and not to reopen until after the general election. I later discovered that that was the practice for a number of Government hotlines, which are mechanisms that enable MPs—as you know, we are Members of Parliament until next Tuesday—to get justice for their constituents.

Following that request, my office got a telephone call from the Cabinet Office saying, “Please withdraw it. We don’t really want to answer this.” I did not accede to that request, and what seemed to happen thereafter is that a whole load of hotlines started reopening. I quite understand why you did not grant my request for an urgent question, Mr Speaker, because it seems that just asking you had a result. As a champion of the Back Bencher, will you use your best efforts to make sure that the original plan to cut off this service to Members of Parliament does not occur until after this Parliament is dissolved?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady. The Leader of the House is in his place and, notwithstanding the right hon. Lady’s excoriating remarks about the Government, it may be his wish to clarify the matter as he thinks fit. I can say only that I will always do my best for Back-Bench Members.

As the right hon. Lady has announced her intention to leave the House, perhaps I can wish her great good fortune, health and happiness in all she goes on to do.

I am very conscious that she and I entered the House together 20 years ago, and we have come to know each other well over the past two decades. I say with feeling, best wishes and good luck.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. It might be for the convenience of the House if I were just to clarify that the understanding I have from the Cabinet Office is that there were some technical problems with one or two lines at the end of last week, but it was never, and certainly is not, the intention of the Government that these rules should be applied at this stage. They will of course come into force, as is normal, at the Dissolution of the House, when all Members cease to have the position of being a Member of Parliament.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. This morning, my office contacted UK Visas and Immigration only to be told that we are now in purdah and it would not talk to us, even about ongoing cases. Clearly, there is an inconsistency of advice going on, and I wonder whether the Leader of the House could respond.

Mr Lidington: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. The position is exactly as I set out in response to the point made by the right hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart).

Mr Speaker: I hope that will prove to be adequate in the coming days. I am most grateful to the Leader of the House for what he has just said, and I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan).

Business of the House (24, 25, 26 and 27 April)

4.16 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington): I beg to move,

That the following provisions shall have effect:

SITTINGS ON 24, 25, 26 AND 27 APRIL

(1) At today's sitting and the sittings on Tuesday 25 April, Wednesday 26 April and Thursday 27 April—

- (a) Standing Orders Nos. 83D to 83H and 83I(2), (3) and (6) (conclusion of proceedings etc) shall apply to proceedings to be taken in accordance with this Order, but with the omission of Standing Orders Nos. 83D(2)(c) and 83E(2)(c);
- (b) no notice shall be required of any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown and any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown may be proceeded with, though opposed, after the moment of interruption and shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House;
- (c) no Motion to alter the order in which proceedings on a Bill are taken, to recommit a Bill or to vary or supplement the provisions of this Order shall be made except by a Minister of the Crown.

(2) (a) A Motion referred to in paragraph (1) (c) may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

- (b) The Question on such a Motion shall be put forthwith; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(3) (a) At today's sitting and the sitting on Tuesday 25 April, Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply, except to questions on Motions in the name of a Minister of the Crown to approve a statutory instrument.

- (b) At the sittings on Wednesday 26 April and Thursday 27 April, Standing Order No.41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.

MONDAY 24 APRIL

Finance (No. 2) Bill

(4) The Finance (No. 2) Bill shall be committed to a Committee of the whole House.

Northern Ireland (Ministerial Appointments and Regional Rates) Bill

(5) Paragraphs (6) to (11) apply to proceedings on the Northern Ireland (Ministerial Appointments and Regional Rates) Bill.

(6) Notices of Amendments, new Clauses or new Schedules to be moved in Committee of the whole House may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before the Bill has been read a second time.

(7) Proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be taken at today's sitting in accordance with paragraphs (8) to (11).

(8) Proceedings on Second Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) four hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

(9) When the Bill has been read a second time—

- (a) it shall, despite Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of bills not subject to a programme order), stand committed to a Committee of the whole House without any Question being put;
- (b) the House shall immediately resolve itself into a Committee of the whole House on the Bill.

(10) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) six hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

(11) If the Bill is reported with amendments, the House shall proceed to consider the Bill as amended without any Question being put.

Other business

(12) At today's sitting—

- (a) any Lords Amendments or Lords Message in respect of any Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put (and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly);
- (b) proceedings on any Lords Amendments or Lords Message in respect of any Bill shall be brought to a conclusion (unless already concluded) one hour after their commencement (and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed).

TUESDAY 25 APRIL

Finance (No. 2) Bill

(13) Paragraph (14) applies to proceedings on the Finance (No. 2) Bill.

(14) At the sitting on Tuesday 25 April—

- (a) the House shall resolve itself into a Committee of the whole House on the Bill without considering any notice of an instruction to the Committee;
- (b) proceedings in Committee of the whole House shall be brought to a conclusion (unless already concluded) four hours after their commencement;
- (c) any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (unless already concluded) five hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House;
- (d) if the Bill is reported with amendments, the House shall proceed to consider the Bill as amended without any Question being put.

(15) Paragraph (14) shall have effect notwithstanding the practice of the House as to the intervals between stages of a Bill brought in upon Ways and Means Resolutions.

Other business

(16) At the sitting on Tuesday 25 April—

- (a) any Lords Amendments or Lords Message in respect of any Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put (and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly);
- (b) proceedings on any Lords Amendments or Lords Message in respect of the Health Service Medical Supplies (Costs) Bill or any other Bill shall be brought to a conclusion (unless already concluded) one hour after their commencement (and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed).

WEDNESDAY 26 APRIL

(17) At the sitting on Wednesday 26 April—

- (a) any Lords Amendments or Lords Message in respect of any Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put (and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly);
- (b) proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments to the Digital Economy Bill shall be brought to a conclusion (unless already concluded) three hours after their commencement;
- (c) proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments to the Criminal Finances Bill shall be brought to a conclusion (unless already concluded) two hours after their commencement;

- (d) subject to sub-paragraphs (b) and (c), proceedings on any Lords Amendments or Lords Message in respect of any Bill shall be brought to a conclusion (unless already concluded) one hour after their commencement (and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed).

THURSDAY 27 APRIL

(18) On Thursday 27 April there shall be no sitting in Westminster Hall.

(19) At the sitting on Thursday 27 April—

- (a) any Lords Amendments or Lords Message in respect of any Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put (and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly);
- (b) proceedings on any Lords Amendments or Lords Message in respect of any Bill shall be brought to a conclusion (unless already concluded) one hour after their commencement (and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed).

GENERAL

(20) Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) shall not apply in relation to any proceedings to which this Order applies.

(21) In this Order, a reference to proceedings on or in respect of a Bill includes a reference to any of the following—

- (a) proceedings on any Motion to alter the order in which proceedings on or in respect of a Bill are considered;
- (b) proceedings on any Procedure Resolution, Money Resolution or Ways and Means Resolution in relation to proceedings on or in respect of a Bill;
- (c) proceedings on any Motion under Standing Order No. 83M (Consent Motions for certified England only or England and Wales only provisions) or 83N (Reconsideration of bills so far as there is absence of consent), and a reference to a stage in proceedings on or in respect of a Bill includes any proceedings mentioned in sub-paragraphs (a) to (c) that are relevant to that stage.
- (22) (a) The start of any emergency debate under Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) to be held at today's sitting, at the sitting on Tuesday 25 April or at the sitting on Wednesday 26 April shall be postponed until the conclusion of the proceedings at that sitting to which this Order applies.
- (b) No debate shall be held in accordance with Standing Order No. 24 at the sitting on Thursday 27 April.
- (23) (a) Any private business which has been deferred to a time appointed under Standing Order No. 20 (Time for taking private business) for consideration at today's sitting or at the sitting on Tuesday 25 April, Wednesday 26 April or Thursday 27 April shall, instead of being considered as provided by Standing Orders or by any Order of the House, be postponed until the conclusion of proceedings at that sitting to which this Order applies.

(b) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to the private business so far as necessary for the purpose of securing that the business may be considered for a period of three hours.

(24) (a) At today's sitting and the sittings on Tuesday 25 April and Wednesday 26 April, the Speaker shall not adjourn the House until any Messages from the Lords have been received and any Committee to draw up Reasons has reported.

(b) At the sitting on Thursday 27 April, the Speaker shall not adjourn the House before a Message has been received from the Lords Commissioners.

(25) If today's sitting continues after 11.30 a.m. on Tuesday 25 April, this Order shall have effect as if any reference to the sitting on Tuesday 25 April were a reference to today's sitting.

(26) If the sitting on Tuesday 25 April continues after 11.30 a.m. on Wednesday 26 April, this Order shall have effect as if any reference to the sitting on Wednesday 26 April were a reference to the sitting on Tuesday 25 April.

(27) If the sitting on Wednesday 26 April continues after 9.30 a.m. on Thursday 27 April, this Order shall have effect as if any reference to the sitting on Thursday 27 April were a reference to the sitting on Wednesday 26 April.

(28) If today's sitting, the sitting on Tuesday 25 April or the sitting on Wednesday 26 April continues as described in any of paragraphs (25) to (27), any business set down for consideration at the later sitting mentioned in that paragraph may be considered at the continued sitting, notwithstanding the practice of the House which forbids the bringing forward of an Order of the Day.

The purpose of the motion is simply to allow for the orderly conclusion of the business currently before the House before the House is prorogued. The provisions are being made for the convenience of the House, so that we can bring proceedings on our business to a swift and orderly conclusion.

4.17 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for bringing this motion to the House and for the helpful explanatory note, which runs to three pages and is available in the Vote Office. May I also thank the staff for the expeditious way in which they are dealing with the future business, given the forthcoming general election?

4.17 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I simply wish to thank the Leader of the House for bringing this motion to the House and say to him that he can rest assured that we will scrutinise everything in our normal fashion.

Question put and agreed to.

Northern Ireland (Ministerial Appointments and Regional Rates) Bill

Second Reading

4.18 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Before I move forward with this business, I would like to pay tribute to those in the Police Service of Northern Ireland and in other emergency services who spent yesterday keeping people safe from a significant bomb placed by dissident republican terrorists next to a primary school in north Belfast. I am sickened by this incident, which has caused outrage in the community and far beyond. It is clear that the consequences could have been utterly devastating. Potentially to put children, the wider community and police officers in danger shows a wanton disregard for life. This shows these terrorists for who and what they really are, and is a potent reminder that they have nothing to offer.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the Secretary of State accept that the attempts this morning by the BBC to try somehow to justify what the terrorists did at the weekend on the basis that there had been no political progress shows the kind of banal reporting we get from the BBC? It is not worthy of a publicly funded body.

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman has made his point in his own way. All I will say is that this was an appalling incident for which there was no justification whatsoever. I think the whole House would wish to pay tribute to the PSNI and all those agencies that do such an incredible job in seeking to provide security for Northern Ireland, for the risks that they often put themselves under as a consequence of that work and for the incredible contribution that they make.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): Does the Secretary of State agree that it is not enough for political parties and individuals to say that they support the rule of law? Surely it is incumbent on us all to support the individual officers who come from right across the community to serve all of the community. We should all be giving them our wholehearted support.

James Brokenshire: The right hon. Gentleman makes a powerful and important point about the incredible job that the PSNI does, the contribution that it makes and what that often means for its officers. I have a huge amount of respect for their professionalism and the personal dedication that they bring. I am sure the whole House would wish to underline that message of support for the incredible job that they do.

Moving on to the Bill, I have updated the House twice on the political situation in Northern Ireland in recent weeks: in my oral statement on 28 March and in my written ministerial statement last week. On both occasions, I set out that I would seek to bring forward legislation with two aims in mind: to provide the legal basis for an Executive to form, and to set a regional rate to enable that important source of revenue to be collected. As we approach the final week of this Parliament, now is the right time to deal with both those matters, in order

to provide greater certainty for the people of Northern Ireland and to provide the opportunity for the parties to come together to secure the resumption of devolved government.

The background leading up to the introduction of the Bill will be familiar to many in the House. The collapse of the previous Executive in January placed a duty on me to set a date for a further election. I did so in January, and the election itself was held on 2 March. Since then, the UK Government have been engaged in talks with the political parties and, as appropriate, the Irish Government, in accordance with the well-established three-stranded approach. The talks have had one clear purpose: to re-establish an inclusive, devolved Administration in line with the 1998 Belfast agreement and its successors. Progress was made on several fronts during that phase on the formation of an Executive, including the budget and programme for government.

There was progress on legacy, too. Constructive discussions took place with all the parties on the detail of the legacy institutions set out in the Stormont House agreement and on the need to reform legacy inquests. Although no one will underestimate the challenge of addressing the legacy of the past, the proposals are now sufficiently developed that the next step should be to publish them for consultation. That way, we can listen to the views of victims and survivors and all those who will be most affected by the proposed new institutions.

Despite the progress that was made, there remains a defined number of outstanding issues on which there is a lack of agreement between the parties, and it was clear that a period of reflection was necessary to give the impetus for the discussions to conclude positively. It was with that in mind that the talks were paused over Easter. Since then, meetings have continued between the parties. The restoration of devolved government remains achievable, and it remains the absolute priority. It will, though, require more time and more focused engagement by the parties on the critical issues that remain, building on the discussions over the past seven weeks. The Bill would provide the space, and the opportunity, for the parties to do just that. We will remove the current legal barriers so that the Assembly can meet and an Executive can be formed at any point from Royal Assent to 29 June—three weeks after the general election.

We recognise that there will be focus on the general election, which is why the Bill provides parties with the scope and space to continue discussions to resolve their outstanding issues, while providing a period of reflection for the new Government if a deal still does not prove possible. That said, it remains highly desirable for the parties to continue to work to make progress quickly for the reasons that I have set out, and this Bill does not preclude the formation of an Executive sooner if the parties wish that to happen. That is an important point. In passing this Bill, we make it clear that the responsibility now lies with the parties to come together and make progress, and as I have indicated, I strongly believe that that can still happen. We have removed the legal barrier to progress, enabling an Executive to form without the need for a further Assembly election. If the parties have the will to make progress between now and the end of June, the platform is in place for them to do just that. In the meantime, we should not lose sight of the benefits

that an agreement would have for the people of Northern Ireland. I am sure that that will be the hope of those voters who gave the parties a mandate on 2 March.

I pay tribute to the Opposition for their constructive and positive engagement in the process leading up to the introduction of this Bill. I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson) who may be making his final appearance at the Dispatch Box as shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Despite our broader political differences, I thank him for the overall support that he and his party have given me since I became Secretary of State in July. Northern Ireland undoubtedly benefits from the broadly bipartisan approach that we take in this House and, whatever the result of the general election, I hope that that will always continue. I wish him all the very, very best for the future. I know that his presence will be missed by many across this House who will wish him well in whatever new opportunities and new challenges he takes forward.

Moving to the substance of the Bill, clause 1 would remove the present legal barrier to an Executive being able to form to implement any deal that has been reached. It would retrospectively reset the 14-day clock in the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which expired on 27 March, with a 108-day period, removing the present duty on me to set a date for an election, with it arising again at 4 pm on 29 June if an Executive have not been formed by that point. This will provide the space for an Executive to form, and makes it clear that the responsibility for progress lies with the parties—indeed that duty to form an Executive and appoint Ministers in that process. As necessary, it would provide a period for further talks in the new Parliament, allowing all sides to take stock and move forward if a deal is not already in place. It would also mean that, if a deal is not struck, there is a period for the new Government properly to consider the way forward. That is important. In the absence of a deal, significant decisions will need to be made in the new Parliament to provide political stability in Northern Ireland. However, it will be for the parties to seize the opportunity, whether in the coming weeks or soon after, to deliver the Executive that they have so clear a mandate to secure.

I have mentioned the two acute issues of financial uncertainty caused by the lack of an Executive. The first is the absence of a 2017-18 regional rate, which represents more than 5% of the total revenue available to the Northern Ireland Executive. Normally, this would have been set by the Department of Finance earlier this year, via an affirmative rates order in the Assembly. That would have enabled bills to be issued in 10 instalments, giving certainty to ratepayers and allowing various payment reliefs to be applied. However, time has nearly run out for that course. If no rate is set in the next few days, there will be fewer bills in higher instalments, and the longer it takes to set a rate, the worse that situation will become. The only outcome would be bad debt, lost revenue, uncertainty and hardship.

Although we are clear that this is a devolved matter, we are also clear that only the UK Government can take action to secure the interests of individuals, businesses and indeed the Executive. Clause 2 would address the issue by setting a 2017-18 regional rate in Northern Ireland. It does so by setting “pence per pound” rates for both domestic and non-domestic properties. These

rates represent a 1.6% inflationary increase, the same approach as was taken by the Executive in setting a rate the year before. As we make clear in subsections (4) and (5), it would not cut across the continuing right of the Executive to set a rate by order in the usual way, so this would be the most limited step available to us, taken at a point beyond which we cannot delay.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): The Secretary of State is outlining very well the business that this House may have to do and the business that he has to do today. But does he accept that we would not be in this place were it not for the arrogance of Sinn Féin, who walked away from the Executive and left Northern Ireland in the predicament we are in today?

James Brokenshire: What I can say to the hon. Gentleman is that in the recent election a clear mandate was set for the resumption of an inclusive devolved Government in Northern Ireland, and the focus needs to lie on that, on getting the Executive back into position and on dealing with the differences between the parties in Northern Ireland. We should all feel a responsibility for seeing an Executive back in position, working to serve the best interests and needs of the people of Northern Ireland. Ultimately, that is where our absolute and resolute attention should lie.

For completeness, although it is not covered in the Bill, I should say that the second financial matter is the lack of a 2017-18 budget. Its absence has meant that since the beginning of this month civil servants alone have been in charge of allocating cash, which is clearly not an acceptable solution for the longer term. Before Easter, therefore, I made it clear that I would provide further assurance in that regard if an Executive were not in place, consistent with the UK Government’s ultimate responsibility for political stability in Northern Ireland, so I wish to take this opportunity to provide further clarity to people, businesses and public services in Northern Ireland.

We very much hope, as I have said, that we will see an Executive up and running as soon as possible, but if that does not prove possible, I want to put on record that this Government would be prepared, as a last resort, to pass an Appropriation Act in the next session to provide legislative authority for the expenditure of Northern Ireland Departments. That is not a step that any Government would take lightly, but this House must not forget the duties we must uphold for the people of Northern Ireland.

Sammy Wilson: The Secretary of State has identified a very important issue—the lack of a budget—but does he accept that even with the assurances he has given to the House today there are still tens of thousands of people in the voluntary and community sector who depend on money from Government Departments of which they cannot be assured at this stage, that their jobs are therefore in jeopardy and that they face uncertainty? The longer he leaves this decision, the more he leaves people in that sector of the economy in a vulnerable position.

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland. I have very much had that

[James Brokenshire]

sector at the front of my mind in publishing my written ministerial statement and in saying what I have this afternoon, knowing that some people have been put on protected notice and about the impact of uncertainty on whether payments will be continued beyond the current window. I know the civil service and Departments have already given assurances on funding for three months, but what further assurance can be given? By providing comfort to permanent secretaries through my written ministerial statement, I am advised that Departments will be able to extend current letters of comfort to give greater support and flexibility for the voluntary and community sector.

The broader point made by the hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) about the need for greater certainty and for a budget to be put in place is absolutely right. This is not a situation that can continue for much longer, which is why I have said what I have about the preparedness of this Government, if re-elected, to make steps to seek an Appropriation Bill should that prove necessary. As I have indicated, I earnestly hope that that will not prove necessary and that an Executive can and will be formed to make those decisions. In no way does the statement that I have made today cut across an Executive's ability to take up position and set a budget in due course.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): Flexibility is a key point in running the budget. Civil servants run their departments well with their budget, but those little bits of flexibility matter when we as politicians are asked to help people. How does the Secretary of State envisage that working if we do not have a functioning Assembly? Will there be some mechanism so that people on the ground who have lost money or cannot do something are listened to?

James Brokenshire: The clearest way is for an Executive to be formed. That is the most direct way for assurances to be given and direction to be provided. The lack of political direction at the moment underpins the need for an Executive and political decision making in Northern Ireland at the earliest opportunity. As I have indicated to the House this afternoon, the UK Government are prepared to take action should that be necessary. Our sense of responsibility as the UK Government is to provide the necessary political stability and assurance for the people of Northern Ireland.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): To be absolutely clear, is the Secretary of State stating to the House from the Dispatch Box that the choice is clear: it is devolution or direct rule? By putting in place the points that he has made about appropriations, the ground is being laid for direct rule if that is required.

James Brokenshire: I do not want in any way to prejudice the outcome of the coming weeks. I earnestly hope, believe and want to see devolved government re-established in Northern Ireland. That is profoundly in the best interests of Northern Ireland, so that there is local decision making. There should be a strong message across the House of wanting to put that in position at the earliest opportunity. I have been careful in what I have said in laying out the position on the budget, and I have given assurances to allow flexibility for the Northern

Ireland civil service to use residual emergency powers to deal with the pressures that it is experiencing and to ensure that public services continue to be run.

I have published a written ministerial statement that sets out indicative departmental allocations which reflect the budget priorities and decisions of the last Executive. They provide a basis for allocations in the absence of an Executive. It is important to make the point that those numbers are not UK Government numbers, but reflect the advice of the head of the Northern Ireland civil service and his assessment of a position that takes account of the priorities of the political parties before the Dissolution of the Assembly, as well as further allocations that he considers are required. They are intended to give clarity to Northern Ireland Departments about the basis on which they may wish to plan and prepare for more detailed decisions, and to discharge their responsibilities in the meantime.

We should, however, make it clear that those totals would not constrain the freedom of an incoming Executive to amend spending allocations, nor would it prevent the UK Government from reflecting on the final allocations in the light of circumstances at the appropriate time. I underline the position set out in the Bill. If agreement is not reached by 29 June, the electoral duty would essentially return to the Secretary of State, who would call an election in a reasonable period. Any incoming Government would need to reflect carefully on the stability of Northern Ireland and, as I have said, the need to deal with certain financial issues. We need to be resolutely focused on the need to get an Executive into position. That is precisely what the Bill allows for.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement, but has he seen the slightest indication from Sinn Féin, in the detailed and long negotiations that he has no doubt had so far, that they might consider being part of an Executive?

James Brokenshire: Yes, I have. That is why I believe that agreement is possible. The discussions that have taken place over recent weeks have shown where the space for agreement and compromise may lie. It is important that the Bill provides that space and opportunity for the parties to be able to find resolution of the outstanding issues and get back into devolved government, which is what the people of Northern Ireland voted for.

To go back to the budget, that budget does not allocate the resource and capital funding provided in the Chancellor's March Budget. This funding was not allocated before the dissolution of the last Executive, and it is right that funding is available for parties to allocate to further priorities as they deem appropriate. Further detail on the spending plans will need to be provided through the Appropriation Act. My hope and belief is that the Act will be taken through the Northern Ireland Assembly, but that obviously relies on the Executive being formed. As I have indicated, that is where the focus should lie. If not, as I have said, we would be prepared to legislate to provide certainty, in line with our ultimate responsibility for political stability and good governance in Northern Ireland.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Will the Secretary of State clarify whether, in his mind, such legislation in that context would amount to direct rule in the sense

that we have always know it, or would it be some form of downloadable legislative cover for administrative governance when it comes to further budget setting?

James Brokenshire: Again, I would not want to prejudice what the situation might be. That will be for an incoming Government. My point remains that that does not need to be the outcome. The outcome we want is for an Executive to be formed and a devolved Government to be in place, making decisions in Northern Ireland for the people of Northern Ireland. That is why I make these point about what the Bill provides and how it gives the space to allow that to happen. That must be the focus of us all in the time ahead.

By passing this Bill, we can provide the scope and space for a deal to be done by the parties. I will be working intensively with the parties to secure that outcome in the weeks ahead. Northern Ireland needs the restoration of an inclusive devolved Government working in Northern Ireland's best interests. That is what the people of Northern Ireland voted for. It is what will deliver the public services that people rely upon, and it is what businesses, community groups and individuals across Northern Ireland want. The Bill will secure a framework within which that can be delivered. I commend it to the House.

4.43 pm

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): I thank my comrade, my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith), for being here.

I totally agree with the Secretary of State's opening words about what happened yesterday in Northern Ireland. This is clearly not where we need to be, and that is the main reason why we need to get resolution, and to get the Executive back up and running again. I also thank him for the kind words he said about me and the role that I have tried to play in this House. I congratulate him on the work that he has done and shared with me over difficult times to try to find a way forward.

I never wanted this debate to take place or to participate in it. The reality is that this is combined political failure on the part of all politicians right across these islands. The failure to constantly shape the crucial progress of confidence and trust has led to the sad situation facing us today. Not many years ago, the world looked on with a mixture of amazement and admiration when people and politicians put to one side centuries of animosity and hatred to build a new future for the people they served. Today we risk losing that vision.

As this Bill comes before the House, I am mindful of the issues that have caused the current impasse. Northern Ireland has seen drastic changes over the past few decades and difficult challenges have been overcome. The current challenges should not, by any means, be insurmountable—these are clearly less serious matters than those that faced us in 1998 or 2007—but the repercussions of failure are equally serious and dangerous. With good will on all sides, agreement could be reached, but people will have to compromise.

