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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 4 July 2017

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH

The Secretary of State was asked—

Leaving the EU: NHS Workforce

1. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What recent discussions he has had with the Home Secretary on ensuring that the NHS has the workforce it needs after the UK leaves the EU. [900174]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): The 150,000 EU nationals working in our health and care services do a brilliant job and we want them to continue doing it. I am in regular talks with Cabinet colleagues to inform both domestic workforce plans and the Government's negotiations with the EU.

Mr Carmichael: The Secretary of State will be aware that that figure represents in excess of 5% of the total workforce in the NHS. This matter will have to be addressed, engaging with the recruitment sector, the employment sector and, indeed, the devolved Administrations. Is that how he will handle it?

Mr Hunt: We absolutely will be taking a UK-wide approach. The numbers for England are actually slightly higher than those the right hon. Gentleman talks about—about 9% of doctors and about 19% of nurses are EU nationals. However, we are still seeing doctors and nurses coming to the UK, and we need to do everything in all parts of this House to reassure them that we see them as having a bright and vital future in the NHS.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): If students with four As at A-level continue to find it very difficult to get into a medical degree in this country, is it any wonder that we have to import them from Europe?

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point. That is precisely why last year we increased the number of medical school places with, I think, the second biggest hike in the history of the NHS—a 25% increase. We absolutely do believe that this country should be training all the doctors and nurses that we need.

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): The truth is that EU staff no longer want to come here. Doctors and nurses are leaving in their droves, and thanks to the abolition of the NHS bursary, our nurses of tomorrow are going to have to pay to train. When will the Secretary of State understand that this staffing crisis has not

materialised out of thin air but is directly attributable to his actions and the actions of his Government over the past seven years?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady may have noticed a little thing called Brexit that happened last year, which is the cause of understandable concern. If she looks at the facts about how many doctors came from the EU to the NHS in the year ending this March, in other words, post-Brexit, she will see that 2,200—[*Interruption.*] Someone asked about nurses. I happen to have that information here: 4,000 nurses joined the NHS from the EU in the year ending in March.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): One of the consequences of free movement in the European Union is that proportionately we take in rather fewer doctors, in particular, and fewer nurses from the Indian subcontinent and other places. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the capacity to revisit the strong relationship we had with those workforces in the immediate post-war years?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We want to attract the brightest and best into the NHS from all over the world, wherever they come from, if there is a need. The only caveat I would make is that we have imported a number of doctors from very, very poor countries that actually need those skills back home. We have to recognise that we have international responsibilities to make sure that we train the number of doctors and nurses we need ourselves.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State should know that staff shortages are not just bad for patients—they are also costing a lot more, in Nottingham and elsewhere, because of locum and agency costs. Is it not clear that if we start restricting access from the EU for staffing purposes, it will cost the NHS an absolute fortune more?

Mr Hunt: Let me reassure the hon. Gentleman that there is no intention to restrict access to vital professions such as the clinical professions in the NHS post-Brexit. We have said many times that we will have a pragmatic immigration policy. The long-term solution is not to depend on being able to import doctors and nurses from anywhere, because the World Health Organisation says that there is a worldwide shortage of about 2 million clinical professionals; we are not the only people facing the challenge of an ageing population.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's words and his deeds in terms of recruiting more doctors and nurses domestically, but as he said, hospitals such as mine in Basingstoke rely on the best and the brightest from around the world. What can he do to make sure that when we need to recruit nurses, in particular, we have the travel permits and work permits available to enable them to move in swiftly rather than having to wait for long periods of time?

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to make that point. Nurses are, in fact, on the Home Office's tier 2 shortage occupation list, and they will remain so for as long as we need them to do so. The bigger issue is that for a long time we have relied on

being able to import as many doctors and nurses from the EU as we need to, and that has meant that we have not trained enough people ourselves. That is bad for EU countries and for our own young people.

Doctors and Nurses

2. **Justin Tomlinson** (North Swindon) (Con): What steps are being taken to increase the supply of doctors and nurses in the NHS. [900175]

12. **Mr William Wragg** (Hazel Grove) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to increase the number of doctors and nurses working in the NHS. [900185]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): Last year this Government announced one of the biggest expansions of medical training places in the history of the NHS, involving funding 1,500 additional medical school places every year—of which 500 start this September—and reforms that will enable universities to offer up to 10,000 additional nurse training places every year.

Justin Tomlinson: Swindon clinical commissioning group secured pilot funding for its successful video campaign to recruit additional GPs to fill vacancies in our local community. Will the Secretary of State commit to exploring further innovative ways to match newly qualified staff to vacancies that they might not have considered?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. In parts of the country, GP shortages have been successfully addressed as the CCG has done in Swindon. An important part of this is persuading people who go into medicine that general practice is one of the most exciting and rapidly changing parts of medicine today. We have seen a 9% increase in the number of medical students choosing to go into general practice since 2015.