There are a number of areas that I wish to highlight. The first, which is one of the sticking points that has been raised, is equalities. The hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) mentioned the intransigence of Sinn Féin, and none of us is surprised that it is acting in an

intransigent manner. What has surprised me about the position in which we find ourselves is the strength of feelings about the break-up of the Executive right across the nationalist community—it is not just one political party that has real concerns.

One of these serious concerns is about the failure to move on equality legislation. The Democratic Unionist party is proudly a party of Unionism, yet it seeks to limit the equality rights of people in Northern Ireland—access to abortion, and the rights of members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community. Those rights are seen in every other part of the United Kingdom, so why does it oppose their extension throughout our United Kingdom? Why should two people who love each other not be able to show that in a formal marriage ceremony in Northern Ireland as they can in Great Britain? Why should a woman in Northern Ireland not have the right to choose what she does with her own body? Surely those ideas of equality and fairness are as core to those people's identities as they are to the identity of myself and every other person living on these islands.

Another sticking point—again, we are hoping to see progress on this—is the Irish language. This is another example of how rights that are enjoyed by people across Great Britain are not available in Northern Ireland. In Wales and Scotland, legislation provides protections for the respective indigenous languages. Even in Cornwall there is a council-backed Cornish language strategy. Why do some in the Unionist community want to deprive many in Northern Ireland of the same advantages?

Sammy Wilson: Before the shadow spokesman pontificates on these issues, he should at least try to get his facts right. In Northern Ireland, £171 million has already been spent on giving those in the Irish language community the ability to have their own schools—some schools have opened with fewer than 14 children—to have street names written in the Irish language and to have departmental letter headings in the Irish language, as well as to address a whole range of other issues. If the hon. Gentleman is going to pontificate about the promotion of the Irish language, he should at least get his facts right.

Mr Anderson: I am more than happy to leave it to others to pontificate—they have had much more practice of that than me. The point I am making is that there is a difference in the protections in Northern Ireland, and protection is what the nationalist community has asked for. There is not the same legislative basis as in Wales and Scotland, and that is one thing that politicians in Northern Ireland could put right tomorrow. They could have put it right in the last 10 years, and they could have put it right after the talks broke down in January, but they have so far chosen not to.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: The shadow Secretary of State is going through a list of Sinn Féin demands, but I just wish he would come and talk to DUP Members from time to time, because we have issues. One of those is the armed forces covenant, which is implemented in full in every part of the United Kingdom except for Northern Ireland. Will he now join us in demanding that Sinn Féin honours the obligation to fully implement the armed forces covenant in Northern Ireland?

Mr Anderson: The right hon. Gentleman, for whom I have a lot of respect, says that I am promoting what Sinn Féin is saying. I have been very clear about the issues that have led to the impasse—they are not just Sinn Féin issues. I am raising these issues for this House, and for the people outside in the rest of Great Britain who might not have the inside knowledge that he has, to try to identify where the problems are and to point out that people can negotiate their way out of things if they want to.

On talking to the right hon. Gentleman's party, I met his leader last week to discuss these very issues. I am very pleased that she is prepared to have discussions across the board. We are trying, as we always have, to work in a non-partisan way.

On the armed forces covenant, I am pleased that the Chairman of the Northern Ireland Committee, the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson), is in the Chamber. We worked together on the covenant. We agreed a report that called on all parties to do the right thing by the people who have served our country, so I do not need to take any lectures from the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) on the armed forces covenant.

I welcome the discussions that the parties have been having. I believe that we can reach an agreement that is not only beneficial to the Irish language community, but—this point has been raised with me by the right hon. Gentleman's leader in Northern Ireland—that gets more support and respect for the needs and heritage of the Ulster Scots community. I believe that that could be negotiated if people were serious about trying to find a way forward. I understand why some of the parties in Northern Ireland are against legislating on this: it is seen as a side deal that was done by Tony Blair many years ago. That might have been right or wrong at the time, but things have moved on. This is another relatively small step in the right direction that could be made today to try to resolve the outstanding issues.

Ian Paisley: Does the hon. Gentleman honestly believe in his heart that any of the things that he has read out today have led to the breakdown of the Assembly? If so, he is really saying that he does not believe in devolution, and that no region of the United Kingdom should have its differences recognised, which devolution allows for, because everything should just be the same across the United Kingdom.

Mr Anderson: As somebody who has been a passionate supporter of devolution for many years, I do not accept that criticism.

We have a situation that is at breaking point, and we need to find a way forward. Before I came to this House, I spent all my life in negotiating situations and conflict resolution as a trade union representative. It should be possible to resolve the situation, but that will not happen as long as people are saying that they are not prepared to move on this, that or the other. I am talking about people on both sides, as I shall set out later in my speech. Unless people are prepared to move, the reality is that this House will probably have to take back direct control in Northern Ireland, which would be in nobody's interests. It would not be in the interests of devolution or of people governing themselves.

I want to move on to the legacy situation. Clearly one of the biggest issues facing all of us—this has been the case for many years—is how we deal with Northern Ireland's tragic past. The truth is that we have all collectively failed the victims of the troubles, and their ongoing suffering is only compounded by our lack of action. Regardless of the background, or whether they served in uniform, we are depriving them and their families of the truth and the closure that many of them want. The truth, regardless of how hard it is, must be heard.

During my many visits to Northern Ireland, I have heard details of many cases from families who lost loved ones, but one in particular has stayed with me: the case of Samuel Devenney. When I met his family last year, I was informed by them of the details surrounding his death in 1969. I would like the House to bear in mind that date—it is almost 50 years ago. That family have never had access to all the relevant files, which are now held by the Metropolitan police. They were due to be released into the national archives but, yet again, they have been reclassified and are being retained by the police service until at least 2022. That cannot be anything other than a travesty.

I ask Members to think about 1969—it was a very different world. I was a 15-year-old boy starting work as a coalminer. England had won the world cup a few years earlier. We had not joined the Common Market—*[Interruption.]* I thought that would get a cheer. We were two years away from decimalisation—perhaps that will be the subject of the next campaign. The Beatles were still friends, Brian Jones was still in the Rolling Stones, and Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin and Jim Morrison were still alive and making great music—*[Interruption.]* Yes, Labour was indeed in office, and doing great things.

At that time, however, on 19 April 1969, Mr Devenney died at the hands of Royal Ulster Constabulary officers, who were never prosecuted due to a lack of evidence. Mr Devenney was seen as one of the first victims of the troubles and still today his family are pleading for justice. This is just one of the many cases in Northern Ireland. The lack of progress made by countless Governments—Labour and Conservative—shows a dereliction of duty from us here in Westminster. I am not making a special case for Mr Devenney, other than to point out how long his family have gone without closure. That is completely and utterly unacceptable.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech about, it seems, every sin that has ever been committed by every person in Northern Ireland. As this Parliament comes to a close and there is a clear financial imperative for the Northern Ireland Government to be able to continue throughout our election period, when the Secretary of State and the UK Government will be somewhat constrained, and certainly during the Northern Ireland Assembly's Dissolution, does the hon. Gentleman accept that it would be more helpful if he made a positive contribution about how he can assist the Secretary of State, who has made a statesmanlike speech about bringing people together, rather than a divisive one, which is more in keeping with the leadership of the hon. Gentleman's party than his own spirit?

Mr Anderson: Perhaps my accent means that the hon. Gentleman is not getting what I am saying. I am talking about the realities on the ground. It is right and proper

that this House hears what the obstacles are. The Secretary of State and I have talked about them ad infinitum over the past few months. We have tried to play our part in resolving them and to say to the people over there that although there are issues, they are not huge. This is not about people being let out of jail, as they were 20 years ago, on-the-runs or people being pardoned. They are relatively small issues, but they are genuine. If we cannot resolve the issues of equality and legacy, what are we here for?

The hon. Gentleman referred to the Northern Ireland Government, but I remind him that the Assembly is not even sitting. I am very clear that we will, without doubt, offer support. I have also had discussions with the head of the civil service and I am determined that it will be allowed to have the powers that it will need to carry on supporting public services in Northern Ireland. I am a huge supporter of that, which is one of the reasons why I am involved in this work.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Given that we are trying to achieve consensus and talk about the issues seriously, the hon. Gentleman will no doubt wish to balance the examples he cites from one side with an acknowledgement that there are still many families in Northern Ireland who have never had a proper inquiry into—or, indeed, an explanation from Sinn Féin or the IRA about—what happened to their loved ones. It is only fair that he should reflect on that and perhaps say something about it.

Mr Anderson: If I had not been so generous in accepting interventions—I have been happy to do so—I would have come on to that point. I did point out that I raised that gentleman's case only because of how long ago it happened. We, as genuine, reasonable human beings—forget our status as politicians and our party affiliations—should be able to resolve matters and say that it is not right that, 48 years after something happened, families have not had the chance to see a report on the reason behind it.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I am sorry that I was not here for the start of the debate, but I was here in time to hear the hon. Gentleman's remarks about Mr Devenney and the Royal Ulster Constabulary. My late husband was very proud indeed of the extraordinary men and women who served with extraordinary courage and made an extraordinary sacrifice—302 RUC officers were murdered. Would the hon. Gentleman like to put on the record his thanks, gratitude and admiration for the RUC and the service it gave during the troubles in Northern Ireland?

Mr Anderson: I will do that, as I fully intended to do in my speech. I think the hon. Lady will confirm that although we might have a different view on the future of Ireland, we have worked together and we recognise the great role that those people have played. As much as anything, raising legacy issues is about getting the truth out for people who might have been unjustly castigated for years for something that was not their fault. Without clarity, truth and honesty, we will never get there.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: Following on from the comments of the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), may I help the hon. Gentleman with

an example? My cousin Samuel Donaldson was murdered by the Provisional IRA on 12 August 1970, along with his colleague Constable Roy Miller. They were the first two RUC officers to be murdered by the Provisional IRA in what has become known as the troubles, and no one has ever been brought to justice for their killings. IRA-Sinn Féin have refused to co-operate in providing the information that would enable those responsible to be brought to justice. I call on the shadow Secretary of State to join us in calling for Sinn Féin to step up to the plate and to own up, come clean and give information to families who have been waiting for decades for truth and justice.

Mr Anderson: I could not agree more with the right hon. Gentleman, and I believe that that is part and parcel of the demands that we in this House should make. Such co-operation is part of Sinn Féin's responsibility as democratically elected politicians, and they should be doing that in every way they can; they must never, ever run away from it. I want to make it clear that to me, all victims are equal. Anyone who was injured or killed as a result of the troubles in Northern Ireland—whether they were a civilian, a paramilitary or one of the selfless individuals in the armed forces or the RUC who sought to protect the people of Northern Ireland—deserves the truth. I call on all parties to do all they can to make that truth known.

James Heapey (Wells) (Con): The shadow Secretary of State mentions the contribution of our armed forces in Northern Ireland. As a former soldier, I wonder whether he will confirm that he believes, as I do, that the British Army should not be subject to further investigation over its actions during the troubles. Will he also confirm that the loyalties of the Labour party, under its current leadership, lie firmly with the British Army, not with the IRA?

Mr Anderson: I am sorry, but I cannot agree that people in uniform who acted incorrectly should not be brought to book. What signal would we be sending out if we let that happen—that it is all right to act out of order? We expect the highest standards from our great people in uniform. In response to the hon. Gentleman's comments about the leadership of the Labour party, it is clear that the party is committed to our armed forces and not to any terrorist organisation.

Sammy Wilson: Would the shadow Secretary of State accept, however—I think this is the point that the hon. Member for Wells (James Heapey) was trying to make—that not every incident in which the police or the armed forces were involved that included a killing should be treated as though it were a murder? This inequality causes the anger that we have seen in so many families. There is no doubt that every killing by terrorists was a murder—it was illegal—but many of the incidents in which soldiers and policemen were involved were in protection of life and property. Therefore, they should not be treated by the authorities, as they are at present, as though they involved something illegal.

Mr Anderson: The hon. Gentleman and I have worked together on these issues, and he knows my view that it is obvious that the vast majority of the things done by our forces were not murder. But the process of investigation has fallen apart, and we need to put it back together

[Mr Anderson]

again so that we can get to the bottom of things. If there are some cases that could be construed as murder—this is quite clear in the agreements that people have signed to try to make the process work—we have to get to the root of them and get them aired out in public. That is all we are saying. I agree with him that the vast majority of things that were done by the forces were in no sense murder. In the interests of all the parties in Northern Ireland, and of the Government, we must get the legacy stuff properly resolved, and that must be properly resourced.

We in Labour accept that there may well be some genuine issues on the national security front, but I say respectfully to the Government that national security must never, ever be used as a cover-up for wrongdoing by Governments and other agents of the state. I include in that my former colleagues in Labour Governments as well as the Secretary of State's colleagues in former Conservative Governments.

Ian Paisley: Before the hon. Gentleman moves off the legacy issue, may I challenge him, because he has spent some time detailing a legacy case, to detail any other case that involves listing a Unionist grievance? That would balance the books in the way that the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) suggested. Does the hon. Gentleman know of any Unionist grievances?

Mr Anderson: I do, but I am not prepared to detail such cases today, because I prepared that one, and as I said at the beginning—[*Interruption.*] If the hon. Gentleman will allow me to speak, I will tell him exactly why. I used that case because it was so long ago. He probably was not listening—he usually listens, but perhaps he was not doing so—but I made it very clear that I make no differentiation between victims. Whoever they were, however they died or however they were injured, they all deserve the right to have a system in place that enables a trial to be won. That is what the politicians in Northern Ireland are failing to do: they have failed to have a system that works properly. We have to build genuine openness, as well as confidence and trust, because if we do not, people will never be able to move this country forward.

Another issue that I want to raise—I am moving on from the legacy issue—is the abuse of the petition of concern, about which discussions with the political parties have taken place during the past few months. That process was put in place in the original agreements to allow a space for remedying issues, including the abuse of power, raised by one community against another. It was to make sure that that such things could not happen in the institutions, but it is now being used as a veto over progress. This was not the intention, and we must try to get back to the original intention.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I agree with the hon. Gentleman about that particular point, but a year ago—I do not know whether he was at this meeting—I made that very point to the then First Minister, Peter Robinson, and the late Martin McGuinness, and they both defended the petition of concern process and said that it worked well for each side. I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman, but that is what we tend to come up against.

Mr Anderson: I have no doubt that people who may want to use the process for the purpose I have described—as a veto, rather than as a genuine way of resolving problems—would say that. Of course they would. However, I am relating to the House the things I am being told as part and parcel of my trying, in my little way, to say that we should find a way to get the Executive up and running again. That is what this is all about; it is not about scoring points, or making points about what happened 40 years ago. I am relating the issues that people are telling me are the reasons why they cannot sit down with each other, and I am saying that any reasonable human being should be trying to find a way through this.

Another issue that I want to address—the renewable heat incentive—is again one on which a reasonable position could be reached. We were all told it was the straw that broke the camel's back. The Government should work with the parties there, saying that we should get the inquiry going, and when its report comes out, we will work to make sure that any funding shortfall is not laid directly at the feet of the people of Northern Ireland, unless that is done in a way that can be managed over a period of time. That is very important if we are not to end up losing funding for vital public services while this matter is cleared up.

We need the parties to begin to trust each other and to move away from entrenched positions. I say clearly to Sinn Féin from the Opposition Dispatch Box that it should drop its demand for the leader of the DUP to stand aside while the inquiry is going on. It should seek assurances from her—I believe she has given such assurances—that she will co-operate fully with the inquiry, accept its outcomes and will not hinder its progress in any way. That would be a huge step in the direction of rebuilding the trust and confidence that have allowed sworn enemies to govern in Northern Ireland during previous years.

I hope that Members will take what I have said today in the spirit in which it is meant. I have laid before the House the issues that people are telling me are the reasons why the system has fallen apart. Some may be cynical and say that those are not the reasons—we will no doubt hear that over the next few hours—but I am reporting back to the House what I am being told about what we should do to move forward.

I am sad to be in the situation of having a general election. Sadly, the Government's failure to recognise the impact of that on reaching a resolution in Northern Ireland is symptomatic of the approach they have taken during the past seven years. The lack of direct, meaningful engagement by both the present and the previous Prime Ministers has done nothing but show the people of Northern Ireland that they are little more than an afterthought in this Government's mind. It is no way to act in a situation that is still one of conflict resolution. The "job done" attitude just does not work.

I welcome the Bill, because it provides more time for the parties to engage in discussions about the formation of an Executive. With a general election looming, it is apparent that the Government did not think of the effect it would have on Northern Ireland. Thankfully, the Bill does not represent direct rule, which it may well have done, so I am pleased that that is out of the way, in the short term at least. It sets a regional rate, which is necessary to fund vital public services in Northern Ireland, and fills the gap in the short term.

I call on all parties to do what the Secretary of State said: when the Bill receives Royal Assent, hopefully on Thursday, they should sit down on Friday and start working it out, and look at the reality of what they are saying they cannot resolve. I suggest that every one of the points I have laid out today can be resolved if people want to do so. If they do not, we will be back here—well, I won't be, but others will—in a few weeks' time with things possibly in even worse shape. Sadly, I believe that what we saw yesterday in Northern Ireland may well be repeated, as a way of people saying, "We've tried for 20 years to work together. It isn't working and it's never going to work. The only way is to go back to where we were." None of us should want that and none of us who has any say in this should let anything get in the way of stopping it happening.

Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The shadow Secretary of State indicated in his speech that he was going to list a number of grievances and a number of issues in relation to legacy. Can you confirm for us what time we have left for this debate? The shadow Secretary believed he was running out of time, but he has sufficient time to make those lists available to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point of order. I can answer part of it. I would expect the Second Reading debate to last until 8.16 pm, so there is plenty of time. As to the content of the valedictory speech made by the hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson) from the Dispatch Box, that is not a matter for me but entirely a matter for the hon. Gentleman. I am sure that if he has something further to add to what he has already said, he will find an opportunity in the next three hours to say it. Later today, after Second Reading, we will hopefully have the Third Reading debate, when I would expect to hear more speeches from both sides of the House.

5.12 pm

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I join the Secretary of State in his condemnation of the actions taken yesterday, which were another attempt to kill innocent men, women and children. That is totally unacceptable in any part of the world. For it to continue in the United Kingdom is abhorrent to all right-thinking people. I congratulate the Secretary of State on the work he has done over the past few weeks, which to him probably seems like months. He has done his utmost to bring the parties in Northern Ireland together to get the institutions up and running again. I thank him for keeping in touch with me, as Chairman of the Select Committee. That has been very useful, so I thank him. I wish him well in his future discussions.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson) for his performance over many, many years in this House. He has worked here for many years and I was very sorry to hear that he will not be seeking re-election to Parliament. He was a long-standing, very active and extremely good member of the Select Committee for many years before he took up his present position. I can confirm that he is a tough negotiator, but he is a fair man and it was a great pleasure to work with him. I wish him well for the future.

It is unfortunate that we have to be here yet again to discuss these matters and it is unfortunate that the rates have to be set from this place. It is not entirely democratic and it is not in any way satisfactory that, following an election with a high turnout of voters, we end up taking decisions here in this place that should rightly be taken in Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, it is worse than that, because that is just a microcosm of a bigger situation. I know that many individuals and businesses in Northern Ireland see the breaking down of the institutions as a distraction from what they want to do. Only last week, I had a meeting with representatives of a business that wants to expand and bring potentially hundreds of jobs to Northern Ireland. They do not know where they are. They do not know what the position is. They do not know how the planning process will work, because it is a large application. They really do regret the present situation. It is not one in which any of us want to find ourselves, but here we are again.

I am glad that the Secretary of State outlined the options. He did not actually use the words "direct rule", but that is obviously what we will be sliding towards if no agreement can be secured and we cannot get the institutions up and running in Northern Ireland. I do not want that to happen. What I do want to happen is, for instance, the addressing of the concerns that that company raised with me last week. I want the company to be able to create those jobs in Northern Ireland without the distraction of election upon election upon election, and the making of decisions in a piecemeal way. That is not what people of that kind want.

I was in Northern Ireland a couple of weeks ago on a social visit, speaking to friends there. They are Catholics, which is an important factor because of what I am about to say. They said to me, "For goodness' sake, Laurence, get on with it and bring back direct rule, because that is only way we will see any decisions made." They do not particularly want direct rule—most people probably do not want it—but if it comes to a choice between chaos and direct rule, people will go for direct rule. They will have to.

It is unfortunate that we have reached such a position, but let me say to those who are likely to bring about that situation—and they are not, I believe, those who are in the Chamber today, but those who refuse to take their seats in the Chamber—that it would be rather paradoxical and strange that the one party that says that it does not want rule from this place should be the party that will bring it about. How odd will that be?

If those people are listening, let me inform them of what direct rule really means. I was a shadow Minister when we had direct rule in previous Parliaments, and it does not mean that everything is decided in the Chamber. It does not work like that. There are Committees upstairs with 20 or so members—hand-picked by the Whips: let us be honest about that. Very few of those members would be from Northern Ireland, because of the mathematics involved. Important matters are decided in those Committees. That is the reality of direct rule. I would ask those who are getting in the way of the institutions' being set up again, "Is that how you want Northern Ireland to be governed?"

Sammy Wilson: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that members of Sinn Féin have form on this issue, and that—this may have some resonance in the current

[Sammy Wilson]

circumstances—when they want to dodge hard decisions, they are quite happy, despite their “Brits out” rhetoric, to hand powers back to Westminster so that it can make those hard decisions, as they did in the case of welfare reform about a year and a half ago?

Mr Robertson: That is a very good point. I genuinely do not know what their logic is. As I have said, theirs is the party that shouts the loudest about its opposition to British rule, as they call it, yet theirs seems to me to be the party that will shortly bring it about. As I have also said, I do not want us to go down that road, and there is still time to avoid it.

That takes me to my next point, which is about power-sharing. I think that those on all sides, if they sign up to power-sharing, must accept what that means. It means working with people whom you do not necessarily like. It means working with people with whom you do not necessarily want to work. It means compromising on certain policies. You do not always get the exact policy that you want. Come to think of it, I suppose that every political party is like that. We all have discussions within political parties; we all have disagreements on policy within political parties. We all have to work within political parties with people with whom, perhaps, we do not want to work. That is the reality of politics. In fact, that is the reality of many jobs. People who work in companies have to work with people whom they do not like. They have to work on policies which are set by management and with which they may not agree. That is the nature of work. If people are not prepared to accept compromises—if they are going to run away every time there is a difference of opinion, and take the ball home, and bring the institutions down—the system simply will not work. I think that all parties—I am not talking about just one party—must accept that.

Dr Alasdair McDonnell (Belfast South) (SDLP): I am not here to represent Sinn Féin, and I do not think I will ever want to be, but is the hon. Gentleman seriously suggesting that all of us should have turned a blind eye to the crisis over the renewable heat initiative and done nothing? To my mind, he ignores the fact that this crisis was triggered by a serious issue of confidence that needs to be dealt with and resolved. Other things have piled in, and we can throw abuse—[*Interruption*—and there is a lot of it coming from the Democratic Unionist party Bench behind me, but that serves no purpose. If we are going to go forward, we need to restore devolution in Northern Ireland, and if we are going to do that, we have to behave in a sane, sensible and mature fashion and recognise the facts.

Mr Robertson: It is a pleasure to work with the hon. Gentleman on the Select Committee as well, and he brings a great deal of calm and common sense to it. I fully understand what he says, and I am not saying that that should be brushed under the carpet, but I do not see why an inquiry could not have been carried out with the then First Minister still in place. To risk bringing all the institutions down is—on any issue, to be honest—not worth it. I think this is a big issue; it is worth half a billion pounds over 20 years, but I do not think it is a big enough issue to bring the institutions down.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I commend the hon. Gentleman on all he has done as Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. Does he agree that at times we see double standards operating in Northern Ireland? In the constituency of Belfast South, we had a most brutal murder in a pub of a young man by members of the IRA, and as a result my party and others questioned Sinn Féin’s fitness for government and confidence in that fitness, yet the SDLP did nothing, absolutely nothing, to challenge Sinn Féin on that issue and its fitness for government. Are there not double standards operating here? Is one murder not worth more than the RHI scandal?

Mr Robertson: The right hon. Gentleman raises an important point, and it goes back to the point I was trying to make earlier: we either accept that we have to work with people we do not like and do not want to work with, or we do not, and if we do not accept that, there is no power sharing. It is as simple as that.

I am afraid it is a very good point that parties on both sides have had to work with people they do not want to work with. There are accusations about certain Members of the Assembly, and if they were in this place and we had to work very closely with them, maybe we would not like that either, but it has had to happen for the sake of devolution and the institutions.

The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to draw our attention to some of the terrible crimes that have been committed. The shadow Minister has been questioned on the issue of citing crimes from across the board; I know that he very much condemns crimes wherever they come from.

The Select Committee is concluding its report into Libyan-sponsored IRA activity, and I was rereading the proposed document this morning. I will not go into the details as the Committee has not considered it, but in that draft report are many examples of IRA violence—of the way the IRA has torn lives apart. Rereading some of those things this morning in the car as I came down to Westminster served as a reminder of what has gone on in Northern Ireland and how unacceptable it was.

I do not want to get into the issue of the prosecution of the soldiers at this point as that strays from the central part of our debate, but of course one side in the conflict always referred to it as “the war.” They did so because that excused the indiscriminate killing of men, women and children. So one side had a “war” and the other side was expected to go by the book—or the yellow card, to be precise. That is a very unfair way of looking at this whole situation and the whole legacy issue.

Ian Paisley: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way—and I do count him as a friend for the support that he has given to Northern Ireland over many years. Does he accept that the Bill before the House will tip the scales in favour of direct rule? Tonight, people in Ulster will be watching their televisions and learning that it will be this House that is setting their rates. For the past 10 years, that has been done in the Northern Ireland Assembly. If that balance is tipped, each piece of legislation that comes forward will make it harder and harder to get back to devolution.

Mr Robertson: My hon. Friend puts his finger on the problem. Yes, this is a slippery slope, but in some ways the Bill offers an opportunity for people to get together

and re-form the Executive. It would allow that to happen. However, my hon. Friend is right. Indeed, it would probably not be the whole of this House that decided the rates; that would be done by the Secretary of State. With respect to him, that is the only way he could do this. This goes back to what I said about direct rule earlier. Hon. Members will not get a say on the details, whereas if these decisions were being taken in Northern Ireland, there would be much more involvement by local people. That would be far better.

I really hope that the Secretary of State will somehow be able to get the parties together in Northern Ireland so that we can avoid having Committees upstairs here running Northern Ireland, which would be most unsatisfactory. Whether he succeeds or not, we really need to look at the Belfast agreement and the legislation to see whether they need updating. I do not wish to undermine the principles of power sharing in any way, but we need to make an attempt to make it work. At the moment, it is not working. If it were, we would not be sitting here now and we would not have been in crisis 18 months ago. I do not want everything to be set up again, only to find that we are in crisis again after six or 12 months.

The shadow Secretary of State mentioned the petition of concern issue earlier. I, too, raised that matter, and I was told at the time that the parties were happy with the situation. That, and an awful lot of other issues, need to be looked at. We need to modernise and update the arrangements so that they can deal with the situation that we find ourselves in now, rather than the one that we were in 20 years ago. Without doubt, a lot of progress has been made in Northern Ireland. We cannot deny that, and we should not want to, but we have to get the political process right as well. If we do not, people will completely lose faith in it, and that would be in nobody's interests.

5.27 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): First, I associate myself with the Secretary of State's comments about the terrible discovery that was made yesterday. I commend all the emergency services and the police for the tremendous efforts made on behalf of their community. I also echo his words about the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson), who is stepping down not only from this position but that of shadow Secretary of State for Scotland. His efforts in both remits have been much appreciated.

The Scottish National party will support the passage of the Bill. The decisions involved would be better made on the other side of the Irish sea, but we are where we are and it is important to set rateable values so that the administration of public services can continue. There are Brexit difficulties coming down the road, especially around border issues, and it is right that we do all we can to minimise the turbulence, but those decisions should properly be made in Stormont. There is a real need to get the political Administration in Stormont back up and running, and I am sure that the electorate who are being asked to go back to the polls for a snap general election so soon after the snap Stormont election will be urging a resolution to the negotiations and a resumption of administration duties. Getting an Administration up and running so that decisions can be

taken there rather than here would be the best option all round, and that should be our main aim. As I have said, the SNP will support the Bill.

5.29 pm

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): I begin by echoing the previous comments, particularly those of the Secretary of State, on the vile and cowardly bomb left outside Holy Cross Boys Primary School in the Ardoyne. I commend all those in the security forces who handled the incident and who handle similar incidents 24 hours a day, seven days a week, every week of the year. We all owe them a great debt of thanks for the manner in which they continue to police Northern Ireland. I also pay tribute to their predecessors who created the conditions, in intensely difficult circumstances and under quite extraordinary provocation, that enabled the peace process to take place.

On that basis, I wholly commend the comments of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, who has shown remarkable forbearance and patience, who has been abused and criticised quite unfairly in recent weeks and who has let himself in for a further extension through to 29 June, which is a wholly sensible measure. As he rightly said, there is not a single Member of this House, at least not that I know of, who would like to see direct rule return. The shadow Secretary of State, sadly in his valedictory performance—we will miss him in the next Parliament—rightly concurred that no one here wants direct rule to come back. There is a slightly daft narrative that some crazy Brits really want to reimpose direct rule, but absolutely not.

The institutions were set up and the Belfast agreement was passed after the most extraordinary period of negotiation, man-years of effort and bipartisan agreement in this House when members of Conservative Administrations made intensely difficult decisions that were supported by the Labour Opposition. In turn, when Labour came to power and we were in opposition, we supported the Labour Government. I had the honour to be shadow Secretary of State when the last major element, the devolution of policing and justice, went through, and we backed Labour all the way. There was a similar process in Dublin, where both main parties consistently supported the process, and of course none of this could have happened without the extraordinary support of both parties in the United States of America.

There is exasperation that we have now come to this point. There has been such progress, and I would like to speak up for those hard-working people on the ground in Northern Ireland. I still go to Northern Ireland, and the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) and I appeared on "Spotlight" about three weeks ago. A lady in the audience asked me a good question, "What is going to happen about our budget? Who is going to pay our bills?" That was exactly the right question because she, along with many others, probably voted on 2 March to elect local politicians to make these decisions. None of us wants to make these decisions for those local politicians. It is completely exasperating.

I go to see the most wonderful, world-class businesses, which are trying to attract investment to Northern Ireland. They are travelling on behalf of Northern Ireland, representing hard-working, brilliantly skilful Northern Ireland people, and what is the international message?

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that maybe a longer-term strategy is now re-emerging from Sinn Féin to make Northern Ireland unstable so that the people of Northern Ireland start to question its ability to govern itself? Maybe it is a tactic of Sinn Féin's.

Mr Paterson: I do not like to comment on the motives of any political party. I would just like to say that, as someone who has been involved in Northern Ireland—I had three years as shadow Secretary of State and two years as the real Secretary of State—there is such good will among the populace across all parts of the community. I do not like talking about communities; I like talking about the whole community. They long for this to work, and there is real good will, but now there is utter frustration.

I am particularly exasperated because my great project, with representatives of four local parties—the fifth local party was also supportive—was to give Northern Ireland politicians the ability to set corporation tax, because we know that the Republic of Ireland's determination, in the face of intense criticism from other major member states of the EU, to hold on to its right to set corporation tax has been the key to its success. The then Finance Minister in Dublin described it as the cornerstone of that success. As part of what was called the Azores agreement, it was vital for there to be a democratically elected institution in a devolved area to make that decision.

The current situation is exasperating for me, having got this measure through—having got complete unity among Northern Ireland parties and the support of almost all Northern Ireland business—and knowing the tremendous good it has done. The hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) is sitting there and I have visited his constituency. Just over the border, in Letterkenny, an extraordinary amount of investment is being made because of the corporation tax rate there, yet so much of that could have gone to Londonderry if the rate had been set in Northern Ireland. This measure was one of the great achievements of the last coalition Government, and I pay full tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs Villiers), who took it through during her time as Secretary of State. The powers are there, if only local politicians would grab the opportunity and establish an Executive.

Sadly, I must support this Bill; I totally endorse the comments of the Secretary of State and shadow Secretary of State that we would like to see an Executive set up. We had a successful election—that passed off—there are newly elected Members of the Legislative Assembly and they should be working with the institutions to set up a new Executive. Sadly, it is necessary to set a regional rate, but I hope we have to do it only temporarily. It is sensible for the Secretary of State to set a lengthier target of 29 June, and I wish him well on that, but if the elected local politicians still do not come to their senses by then I ask him to consider introducing legislation here on the issue of the cost of Stormont. Crudely, it costs about £1 million a month in salaries and expenses for MLAs. I know full well that the Northern Ireland public—

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The right hon. Gentleman is about to move on to a subject he takes great interest in. When he was shadow Secretary

of State, he promised to people—he went around Northern Ireland and he told this House—that when a Conservative Administration came into power he would deal with the cost of Sinn Féin MPs who are elected to this place, do not do any work and do what he is now going to go on to claim the MLAs are doing at Stormont. He did nothing about that. Will he now agree that if the Government are going to take steps at Stormont, they will need to take steps at Westminster as well to address the same problem that exists in relation to people who are elected to this House and who, voluntarily, do not do their job? For us on the Democratic Unionist party Benches, this will be a critical issue.

Mr Paterson: The right hon. Gentleman knows my position on this issue, but I was Secretary of State in a coalition Government and we now have a robust Conservative Government—

Mr Dodds: You did nothing.

Mr Paterson: I know Members do not like this, but I should say that there are very few tools left in the Secretary of State's box and one is to put financial pressure on the political parties. [*Interruption.*] This may hurt the right hon. Gentleman's party and it may hurt his competitors, but I have not heard anything from the other side as to why this should not be done. I have not heard a single member of the public in Northern Ireland criticise this. The *Belfast Telegraph* polled a significant number of people and a very large majority supported the idea. We still have time—even if this Bill goes through today, we will still have until 29 June; we will have had four months, or a third of a year. I do not think this approach is unfair, and I think it has huge support across Northern Ireland among the general public. I do not think it is unfair to say that if elected Members cannot get their act together after four months, they should cease to receive public money in salary and their staff should cease to receive public money in their salaries and costs.

Mr Dodds: So I take it the right hon. Gentleman will repeat the same call in relation to Members and their staff here who are in receipt of public money but do not do their jobs. Will he say that clearly to the Government Front-Bench team today?

Mr Paterson: I am a simple Back Bencher, but the right hon. Gentleman knows very well that I believe strongly that, in the words of Lady Boothroyd, as she now is, there is no such thing as “associate membership” of this House. She was exactly right on that. Those elected to this House should take their seats if they are to receive public money, but that does not get away from the point I am making, which is germane to this point about 29 June. I repeat it again: should elected Members not get their act together and form an Executive, the Government should consider taking powers to stop them getting salaries and expenses from the public purse, because that will put pressure on them and that is what the people of Northern Ireland will be looking for. In the light of that, I will support the Bill tonight. I regret very much, as does the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State, that we have come to this point, but it is a sensible measure to buy us more time.

5.39 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I echo the words of the Secretary of State and other Members by congratulating the security forces on stopping the murder of policemen by the bomb that was placed outside a primary school in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds).

I am disappointed with the Labour party spokesman, the hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson), although perhaps I should not be. Like the BBC this morning, he almost tried to associate that bomb with the fact that there is a political impasse at Stormont. I am glad that the police and the principal of the primary school rejected that idea—they are far more perceptive than some of the BBC reporters. They fully understood that the people who plant these bombs do not care whether Stormont is working—if Stormont is working, it is an excuse; if it is not working, it is an excuse. Those people are determined to bring terror to the streets of Northern Ireland simply to get their own way, which they cannot get through the ballot box. We have to nail this lie that there is somehow justification in planting bombs because of what is happening in politics—there is no justification.

Mr Anderson: I just say very clearly to the hon. Gentleman—I will call him my hon. Friend—that he has not got what I said right in any way. I said nothing like that. The first thing I did in my speech was to condemn the act, but I did say at the end of it that the failure to get a political resolution will give some people another excuse to go back to the bad old days. That is not at all to say that I condone what went on in any way—not a chance.

Sammy Wilson: And of course the point that I am making is that these people do not need an excuse, because they are committed to changing Northern Ireland's status through violence. Whether Stormont is working at full tilt or not working, that is sufficient reason for them to continue what they are doing.

I welcome the comments that were made about the incident by Sinn Féin's North Belfast spokesman this morning. He talked about how vile it was that a school should be used as a basis for an attack on the security forces, but let us not forget that Sinn Féin and Kelly's comrades used schools as a means of attacking members of the security forces in the past. Indeed, they walked into classrooms and shot part-time members of the security forces. They blew up buses that were taking children to school. They killed the drivers of buses who were taking children to school. Although we welcome the fact that there now appears to be a change of heart on the part of Sinn Féin, it does us well to remember that the tactics used by the dissidents are no different from those that were used by Sinn Féin and the Provisional IRA for more than 30 years in Northern Ireland.

We support the Bill—it is a necessary piece of legislation. When the Secretary of State spoke to it, he could have gone further by making it clear to Sinn Féin—I will address this further later on—that it has created the current situation and is responsible for the stalemate we face. He should have made it clear that the alternative to progress is direct rule. That possibility ought to have been spelled out in this House.

The Northern Ireland Office has made not offending Sinn Féin into an art form. The Secretary of State should pay less heed to the Northern Ireland Office and more to the political reality on the ground. I simply say to him that had he acted more quickly at the beginning of the crisis, we could have avoided this situation in Northern Ireland. Despite the pleas in this House from Democratic Unionists, the Labour party, the Scottish nationalists and some of his own Back Benchers, he did not initiate the investigation that could have taken the sting out of Sinn Féin's accusation about the renewable heat incentive. Time and again, he said at the Dispatch Box that because there was no agreement between the political parties, he could not initiate an investigation. Cynically, as soon as Sinn Féin had got what it wanted—mainly to bring down the Executive—the first person to announce the inquiry was no less than Máirtín Ó Muilleoir, the Sinn Féin Finance Minister. The Secretary of State should have initiated an investigation.

The Labour spokesman talked about the need to get away from this particular part of the impasse, but Arlene Foster never refused to take part in a public inquiry. She never refused to give her account to or to be questioned at a public inquiry. The problem was that there was not an inquiry. Had the Secretary of State been prepared to grasp that nettle, we could have avoided a situation in which Sinn Féin was able to use the excuse that until it had clarity on the issue, it could not possibly work with Arlene Foster. The lesson for the Secretary of State to learn from what happened is this: despite the threats that might come from Sinn Féin, sometimes it is important not to listen to the wets in the Northern Ireland Office, but to act on political instincts.

Mark Durkan: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the Government here should have acted more quickly as the RHI scandal emerged, but he is painting a complete fiction by trying to say that the DUP wanted a public inquiry—it entirely opposed a public inquiry. It was on the same page as Sinn Féin in opposing a public inquiry. It said that an inquiry by the Public Accounts Committee in the Assembly would be sufficient, and it was on that cue that the Secretary of State ensured that he and Treasury colleagues stayed out of the issue.

Sammy Wilson: I do not want to bore the House with the details of what happened last December, but the First Minister made it quite clear at that stage that she believed that she had nothing to hide. She was prepared to face an inquiry of whatever status was required to get to the truth, and that is still her position. In fact, she is co-operating on this.

The Bill is also necessary because of the way in which the finances in Northern Ireland have been left. Again, there are lessons to be learned from this. I suspect that the Secretary of State will have to come back at the end of June with another Bill to implement the budget in Northern Ireland. It will not be a satisfactory budget, because it will probably be based on last year's distribution of finances to ensure that 100% of the budget is spent, and no new priorities will be set. As the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), stated, one of the central planks of the Executive's economic policy cannot to be contained in that budget, because it will not be possible for this House, while we remain in the EU,

[Sammy Wilson]

to legislate for the reduction of corporation tax and, of course, to allocate funds for that. That will be a missed opportunity for many firms and prospective investors in Northern Ireland.

Let us look at why we have no budget, because this gives an indication of where Sinn Féin is and the prospects for an agreement. We do not have a budget in Northern Ireland not because the Executive could not agree one, and not because it was rejected by the coalition partners, but because there was never a budget brought forward to the Executive. Why was that the case? I think that Sinn Féin could not face the reality of having to introduce a budget in which hard decisions needed to be made. Of course, that was true about the restructuring of the health service. There was a report on restructuring the health service that set out how money could be saved and how some of the problems it faces could be addressed, but Sinn Féin did not act on it. Why? Because that involved hard decisions. When it came to welfare reform more than a year and a half ago, Sinn Féin did not act either. It was quite happy for that to be dealt with by the Government here.

There is a question that must be asked by those of us who are involved politically in Northern Ireland: is Sinn Féin serious about getting out of the impasse, or is it quite content? Those in Sinn Féin will never answer this, but are they quite content for the process to roll on and on, to have direct rule, and to have difficult decisions about the budget, the allocation of resources, Brexit and all the other things that concern them decided here? They can then blame the big bad Brits, but keep their hands clean and maintain the myth in the Irish Republic, perpetuated by the bearded guru, Gerry Adams, that somehow they have an economic policy that can avoid any austerity measures. The one thing they do not want is to have to introduce austerity measures or cuts in Northern Ireland while they are promising people in the Irish Republic that they have some kind of economic magic wand they could wave if they were only in coalition down there.

This is the question that the Secretary of State has to ask. It is the question that we as a party have to ask, too, as well as the other parties in Northern Ireland. What concessions does Sinn Féin really want, or might direct rule suit its purposes until the election takes place in the Republic? Why did those in Sinn Féin not bring forward a budget? Why did they not make hard decisions when they could in the Northern Ireland Assembly? They consistently—this has always been their position—run away from these decisions. If that is the case, we will have an impasse after the election on 8 June.

The difficulty in the talks is that we have seen the reason why Sinn Féin cannot or will not go into government change almost weekly. First of all it was the RHI, but RHI is hardly mentioned now. The Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee was right—was the RHI such a big scandal that it should have resulted in a constitutional crisis? At the risk of causing some anger among Government Members, let us look at the RHI throughout the United Kingdom, and at Drax power station, where a coal mine down the road was closed while wood pellets were brought from halfway around the world. There is no cap on the subsidy—it started at £400 million, it is now £600 million, and by 2020 it will

be £1 billion. Did any Minister resign? Did the Government fall? No, yet a £25 million overspend that has now been corrected in Northern Ireland caused a constitutional crisis.

Mr Laurence Robertson: The hon. Gentleman makes the point very well. I put it to him that there is no issue that this House could face that would persuade us to disband the whole Parliament, is there? That is the point.

Sammy Wilson: This is a point that was made time and time again. Of course, Sinn Féin was ably assisted by the BBC, which, for 70 consecutive days, I think, kept the issue in the news bulletins. Of course, now it has been dropped and we hardly ever hear it mentioned.

There are other issues that have come to the fore, such as the Irish language Act and the denial of rights of Irish language speakers. Of course, I wish the hon. Member for Blaydon well when he leaves this House, but we saw the face of the Labour party in this House this afternoon and we heard the voice of Sinn Féin. When Labour's spokesman gave his speech at the Dispatch Box, we heard the same kind of excuses, we heard that people were being denied their right to speak the Irish language. They are not being denied their right to speak the Irish language. We fund the Irish language through the Assembly to the tune of £171 million. We allow Irish language schools to be opened and fund those schools when there are as few as 14 pupils in them while at the same time closing schools in the state sector with 50 or 100 pupils in them. Yet we are told that we somehow or other do not give proper treatment to those who wish to speak the Irish language. Councils are free, if they wish, after following the requirements of the legislation, to put Irish street names up on streets across their areas, yet we have this myth perpetuated that the Irish language and the refusal to accept an Irish language Act are the big impasse in the talks.

We heart parroted again today—surprisingly, I even saw the Under-Secretary of State nodding his head—ideas about people being denied their rights on gay marriage and denied certain abortion rights. I simply say to the Minister that the whole point of devolution is that people in the regions of the United Kingdom have the opportunity to make the laws that they believe best reflect the views in their society. I would say the same to the Labour spokesman. If you want uniformity, do not devolve the issue. If you are allowing differences in different parts of the United Kingdom, respect devolution and respect the views of the parties elected to those Assemblies, who, by the way, stand on their manifestos, who do not hide their view. We have never hidden our views on these issues in our manifestos; people vote for us on the basis of our manifestos and we then have a duty to reflect that in the decisions that are made.

It is not about rights, of course, because, despite all the rhetoric from Sinn Féin about equality, respect, rights and so on, we have seen that when it comes to the rights of those who served in the security forces, there is no willingness to show respect. When it comes to the views of the people we represent on many of these issues, there is no respect there. In fact, there is a recommendation that we should somehow abandon the promises we made to those people. I say to the Minister and the shadow Minister, do not be taken in by the idea that that is the cause of the impasse in the talks.

We have been told that the issue is Brexit. I find that very strange coming from Sinn Féin, because the one party that will not shape the Brexit talks, the negotiations or the outcome of Brexit decisions in this House is Sinn Féin, because its Members do not attend. Yet they want a broad coalition against Brexit. The Social Democratic and Labour party does not like to say that it wants to get involved with a sectarian pact with Sinn Féin, so it is trying to portray it as a liberal, progressive pact against Brexit, which also includes the Alliance party, which seems a bit reluctant, and the Greens. Let us not be in any doubt: any pact on any seats that involves Sinn Féin and the SDLP is a sectarian pact—it is not about changing Brexit—

Mr Dodds: By their own definition.

Sammy Wilson: Indeed. We have been told that Brexit is another reason why we cannot progress, because the Government have been disrespectful of the vote in Northern Ireland against leaving the EU. The Government have not been disrespectful—if anything, they have worked well with the Administration in trying to address the unique issues that Northern Ireland faces, just as they work with the City of London, the motor car industry and other industries on issues that affect them. Of course, different parts of the country and different sectors of the economy face different issues, but there should be a method of fitting that in. The one sure way that we will not fit it in is if we do not have devolution.

The Secretary of State is right about the regional rate—a decision needs to be made. It is an important part of Government finance in Northern Ireland, and we need certainty. Councils have not sent out rate bills, because the regional rate has not been established—it is a source of income for them too. It is therefore important that a quick decision is made. However, as I said in an intervention, the Secretary of State must not allow the delay on budgetary issues to continue because there is uncertainty in Departments, which can have only 95% of the budget allocated, which has a knock-on effect. No one knows—even with the 90-day notice for voluntary and community groups, suppliers and so on—what the full budget will be, so the precautionary principle sets in, and those notices are given out. We will have to move quickly on that.

May I make a point on behalf of my party? There is no reason, even before the general election campaign begins, why devolution should not be up and running. People were elected to the Assembly and they have a mandate to serve in the Assembly. The way to sort out these issues is to debate them in the Assembly. However, one party in particular has made a list of demands. First, it said that it wanted RHI sorted out. When that did not happen, it said that it could not serve with Arlene Foster. Then it said that legacy issues had not been dealt with by the Government. I hope that some of its interpretation of those issues, especially on the unequal way in which terrorists have been treated in relation to incidents involving the security forces, are never accepted by the Government. Then we were told there were lots of new issues about equality and respect.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend agree that the problem is not just that Sinn Féin have listed a series of unreasonable

demands? They have said that many of those demands are fundamental prerequisites even before the institutions are established again, rather than trying, as he has suggested, to resolve them in the institutions. They want the institution up and running on their unreasonable terms even before they enter the place.

Sammy Wilson: That is exactly the point I was making. These issues can be resolved in the Assembly. If we want to decide what position to adopt on Brexit, who better to do it than Ministers in the Assembly introducing the issues that affect their Departments and reflecting the difficulties that we face? If we want to sort out issues around culture and so on, we should do so in debates in the Assembly, then the relevant Ministers could introduce legislation that could be properly debated. If we want to deal with legacy issues, there is a role for the Assembly in doing so. These things can be dealt with in the Assembly—that is the place to deal with them, rather than saying that unless we get these things sorted out on the terms required by one party we will not have devolution.

This is where I take issue with the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for North Shropshire, who spoke about punishing Assembly Members. First, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North pointed out, if we are going to punish people for not doing their job, we should punish Sinn Féin, who have milked this place dry for the past 10 years, getting millions of pounds from it, but not doing their work. Secondly, we should recognise that it is not the intransigence of Assembly Members generally that has led to this position. Thirdly—and he should know this as a public representative—there are many ways in which public representatives do their job. Of course they have a role in the body to which they are elected, but they also have a role in relation to their constituents. The Assembly Members in my party who were elected have worked tirelessly at constituency level as well as taking part in the talks and preparing material for the talks. As for the notion that somehow or other they are lying around at home watching daytime television and getting paid for it, he should know better, and so should many of the people who have commented on it.

If we want to understand the situation, we ought to ask whether people think we are intransigent because we are on a jolly, it is great and we do not want the Assembly up and running. I do not know any colleagues who do not want to be back in Stormont tomorrow doing their job. I therefore believe that the Secretary of State can push the thing along by spelling out to Sinn Féin that the consequence of not getting the Assembly up and running is that decisions will be made here in Parliament.

I do not want to see that happen. I do not want direct rule, and I do not believe that it will be good for Northern Ireland or for the House to have to do that. The Secretary of State should begin to address the issue and, rather than using the generic term, “the parties”, should begin to point the finger. He knows how difficult Sinn Féin have been. In fact, they took umbrage at him, and did not even want him to chair talks because of his comments about the security forces. That is the kind of arrogance that we have had from them, and until that arrogant bubble is burst we will not make any progress in Northern Ireland.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. We have plenty of time for the debate, but if hon. Members take much more than about 15 minutes each we will run out of time. I have a theory, merely put together after spending many hours, days and weeks in the Chair observing the House, that most things that have to be said can usually be said in 15 minutes. I make no criticism of anyone who has taken longer; I merely make a plea that that is a reasonable amount of time to take. I call Sir Jeffrey Donaldson.

6.8 pm

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I join my colleagues in welcoming the opportunity to take part in the debate. I commend the Secretary of State and his ministerial colleagues for their conduct in the negotiations. At times, they have been disrespected by at least one of the parties, Sinn Féin, which has said some quite nasty things about them, but it is not easy to chair negotiations, particularly when some participants are acting unreasonably. I therefore want to place on record our gratitude to the Government for the role that they have played in trying to bring things together. And we do want things to come together. Let me be clear about that from this party's perspective. Considering where we have come from in Northern Ireland, it is quite a remarkable thing for the leading Unionist party in Northern Ireland to say that it has no preconditions for going into government with Sinn Féin. Turn the clock back a few years and imagine that the leading Unionist party would be saying, "We're prepared to go into government today with Sinn Féin without preconditions." Yet it is Sinn Féin who refuse to form a Government.

I am told that "ourselves alone" is the literal Irish translation for "Sinn Féin"—the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) is probably better qualified than me on that—and I am afraid that Sinn Féin are living up to their name on this issue because, as far as I can see, all the other parties in the Northern Ireland Assembly are prepared to see a Government formed, except Sinn Féin. The Government must be and need to be aware of that.

As a supporter of the peace process, I am now left with a very serious doubt in my mind about whether Sinn Féin really want to be in government at all. I am also left with a serious doubt in my mind about the workability of the mandatory coalition model as a basis for government when it gives Sinn Féin a veto over the formation of a Government, as it does. In truth, that is where we are. The government of Northern Ireland is being vetoed. The formation of a Government is being vetoed by one party that is refusing to go into government. Because of the nature of the architecture and the framework for government in Northern Ireland, it has that veto, can exercise it and is doing so at present.

Lady Hermon: If my memory serves me correctly, the written statement published by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland last week indicated that there had actually been some progress among the parties in the talks, and that those talks had not been a complete waste of time. It would be very helpful for the people of Northern Ireland—and, indeed, this House—to understand where progress among the parties has been made, and to narrow down the stumbling blocks that are being cast up by Sinn Féin.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: In truth, although some progress has been made in homing in on the issues, it would be wrong to say that we have reached agreement on any of them. What are those issues? Well, they include the legacy of our troubled past, and the quest for justice and truth by the innocent victims. We have come a long way in developing proposals, which I understand the Secretary of State is willing to publish for consultation in the coming weeks. We very much welcome that. A failure to form a Government in Northern Ireland should not prevent the Government in this place from proceeding with legislation to establish new legacy bodies.

I say to the Secretary of State that, although Sinn Féin may have a veto over the formation of a Government, it would be the ultimate irony if we allowed the party representing the organisation that murdered more people in the troubles than anyone else to veto the legacy bodies and institutions that are to be established to investigate those murders. It is just absurd that we would even consider handing Sinn Féin a veto over the investigation of murders that were committed by the Provisional IRA. We need that historical investigations unit up and running to investigate those murders in order to level the playing field. As the Secretary of State knows, because I have said this to him and Minister many times, there is not currently a level playing field. At the moment, we have legacy inquests, the Kenova inquiry, the examination of the events known as Bloody Sunday, and a completely disproportionate focus on what the Army and police did in Northern Ireland.

I echo the comments made earlier that the killings committed by the Army and the police were for the most part lawful, and were about protecting life and the community. Of course, when someone has done something wrong in the past, the law has investigated, but it is entirely wrong that we have a legacy investigation branch of the PSNI that is devoting so much of its resource towards investigating the police and the Army, and little towards investigating the 90% of murders committed by the paramilitary terrorist organisations in Northern Ireland. That is not a sustainable position. After the election, I trust that the next Government will take forward this legislation and establish those legacy bodies.

I also say to the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) that another issue on which we are waiting to get agreement is the armed forces covenant, which I referred to earlier in an intervention. Sinn Féin talk big on respect and equality, and this is an issue about respect and equality. It is about ensuring that the men and women who have served our country in the armed forces are not disadvantaged by virtue of their service. That is the very basis of the armed forces covenant. It is also about the wider community across the nation showing respect for the men and women who serve. Equality and respect is what we are talking about in relation to the armed forces covenant. We need Sinn Féin to step up to the mark, and all the political parties in Northern Ireland to agree to the full implementation of the armed forces covenant in Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom.

Sammy Wilson: Does my right hon. Friend accept that the number of people affected by that is far more significant than the number in some other minority groups that Sinn Féin are demanding equality and respect for?

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I intervened on the shadow Secretary of State to make that very point. While he was busy listing all the groups that he says he has met, who are demanding rights and equality, the one group he missed out were the 150,000 men and women in Northern Ireland who have served in our armed forces. That number is far greater, by far, than the number of people who speak the Irish language or any other minority group that the shadow Secretary of State bothered to mention. Add to that the fact that the armed forces covenant also covers the families of those 150,000 people, and the figure comes to half a million people. That is not my figure; it comes from Northern Ireland Office statistics.

Half a million people out of a population of 1.8 million would benefit from the armed forces covenant in Northern Ireland. It would be nice to hear the shadow Secretary of State and his colleagues say, for once, “Yes, this is something that we would want included.” I sincerely hope that the outcome of the negotiations will be that all parties, if they are genuine about respect and equality, sign up to the full implementation of the armed forces covenant in Northern Ireland.

Ian Paisley: Does my right hon. Friend agree that Sinn Féin are so committed to the Irish language that Carál Ní Chuilín, the party’s previous Minister in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure in Northern Ireland, cut Foras na Gaeilge’s budget by £700,000 for the past three financial years? Sinn Féin claim that we do not show respect to the Irish language, but they could not even find enough areas to spend the money on.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: My hon. Friend’s contribution stands on its own feet. I endorse what he said.

Danny Kinahan: Will the right hon. Gentleman give us his feelings about the discussions on the military covenant? I joined him on various occasions, and the party that we have all been talking about today that does not take part at least turned up once, but all they wanted was equality. To try to equalise their terrorists with our soldiers is an absolute disgrace.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. On this issue, our two parties are at one, and we spoke with one voice in the working groups dealing with the armed forces covenant, because we believe passionately that this issue must be addressed in the context of Stormont’s responsibilities towards a large group in our community—and I mean our community in its totality, because the armed forces draw from all sections of the community in Northern Ireland, and always have done, and that is something we are grateful for.

I want to echo the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) about Brexit. I find it quite remarkable that some of the parties talk about the need for a special status for Northern Ireland when it comes to Brexit. Yet, Sinn Féin refuses to form a Government, which is the one vehicle that can help to develop a consensus around how we deal with Brexit. Let me say to the Secretary of State that if we arrive at a situation where there is direct rule and we have no Government functioning in Northern Ireland, it will be unacceptable for this Government to

pander to those voices demanding special status in the absence of a political consensus around this issue in Northern Ireland. It is not good enough to hand Sinn Féin a veto over forming a Government and then to say that parties would be excluded from the decision-making process around Brexit.

The Social Democratic and Labour party, the Alliance party, the Green party and Sinn Féin can gang up on the DUP all they want on this issue, but if we return to direct rule and there is no Government in Northern Ireland, we are not going to stand by and allow some kind of special status to be created against the interests and wishes of the Unionist community. There has to be a cross-community consensus on this issue—nothing else will work in the absence of devolution. If Sinn Féin, the SDLP, the Green party and the Alliance party want special status for Northern Ireland, there is only one way that that will be delivered, and that is by having a devolved Government, so that we can build a consensus on this issue. In the absence of a devolved Government, Sinn Féin can forget it; they can protest, dress up as funny little customs men and go around the border pretending that we are going to have a hard border, but that will not wash with Brussels. The only way to deliver for Northern Ireland is either for us to have our own Government or for my colleagues and me to be the voice for Northern Ireland in this Chamber, and I fully expect a strong DUP team to be returned after the general election to speak for Northern Ireland in this House.

I say again to the Secretary of State and his colleagues that part of this is about the budget. When the Secretary of State or the Minister winds up, will he tell us whether the budget will continue to include funding for the mitigation measures that were put in place in relation to welfare reform in Northern Ireland? A lot of vulnerable people in Northern Ireland would like to know the answer to that question, and it is important, because we need to expose Sinn Féin on this issue. This House is making provision for the funding of public services in Northern Ireland, so it is important to know whether the mitigation measures in relation to welfare reform will be included and for how long.

Finally, the current crisis proves that mandatory coalition—handing a veto to one side of the community—is a fundamentally flawed way of democratising government. The DUP wants—this has long been an objective of my party—to move towards a system of voluntary coalition in Northern Ireland. We should move towards a situation where the parties come together after an election, negotiate and agree a programme for government. Those parties that want to be part of the Government can voluntarily go into government, and those that do not can go into opposition. What we cannot sustain is a situation where those parties that do not want to go into government have a veto over everybody else in forming a Government. That is not democracy; it is the very antithesis of democracy.

Lady Hermon: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for taking yet another intervention, and I was tempted to make one because he was at the St Andrews agreement. He will recall that the Belfast agreement suggested—this was approved in the referendum in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland—that the First and Deputy First Ministers would be jointly elected, but that was

[Lady Hermon]

changed, unfortunately, after the St Andrews agreement. One proposal is that we go back to that and bring the parties together, putting the two names on the same ticket so that the Members of the Legislative Assembly have to vote for them. Is that an option the DUP would consider?

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: We will certainly look at options, but I have to say to the hon. Lady that that proposal does not solve the problem. If we are going to look at solving the problem, we have to be more fundamental about it—a sticking plaster will not do. That is why my colleagues and I believe that, in time, we will have to look again at the whole model of devolution and at the basis of mandatory coalition and whether it will work. It is certainly not working for Northern Ireland at the moment; it is delivering a veto that is preventing the formation of a Government at a time when we have huge decisions to take about our future, not least on Brexit. The people of Northern Ireland are being denied a voice because one single party, representing less than 30% of the vote, refuses to go into government. Surely that is an unsustainable position. While the Bill is welcome, it is merely a first step—a bandage. It will not fix the problem, and we do need to fix the problem.

6.26 pm

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): In following the hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), I should say that I was struck by the number of times he condemned Sinn Féin for using a veto—that from the DUP, the most veto-holic of all the parties, not least in relation to the abuse of the petition of concern, which other hon. Members referred to earlier.

Let me join others in referring to the grave attack at the weekend—the attempt to murder police officers and to use the precincts of a school to create disruption in a community and set up a situation where, yet again, officers of the PSNI, who serve and represent our whole community, would be under threat. However, I cannot join the attack by the hon. Member for East Antrim on the BBC for somehow making an untoward reference to that incident. He seemed to omit the fact that, in a debate I was part of on the BBC yesterday, his own colleague, the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), referred to the attack in the context of the political vacuum that exists and that could continue to exist. That linkage was made by one of his own parliamentary colleagues, so for him to turn round and use it as an excuse to have yet another go at the BBC just seems bizarre and out of place.

Ian Paisley: In his opening comments, the hon. Gentleman said there was abuse of the petition of concern. Does he agree that the biggest abuse came when the SDLP and Sinn Féin joined together to stop Gerry Kelly from being suspended from the Assembly for five days in line with the recommendations of the Commissioner for Standards?

Mark Durkan: No. The biggest abuse of the petition of concern comes whenever it is used to prevent motions in the Assembly—even non-binding motions and valid and credible motions of censure—from having any

standing whatever. If people are going to use the petition of concern in relation to motions of censure in one way, they should recognise that others are going to say, “If you are going to veto things in one way, you are creating the rules, and you are going to have to live by them.”

As on so many things, we need to return to what was originally provided for in the Good Friday agreement. The petition of concern was not included in the agreement as a veto; it was provided as a trigger mechanism for an additional form of proofing by a special committee in relation to concerns about rights or equality—that is all it was provided for. Unfortunately, the legislation did not properly reflect that, and it left things up to the Standing Orders in the Assembly, but those Standing Orders have never been right. Sinn Féin and the DUP have always been happy to leave the petition of concern as a dead-end veto under the Standing Orders of the Assembly. That was never in the agreement, as people will see if they care to look at the relevant paragraphs. Let us return to the petition of concern as an additional proofing mechanism for rights and equality, not as a prevention mechanism against the advancement of rights and equality in areas such as equal marriage.

The hon. Member for East Antrim excoriated the hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson) and told him that devolution is the opportunity to best make the laws that reflect the views of society. I absolutely agree with that. I am quite happy for the Assembly to make the laws that apply to abortion and to equal marriage. The Assembly is showing a clear wish and a clear intent there, and there have been clear indications of where the support of the people of Northern Ireland lies—it is similar to that in the south, as shown by referendum. The problem is that the DUP is vetoing and stopping the devolved Assembly having that legislative power. The DUP is criticising Sinn Féin for not allowing the government function to be created in circumstances where the DUP itself is regularly using a veto to prevent the legislative function of the Assembly. It is a “Whose veto trumps whose?” situation.

Sammy Wilson: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman, who argued for power sharing and safeguards within a power-sharing Executive and Assembly, is now happy with majority rule. I am sure that will go down dead well with his constituents.

Mark Durkan: I am entirely happy with operating the Good Friday agreement as the people voted for it—people of Ireland north and south. A petition of concern would mean that a mechanism could be checked and proofed. If there were not concerns in relation to rights and equality, it could proceed in the normal way through the Assembly; if there were, it would require cross-community support. I make no apology for my part in negotiating and drafting the Good Friday agreement and in helping to establish the institutions. I regret the fact that we have departed from the Good Friday agreement in so many ways.

The hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) referred to the appointment of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister. Like her, I listened to the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) saying that we need to change things and get to a different way, and that there should not be a situation where one party can veto. Let us remember that the

St Andrews agreement limited the appointment of the offices of First Minister and Deputy First Minister to two parties and two parties only. It specified that the biggest party of one designation would appoint the First Minister, and then the biggest party of another designation would appoint the Deputy First Minister. There was to be no role for the Assembly any more in electing and having a free choice in the joint election of First Minister and Deputy First Minister, as the Good Friday agreement provided. If the right hon. Gentleman is in any way serious about what he is saying, then next time we are tabling amendments in respect of changing how the First Minister and Deputy First Minister are appointed, he should join us in supporting those amendments, not oppose them. I checked with the Clerks as to whether the Bill's reference to ministerial appointments would have allowed me to table such an amendment. I was advised that the narrow terms of the Bill would not have allowed me again to table the amendment that I have tabled in the past.

Given the way in which acronyms are used in this place, no doubt this Bill, which we might call the ministerial appointments and regional rates Bill, will be referred to as the MARR Bill. However, there is nothing memorable about it. It is purely ephemeral in the sense of making exigent provisions in relation to the striking of a regional rate so that rates bills can be issued and councils can get their take of the district rate. I regret that it has been necessary to bring the Bill forward in this House, but I support it in terms of allowing the revenue to come in to support public services, both those run by councils and those provided by regional government departments.

The Bill is also ephemeral in the sense of resetting the meter on the appointment of Ministers. I note that the Secretary of State has chosen a timeline that would broadly equate to what the timeline under the current legislation would be if there was an Assembly election on the same day as the general election. Therefore, those who have argued for an election on the same day can have no objection to that timeline. As we heard from other hon. Members, there is another coincidence in relation to the timeline with regard to the budgetary pressures and the fact that the civil service is now having to assign a percentage of the budget in the absence of an elected Government in the Assembly. All sorts of groups and budget holders, including in the community and voluntary sector, but not only there, have been given the indication that their funding is guaranteed, as was, for the first 13 weeks of the financial year. Those 13 weeks will bring us to within a calendar week of the same deadline that we have. That should concentrate minds—I hope that it does—about what the consequences of an absence of the institutions would be.

Tom Elliott: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that if there is no progress within the timescale set in the Bill, the Secretary of State needs to bring forward further legislation to resolve the budgetary issues, because we cannot keep going through the financial crisis that departments are currently in?

Mark Durkan: We have to use the timeline that is created here and now. We also have to use such good will as any of us were able to detect in the talks in Stormont Castle over the past number of weeks.

I personally would not come to the conclusion that one party is determined to prevent the formation of a Government altogether. I wish I had more evidence that I could point to so as to support my hunch that Sinn Féin would want to see the formation of a Government. It would be better if Sinn Féin would say more in public that gave people reason to believe that. In the debate I took part in on the BBC yesterday, I was struck by the fact that Chris Hazzard of Sinn Féin said that Sinn Féin would have a powerful position in relation to Brexit because of having four MEPs and because Dublin was going to have a decisive role as a member state. He put no premium whatsoever on the institutions of the agreement. At no point did he say, "The important thing that will help us to offset some of the challenges and threats of Brexit is having our own devolved Government who are part of using and activating the strand 2 structures that are the best way of doing things on an all-Ireland basis, with relevant sectors being treated as an Ireland market, and that being reflected and respected with regard to EU construction programmes and potential funding, as Michel Barnier has indicated." There was none of that whatsoever from Sinn Féin. I can therefore see why people are worried about what it is saying about Brexit and asking, "Where are the institutions of the Good Friday agreement?"

Strand 1 of the Good Friday agreement would be pretty central to making those institutions work because, as we know from what happened before, strand 2 cannot be activated—we cannot have a North South Ministerial Council—unless we have northern Ministers in a northern Executive. It is therefore imperative that we get our institutions up and running. A failure to do so means that we are sentenced to the hard Brexit that people are complaining about and worried about, but also a hard Brexit in the absence of any devolved mitigation—any north-south axis that can be used, including by the Irish Government. Strand 2 provides that the views of the North South Ministerial Council will be reflected and represented in various EU meetings, so it gives the Irish Government a potentially powerful role. However, whenever Chris Hazzard referred to the Irish Government's role yesterday, none of that related to the fact that they would be reflecting the views of the North South Ministerial Council in EU meetings. We need to get the institutions up and running, although I recognise that there are issues in the way.

I do not accept the rewriting of recent history by the hon. Member for East Antrim in relation to the renewable heat incentive. When questions were put to Treasury Ministers and to NIO Ministers about a Westminster and Whitehall interest in RHI, the DUP was seething at any such suggestion by me, by my hon. Friend the Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie), or by the two Ulster Unionist party Members. The DUP was completely opposed to a public inquiry. The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley made it very clear on TV on several occasions that consideration by the Public Accounts Committee in the Assembly was sufficient and there was no need for any other inquiry. It had Sinn Féin on board with that position for quite a while, and then things fell apart between them.

Like the hon. Member for East Antrim, I ask why the Northern Ireland Executive did not produce a draft budget. Why are we in this position at all, with no hint

[Mark Durkan]

or sign of what the devolved budget would have been? Let us remember that back on 21 November the DUP and Sinn Féin issued a joint article, stating:

“This is what delivery looks like. No gimmicks. No grandstanding.”

And that was when there was no sign of a draft budget. The DUP was quite happy to say that it was good government not to have a draft budget at that stage. We are now at a point when we should have long had the revised budget. That is what the joint article by Arlene Foster and Martin McGuinness said and it was accompanied by a lovely photograph: back in November, Sinn Féin and the DUP gave us the Mills & Boon version of lovely government. Then the wheels started to come off after the pressure created by the RHI issues in December.

What was the root cause of the arrogance that manifested itself in the RHI scandal? It was the fact that the DUP felt that it was not accountable to the Assembly and that it had been appointed entirely according to its own mandate. We heard Arlene Foster say that she had a mandate from the people of Northern Ireland. The DUP’s mandate in last year’s Assembly election was no greater than that which the Labour party got in Great Britain, and yet we were told by Arlene Foster that her mandate from the people of Northern Ireland meant that she could ignore the mandate received by everybody else in the Assembly. Given that she was not appointed by the Assembly, contrary to the provisions of the Good Friday agreement, she had no sense of accountability to it, which is why the DUP made it clear that it would veto any motion passed by the Assembly on the RHI. Of course, that is what it did, and in so doing it not only ignored the proper authority and its debt of accountability to the Assembly at large, but broke the ethic of mutuality and jointery in the offices of the First and Deputy First Ministers. That made it very difficult, if not impossible, for Martin McGuinness to continue as though there were no other strains present.

Those are not the only challenges that we need to resolve. Other hon. Members have touched on legacy issues, but unfortunately, given Madam Deputy Speaker’s advice on time, I will not be able to go fully into them. The hon. Member for Blaydon has referred to the Sammy Devenney case, which happened in my constituency. Conservative Members have also raised concerns about former officers being pursued and questioned about previous cases. However, although those cases have been presented here as examples of people being pursued for prosecution, they have actually come about as a result of new inquests about controversial deaths that have shown that some of those who were killed were not terrorists or gunmen as had previously been reported, and that therefore their killing was wrongful. It is entirely legitimate that legacy issues should be pursued and questions asked. Officers gave various accounts—and Ministers in turn, down the years, have in this House given false accounts—of those deaths and incidents. It is entirely proper that those cases should be well pursued.

Although there has been a measure of agreement among Sinn Féin, the DUP and the British Government—notwithstanding disagreements on questions of national security—on limited approaches by the historical investigations unit, the Social Democratic and Labour party wants more architecture on legacy issues, not

least with regard to thematic approaches. The HIU is able only to produce individual reports on individual cases, and not to join the dots, show the patterns or draw on the wider lessons. It is also confined to looking at killings, but the troubles have many other dimensions and legacies of victimhood that are not just in relation to killings. People have many questions about the pattern, motives and character of the violence carried out by paramilitaries as well as, possibly, by the security forces, and they want those questions to be examined and tested. I think that that would give a more equal assessment of the past.

We considered those proposals in the Haass talks. Richard Haass and Meghan O’Sullivan had particular ideas about a strong approach to thematics, which would have reflected the interest right across the community. It would not only have addressed issues of state breaches and allegations against state forces; it would have been very wide, open, thorough and responsive. We need to return to those sorts of arrangements in respect of the past.

We need to make progress on the Irish language Act, but let us be clear that part of the problem is that people are selling riddles, because in the St Andrews agreement there was a pledge from the British Government that they would legislate for a language Act, whereas the only commitment on the part of the parties was for a language strategy. Ambiguities and contradictions were built into it and some of us sought clarity at the time. Sinn Féin was spinning it that there would be an Irish language Act in the Assembly, but we pointed out our honest interpretation of the literal language. Of course, we were decried simply for pointing out the truth.

Whatever the problems in relation to the Irish language Act and the RHI issue, we need to remember that Brexit is the biggest issue facing us all. What helped bring about the discolouration in the politics around our institutions? The fact is that it was Brexit, which has made a much bigger difference to the political atmosphere in Northern Ireland than certain Members care to admit.

Mr Gregory Campbell: The hon. Gentleman says that Brexit is the fundamental issue. Given his position on Brexit, does he take any comfort from the fact that the British and Irish Governments and the EU have ruled out a hard border? Does he accept that there will not be one?

Mark Durkan: I accept that those bodies have given that indication, but they have not said how it will be done. The Prime Minister has been careful to say that she wants the border to be as frictionless and seamless as possible and that there would be

“no return to the hard borders of the past”,

but there has been no full commitment that there will be no possible borders of the future. Sector after sector in Northern Ireland worries about such borders, and the best way to prevent them is to properly use the machinery of the Good Friday agreement, which allows for areas of co-operation and joint implementation. It also allows us to take concerted action on a north-south basis and say that different sectors want to be treated as an island market. Given the EU’s historical position, that should be fully respected and reflected. If the British Government are serious about wanting to continue to honour the Good Friday agreement in the context of Brexit, they should allow that to happen.

That is what special status would look like. We do not have to negotiate a new special status for Northern Ireland. We have to have the full optimisation of the Good Friday agreement in the context of any Brexit, so that we can have the strongest regional say in our own interest and a strong north-south axis. We also need to use the east-west structures of the agreement, not least the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference, which can deal with all of the non-devolved issues that the two Governments have in common, as well as allow devolved Ministers to be part of those meetings, particularly when they touch on devolved matters. I believe that that would be a much more attractive facility for devolved Ministers than even the Joint Ministerial Committee on European Negotiation, because the common experience of all the devolved Administrations is that they find it pretty confusing and belittling.

Using the structures and mechanisms of the Good Friday agreement would give us the best answer to Brexit, but we will not do that unless we use the additional time given by this Bill to make sure that we form an Executive in the Assembly that was elected on 2 March.

6.48 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I did not expect to get called at this point, Madam Deputy Speaker; I usually get called at the end of debates. The good book says that

“the last shall be first, and the first last”,

but today I am somewhere in the middle. It is always a pleasure to speak in this House.

I congratulate the Secretary of State and the Government on presenting the interim measures in the Bill. This is not where we want to be, but we are committed to the Northern Ireland Assembly and the democratic process. The Bill gives us all an opportunity to make a contribution. A number of valuable speeches have been made, some of which raised questions in my mind, which I will speak about later.

Until recently, we had a functioning Executive that was more than fit to handle the issue of rates and to make Northern Ireland's economy prosperous. In the short time that I have, I want to talk about the positive things that the Northern Ireland Assembly has achieved. The statistics are quite incredible. Unemployment numbers in Northern Ireland dropped to 39,320 in 2016. In my constituency, the percentage of people who claim for unemployment dropped from 5.3% to approximately 3.5%. The Democratic Unionist party has achieved that by being in government in Northern Ireland, making things work and getting the business done. That is what we do—we get the business done.

We have supported the creation of more than 40,000 new jobs, smashing the target of 25,000. We have instigated £2.9 billion of investment, which is almost three times the target of £1 billion. Such positive things are made possible by a good Assembly in which all parties are committed to working together, without one party stopping the whole process. We have had £585 million of research and development investment—almost double the target of £300 million—and 72% of new jobs supported by the “Rebuilding our Economy” programme have paid above the Northern Ireland public sector median salary. That gives some indication of what can happen when the Northern Ireland Assembly works. It has delivered at the highest level, and the figures have been way beyond many people's expectations.

We took control of air passenger duty on long-haul flights leaving Northern Ireland and reduced the charge to zero. That power was taken off us by Europe, but we will now divest ourselves of Europe and wipe the dust off our coats in that regard. If we have a working Assembly, we will have a chance to reinstate that measure and put ourselves back in the market for long-haul flights.

Northern Ireland received more than 1 million more visitors than previously over the past three years. We have achieved year-on-year growth in tourism spending, which reached £752 million in 2014 and has increased in each successive year. The number of cruise ships docking in Northern Ireland has increased year on year. Some 80 vessels and an estimated 145,000 guests came to Northern Ireland in 2016, and the figures for this year show that there has been even more growth in the sector. That is what happens when we have a working Assembly to which all parties are committed, but one party—Sinn Féin—is not, and that has to be addressed.

On business taxes, the DUP has continued the policy of industrial de-rating, which has saved local businesses tens of millions of pounds, protecting jobs and encouraging investment. We have protected the small business rates relief scheme, which has benefited many small businesses across Northern Ireland by approximately £18 million per year. Small and medium-sized businesses across Northern Ireland have benefited directly from that action by the DUP. We delivered a Northern Ireland-wide rating revaluation that reduced rates bills for many businesses. Since 2012, 525 new businesses have benefited from the introduction of empty premises rate relief. When the Assembly was operational, it brought success to the people of Northern Ireland. The DUP remains committed to that, and we are looking forward to other parties making their contribution.

For years, business organisations have campaigned for the devolution of corporation tax and for the setting of a lower rate. Those powers have been described as potential game-changers for our economy. Other parties had second thoughts and were not sure what to do, so they gave up on it, but the DUP persisted and secured them. A date has been set in 2018 for the rate to be lowered to 12.5%, but there is now a question mark over that, because Sinn Féin's intransigence has made the Assembly unworkable. If the Assembly was back up and running, we could deliver on that, and thereby deliver more jobs and a stronger economy across Northern Ireland. The cut in corporation tax will build on the strength of our workforce and the comparative cost base that makes Northern Ireland an attractive investment opportunity.

When the Executive was up and running, it delivered, and it should continue to do so. This does not read like a non-functioning, defunct Executive; it reads like an Executive in which one party was working hard to deliver for the people of the Province, but which was unfortunately brought down by another party that aspired to be in control to push a political point. Members have spoken eloquently today about the political aspirations that Sinn Féin has pushed hard to achieve. The Assembly was brought down by a party that does not send representatives to this House to fight for Northern Ireland—Sinn Féin representatives never sit on these green Benches and never take part in the decisions made for the people of Northern Ireland who elected them—but that will ask people to vote for it in a

[Jim Shannon]

Westminster election, even though it will return nobody here to work for them. That is hard to believe. Sinn Féin Members refuse to take their seats in this place to fix what they have broken.

Members of my party and I will stand in the forthcoming election as people who work hard on the ground for our constituents. We work hard in this place, as the statistics show, for our constituencies, people and country. We are left in a position in which the Secretary of State has to step in. I am thankful for his willingness to do so, but that is not what we want or what the people of Northern Ireland deserve, and it must change.

Just a few weeks ago, the hon. Members for South Down (Ms Ritchie) and for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Tom Elliott)—he has just left the Chamber—and I had a very constructive meeting with the chief executive of the Education Authority, at which we pressed for funds for outdoor centres. The chief executive indicated that even before the setting of the budget, the EA was £73 million short this year on its education spend. If it is short to that extent when the Assembly is not functioning, what will happen if the situation continues?

Sammy Wilson: Does my hon. Friend recognise that even if the Secretary of State took powers to handle all the budgetary issues, the pattern of spending would be as established in previous years of the Assembly—no new initiatives could be implemented, because the power would be simply to disburse the funds on the basis on which they had previously been distributed—even though the priorities might now be different? Taking over budgetary powers will not resolve the issues that my hon. Friend is talking about.

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Taking those powers will not address the issues, and we cannot address the issues because we do not have a working Assembly—if we did, we could at least make some decisions. We need the Finance Minister to bring forward a budget, as others have indicated, and we need all parties to be committed to the Executive. It is very frustrating to be in this position.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) referred to the case that the shadow Secretary of State raised. I look on the shadow Secretary of State as a friend—I wish him well in his retirement—so I was disappointed by the fact that he did not give any examples of similar cases from among the Unionist community. He could have mentioned Bloody Friday, when the IRA bombed people and blew them to bits. He could have mentioned Darkley, where the Irish National Liberation Army attacked and murdered people who were worshipping their God. He could have mentioned La Mon, where the IRA murdered innocent people who were on a night out. He could have mentioned the Abercorn restaurant, where people were murdered while they were having a meal. The Unionist community wants to know where the inquiries are.

Sammy Wilson: Does my hon. Friend accept that we see this pattern from the Labour party, especially under Jeremy Corbyn—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. I am sure the hon. Gentleman means the leader of the Labour party, or the right hon. Member for Islington North.

Sammy Wilson: Does my hon. Friend accept that this is a pattern established by the Labour party under the leadership of the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), who has refused even to acknowledge, let alone read, letters sent by Colin Parry, whose son was killed at Warrington?

Mr Anderson rose—

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I am happy to give way to the shadow Secretary of State.

Mr Anderson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way—I also look on him as a friend. May I make it very clear that I raised that case specifically to make a point about how long it has taken to resolve? I wanted to say to people in Northern Ireland and in this House that we have had 48 years to put the legacy thing right. I fully agree that the other cases that the hon. Gentleman has just spoken about could have been mentioned. It is unreasonable for victims' families to have to wait for any length of time, but it is particularly unreasonable for them to have to wait for 48 years—that was why I raised that particular case.

Jim Shannon: My cousins and our family have been waiting 46 years for such a matter to be addressed. The families of the four UDR men about whom we recently had a debate in the House—Members on these Benches took the time to attend and offer their support—have been waiting some 27 years for justice for those people. We are looking for justice, we want to see it coming, and we want to hear people saying that throughout the Chamber—[*Interruption.*] I am quite happy to respect everyone else, and if there is a case to be answered, let us answer it, but to be honest, if there is a case involving our side, I want to hear people talking a wee bit more about it. I want to hear about inquiries for Unionist people who have endured some 35 years of terrorism—[*Interruption*—and, yes, ethnic cleansing. Down by the border, people were murdered. Why? Because they were Protestants and Unionists. Why did others do that? Because they wanted to get the land. That is an example of what has happened, but we never hear about it from certain elements in this House. We are going to talk about it tonight, because it is a fact that has to be heard.

Ian Paisley: As my hon. Friend has heard, we have been chastised for representing certain traditional values. I have a letter from a parish priest in my constituency thanking me for the work our party does—

Dr Alasdair McDonnell: Name him.

Ian Paisley: No, I will not name him, but I will show you the letter, Alasdair. If the hon. Gentleman wants to see it, I am happy to share it with him.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. I have a couple of things to say. Interventions are getting extremely long. Members are also referring to each other directly—we do not do that; we speak through the Chair. The whole tone of the debate until now has been very good, and I really do not want that to disappear. I understand the passions and the tensions, and I understand the importance of these matters, but the tone of the debate should be maintained as it has been so far. I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will move on to my last few comments.

I thank the Secretary of State for introducing the Bill and for the positive contribution that he and the Under-Secretary have made to the talks process. They have tried hard to move the talks forward, and they have our support for the Bill. We fully support these interim measures in the hope that our Executive will be able to function soon, and that we can achieve more of all the things I have mentioned, such as reducing unemployment, creating jobs and prosperity, and focusing on what matters for the young people of today and those of a different age.

I hope that those who seek to stand in the way of democracy will realise what we have been dealing with for years. We do not enjoy sitting beside unrepentant terrorists, but we must do so as they have a mandate, and the country must function as a democracy. We accept that and we understand the process. They may not look forward to sitting beside us, but we have a mandate as the largest party in the Northern Ireland, and that is the definition of democracy. I say to Sinn Féin, “If you cannot work with us, resign your seats and allow those who look to the good of Northern Ireland—Unionists and nationalists, and all those thousands who designate themselves as neither—to do the job so that we do not have to come to this Chamber again with more interim measures, which indicate a failure for democracy and a worse failure for the people of Northern Ireland.” Let us be positive. Let us hope that this is only interim legislation and that by the end of June the parties will have come together. I ask Sinn Féin to make such a contribution and to step away from the high bar it has set so that we can have negotiations—with those from both traditions, and those who want a way forward—that will actually lead somewhere for the people of Northern Ireland.

7.3 pm

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): May I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on his positive contribution to this debate? It was really what we needed, because the debate was getting a little bleak at times.

I thank the Secretary of State for all the work he has put in on Northern Ireland, including going out and meeting people throughout the community and really listening to them. I want to echo his sentiments about the bomb outside the primary school, which is quite disgraceful. That sort of thing should never have been happening, and we thought we had moved away from it all. It really emphasises how brittle the situation is in Northern Ireland, and how it falls on all of us everywhere to try to find the right way forward.

I also thank the hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson) for all that he has done, including coming to speak to our party conference. I may not agree with everything he has said today—he stirred up the debate, which got quite lively—but we did talk about some of the issues that really needed to be discussed today. That includes the fact that one party is not in the House. It takes all the money and fees, but does not represent its people. It paints itself to the rest of the world as the cuddly bear of Northern Ireland politics, when it is in fact a very different kind of bear altogether.

We very much welcome the Bill and its provisions, and the breathing space that it has provided up to 8 June. It will allow us to put in place what Northern Ireland wants to meet its needs. Key decisions on the public finances were needed, and we know that when such things are put on ice, the most vulnerable always pay the price.

However, there are still great difficulties with the budgets. Schools I have talked to say that they are already working on budgets that are not based on plans for the future; they are just using guesswork. In one constituency case, the Gaelic Athletic Association, which was borrowing the pitches of local integrated schools, can no longer use them because the cuts mean that schools cannot provide a caretaker to look after the pitches, so people cannot now train for their games. In other cases, a mass of capital expenditure is needed in education. I note that the budget that has been presented has a 2.5% cut for education, and a slight rise for health.

There are a lot of problems ahead, and we need flexibility. As I said in my earlier intervention, we also need a mechanism so that when people approach politicians while the Stormont Government are in limbo, such information can be fed to heads of Departments and action can be taken. We need a little bit of such flexibility. I note that what is being put in place does not entirely have a statutory footing, so I hope that it will not lead us into a world where it cannot be challenged in the courts.

The issue of corporation tax was raised earlier. We would like to hear what the intentions are for it. The change was meant to come in during 2018. Will the Secretary of State confirm that that would still be the case if Stormont was not in place?

Several Members have mentioned that we now have 90 MLAs who are working away, with their offices looking after the people on the ground, but we need decisions to be made. We should be focusing on health, education and welfare, but we are instead being dragged into discussing the Irish language and other matters on which we are finding it difficult to get everyone to agree.

As others have done, I want to emphasise the legacy issues. We have to find a way forward. I note that the Secretary of State is looking at bringing in a consultation, and I welcome such an outcome, but we must at no time forget the victims. They must always be well looked after, and not just in Northern Ireland, because there is a mass of victims over here who are not properly looked after either. The Secretary of State knows that I am keen for us always to look after the servicemen, and to make sure that there is no equality with the terrorists, but at the same time we must find a way forward on the legacy issues. There has to be a solution, but it will need all of us to sit down, and pressure must be put on Sinn Féin for that to happen.

Because of Brexit, getting the Assembly up and working will be key. Whether or not those involved were remainers—I was a remainer, but the people have spoken and we must listen to them—we need their involvement. During visits to various areas, such as the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee visit to Dublin, and in speaking to others, I have found that Unionism does not have a voice, either because of the limits of strand 2, or because we have not got a Government of our own. We must have a way to ensure that all types of Unionism—not just the DUP, but the UUP and others—are listened to throughout the Brexit negotiations.

[Danny Kinahan]

We need to have 18 MPs back here in the Chamber, not just 14. We need to make sure that everyone is represented. If we look into it, we find that 250,000 people in Northern Ireland are not represented. That will be key in the Brexit negotiations, and we need to make sure that our farmers in every constituency are listened to, just as much as we need to look after our universities, our businesses, and the community and voluntary sector. Our environment keeps being left out all the way through, and we must make sure that it is very much part of the Brexit negotiations.

I was fascinated to hear Members suggest that mandatory coalition may not be the right way forward. When I have spoken to the Secretary of State, I have many times said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing again and again, so it is great to hear others changing their minds or looking at something different. We need to find another way of all working together. That may be a voluntary coalition, but if so, we must make sure that we look after the minorities, so that is not without its difficulties. We could even have a minority Government if the two major parties cannot agree, but we all need to sit down and find a way forward. I know that every single person sitting here wants solutions and can work together. One party that is not here does not make it easy, but that does not mean that the other parties here are not at fault too. With a little humility, and a little consideration of the RHI issue and a realisation that it was a certain party's fault, we could all work that much better together.

I long to see Northern Ireland working. I do not want to see devolved government failing. If it is not working and we have to have direct rule, it has to be for as short a time as possible and as effective as possible, but it also has to be done by listening to all of us in Northern Ireland. I thank the Secretary of State for what he has put in place today. I hope we can get there and I look forward to seeing Northern Ireland really thrive in the future.

7.10 pm

Dr Alasdair McDonnell (Belfast South) (SDLP): Like many in Northern Ireland, I am saddened that we have come to this impasse which has created the issues we are trying to solve. There are so many problems that need to be faced, but we will not face them or solve them by trading insults or abuse. I will attempt to be as positive as possible and I will avoid that well known pastime in Northern Ireland called whataboutery.

I pay tribute to the shadow Secretary of State the hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson) for his outstanding public service over many years, both in this House and in the years before he arrived here. Thank you, David. I know that all in this House will wish him well and those of us who have worked with him will miss him: his kindness, his tolerance and his caring approach.

I would first like to touch on what I consider to be an absurd and relatively insulting suggestion by the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) that the SDLP did nothing about the killing of Robert McCartney in a bar in Belfast in 2005. His point is neither accurate nor well made. No one can criticise me on how outspoken I was about the murder of Robert

McCartney. Sinn Féin, in the immediate aftermath, were still trying to pretend that it was the result of some sort of knife crime when I unequivocally pointed the finger at IRA involvement in that murder.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I would like to correct him. I may have got the location wrong in terms of where the murder was carried out, but I was talking about the tit-for-tat double murder of Jock Davison and Kevin McGuigan that occurred during a period when Sinn Féin were in government. One of those murders was carried out in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. I was simply making the point that I did not hear the hon. Gentleman, on that occasion when there were multiple murders involved, calling into question Sinn Féin's fitness for government or his confidence in the Government in those circumstances. I think that that is a fair point to make.

Dr McDonnell: The record will show that the right hon. Gentleman referred to a murder in a bar and the only murder in a bar was that of Robert McCartney. I was active politically in criticising both the murder of Jock Davison and the murder of Kevin McGuigan.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: And the Government?

Dr McDonnell: I am being heckled here.

Mark Durkan: I remind my hon. Friend that when it came to the Stormont House talks, it was the SDLP who submitted the papers on a whole community approach to tackling paramilitarism, it was the SDLP who put in a whole enforcement approach to tackling paramilitarism, and, in fact, it was the SDLP who wanted paramilitarism and criminality on the agenda of those all-party talks. It was the DUP who helped to veto that originally. [Interruption.]

Dr McDonnell: We risk getting into whataboutery. In fact, we are probably deeply into whataboutery. I just want to put on the record that at the time I was very critical, publicly and aggressively, of the murder of Robert—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. We are in danger of ranging far outside the Second Reading of the Bill and getting bogged down into specifics about individual parties. I understand why and where that is coming from, but if we could keep more closely to the Bill, that would be fantastic.

Dr McDonnell: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker, but allegations were made and I felt that I had to refute them. I will leave it at that and perhaps sort it out with the right hon. Gentleman privately. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ooh!"] We can sort it out over a cup of tea.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I am glad for that clarification.

Dr McDonnell: I am not a violent man, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Moving on, we are in this situation because of a failure to face a new reality. Some may not agree with me, but the difficulties and the fiasco around the renewable heat incentive triggered a sequence of events that spun out of control. People out there want answers and they

feel that they deserve them. Many of those who want answers are not nationalists. I have met many Unionists who are horrified by the events relating to the RHI. I will leave it at that. Clouds of confusion or poking each other in the eye only make things worse.

I say to the Secretary of State that it is vital that no stone is left unturned until devolution is restored in Northern Ireland. We have massive problems that must be faced. Northern Ireland is suffering from a total lack of confidence in its institutions. There are many issues facing us, but four jump out. The first is Brexit. Northern Ireland voted against it and to my mind it will be very difficult for Northern Ireland. The issue is multi-layered, but I will take just one example. I am being inundated by community groups and community workers from peace building groups from various marginalised communities who are heavily dependent on European peace funds to carry out their work. Those groups are currently facing collapse through lack of funding. They are not from any particular tribe or side of the political divide.

The second issue is our economy. The delay in the reduction in corporation tax was mentioned earlier. Aside from corporation tax, there was meant to be a prosperity dividend following the peace process. It never came. To my mind, peace will not be fully sustained unless our economy gets a boost and real jobs are created. Currently, we have no budget. This has serious consequences, in particular for our schools and our health service.

The hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) mentioned many of the problems in education. I will not repeat them, but I will make one point. We have very serious problems with underachievement, despite some very powerful successes at some schools. I urge the Secretary of State to work with me, the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds) and the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) to do what we can to solve the crisis in underachievement in education in marginalised areas. It is frightening. I would be glad if, in conjunction with my colleagues from neighbouring constituencies, the Secretary of State or the Minister could find the time to visit some of those schools, because it is despair-plus-plus for the people who try to teach in and run them. These are the people who are really suffering now, more than any others, as a result of the present difficulties. We need to deal with the problem of education despair and disadvantage in these areas. If we do not deal with it, we will create an underclass of people with no stake in society and they will be disruptive to society in the years ahead. That is the narrow self-interest. The broad interest is that we have a duty to ensure that all children of the nation are treated equally.

Our health service is stumbling towards despair. Primary care struggles to cope when hospital waiting lists, in particular surgical waiting lists, are in great difficulty. I will not go into detail on that.

I want to make an honest point about the attacks on the Irish language and I hope it will be taken as such. I was tempted to make this speech “as Gaeilge”, but I felt that not too many people would understand me so out of courtesy I decided not to. I am talking about attacks on the Irish language, and the immature abuse that is heaped on those who wish to speak Gaelic. It is not a crime to speak Welsh in Wales, and it is not an offence to speak Gaelic in Scotland. I remind the House that

100 years ago the revival of the Irish language in my county, the proud county of Antrim, was led by Unionists, not by nationalists. It would be disastrous to hand the ownership of the Irish language exclusively to Sinn Féin. I will never agree to that, whatever form it might take. The Irish language is the possession of no political party or grouping; it is the right and the property of all, culturally and in all other dimensions.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) requested support for victims of the IRA. I could not agree more. Many of my friends were murdered by the IRA, and I am very willing to put on record my support for any campaign for justice, honesty, openness and answers for all victims and survivors, regardless of who they are or what their political aspiration might be. That includes every single victim.

A general point has been made about the legacy issues, and other Members have spoken about the details. I merely say that we must find a solution, and beg the Secretary of State to press on, because otherwise instability and discontent will be fuelled.

In the remaining few minutes or seconds of my speech, let me wish the Secretary of State every success in his efforts to ensure that devolution is re-established, because it is the best deal for Northern Ireland. I genuinely hope that the extension to 108 days will allow space for the restoring of the institutions. I also hope that striking a temporary regional rate will help to restore a degree of financial stability. As for the allocation of the billions of pounds that the Brexit people promised us on the back of a leave vote—as Members may recall, they promised us £350-odd million a week for the health service—I urge the Secretary of State to ensure that some of the money that is released is spent on the creation of a prosperity process that will deal with educational underachievement and strengthen the health service so that it is able to cope with the demand in Northern Ireland.

7.22 pm

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): It gives me great pleasure to speak in the debate, and to follow the hon. Member for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell). I welcome the Bill, as far as it goes. It is necessary, but unfortunate. There is now a new deadline, but as it is the same deadline that was imposed for the first set of talks, it is, in fact, not really a deadline. Let me say to the Secretary of State, with great respect, that he may find that a hard rather than a soft deadline would produce more dividends by making it clear to some people during the talks process that it is time for them to make their minds up and decide whether or not they really want devolution.

Whatever our differences are on these Benches—there are three Northern Ireland Benches here, and things can get heated at times, especially when Members talk about historical events—the one thing that binds us together is the fact that we are here to represent not just the people who voted for us, but all the people in our constituencies. We all take our seats, and we all speak up and stand up for Northern Ireland. Whatever differences there may be between us, that is something that we have in common.

In recent days, eulogies have been delivered about the former Deputy First Minister, who passed away. Some people said that he had gone down a certain path because

[Mr Nigel Dodds]

he had no choice, but other people who grew up in places like Londonderry and west Belfast at the same time—people like John Hume and John Cushnahan, in west Belfast—did not take up an Armalite or a bomb. It could be said that they came from the same background, but, although they chose a different path from my colleagues and me in terms of their politics and outlook, it was a democratic path. They deserve praise and honour for that, but it is sometimes easily forgotten.

We have, of course, been here before. Not so long ago, we had to pass emergency legislation to sort out the issue of welfare reform in Northern Ireland. That was another crisis that led to intensive talks and agreements. It was another crisis that was brought about because some Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly, for whatever reason—we will not go into the details tonight—did not want to make the decision to implement welfare changes that were an inevitable result of changes agreed to here at Westminster. We opposed those changes, but we accepted that a budget had been set and we had to get on with the reality of the situation that had presented itself to us. We brought in mitigations, but, sadly, some of them may be at risk if we do not get devolution up and running.

Sinn Féin, however, appeared willing—in fact, was willing—to allow this Parliament, whose authority, legitimacy and validity it questions, queries and lambasts all the time, to do the heavy lifting and implement the hard decisions that were necessary. Indeed, I understand that Westminster still has the legal authority until the end of this year, because the sunset clause has not yet kicked in. There has not been a word about that from Sinn Féin. The sovereign Westminster Parliament has full control in that regard, yet we are told that in no circumstances must there be a return to direct rule. There has already been a partial return to direct rule in respect of welfare reform, and Sinn Féin agreed to it. That is the reality.

Let me make our position very clear. We want devolution to be restored in Northern Ireland. Those of us who sit in Westminster might have more influence if matters were to be decided here, but it would be far less influence than the influence that Members of the Legislative Assembly—members of all parties—would have in Stormont in deciding on the affairs of Northern Ireland. That is what we want to see.

Lady Hermon: The right hon. Gentleman has made a valuable point. We are heading towards a general election campaign, and harsh words will be said by one party about another, because that is what happens during general election campaigns. Will he take this opportunity to reassure the people of Northern Ireland that even during the campaign, there will be low-level discussions—perhaps not even low-level discussions—between his party and Sinn Féin in an attempt to get positive talks up and going immediately after 8 June?

Mr Dodds: We have made it clear that we are happy to continue contacts during the election campaign, and I am sure that there will be such contacts, at official and other levels. We have no difficulty in trying to reach out and secure agreement on the issues that are outstanding.

We want to make it very plain today that we do not stand in the way of the restoration of devolution, and nor, I understand, do some other parties to the process. We will form an Executive tomorrow, on Monday, on Tuesday, or on any day on which the Secretary of State cares to call the Assembly together. We will go into government, but as my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) said, people should not take that for granted. People should not just say, “That is okay.” Given what we have come through, as a community and as political representatives, representing people who have been on the receiving end of IRA bombs, bullets and all the rest of it, we are making a massive statement. However, we are prepared to do that, and willing to do that, for some of the reasons given by the hon. Member for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell). He mentioned education and the levels of underachievement in places like north, east and south Belfast in particular, but also in many other parts of the Province. This is a critical issue, and steps to address it were being taken in the Assembly by the Minister of Education—and not just our Minister, but previous Ministers as well.

I wish that that work could continue across government in Northern Ireland, because it is better that local Ministers who have an understanding of, and a feel for, these issues and know what will and will not work drive these policies, listening to people on the ground. That applies, too, to the health service and all its needs and the big decisions that need to be taken. On the voluntary and community sector, again we share common ground on the fact that people need certainty about budgets and do not know what is going to happen. Recently, Arlene Foster and I met representatives of the business community; right across the board, their consistent message was that they wanted devolution up and running, and we agree, so we will work to achieve that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) outlined in his speech some of the achievements of devolution. They are sometimes easy to forget given the general view that “Devolution never did anything for us; local Government in Northern Ireland never achieved anything.” Leaving aside the big prize of peace and stability, we must reiterate the benefits of devolution; it is important that they get repeated over and again.

One thing that is slightly reassuring is that, while in the run-up to January everybody said, “Get rid of Stormont; it’s a waste of time and nobody wants it,” and nobody was speaking out in favour of it, since it has been down, everybody has been coming out and saying, “Make sure you get Stormont up and running; it will be a disaster if it fell.” I just wish some of those people would speak up a bit more loudly at the time when difficult decisions are being taken by the Executive and the Assembly, because it is easy to join the general throng and say “Everything’s terrible” when tough decisions have to be made. With regard to what Sinn Féin is now saying, I read an article by Declan Kearney recently, in which he berated the Conservative Government; he said that since 2010 there has been a change in attitude from British Governments. He blamed the DUP, with no blame whatsoever attaching to his party, of course. There is a rewriting of the past going on: not just a rewriting of the last 30 years of the troubles, but a rewriting of the last seven or eight months. The House needs to be reminded that before January, when the late Martin McGuinness resigned and collapsed the Assembly,

even though the RHI issues were being addressed and could be addressed and there was no reason for the Assembly to be collapsed, we had had a joint letter signed by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister on Brexit. It was a very helpful and positive letter. There was no issue then about special status or how this was a matter that would destroy Northern Ireland's Government. We had also had a draft programme for government agreed that was out for consultation, and, indeed, it had received a great deal of positive reaction from most people across the community. We had also had a joint article penned by the late Deputy First Minister and First Minister in the *Belfast Telegraph*, setting out a very positive vision for Northern Ireland. There were regular and very good meetings happening between Sinn Féin and the Government and the DUP and others in relation to legacy issues, and all of that was being worked through, too. But now we are told that this was all a total disaster and that government could not possibly continue in Northern Ireland because of Brexit, because of the legacy issues, and because of the Irish language issues. Yet Sinn Féin went into government in mid-2016 with a draft programme for government that did not mention the Irish language; no such demand was made then, but suddenly it has become a demand.

Then Sinn Féin said, "It's about respect." Some people have talked about the use of insulting language, and I have to remind the House of some of the things said by Sinn Féin members. Gerry Adams referred to Unionist b*****s—I will not use the expletive. He said that equality was a means of breaking Unionists; how insulting and awful is that sort of language? We did not walk out of the Government, however, and nor did we when the Secretary of State was recently disparaged and insulted by Gerry Adams in the talks process, or when the right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) was referred to in insulting language on the radio, again by Gerry Adams. We did not walk out, either, when Martina Anderson stood up in the European Parliament and told people in the most insulting, revolting, vile language where to put the border. Indeed, I see that Mary Lou McDonald, deputy leader of Sinn Féin, was running around today in a T-shirt glorying in that vile language; what does that say to Unionists? What, indeed, does it say to honest, decent people who took a principled position to leave the EU? This is insulting to many of us. And as to when Michelle O'Neill left the talks and travelled down to Coalisland to stand there and eulogise IRA murderers, how insulting is that to the rest of us?

What I am saying is that there are issues that cut across both communities. On the way forward, yes, we can have another election. We are having an election on 8 June, so there will have been plenty of elections since last May when we had the first Assembly election, and we can have another Assembly election, so that accounts for another three months, but where do we go after that—to direct rule? If that is what Sinn Féin is really aiming for, I do not understand, for the reasons I have outlined, why it would want to go down that path. I welcome the fact that the Government have made it very clear that there will be no joint sovereignty; that is, in fact, against the terms of the Belfast agreement—the very agreement that Sinn Féin says it is committed to. The Government have made it clear that there will be no border poll, again because of the reasons set out in the Belfast agreement. They have made it very clear that

the stability of Northern Ireland and its future is a matter for the British Government, and so it is. The only way forward is to have devolution.

A Member on the Conservative Benches said in this debate that people have had to make intensely difficult decisions. He referred to the Conservative party and the Labour party, and I want to add my personal best wishes to the shadow Northern Ireland spokesman, who is leaving the House at this election. We may disagree on many issues, but I wish him personally very well for the future. The Member on the Conservative Benches said that, despite the differences between Conservative and Labour, intensely difficult decisions were made by both of them during the political and peace process. He also referred to the parties in the south and the parties in the United States, but may I add that the parties in Northern Ireland had to make intensely and personally difficult decisions, too? We represent constituents who have been murdered and butchered by terrorists, and there are Members here who represent constituents murdered and butchered by loyalists. We represent and have family members who were murdered. Some of us saw close colleagues done to death in front of us. Some of us were personally attacked and assassination attempts were made on us. People had their offices bombed and letter bombs sent. We have been through years of this; we have made intensely difficult decisions, and despite all of that we are committed to devolution.

Some people say that we want to throw it all up in the air; we have come too far for that, but we need a partner to work alongside us in government. I have no doubt about the commitment of parties like the SDLP, the Ulster Unionists and the Alliance to working for the best for Northern Ireland, but I begin to worry about Sinn Féin when it continually threatens the institutions every time there is a difficult problem. We need a partner that wants to work in government and that recognises the parameters within which we operate, which are that we are a devolved government that is part of the United Kingdom, but there are north-south and east-west arrangements and we all play our full part in that, and there is guaranteed power sharing and people's rights are protected, and that we will leave the EU as part of Brexit, but there will be special arrangements, recognising the special circumstances of Northern Ireland across a number of areas. Because we share a land frontier, there has to be a different arrangement, of course.

So that is what we are seeking, and I hope that we can achieve it in the coming days. However, we cannot achieve it on our own. The Secretary of State will recognise that we have tried to reach out in the recent talks at Stormont, and we will continue to try to resolve these difficult issues. He is a player in all this as well, because Sinn Féin have criticised him, just as it criticises us, for not moving on the legacy issues. He knows the kind of criticism that we have to take. However, we want to find a way through all that. We are totally committed to doing that, after 8 June, and we will continue to do whatever needs to be done during the election period. I welcome the Bill and I hope that it will go through without any opposition tonight.

7.40 pm

Mr Anderson: This has been a—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. The hon. Gentleman must ask for the leave of the House, as it is the second time he has spoken. I am sure that he will be given it.

Mr Anderson: With the leave of the House, I want to apologise for the absence of my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), who has been at the dentist all day—no doubt preparing for his photoshoots. I want to thank everyone who has said kind words about me, particularly those who did not mean them.

I will not take long, but I want to mention one thing that has stayed with me during all my time in this House. In the winter of 2007, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee was doing an investigation into community restorative justice. I was sitting in a minibus behind Sir Patrick Cormack. To his left sat a mountain of a man named Maguire. It was a dark, cold night, and we got off the bus at a community centre where that man was going to speak to some young people. Patrick said to me, “David, that’s the hardest thing I’ve had to do in my life.” I said, “What’s that, Patrick?” He replied, “That man just told me that he had committed two murders on behalf of the IRA. Now he is going in there to tell young people not to follow his path.” Patrick talked about losing colleagues, including Ian Gow and Ross McWhirter, and my heart went out to him, but he then said that we had to put those things to one side and act as parliamentarians. That is exactly what we are asking people to do today. People have asked questions about the blockages that are making it impossible to move forward, and they may well be right, but the Secretary of State and I both know that that is the hand we have been dealt and that we have to try to move things forward.

I reiterate that I do not believe any of these issues to be unresolvable. On equalities, I do not believe that asking the Unionist parties to move and to bring Northern Ireland into line with the rest of the United Kingdom it is too big an ask. Indeed, I have been led to believe that a majority vote in Stormont in November 2015 agreed that that should happen, but the process was then blocked by a petition of concern. On the Irish language, we are asking for what the other parts of the UK have—namely, for the proposal to be put on a statutory footing. At the same time, we must recognise the real issues around the heritage of the Ulster Scots and put forward work to develop those areas.

On the renewable heat incentive, I reiterate that Sinn Féin should stop making its unreasonable demand that the leader of the DUP should step aside. That would be a huge step in the right direction. On legacy, despite all the criticisms, we need a system that will protect all victims, that treats them all equally and that, as far as possible, brings justice and closure to them and their families. I do not believe that any of those are unreasonable requests. We should call the bluff of those who are trying to block this process and get them back to doing the jobs that they volunteered to do in the first place.

7.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Kris Hopkins): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend—I will call him my hon. Friend—the Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson), and I am pleased that we have the full support of Her Majesty’s Opposition

today. I have had the pleasure of knowing him since 2010, when we served together on the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and on the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. There are many issues that we do not agree on, and our politics may be somewhat different, but he is a good and kind man. I want to echo a couple of the points that he has just made. On women’s rights, he was right to say that we should stand up and challenge the situation. He also suggested that I should respect the fact that LGBT issues were a devolved matter, and I do. As an individual, however, I look forward to attending Belfast Pride between 28 July and 6 August, where I shall stand alongside the best part of 50,000 people from Northern Ireland. They have a significant voice that needs to be represented and recognised. I pay tribute to those on the Opposition Front Bench for their support, and for the bipartisan spirit in which we are able to take these steps to deliver political stability and good governance in Northern Ireland. This is especially important given the forthcoming general election.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State covered the substance of the measures proposed in this short Bill. It first proposes to give the space for an Executive to form, providing the framework for success in the final phase of the talks before us. It also takes the modest steps needed to set a regional rate, to provide certainty for ratepayers and a future Executive alike. Rather than covering that ground again, I should like to respond to some of the specific points that have been raised in the debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) was among the many who condemned the terrorist attack and attempted murder involving the placing of a bomb outside a school. Many depraved acts have taken place in Northern Ireland over many years, but to place a bomb outside a school is probably one of the most despicable I can think of. I am sure that the community around that school will be appalled that young people were put in danger by those psychopaths, and I am sure that every part of our community will stand up and condemn this act. My hon. Friend also mentioned the fact that it was unfortunate that the rates were going to be set here, and rightly said that those decisions should be made in Northern Ireland. He also pointed out the impact on businesses of the uncertainty that sits over Northern Ireland at the moment. He said that he did not want direct rule, and warned of the consequences of its introduction. I reiterate that we do not want direct rule either.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) made a very succinct speech—perhaps others who have made contributions today could learn a lesson from her—and I thank her for her support. She rightly said that the political Administration in Northern Ireland should be taking the decisions, and we agree with her on that. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) has given his apologies; unfortunately he has had to go. He paid tribute to the brave police officers in Northern Ireland, and I completely agree with that sentiment. We should never forget them. He said that not a single Member of the House wanted direct rule, and I can tell him that no one on this side wants it. We want local politicians who have been given a mandate to take responsibility and to deliver an Assembly and an Executive who can make decisions on behalf of the hard-working people he talked about.

He rightly said that good will existed among the people of Northern Ireland to try to make this work, and that it just required the elected politicians to take responsibility. The hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) condemned the attempted murder of the police officers outside the school, and I welcome his support for our police. He has long had a reputation of speaking up for them. I also welcome his support for the Bill.

The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) supports the Bill, and I put on record my gratitude for his support on issues of legacy, too. He has secured several debates in recent months that have given us opportunities to discuss this important issue, to get a balanced view and to make sure that the issue of proportionality is put out there—there is a recognition that 90% of the people killed in the troubles were killed by terrorists. He asked specifically about welfare, and the function of the Bill is to make sure that moneys can be sent through to the civil service in Northern Ireland. As part of the agreement, regulations are already in place for the civil service to make decisions. The agreement has been actioned in full, so the resource is there. It will be for the permanent secretary and the team to make choices about that money.

The hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) regrets the necessity for the Bill—again, that sentiment came out several times—but he does support it, which I appreciate. He wants to get the institutions up and running.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made a positive contribution, which is good to see because many negative elements have been raised this afternoon. There was a degree of “statto” in there being so many positive statistics that he wanted to give us. It is important to reiterate that devolved government has been in place and that services have been delivered as a consequence, and we need to keep demonstrating that this is about local people delivering for their communities.

The hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) made a measured contribution in welcoming the Bill, which I appreciate. He mentioned the issues of corporation tax and asked whether it will be incorporated. It is a devolved matter but, as we have said for some time, the Executive are required to demonstrate their competence on moneys. There is a fundamental bit missing, because we need an Executive in order to demonstrate that in the first place. I agree that we want to see corporation tax delivered, too, but we need an Assembly in place to be able to move forward. I put on record again his support for finding solutions to the issues of legacy that affect all communities in Northern Ireland.

The hon. Member for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell) is a good friend of mine, and he spoke with much warmth about his friend, the hon. Member for Blaydon. It is positive to hear that cups of tea will be consumed between the hon. Member for Belfast South and the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley, which is the kind of politics we need to promote in Northern Ireland—a good chinwag over a cup of tea.

The hon. Member for Belfast South made an important point about the Welsh language. Gaelic is spoken in Scotland, and nobody should be ashamed of the treasured Irish language, which is a massive cornerstone of a culture across Ireland that I know many people in Northern Ireland treasure, too.

The right hon. Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds) welcomes the Bill and laid out clearly the merits of a democratic path. He reiterated his commitment to devolution, which we appreciate.

Lady Hermon: I am grateful to the Minister for kindly and enthusiastically giving way. There appears to be one key issue that he, to my disappointment, has not yet addressed. The issue was raised by a couple of people who contributed valuably this afternoon, and it is about Sinn Féin’s allowances in this place when they sit as absentee MPs. Are this Government prepared to take a hard-line, hard-headed and proper approach towards Sinn Féin, which does not take its seats but is still able to take advantage of a huge amount of public funding from this House for administrative and secretarial assistance? I say that with great passion, because I sit here as an independent. I do not have a party. I receive no allowances in support of additional secretarial or administrative assistance, and I am hugely resentful that the absentee MPs who claim to represent constituencies in Northern Ireland are able to be paid thousands of pounds of taxpayers’ money.

Kris Hopkins: I could give a diplomatic answer to a lot of that. My first ever point of order asked why Sinn Féin gets paid when it does not come here, so I will not contradict myself on that issue. The hon. Lady knows my view on this and, in talking about the future of the Assembly, it is about making sure that we create the right political space in which all parties can find agreement and come together to offer leadership for Northern Ireland. I could engage in that partisan debate. My comments are already on the record, and I will not contradict myself.

I sincerely hope that a deal can be reached, regardless of the broader context of the talks. We will all work towards that outcome, but it will be the parties that need to take up the mantle and deliver inclusive, stable government for the people of Northern Ireland. If they do not, it will be for this or any future Government to continue doing what is required to ensure that Northern Ireland has the political stability it needs.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: Will the Minister give way?

Kris Hopkins: I have a sentence and a bit to go, but I will give way.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I have listened carefully to the Minister, and I know his background as a former serving member of the armed forces. I would not want him to underestimate the importance of the armed forces covenant as an issue in these negotiations. It leaves me a little concerned when I hear the Opposition spokesman and now the Minister refer to issues in the negotiations and make no reference to the armed forces covenant. I would not want him to conclude his remarks without making reference to the importance of that issue and its full implementation in Northern Ireland. That is important to getting agreement.

Kris Hopkins: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I appreciate that this is about putting stuff on the record. I have a service record, and I have spoken to many councils during my time in Northern Ireland about the delivery of this issue. I will never shy

[Kris Hopkins]

away from making sure that our armed services and veterans have the best possible services. It is important that we constantly challenge people who are responsible for delivering that, and I assure the House that, so long as I hold my position, this issue will always be at the forefront of my mind.

The Bill will provide the framework for success, and we hope it will be the catalyst for the resumption of devolved government. With that in mind, I would be grateful if we proceeded with support across the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Committee of the whole House (Order, this day).

Northern Ireland (Ministerial Appointments and Regional Rates) Bill

Considered in Committee (Order, this day)

[MR LINDSAY HOYLE *in the Chair*]

Clauses 1 to 3 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill reported, without amendment.

Third Reading

8 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to today's proceedings, which have provided valuable and important exchanges on the Bill. They have made very clear the unequivocal support of this Government and this House for devolved government in Northern Ireland. I extend my thanks to Her Majesty's Opposition, to the Scottish National party and to all others for their support for the Bill, and for agreeing to its faster than usual passage through this House.

As we have heard, this Bill is short and modest in scope, but it provides the framework within which the parties may come together, reach agreement and, yes, form an Executive. If an agreement can be reached, it will give the parties the platform to convene the Assembly, appoint Ministers and get on with the resumption of devolved government. That is what the people of Northern Ireland voted for on 2 March, and it must remain the focus. This Bill will also provide the flexibility for an incoming Government to act in the best interests of Northern Ireland and the space for the parties to conclude a deal. I am very appreciative of the support of the House for this approach.

I was grateful, too, for the support there was for the Government taking the exceptional step of having this Parliament set a regional rate for Northern Ireland for this year. Although very much a step we had hoped to avoid, that is an essential move for securing greater financial certainty for individuals and businesses in Northern Ireland. It stands alongside the remarks I made on Second Reading about the budget situation in making it clear that this Government will always uphold their responsibilities on political stability and good governance in Northern Ireland.

In conclusion, I am grateful to all right hon. and hon. Members for their support for the passage of this Bill. I thank my officials for the support they have provided. I am also grateful for the support of the Northern Ireland civil service and of my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Kris Hopkins). The Bill provides the scope and space for a deal to be done, which is what businesses, community groups and individuals across Northern Ireland want to see. I am sure I speak for the whole of this House when I express my sincere hope that all sides use the opportunity this Bill provides to secure the resumption of devolved government in Northern Ireland at the earliest opportunity, and so I ask right hon. and hon. Members to support this Bill on its Third Reading.

8.3 pm

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): I take great pleasure in saying the last words I will say in this House: I have nothing more to say.

8.4 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The Bill has not been amended and I have already indicated that in the current circumstances we will support it, but I just want to wish all the parties the very best in the negotiations. I devoutly hope that an agreement can be reached soon and that the institutions can be restored as soon as possible.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 3 to 5 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

CORPORATION TAX

That the Corporation Tax Act 2010 (Part 8C) (Amendment) Regulations 2017 (S.I., 2017, No. 364), dated 13 March 2017, a copy of which was laid before this House on 13 March, be approved.

DANGEROUS DRUGS

That the draft Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 (Amendment) Order 2017, which was laid before this House on 14 March, be approved.

IMMIGRATION

That the draft Immigration Act 2016 (Consequential Amendments) (Biometrics and Legal Aid) Regulations 2017, which were laid before this House on 13 March, be approved.—(*Andrew Griffiths.*)

Question agreed to.

Primates as Pets

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Andrew Griffiths.*)

8.4 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to be here to see off another day, Mr Deputy Speaker. At the outset, I wish to thank Dr Alison Cronin, the director of Monkey World, the international primate rescue centre in my constituency, which assists Governments around the world to stop the smuggling, abuse and neglect of primates. Her time and input into this debate have been invaluable.

It seems barely credible in this age of enlightened animal welfare provisions and animal rights, but it is still entirely legal for someone to walk into a pet shop and buy any one of 66 species of monkey as easily as they can buy a goldfish in a plastic bag. These monkeys—all types of marmoset, tamarin and squirrel monkey—are snatched away from their families as infants and sold in birdcages for well over £1,000 each. There are no licensing demands or special regulations for their care. The pages of *Loot*, for example, are full of advertisements for these animals. A brief search of the internet shows that it is awash with monkeys for sale, supplements for their diet and advice on looking after them. According to Dr Cronin, at least half these advertisements are scams. Many demand large amounts of money up front for vet checks and transportation, all too often for non-existent monkeys.

Although not all breeders are unscrupulous, the public and the primates need to be protected. It is a fact that most buyers are well meaning, wanting only an entertaining and lovable pet that can be fed on scraps from the table, but the truth is that almost no domestic owner is equipped to look after primates properly. When, months after buying one of these tiny creatures, they call for help because their monkey is lying on the floor of the cage crying, it is far too late. Most south American monkeys—all 66 species for sale come from there—are extremely sensitive to a lack of vitamin D, and the lack of sunlight in a British birdcage deprives them of this crucial nutrient, as we might expect. Without it, they can, almost overnight, develop rickets. Although, with the right treatment in expert hands, rickets can be reversed, the agonising skeletal damage is permanent. Even without rickets, a marmoset frequently becomes aggressive and/or withdrawn, as its unnatural confinement takes hold, with it starved of its natural habitat and unable to mix socially with other monkeys.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to listen to anything the hon. Gentleman has to say. He and I agree on many things, the first of which is that we need to be out of Europe. However, in this instance, does he think that we should follow the lead of the 15 European countries that have banned keeping primates as pets, because they have shown the way? I think that he and I agree on that, too.

Richard Drax: It is always a pleasure to be in the same place as the hon. Gentleman, as we are in this debate. I will come on to address that point and a possible solution, which the Minister has heard before, having kindly agreed to me myself and Dr Cronin.

[Richard Drax]

As I was saying, there is no doubt that these monkeys are suffering. Let us compare the circumstances in a cage in someone's kitchen with what happens in the wild, where marmosets pair-bond for life and bring up extended, exuberant families, and every monkey participates in caring for the younger ones. They are never alone and they live for 15 years. Tragically, barely weaned infants are handed over by unscrupulous breeders who rely partly for their profits on the fact that marmosets almost always bear twins, after a gestation period of about four months. The males are sold on, while the females are kept for breeding. They may survive physically, but their captivity is nothing short of torture. Remember, these are primates: they share more than 90% of their DNA with their human cousins—us. That proportion rises to approximately 98.6% for chimps and bonobos, which are our closest relatives on the evolutionary tree, according to the Smithsonian Institution. Such treatment of chimps and bonobos would be considered immoral; indeed, there are laws to protect them.

Almost exactly a year ago, Dr Cronin and I, along with the former Genesis front man Peter Gabriel, delivered a petition bearing 110,000 signatures to Downing Street. The UK primate pet trade petition asked the Government to change the law so that all monkeys would be guaranteed a standard of care, as is already mandatory in zoos and wildlife parks. The Minister kindly said that he would put forward a law for a regulatory system that would ensure appropriate care. Since then, regrettably, we have heard nothing. That is understandable, given all the recent political upheavals—I know that my hon. Friend the Minister has been extremely busy—but according to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs code of practice working group, the number of primates kept as pets in the UK is thought to be between 1,200 and 5,000.

Dr Cronin says she has seen an “exponential explosion” in the British monkey pet trade, with ever-growing numbers of monkeys needing rescuing. In the past 30 years, Monkey World in Dorset has rescued 106 pet-trade monkeys. Of those, 53 have been rescued since 2012, in an accelerating catastrophe caused mainly, Dr Cronin suspects, by social media. Many rescued primates come from decent, well-meaning but inexperienced owners who were duped into thinking they had bought pets that were easy to look after. In a recent police raid, Dr Cronin was asked to rescue a tiny infant marmoset that was freezing to death in a bird cage in a darkened city flat. She says that that is proof that the Animal Welfare Act 2006 is simply not working.

The 2006 Act was passed to cover the care and welfare of all animals—domestic and wild. Under it, DEFRA published a code of practice for the welfare of privately kept non-human primates in 2010, which explained, among other things, that it was inappropriate to keep these animals alone in domestic settings for the purposes of companionship or personal interest. In March 2016, DEFRA announced that it planned to review the code of practice and would make recommendations for any changes to the code within a year. However, the Commons Library has been unable to find any information on the result of the review or any plans or proposals. Dr Cronin says that although the Animal Welfare Act

can be enforced, it does not enforce the conditions in which primates should be kept. Instead, it is most often used to prosecute cruelty or neglect cases after the fact.

Five different laws cover the care of any one monkey in this country. The Zoo Licensing Act 1981 has the strongest laws governing species-specific care, and applies to any parks that are open to the public. Under that Act, some 200 Government inspectors on a constant inspection regime apply extremely rigorous standards covering animal welfare, health and hygiene, safety, ethics and other areas.

Under British law, primates are divided into two classifications. Non-dangerous primates, which can be bought and sold without any form of checking or regulation, make up the 66 species that I mentioned earlier. The rest are classified as dangerous, as specified under the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976, which focuses on protecting owners, not the animals, and fails to acknowledge any duty of care for them. Interestingly, smaller monkeys were declassified on the basis of the size and shape of their canine teeth.

Thirdly, the pet shop licence laws of 1951 and 1983 cover pet shops that sell primates. Fourthly, the Performing Animals (Regulation) Act 1925 and its 2012 regulations cover circus animals, while fifthly the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 covers animals in laboratories. Dr Cronin believes it is not logical that the same monkey could be subject to all the above laws to a greater or lesser degree, particularly as none seems to work properly. For example, she says that Monkey World's most chronic problem is with the legal trade in primates as pets in the United Kingdom.

How do we solve this problem? The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the British Veterinary Association and the Born Free Foundation all advocate an outright ban on the ownership and trading of primates. However, Dr Cronin believes that such a move is neither realistic nor necessary. She suggests that we need a practical solution to ensure that these small primates are kept appropriately—I agree with her. Marmosets, tamarins and squirrel monkeys need to be registered under the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976. Alternatively, a register of primates that are kept as pets could be implemented, like the one for dangerous dogs, as suggested by the Minister himself at a meeting with Dr Cronin and me last June.

Additionally, the Zoo Licensing Act 1981, policed by local authorities, could be imposed on licensed private owners, pet shops, breeders and dealers. If required, the existing large national team of professional zoo inspectors could then be used to assess applications. Extending this existing standard of care to the pet trade would prevent the sale of individual monkeys over the counter, or on the internet, to those who simply do not understand what they are taking on. It seems to me and Dr Cronin, as well as many others, that the best solution is to require private owners to meet the standards imposed on zoos and game parks. Were those standards applied, I am sure we would all agree that no domestic user could possibly meet them, so keeping a monkey in one's home, garage or anywhere else would be impossible. I humbly ask the Minister to please consider changing the existing laws, as he suggested last year, to make sure that all primates sold in Britain are properly protected, as they surely deserve to be.

8.17 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) on securing this debate on the welfare of primates. He has championed this issue for several years, and Monkey World is located in his constituency. The issue has been the subject of a number of private Members' Bills over the years, most recently the one promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray). I recall meeting my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset and his constituent, Dr Alison Cronin, the director of Monkey World, last June to discuss this very topic. I was pleased to have the opportunity to visit Wild Futures in Cornwall; staff there have similar concerns and have also raised this issue with me.

I wish to begin by discussing primates' welfare needs. I listened to the examples my hon. Friend gave of primates being kept in inadequate conditions, and of the medical conditions that they can develop as a result of that treatment. This is obviously completely unacceptable, and it is also unacceptable in law: under the existing law, the Animal Welfare Act 2006, anyone who keeps an animal must ensure that its welfare needs are provided. That is in addition to not causing it any unnecessary suffering—one of the key developments or evolutions in the 2006 Act, compared with the legislation that had gone before it. This applies to anyone keeping a mouse, a dog or a primate. Failure to provide for an animal's welfare is a breach of the Animal Welfare Act 2006.

The Government understand that primates have special requirements, and that is demonstrated in the statutory code of practice for the welfare of privately kept non-human primates to which my hon. Friend referred. This states:

"Primates should not be considered as pets in the accepted sense of the word. They are not a species that can be treated as part of the family in the way that a cat or dog might be."

In addition, in section 1.1, the code goes on to state:

"All gregariously social primate species should display social affiliative behaviours, including physical behaviours and vocal and visual displays appropriate to the species. These include, but are not limited to, social grooming, food sharing, communal resting and interactive play as appropriate to the species. Primates should be housed in stable groups of sufficient size and composition to allow the full expression of these behaviours."

It goes on to state:

"Social interaction with companions of the same species not only provides essential stimulation and learning opportunities, but it also provides a source of comfort, reassurance and enjoyment. Removing a primate from its family or social group may have adverse psychological, emotional and physical welfare implications".

Section 2 of the code goes on to describe in some depth the environment in which primates should be kept. It states:

"In planning a suitable environment, keepers should provide...A suitable location...An appropriate amount of space...An appropriate enclosure with sufficient three-dimensional content, including climbing structures to facilitate species-specific behaviour...The correct temperature, humidity, ventilation, noise levels and lighting...Appropriate feeding and sleeping sites...A means of, and location for, visual welfare assessment...A method of safe capture, handling and isolation of the animals...Security to prevent animal escape and unwanted entry by unauthorised people."

It states that enclosure design and materials used should also ensure:

"A good hygiene regime to avoid disease transmission...A safe environment for the animals...A good regime of environmental enrichment...A wide range of appropriate behaviours."

Anyone keeping a primate in solitary conditions or in a small cage or feeding it an inappropriate diet would already be breaking the law and could face up to six months' imprisonment. That is a fundamental point of the Animal Welfare Act and one reason why animal welfare and veterinary organisations widely regard the Act as being such a success.

Primates are long-lived, intelligent, and socially complex animals. They engage in imaginative problem-solving, form intricate social relationships, and display complex patterns of behaviour. Being social is a striking feature of primates, and perhaps the most important in terms of meeting their needs. With few exceptions, they live in complex societies that can comprise tens of individual animals. In relation to their total life history, primates have long infant and juvenile phases, with social independence occurring long after nutritional weaning. This period is crucial for learning about the physical and social environment, parenting, survival, and reproduction. All primate species are long-lived, and need to be managed in old age.

Richard Drax: I am listening very intently to my hon. Friend. Is he saying that the law is already sufficient to deal with this problem? If that is the case, why are more and more monkeys being kept in these conditions, and why is Dr Cronin having to rescue more and more of them as the years go by?

George Eustice: I was going to come on to deal with that point. There is an issue here around educating people about this code, raising the prominence of the code and ensuring that local authorities understand what is required to be enforced. I was going to touch on that later.

It is important for anyone thinking of buying an animal to understand what is involved and the associated costs of looking after that animal. In the case of a primate, it is even more important because very few people in the country possess the necessary skills to look after such animals.

I want to turn to the point about irresponsible owners. DEFRA receives many representations from people and organisations about problems associated with the welfare of animals—exotic or domesticated. Most of those problems can be traced back to a common denominator, which is irresponsible ownership. Some animals can also be dangerous to people and to our native wildlife if not kept or controlled appropriately. They can also carry diseases transmissible to humans.

Let me turn now to the key issue of advertising. My hon. Friend mentioned the way that primates are often advertised for sale online. The Pet Advertising Advisory Group, which is a collection of welfare and veterinary organisations, has managed to set minimum standards for six online advertising providers, which are: The Hut Group; FridayAds; Epupz; Pets4Homes; Gumtree; and Vivastreet. The standards of all those subscribing to the code, which include the largest classified sites dealing with pet sales, include a complete ban on the advertising of primates. This is an encouraging development and we would like to see other online providers adopt PAAG's minimum standards.

I met my hon. Friend and others to discuss laws around this issue of keeping primates. Although my noble friend Lord Gardiner has taken responsibility for

[George Eustice]

this issue since last July, I can tell my hon. Friend that, as the Minister for companion animals and animal welfare, one thing that I was keen to deliver was a review of animal licensing establishments. In February, DEFRA published its Next Steps document, which sets out how we will change the law in relation to licensed animal establishments. I believe that that will add additional barriers and safeguards when it comes to the sale of primates.

As regards the selling of pet animals, vendors will have to provide information to any prospective buyer, and that applies to traditional pet shops or sales online. That will do a great deal as it will require in law that the existing code is publicised and given to any prospective buyer. In addition, vendors will also have to comply with statutory conditions setting minimum welfare standards in line with the Animal Welfare Act 2006. This is an extra layer of protection for all animals being sold from licensed premises. It also creates further barriers to any trade in primates as it raises the prominence of that code. It means that nobody would be able to sell a primate unless they had been licensed by a local authority, and a local authority would not be able to license any such seller unless that seller complied fully with the code.

It is important to note that, in the case of granting licences, a local authority is able to list the types of species that can be sold and indeed to preclude people from selling certain species. It is therefore possible, and indeed highly likely, that local authorities will take an incredibly tough line on anybody selling primates. The likelihood is that it would only be a tiny number of specialist skilled collectors who understand what they are doing who would be licensed to do such a thing.

I concede that there is more work to do to raise the quality of inspections and the consistency of enforcement, so we will also improve the quality of local authority inspections by providing officers with guidance and, wherever necessary, additional expertise, so that we can strengthen the consistency of enforcement.

My hon. Friend mentioned the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976. The species covered by the Act were last reviewed between 2005 and 2006, with the schedule of animals considered to be dangerous being amended in 2007. Certain animals, including a number of species of smaller primates, such as marmosets, were removed from the schedule, as they were considered to be no more dangerous than domestic cats or dogs. At the time of the review, there were no records of serious incidents involving the primates removed from the list. It is important to recognise that the Act does what it says on the tin and regulates the control and keeping of animals deemed to be wild and dangerous. It is not in itself about animal welfare.

I want finally to deal with the Zoo Licensing Act 1981, and I commend my hon. Friend's constituent, Dr Cronin, for her proportionate approach in coming up with a pragmatic, middle-way solution that goes beyond outright bans to strengthening the licensing. As I have said, I believe that the small changes that we have made to the profile of the primates code within the law through the Pet Animals Act 1951 and other legislation go a long way to strengthening the prominence of that code. The Zoo Licensing Act sets standards for zoos and requires all zoos to have a licence, although there are exemptions from some or all of the provisions of the Act for small collections in specific circumstances. The standards required go much wider than requiring minimum welfare standards for the animals. For example, the standards also set out how zoos should meet conservation and education requirements, and also how public safety should be secured. Clearly for individual owners or other keepers of primates these requirements might not be appropriate. We would therefore not expect to apply the standards to individual owners in full.

We consider that the standards set out in the primate code of practice provide primates with the same level of welfare protection as those in zoos. In both cases, the Animal Welfare Act 2006 applies and we would expect it to be used in cases of cruelty or poor welfare.

In conclusion, there is considerable debate about how many primates are kept in private ownership in this country. There are some estimates that it could be under 1,000, and the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has raised sceptical concerns about some of the figures that are bandied around. As my hon. Friend pointed out, estimates tend to range between 1,200 and 5,000, but the really important thing is not so much the numbers but the standard of welfare. That is the overriding factor. As I say, there are already laws in this area and we are looking to update and improve them where necessary and when we can. We should continue to explore with stakeholders how to reach more owners and potential owners to make them better understand the importance of primate welfare.

Once again, I commend my hon. Friend for securing this debate, and his constituent, Dr Cronin, for the approach she has taken. I appreciate that he will be disappointed that I have not gone as far as he or she would like in adopting the type of licensing regime that he proposes, but I hope that he will continue to work with us as we strengthen the prominence and profile of the primates code in the Animal Welfare Act so that we can tackle some of the problems that he has highlighted this evening.

Question put and agreed to.

8.32 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 24 April 2017

[MRS ANNE MAIN *in the Chair*]

GCSE English Literature Exams

4.30 pm

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

That this House has considered e-petition 172405 relating to GCSE English Literature exams.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main, for the last Petitions Committee debate of this Parliament. I must confess that when I saw the petition, I had mixed feelings. English is my subject: it was what I was most interested in at school, I read English at university and my first job was teaching English. Being of my generation, my head is stuffed full of quotations from Shakespeare to Keats to D. H. Lawrence. My colleagues know that my party piece around this time of year is reciting the opening of the general prologue to “The Canterbury Tales” in middle English, but I will not inflict that on people here.

That knowledge of literature has hugely enriched my life, and I hope that it has enriched my students’ lives too; when they get back in touch with me after I have been in the papers, they say so. But—this is a big “but”—as the great cultural commentator Raymond Williams said, we are all prone to value the kind of education that we received over and above any other kind, but what we choose to teach, and how we choose to teach it, is a selection from what is available. He talked about “what is thought of as an education being in fact a particular selection, a set of emphases and omissions”.

When we consider examinations, the question is what children should learn and how they should learn in order to be fitted for the world in which they will grow up, which will be very different from the one in which we grew up. In my experience, that question is seldom asked by Governments. We are normally subject to the whims of various Secretaries of State; some, perhaps, have had more than others. For instance, we heard about the need to teach “our island story”; then an English baccalaureate certificate was proposed and later abandoned. It is no wonder that teachers often find themselves in a whirlwind. No sooner have they got used to one set of instructions than they must get used to another. In all this, the fundamental questions about what we need to teach our children for the future are not dealt with.

Before I go on, I must say clearly that I think that the study of literature is enormously important for an understanding of oneself and society. Think of Chaucer’s pilgrims, chattering away down the centuries. Their jobs might not exist anymore, but the people can still be met, with all their strengths and weaknesses, in any street in any town. Nor do I believe that much literature is intrinsically too difficult for our children. I have taught Shakespeare to 11-year-olds. I got teenage boys to read Jane Austen by pointing out that her brothers read the books aloud to the officers of Nelson’s Navy, not notable for being a set of wimps. If Shakespeare’s groundlings could follow his plays, I see no reason why our children

cannot—provided, of course, that it is a good juicy murder; there is nothing more boring than having to explain 500-year-old jokes to a class.

Although the choice of text is always one for teachers, it makes my blood boil when I hear people say that some things are too difficult for working-class children, because I was one myself. I say that because when people criticise the exam system, they are often accused of wanting to dumb things down. Nothing could be further from the truth in my case. It is true that the Government have changed the GCSE English literature syllabus so that it is now a linear subject with exams at the end of the course. A new grading system will be introduced this year, and coursework has been abandoned. That is consistent with this Government’s approach to examinations in most subjects.

I grew up with that system, and I was fortunate enough to be good at it, because I was blessed with a good memory, but I am not sure that I agree entirely with Ofqual when it says:

“We do not believe there are any skills in the draft content for English literature that could not be validly assessed by written exam, set and marked by the exam board.”

I might agree that the skills in the syllabus can be tested by an examination at the end, but whether those are the right skills is a different question. There is a place for a more extended and in-depth response to texts, especially those dealing with complex subjects and emotions.

That is where open-book exams can be important. The Government have abandoned the idea of coursework, although it might have been better to change the guidance and the time limits, but I believe that open-book exams can ask far more stretching and difficult questions of our children. The Government rightly said:

“Students should not be misled into believing that they will get good marks simply by memorising and writing out the poems or texts they have studied.”

That has always been the case, as any teacher knows, but the Government also said:

“Students will not need to learn and remember the exact words of poems or texts by heart.”

Moreover, the former chief regulator said in a blog post:

“Assessment is about learning and understanding, not memory.”

I would be convinced by that if not for one thing: in literature, the exact words are important. A great writer chooses words with precision. An approximation of what they said might not have the same force or convey the same sentiments.

The Minister might, like me, be old enough to remember the Morecambe and Wise sketch in which Shakespeare is writing rubbish and the milkman keeps coming in and helping him. Shakespeare writes, “It’s very cold, I said to Yorkie,” and the milkman suggests, “How about, ‘Now is the winter of our discontent?’” [*Interruption.*] My hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) is laughing because she is definitely not old enough to remember it.

The Minister will also remember George Orwell’s strictures on people who use “petite” when they mean “little” and then say that it means “dainty”, or his way of curing people of using the construction “not un-”:

“A not unblack dog was chasing a not unsmall rabbit across a not ungreen field.”

[Helen Jones]

Words matter. Words, like facts, are stubborn things. One must remember a great deal to be able to answer some of the questions in our GCSE exams properly.

The Government, and certainly Ofqual, might argue that extended and more difficult questions can be asked about the unseen texts in the exam. However, strangely, Ofqual prohibits people from having a whole text in front of them, saying:

“We do not expect an awarding organisation to provide a whole text as Stimulus Materials for an assessment for a GCSE Qualification in English Literature.”

I might believe that Ofqual understood what it was talking about if it did not switch from singular to plural in the same sentence and put totally unnecessary capital letters on “stimulus materials”.

I must admit that I am a bit of a sceptic about unseen texts in exams. I used to tell my students, “This is a completely useless exercise, but we will now learn to outwit the examiners,” and they did. We do not actually read literature like that. We do not read extracts; we read plays, novels or poems. It is Leavisite literary critical theory taken to its ultimate. It is a prime example of doing things because we have always done them like that.

The answer to the central question of whether open-book exams are better than exams without the text is that, as always, it depends what we want to test. Whatever Ofqual says, an exam that students take without the text in front of them depends to a large extent on memory. It is impossible to comment properly on a text, for instance to show how an author deals with characterisation, without being able to remember large parts of it. It is impossible to compare two poems without being able to remember large parts of them. Remembering, in itself, does not get a student good marks, but it is an essential prerequisite to answering many of the questions, as a number of the teachers who responded to our consultation pointed out. One said:

“Students must remember lines off by heart, as they are required to analyse them... It is a minimum requirement for the modern text question, as there is no extract.”

As a test of memory, that is not bad, but is that all we want to test? Many people would argue that open-book exams, on the other hand, allow more searching questions to be asked of students. They allow students to do more analysis and evaluation and to synthesise knowledge rather than repeat it. In other words, open-book exams are higher up Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives, which teachers know about because they learn about it in training. It is also true that the skills required in an open-book exam are more like those that we use in real life—it is very seldom that we have to produce a piece of work in a rigid time limit, without recourse to any resources. It all depends on the examination being designed properly.

Open-book examinations have disadvantages, too. For instance, it is much more difficult to ensure that students have a clean text in front of them, without notes. There is also an argument that they may deter students from getting fully involved in the literature that they have to study, because they rely on having the book in front of them. It is often said that having the book makes the exams easier, although I am afraid that I disagree. I did open-book exams at university for some

of my subjects—the Chaucer and Shakespeare unseen papers, which in those days were six hours long—and we had to know the texts very well to know where to look for quotations in the first place. I confess that I have not found a lot of evidence—it may exist, but other pressures have arisen—but the research that I have been able to find, from Washington University in St Louis, found that both sorts of tests enhanced retention of information.

The other issue that we ought to think about carefully is that our children are growing up in an age of information overload. They probably need to learn much more than we did about how to access information, assess its value, organise it and apply it. That may be done in other examinations, but it could also be part of our English literature examination. As I said at the beginning, my head is stuffed full of quotations, and I believe that to really engage with a piece of literature, a reader has to memorise some of it and make sure that they have internalised it. However, I also think that open-book exams can ask more testing questions. They can achieve what the Government say they want, which is to ensure that the brightest pupils can show what they are capable of.

There is a case for both kinds of examination, and the Government should think seriously about making at least some English literature exams open-book in future, but the real issue is that for a long time we have not thought seriously about what our children should learn and how they should learn it. I know that the Minister has a genuine interest in providing the best possible education for young people in this country; he and I may sometimes disagree about methods, but I do not doubt his commitment. Since this Parliament is coming to its end, little can be done at the moment, but I hope that in future he will apply his mind to what exactly we want to test through different types of examination. There is no getting away from the fact that being good at English literature requires some feats of memory, but that is not all we should try to test. I hope that we will think about that, and about what the petition asks for, in future.

4.45 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Main. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), the Chair of the Petitions Committee, who was on top form this afternoon, as always, for introducing this debate. I also thank all those, including my own constituents, who signed the petition.

Although sadly it is too late to change things for this year’s entrants, it is not too late for the next Government—whoever they may be—to change their mind for future pupils. The new structure of the GCSE English literature closed-book exams poses numerous serious issues for students and teachers. It is not simply about the subject being made more difficult than it needs to be; it is about the very reason our schools teach English literature in the first place.

English literature enlightens us. A popular quote says:

“Life depends on science but the arts make it worth living”.

English literature is not an exact science. It makes no sense to test it in a way that basically amounts to a glorified memory test. Studying literature is a way of understanding our world and learning skills to engage

in it by learning to express ourselves and by learning critical thinking, research and writing skills and independent thought. It teaches us to build arguments, analyse, probe and read between the lines. It also teaches us eloquence, which my hon. Friend displayed finely this afternoon, as I hope the Minister noticed.

I have noticed that many of us in this place often do not memorise our speeches. We carefully craft our arguments in prose, and if we need to check the validity of a piece of information, we have a whole host of organisations on hand, inside and outside Parliament, to equip us with briefings and facts. We are not expected to memorise every word we say in here. If it is not expected of MPs, why are we placing that burden of expectation on pupils in our schools? Why do we want students to remember up to 250 quotes? What purpose does that serve, other than displaying a student's ability to learn parrot-fashion?

Closed-book examinations for GCSE English literature encourage the business of learning by rote, not meaningful learning. That is not the best way of assessing learning outcomes or the acquisition of skills for any child. Can the Minister explain how remembering quotes is the best way of showcasing a student's true ability in a small window of time? It is simply not. It is a test not of content but of exam technique, which of course privileges those who can afford private tutors and the like. It is also worth saying that many universities do not examine their literature students in that way, because they know that rote learning is not a sign of intelligence or original thought. It is robust analysis and understanding that count and that undergraduates are rightly tested on, so why on earth do we expect our children to learn lines?

Just as we have seen the Government take our education policy back to the 1950s with the forced reintroduction of grammar schools, so we see them applying a very old-fashioned and traditionalist mentality to GCSE literature examinations. Such a mentality distorts the emphasis of teaching towards drumming quotes into students, rather than analysis and context—what a quote means and why it may be significant. Additionally, under exam pressure even the most capable students may not be able to recall the details of a critical quote. It is absurd that that may prevent them from achieving top marks, or that they may devote all their revision time to learning quotes rather than practising arguments, essay technique and narrative. In this age of technology, we need to be purposefully teaching students and pupils how to access, organise and apply information, and not simply to memorise it.

There is an abundance of thought out there, and thousands of teachers are saying, that this way of testing does not achieve anything positive. One teacher has said:

"I teach students who are capable, intelligent, articulate people with excellent appreciation and critical faculties—in short, brilliant literature students—but who don't have great memories. I myself can't quote from films or songs that I've heard 100 times. These students will gain average-poor grades despite their deep knowledge of, appreciation of and critical analysis of these texts, simply because they cannot remember the precise wording from the text. Either we're testing memory or skill and in a literature exam, I believe that a critical appreciation is more important than an ability to memorise quotations."

Surely the Minister cannot go on ignoring teachers when they tell him that this way of examining pupils is not fit for purpose. Why will he not listen to teachers or

industry experts who say that closed-book exams place a premium on accurate and extensive recall, with students' knowledge dominated by that ability, whereas open-book exams place the emphasis on higher-level learning, whereby students can focus on analysing, evaluating and synthesising knowledge? If the Government are determined not to listen to those who are tasked with teaching the new GCSEs, in the same way that they will not listen to other experts on divisive policies such as grammar schools, who will they listen to?

GCSE examinations are a very stressful time in any young person's life. At a time when students are more stressed than ever before, and when teachers and school leaders are struggling to respond to years of chaotic chopping and changing in the curriculum, the Government should be asking serious questions about the impact of any changes to assessment.

Poor mental health in teenagers is a growing issue, and child and adolescent mental health services are hugely overstretched as a result of this Government's neglect. Has the Minister assessed the likely impact of the changes on the wellbeing and achievement of students? The requirement to learn 15 poems, two plays and one novel could be a stretch for even the most able students, never mind those who already struggle academically. A memory test of this sort is not fair for any student, but it appears that the Government have failed to acknowledge the difficulties it could cause for those pupils with special educational needs. We in this House know that frequently the texts pupils are expected to read contain,

"complex and often ambiguous language".

The expectation that those with SEN will understand these texts well enough to analyse them in the first instance, and then to memorise quotes, is simply unfair.

In an open letter to the then Education Secretary, one teacher said that the reformed English literature GCSE will discriminate against pupils with dyslexia and special needs, because of the Government's "breathtaking ignorance" of these conditions. Even if rest breaks and access arrangements such as extra time can be put in place to level the playing field, I hope—as that teacher hoped—that the Minister can see that no amount of extra time will correct a memory deficit. I would like him to tell us in his response to this debate what provisions, other than extra time, his Government have put in place to ensure that the exam is fair for pupils with SEN.

Once again, this move shows a Government who have no progressive ideas for education or any understanding of the curriculum, regarding what works and what does not work for children; a Government wedded to the educational ideas of the 1950s of segregation and divisiveness, rather than inclusivity; and a Government interested in teaching children how to pass exams and grammar school entry tests, rather than in creating a level playing field, so that all children, regardless of background or disability, can reach their full potential. We should instil in our children a lifelong love of learning and not reduce a magnificent subject such as English literature to forcing kids to learn quotes by rote.

My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North, teachers, students and many others are urging the Government to look at this issue again and to realise the problems they are creating for huge numbers of our

[Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck]

children and their English literature education. I will leave the Minister with one final question: closed-book exams—“To be, or not to be, that is the question”.

4.54 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I think it is the first time I have done so, but I hope that it will not be the last such occasion for either of us.

I listened very carefully to the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck)—I assume she learned by heart the quote she just gave. I congratulate the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), who is the Chair of the Petitions Committee, on opening this debate and on doing so articulately, with fluency and a strong use of language. Perhaps that is the consequence of her immersion in the great canon of English literature. I share her ire about some people saying that some literature is too difficult for children from poorer backgrounds.

The hon. Lady cited Morecambe and Wise, and their wonderful and hilarious use of language. Who can forget Ernie Wise’s catchphrase about

“The plays what I wrote”?

We remember them fondly.

I am aware of the comments that have been made and the concerns that have been raised about the new English literature GCSE, notably the claim that exam boards will not provide pupils with any extracts from the novels, poems and plays that they have studied, as well as the expectation that pupils will have to memorise large amounts of text. I reassure the hon. Lady and all hon. Members that that is not the case. Pupils do not have to reproduce word for word what they have read to pass the GCSE. The examination is not about testing a pupil’s ability to recall specific portions of the texts they have read; it is a test of how they understand and can interpret the literature they have studied.

It is also not the case that pupils have to memorise “250+ quotes”, as reported in the petition. I am not clear where that figure has come from, but neither the Department for Education’s GCSE subject content nor Ofqual’s regulations contain any requirement that suggest it will be necessary to learn such a high number of quotes, or indeed any specific number. Ofqual does not prohibit access to texts during an exam and exam boards may give pupils extracts from works, such as an extract from a novel, a scene from a play or a poem. Such extracts form part of the exam materials. What is not allowed is for pupils to have copies of the full play, novel or set of poems to take into the exam with them.

Before I go on to explain the assessment approaches of the new English literature GCSE, I will say why English literature is so important, although the hon. Lady has already said it. We want all pupils to develop a love of literature by reading widely for enjoyment. Reading is the cornerstone of education. Ensuring that all pupils, whatever their background, are taught to read correctly, and that they develop a love of literature, is key to social mobility.

It is important that pupils have access to qualifications that establish expectations matching those in the highest-performing countries in the world. The reforms to the

English literature GCSE are part of a wider drive to restore rigour and confidence in our public exam system. International tests indicated that the increase in the proportion of pupils achieving top GCSE grades had overstated actual performance. That is why we overhauled a curriculum that was denying pupils the core academic knowledge, and why we reformed the examination system, breathing confidence back into our national qualifications.

Previously, English literature GCSE pupils were examined on four texts at most, and some on only three texts—two texts and poetry anthologies. There was no requirement for pupils to be asked questions on texts that they had not previously studied—what are called “unseen texts”. The remaining texts were covered through controlled assessment, which is a form of coursework. Ofqual decided that new English literature GCSEs would be assessed entirely by exam because that is a fairer and more reliable method.

The subject content for the new English literature GCSE was published in 2013, and the rules about open texts were announced by Ofqual in 2014. Teaching of the new GCSE began in September 2015, which is why we will see the first exams in the new subject this summer. The new English literature GCSE requires pupils to study a range of high-quality, challenging and substantial texts, including at least one Shakespeare play, one 19th-century novel, a selection of poetry since 1789, including representative Romantic poetry, and fiction or drama from the British Isles since 1914. The specification for poetry and a novel from the 1800s is new, and we believe that it adds more depth and rigour to the qualification.

There is also a requirement for pupils to study no fewer than 15 poems by at least five poets, and a minimum of 300 lines of poetry. That element is designed to reward pupils who have gained a deep understanding of literature and have read widely enough throughout the course—it is not about memorising poems word for word. It is interesting to note that the views of the English subject community are mixed, with many not agreeing with the views expressed in the petition. For example, a 2015 blog by the English and Media Centre’s co-director, Barbara Bleiman, put memorisation and learning by heart into context. Focusing on poetry, she wrote:

“It doesn’t seem to us to be unreasonable, in a Literature exam, to ask pupils to choose one poem to talk about that isn’t there in front of them, nor does it necessitate rote learning or wholesale memorisation. Being able to recollect some details from their chosen poem...and give a few examples, using quotation or not, doesn’t require learning by heart or massive taxing of the memory.”

The introduction of closed-book examinations triggered the debate. What that means in practice is that pupils are not provided with copies of the novels, plays or poems they have studied during the course. The expectation is that pupils read widely and deeply during their studies to prepare them to answer questions in the exam about the books and poems they have studied. That means that they will be able critically to compare and contrast a range of literature using relevant quotes and text references to demonstrate the depth of their understanding. Additionally, pupils need to answer questions about unseen texts—texts they have not studied and are unlikely to have read before. These unseen texts might, but do not have to be, by authors whose works pupils have studied as set books. Pupils may have to compare an unseen text with one of the texts they have studied.

We do not expect exam boards to give pupils, or allow them access to, copies of the whole texts they have studied during their exams. Boards can, however, provide relevant extracts, and they are already including examples of such extracts in their sample assessment materials. Pupils will therefore be familiar with the types of extract they will be given. It is important that pupils are not misled into believing that they will get good marks simply by memorising and writing out the poems or texts they have studied. They will not be marked on their ability to learn and remember the exact words of poems or texts by heart. They may gain extra marks through the intelligent use of quotations, but the requirement is about illustrating pupils' interpretation and understanding of the text, and hence demonstrating their understanding of the question. Quotations can be part of that. Each exam board will have guidance for its examiners for each specification that covers expectations of the mark scheme, the aim of which is to ensure standardisation when examiners are marking. It may include guidance on how examiners should approach textual references and quotes.

To gain good marks, pupils will need to show that they are familiar with the texts they have studied and, in some questions, that their understanding is sufficiently developed to compare them either with each other or with unseen texts that have been given to them in the exam. Pupils will need to write about a poem they have studied that is not given to them in the exam, but that will not require them to reproduce the text in full. Rather, it will require pupils to recollect aspects about the poem, such as themes, issues and the way in which language is used to create particular effects, so as to compare it with one provided in the exam.

In the past, pupils have been able to take either annotated or clean copies of the studied texts into the exam, but that risks undermining the requirement for them to have studied in detail the whole text as part of their course. That requirement is important, and it is particularly relevant in poetry. If pupils know they will be given access to the whole text of a poem as part of their exam, they may feel they do not need to study the whole poem, or the whole array or anthology of poems, as they can do the reading during the exam. In addition, if pupils had the text available to them, it would shape the expectations of the exam. For example, if they can refer to the text, exam questions and their mark schemes would expect a much more detailed and extensive use of quotes and references. As it is, questions and mark schemes for the new qualifications are written in the knowledge that pupils will not have access to the text, and the expectations are moderated accordingly. The same relates to questions in which extracts are provided. For example, if an extract from a novel or a Shakespeare play is provided, clear and detailed references and quotes may be expected, and papers marked accordingly.

The e-petition notes that pupils

“are expected to remember... themes and context that are incorporated within these texts”.

That is true, but it is not clear that providing a copy of the text would represent an advantage to a pupil. If a pupil is not already aware of, or able to recall, broad issues such as the themes and context of the texts they have studied, having a copy of the text with no notes or annotations will not help them. Indeed, Ofqual has pointed out that pupils might in fact be disadvantaged

if they were provided with the text. A comparatively short exam does not give time for pupils who are unfamiliar with, or who have forgotten, the themes or structure of the text to use the text in the exam to demonstrate the understanding expected. Additionally, even if pupils have a good understanding of the text prior to the assessment, there is a risk that they might spend significant portions of the exam searching for quotes or references in the mistaken belief that that will secure them high marks. Again, unless the text is provided, the mark schemes for the reformed qualifications do not expect extensive quotes from memory.

Finally, the practice of pupils taking copies of texts into the exam creates practical problems for exam boards and centres. The majority of text editions come with an introduction, notes and a glossary. These annotated texts are immensely helpful in the classroom and would be the most obvious choice for an English department budget. However, such texts would not be appropriate in the exam room, and centres would need to purchase an extra set of texts free of textual additions. Not only is it difficult and, in some cases, impossible to source text-only editions, it would also be a major expense.

The hon. Member for South Shields raised the important issue of children with special educational needs. Students with disabilities are entitled to reasonable adjustments and schools will be in touch with the exam boards to request them. She asked for examples. Typical adjustments are the use of extra time, scribes and readers and, depending on the disability, different fonts, coloured paper, enlarged papers and so on can also be made available. We consulted specifically on access to texts last year as part of a wider consultation on the specifications on the use of reasonable adjustments.

This summer, pupils will not only take the new English and maths GCSEs but will also receive a new grade. The new qualifications will be graded from 9 to 1, instead of from A* to G, with 9 being the highest. The new scale is intended to recognise better the achievements of high-attaining pupils and ensure that parents have greater clarity about how well their child performs in the exams. It will also clearly distinguish the new, more challenging GCSEs from their predecessor qualifications.

I hope hon. Members are reassured that passing the new English Literature GCSE does not require pupils to memorise vast amounts of texts and that our reformed GCSEs will provide all pupils with the qualifications they need to progress to further education and employment.

5.8 pm

Helen Jones: There is very little for me to say, except to thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) for her contribution. I listened carefully to the Minister's detailed response, and thank him for it. No doubt we will discuss the matter at length on other occasions. In the meantime, may I say what a pleasure it has been to chair the Petitions Committee and that I wish colleagues if not the best of luck, at least a sunny election campaign, with little rain?

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 172405 relating to GCSE English Literature exams.

5.8 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 24 April 2017

TREASURY

Cross-Government Prosperity Fund

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke):

I wish to update the House on how the Prosperity Fund has supported global and UK prosperity in its first year and its plans for future years. As we leave the European Union the Prosperity Fund is a vital part of how the UK will be a global, outward-looking nation that is confident on the world stage and has strong, fruitful relationships with countries around the world.

On 21 July 2016 I informed the House of the aims and objectives of the £1.3 billion Prosperity Fund (HCWS104) and a short paper was published on gov.uk that details how the fund operates. The fund uses primarily Official Development Assistance (ODA) resources to promote economic reform in ODA-eligible middle income countries, which are home to 70% of the world's poor, contributing to a reduction in poverty. Shared prosperity is a key part of the UK aid strategy. The fund has a secondary benefit of opening up opportunities for international, including UK, business.

Projects are focused on countries and sectors identified through cross-Whitehall economic analysis as being those areas with large numbers of people living in poverty, potential for inclusive growth and where UK expertise can make a real difference.

As set out in the fund's spending round 2015 settlement letter, the fund is 97% ODA with a small non-ODA allocation. ODA projects must meet the primary purpose to support poverty reduction and promote sustainable economic growth.

The strategic direction for the fund is set by a cross-Government Ministerial Board supported by a director level portfolio board composed of representatives from key departments. This structure reflects the cross-Government nature of the fund and ensures that programmes deliver value for money and support Government objectives. Accounting Officers remain responsible for ensuring the value for money of programmes funded by the Prosperity Fund.

The Ministerial Board has met nine times since January 2016. These regular meetings have allowed it to respond promptly and flexibly to changing circumstances—for example endorsing increased funds to trade related projects after the EU referendum.

The Prosperity Fund has continued to refine its systems and processes throughout the first year in order to ensure that it succeeds. It has acted on positive feedback and helpful advice from the Infrastructure and Projects Authority, the National Audit Office, and, most recently, the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI).

We welcome this external scrutiny as an opportunity to test the portfolio and management systems with independent experts. As stated in our formal management

response to the ICAI review, the Prosperity Fund accepts and is implementing their recommendations, many of which it had already identified through its own internal reviews.

Year one of the Prosperity Fund was designed as a transition year. The Ministerial Board allocated £55 million of ODA to projects in a range of ODA eligible countries including China, India, Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Indonesia, Nigeria and South Africa and in areas such as financial services, infrastructure, business environment, energy, and trade and regulation. It also allocated £5 million of non-ODA in support of Government prosperity objectives in both ODA-eligible countries and developed markets.

In South Africa, electricity shortages have cut GDP by 2% in recent years. The Prosperity Fund piloted an innovative British technology to help address this, enabling local government, universities, businesses and utilities to save a minimum of 15% on their electricity consumption.

In Brazil, the work of the Prosperity Fund has been recently celebrated in national media as an example of the importance of international co-operation to tackle transnational bribery and reduce corruption, and has helped to shape the recently approved “10 Measures against Corruption” law in Brazil.

The Prosperity Fund financed the former Prime Minister's anti-corruption summit in May 2016 which brought together world leaders, business and civil society to agree measures to reduce corruption. The fund has also placed the UK at the forefront of delivering international commitments to tackle corruption such as setting up the International Anti-Corruption Co-ordination Centre, financed by the Prosperity Fund and hosted by the UK's National Crime Agency.

The fund is committed to meeting the UK Government transparency commitments on ODA spend. Details of all year one programmes will be released on gov.uk in mid 2017 and an annual report on the first year will be issued by autumn 2017.

The majority of the Prosperity Fund will be allocated to large, high impact, multi-year programmes. To date 18 such programmes have been endorsed by the Ministerial Board and are now being developed by UK Government Departments including HM Treasury, the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Many other Government Departments are involved in the design and delivery of individual programmes.

These programmes include country specific work in South America and Asia, regional programmes in South East Asia, and multi-country, sector specific programmes on trade reform, insurance, education and anti-corruption. The focus of all programmes is high impact and value for money. We expect the first of these to launch later in the year.

We will refresh our gov.uk page with more information on the fund following this update and will continue to develop these pages as the fund progresses, including with information on programmes as they launch.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Tailored Review of Arts Council England

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock):

I am today publishing the report of the tailored review of Arts Council England. The review was first announced in the culture White Paper in March 2016, and was officially launched on 9 August 2016.

The review's purpose was to challenge and seek assurance of the continuing need, efficiency and good governance of Arts Council England. The review concluded that the functions of Arts Council England are necessary and should continue to be delivered by Arts Council England in its current form as a non-departmental public body.

The review found Arts Council England to be an efficient and well governed organisation that was highly regarded across the arts and culture sectors. The review made a number of recommendations for further improving the effectiveness of Arts Council England, for example through further integrating museums and libraries; further supporting skills capability and financial resilience; developing more local partnerships and strengthening the use of cultural investment as regeneration capital; strengthening the assessment of the impact of its funding; and ensuring that its funding is fully accessible in order to benefit everyone and not just the privileged few. There are recommendations too for DCMS, on providing stronger assurance that the Arts Council is investing public money effectively, and reviewing the cultural property and export licence functions.

The review was carried out by DCMS, and an independent challenge panel was appointed to assure its robustness and impartiality. The review was carried out with the full participation of Arts Council England, and gathered evidence from a range of stakeholders from across Government and the arts and culture sectors and through a public consultation. I would like to thank all those who contributed to the review.

The report will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and is available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/tailored-review-of-arts-council-england>

[HCWS611]

Sky/Fox Merger

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): On Thursday 16 March I intervened in the proposed acquisition of Sky by 21st Century Fox on the media public interest grounds of media plurality and commitment to broadcasting standards by issuing a European Intervention Notice (EIN).

The EIN triggered the requirement for Ofcom to assess and report to me on the public interest grounds specified and for the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) to report to me on jurisdiction. I required Ofcom and the CMA to provide their reports to me in response to the EIN by Tuesday 16 May. Once I receive these reports, my decision-making role in this process would resume.

Given the proximity of this decision to the forthcoming general election and following discussions with the parties, Ofcom, the CMA and the Cabinet Office Propriety and Ethics team I wrote to Ofcom and the CMA on Friday 21 April to extend the period by which these reports should be submitted to Tuesday 20 June.

[HCWS610]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

General Affairs Council

The Minister of State, Department for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Jones): The General Affairs Council (GAC) on 25 April 2017 is expected to focus on: modification of the Commons provisions regulation; bringing cohesion policy closer to our citizens; and implementation of EU macro-regional strategies; followed by a working lunch.

Modification of the Commons provisions regulation

The presidency will provide an update on proposed changes to the legislation which governs the common provisions regulation, the overarching EU regulation which governs the European structural and investment funds. These are expected to be in place before our withdrawal from the EU and were proposed by the Commission as part of the mid-term review of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) in order to simplify and harmonise existing regulations.

Bringing cohesion policy closer to our citizens

The Council will adopt conclusions which: assess the EU's cohesion policy in recent years; recognise the need for greater visibility in its implementation; and call for further simplification and flexibility in the period beyond 2020. A discussion between member states on the themes raised during the negotiation of the conclusions is expected.

Implementation of EU macro-regional strategies

The Council will adopt conclusions on 'EU macro-regional strategies', the frameworks for co-operation between member states and non-member states in tackling common challenges by better using existing EU initiatives and sources of funding.

Working lunch

Following the meeting there will be a working lunch, at which Ministers will have the opportunity to exchange views on the role of cohesion policy post 2020 with Corina Cretu, European Commissioner for Regional Policy. This is expected to be an informal discussion.

[HCWS609]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Law and Order Trust Fund Afghanistan

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Alok Sharma): On 23 December 2016 the Foreign and Commonwealth

Office fulfilled the promise given by the former Prime Minister at the NATO Chicago summit in 2012 to commit £70 million for each of the calendar years 2015 to 2017 towards Afghan National Defence and Security Force (ANDSF) sustainment. At the NATO summit in Warsaw in 2016, the UK committed a further £210 million to sustain its commitment of £70 million per year until 2020.

The UK's 2016 contribution, funded from the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF), has been channelled through the United Nations development programme's Law and Order Trust Fund Afghanistan (LOTFA) to support payroll management, Afghan National Police (ANP) salaries and Ministry of Interior (MoI) and ANP development.

The development of a capable, accountable and responsive MoI and ANP, committed to delivering rule of law, is essential to long term stability and security in Afghanistan. The ANP play a fundamental role in providing security; rule of law and public order; as well as helping to build trust in the legitimacy of the state. Due to the challenging security environment international support for Afghan policing continues to be required. The UK remains committed to supporting the development of security institutions in Afghanistan, including the ANP and MoI.

[HCWS607]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland Finances

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): At the point when the Assembly dissolved in January, there had been no budget set for the Northern Ireland Executive for the 2017-18 financial year. As a result, since the end of March it has fallen to the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Finance to allocate cash to Northern Ireland Departments under powers provided by section 59 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Since that point, consistent with the UK Government's ultimate responsibility for political stability in Northern Ireland, I have been working closely with the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS), in conjunction with the NICS Board, to explore the most appropriate means by which to provide further assurance around the budget for Northern Ireland Departments in the absence of an executive.

I outline in the tables on the attachments, an indicative budget position and set of departmental allocations, based on advice from the Head of the NICS in conjunction with the NICS Board. These allocations seek to reflect, as far as possible, their assessment as to the priorities of

the political parties prior to the dissolution of the Assembly and the further allocations they consider are required within the budget available. By so doing I intend to give clarity to Northern Ireland Departments as to the basis for departmental allocations in the absence of an executive, so that Permanent Secretaries can plan and prepare to take more detailed decisions in that light.

Alongside that, I wish to make it clear—as I shall also do in proceedings on the Northern Ireland (Ministerial Appointments and Regional Rates) Bill—that this Government, if returned and efforts to secure the resumption of devolved Government do not succeed, would ultimately be prepared to provide legislative authority for the expenditure of Northern Ireland Departments for 2017-18.

The totals I set out would not constrain the future ability of an incoming Executive to adjust its priorities during the course of the year. Any future UK Government would similarly need to reflect upon the final shape of allocations in the light of the circumstances at the appropriate time.

Resource - Departmental Expenditure Limits

The resource positions begin from the indicative departmental totals set by the Permanent Secretary of the NI Department of Finance under his s59 powers. From there further allocations have been made in the light of the assessment made by the Head of the Civil Service, in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Civil Service Board, as to pressures to be addressed. These totals do not include the £42 million of resource provided in the March Budget, as that extra funding was allocated after the last Executive dissolved. This is in order to maintain flexibility for the any new Executive to allocate resources to meet further priorities as they deem appropriate.

Capital - Departmental Expenditure Limits

The capital position has been determined by the Head of the NICS, in conjunction with the NICS Board, based on engagement with individual departments, again reflecting the decisions and priorities of the last Executive. It includes the allocation of £114 million of Financial Transactions Capital. It would make available funding for projects which were announced by the Executive as part of their 2016-17 Budget. These include the A5 and A6 road projects, the Belfast Transport Hub, and the Mother and Children's Hospital. However it would be for individual departments to prioritise and allocate their capital budgets. As with the resource totals above, this does not include the £7 million of capital provided in the March Budget.

It can also be viewed, with the attachments, online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statements/Commons/2017-04-24/HCWS612/>.

[HCWS612]

Petitions

Monday 24 April 2017

OBSERVATIONS

EDUCATION

School Funding in Tonbridge and Malling

The petition of residents of Tonbridge and Malling,

Declares that schools in Tonbridge and Malling will remain underfunded under both the current and proposed funding plans.

The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to note their objections to the funding formula for schools in Tonbridge and Malling.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Tom Tugendhat, *Official Report*, 29 March 2017; Vol. 624, c. 370.]

[P002031]

Observations from The Secretary of State for Education (Mr Nick Gibb):

The Government have protected the core schools budget since 2010. This year, in 2017-18, it is the largest ever on record, at almost £41 billion.

There is consensus that the current system for distributing school funding is unfair. It is based on data that is a decade or more out of date, and, as a result, similar local areas and schools receive very different levels of funding with little or no justification. The petitioners are correct that, overall, schools in Tonbridge and Malling currently attract comparatively low levels of funding.

The Government recently consulted on detailed proposals to introduce a national funding formula for schools from April 2018. A national funding formula would calculate schools' funding allocations consistently and transparently, based on their pupils' characteristics.

In the consultation, we published a significant amount of data to illustrate the impact of the proposals. If they wish to, petitioners can access this data to see how the budgets for schools in their area, and all schools in England, would be affected by the proposed formula. These figures are illustrative, and show the funding schools would have received if the formula had been introduced in 2016-17, in full and without transitional protections, compared to the actual funding schools received in that year.

For schools in the Kent County Council area, the published figures show an overall increase in funding of over £29.5 million, with increases for 351 individual schools. In the Tonbridge and Malling constituency, 29 schools would gain, with an overall increase of almost £1.5 million.

The national funding formula proposals include transitional protections to limit reductions to manageable levels for those schools whose funding would reduce. We have proposed to provide continued protection through the minimum funding guarantee, which limits year-on-year reductions to 1.5% per pupil. In addition, we proposed an overall floor that would limit total reductions to 3% per pupil as a result of the formula.

We received over 25,000 responses to the consultation, which we are analysing in detail. We are grateful to all those who expressed their views on school funding and the proposed formula as part of this process. We will publish the Government's response in due course.

HEALTH

Walk-in Services at the Merlyn Vaz Health and Social Care Centre, Leicester

The petition of residents of Leicester East,

Declares that Leicester City Clinical Commissioning Group plans to remove the existing walk-in element of the service from Merlyn Vaz Health and Social Care Centre which would have a detrimental effect on the local community and other members of the public who use the "out of hours" facility, especially on the elderly and vulnerable people who do not have easy access to transport but are able to walk to the Merlyn Vaz Health and Social Care Centre.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage Leicester City Clinical Commissioning Group to reconsider their decision to remove the existing walk-in element of the service from the Merlyn Vaz Health and Social Care Centre.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Keith Vaz, *Official Report*, 01 March 2017; Vol. 622, c. 392.]

[P002021]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat):

The reconfiguration of health services is a matter for the NHS locally. Any changes to local services should be led by clinicians and patients, not from the top down. It is for NHS commissioners and service providers to work together with patients and the public in bringing forward proposals that will improve the quality and sustainability of healthcare services.

Although this is a local responsibility, the Government have set out strengthened criteria that it expects NHS service changes to meet. Namely, they should have support from commissioners, focus on improving patient outcomes, consider patient choice, and be based on sound clinical evidence

Leicester City Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) advises that the contract for the walk-in centre at the Merlyn Vaz Health and Social Care Centre is due to expire on 30 September 2017. The CCG has recently engaged with the public on proposals to replace the service with a community healthcare hub, located at either the Merlyn Vaz Centre or on the Leicester General Hospital site.

On 7 April 2017, following review of the consultation responses received, the CCG announced that the community healthcare hub will be based at the Merlyn Vaz Health and Social Care Centre for at least the next three years.

The CCG further advises that there are already three healthcare hubs in the city that have been in place as a pilot service since September 2015; these became permanent services from 1 April 2017.

From 1 October 2017 the new service at the Merlyn Vaz Health and Social Care Centre will offer urgent GP and nurse appointments from 8am to 8pm, 365 days a year. Both pre-bookable and walk-in appointments will

be offered, although the CCG and service provider will encourage as many patients as possible to book into guaranteed slots. It is hoped this will help reduce waiting times and make maximum use of available GP and nurse time.

The contract, which is subject to procurement, will be for an initial period of three years with an option to extend for up to two further years. The existing provider of the walk-in service will continue to offer unchanged services for patients until its contract ends on 30 September 2017.

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 Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes):

This observation supersedes the observation made on 23 March 2017

Observations by the Minister of State for Transport (John Hayes) on the Petition from the hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) declaring that members of the community in Broxtowe are concerned about excessive speeding on the A52 between Bardill's Island roundabout and Priory Island roundabout. 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.

Highways England is undertaking an assessment of collisions on a section of the A52 and will share findings with the MP in due course. Any concerns should be taken up with Highways England.

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 Highways England to make it aware of the concerns of Parliament.

The Department for Transport (DfT) is responsible for setting legislation and for guidance to traffic authorities on how to provide various traffic management measures. Highways England was created by the infrastructure Act 2014 chapter 7 and has a statutory right to provide road management schemes for their roads, of which the A52 is part.

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/7/enacted>

Speed Limits for the Strategic Road Network including the A52 were set by the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 part 7 section 84. Highways England can introduce a number of measures such as traffic calming or road reconfiguration.

The decisions on the type of measures that might be most suitable are matters for DfT and Highways England in consultation with local communities.

ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 24 April 2017

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT ..	875	COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT—	
Adult Social Care Funding	887	<i>continued</i>	
Affordable Homes	885	Parking Reform.....	884
Assured Shorthold Tenancies.....	880	Pubs	885
Construction Industry.....	891	Rough Sleeping	875
Domestic Violence Refuges	893	Small Businesses	877
High Streets	892	Social Housing Rent Arrears	883
Housing Market.....	887	Supported Housing	879
Local Housing Provision.....	890	Supported Housing.....	881
Northern Powerhouse	888	Topical Questions	893
Park Homes	891		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Monday 24 April 2017

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	55WS	FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE.....	56WS
Sky/Fox Merger	55WS	Law and Order Trust Fund Afghanistan.....	56WS
Tailored Review of Arts Council England	55WS		
		NORTHERN IRELAND.....	57WS
EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION.....	56WS	Northern Ireland Finances.....	57WS
General Affairs Council.....	56WS		
		TREASURY	53WS
		Cross-Government Prosperity Fund	53WS

PETITIONS

Monday 24 April 2017

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
EDUCATION.....	15P	TRANSPORT	17P
School Funding in Tonbridge and Malling	15P	Traffic enforcement measures along the A52.....	17P
HEALTH.....	16P		
Walk-in Services at the Merlyn Vaz Health and Social Care Centre, Leicester	16P		

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CONTENTS

Monday 24 April 2017

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 875] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government

Air Quality Strategy [Col. 901]
Answer to urgent question—(Andrea Leadsom)

Business of the House (24, 25, 26 and 27 April) [Col. 913]
Motion—(Mr Lidington)—agreed to

Northern Ireland (Ministerial Appointments and Regional Rates) Bill [Col. 917]
Motion for Second Reading—(James Brokenshire)—agreed to
Read a Second time
Considered in Committee
Read the Third time and passed

Primates as Pets [Col. 976]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
GCSE English Literature Exams [Col. 425WH]
General Debate

Written Statements [Col. 53WS]

Petitions [Col. 15P]
Observations

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