Mr Wragg: Further to my hon. Friend's question, may I ask the Secretary of State what he is doing to ensure that enough doctors are recruited, developed and retained at my local hospital, Stepping Hill?

Mr Hunt: I heard a lot about Stepping Hill when I went to visit my hon. Friend; I think it was last year. I had the privilege of visiting the hospital more recently after the horrific terrorist attacks, and I commend the hospital for the brilliant work that it did in the wake of the bomb. The hospital has done a good job of recruiting; I think it has recruited 93 more doctors and nearly 300 more nurses since 2010. A national programme to help all trusts to retain their nursing staff has been launched by NHS Improvement in the last week.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): In this country, we are short of approximately 40,000 nurses, and applications for nursing places have gone down by 23%. Can the Secretary of State tell us why he and his Government think that that is the case?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady happens to work in an NHS hospital in which there has been a big increase in the number of nurses. Across the country, there are actually

13,000 more nurses working on our wards than there were in 2010, but she is right: we need more nurses and nursing staff, and that is why we are expanding the number of nurse associates. This year we are, for the first time, opening up an apprenticeship route into nursing, which means that people from non-traditional backgrounds—particularly band 3 healthcare assistants—will find it much easier to get into nursing. That is how we will expand the workforce.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): According to the latest NHS indicators published by the House of Commons Library last week, the number of GPs is estimated to have fallen over the past 12 months, and the figures for March 2017 are expected to show a further fall. Why is that?

Mr Hunt: We have had a big increase in the number of medical students choosing to go into general practice, but we have also had an increase in the number of GPs retiring early. That is a problem that we are urgently addressing.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on serving as Health Secretary for three Parliaments, and say to him that besides doctors and nurses, he should look to increase the use of properly regulated acupuncturists, herbalists, homeopaths, chiropractors and osteopaths, who would reduce the burden on doctors and nurses in the health service.

Mr Hunt: Over those three Parliaments, I have learned to expect questions from my hon. Friend in a similar vein, and I commend him for his persistence in championing that cause. As he knows, I think the most important thing, with all such issues, is to follow the scientific advice.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): When the Government removed the nursing bursary and introduced tuition fees, the Secretary of State said that it was being done, as he has repeated this morning, to fund 10,000 extra student nurse places. The universities are saying that no extra places have been commissioned, however, so when will we see an expansion of student nurse training?

Mr Hunt: I always welcome the hon. Lady's forensic interest in matters south of the border, but given that Scotland has just seen its first fall in life expectancy for over 100 years, she might want to think about her own constituents. With respect to the number of nurses, we now have more than 50,000 nurses in training, and we are confident that we will deliver a big increase in the supply of nurses to the NHS.

Dr Whitford: We still have a nursing bursary and we have no tuition charges, so the Secretary of State may want to explain why universities claim there are no additional places. In addition, we are losing almost half of junior doctors at the end of their foundation years. What action is the Secretary of State taking to find out why?

Mr Hunt: At the heart of this is the need to open up avenues for more flexible working for both doctors and nurses. If the hon. Lady followed what we have done in

England—by successfully pioneering such working, we have reduced agency spend by 19% in a year, whereas it is still going up in Scotland—she might find the NHS in Scotland has more money to spend on her own constituents.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Will the Secretary of State confirm what specific actions he is taking to help trusts, such as the Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust that runs the Alex hospital in my constituency of Redditch, which are in special measures? Such trusts face special pressures in recruiting and retaining staff.

Mr Hunt: I welcome my hon. Friend's first question to me. I am very aware of the issues faced by the Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust, which I visited during the difficult winter period that it has just come through. It now has a new chief executive and leadership team, who have made a very promising start. From the experience of many other hospitals that have been through difficult patches, we have found that it is usually never about the commitment of staff, but about getting the right leadership in place. I can assure her that I saw outstanding commitment from the staff of the trust.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): The number of nurses has fallen for the first time in a decade, which is why we need fair pay now. I read in the newspapers that the Health Secretary now supports the Labour party policy of scrapping the cap, although he did not vote with us last week. Given that he supports our policy, when he soon sets the remit for the NHS Pay Review Body, will he tell it to scrap the cap, and will he publish his instructions before the summer recess?

Mr Hunt: I did not vote for the hon. Gentleman's amendment, because—as usual—Labour Members have told us a lot about how they want to spend the money, without having the faintest idea of where it will come from. He is ignoring an elephant in the room: if we had followed the spending plans he campaigned for in 2015, the NHS would have £2.6 billion less this year, which is the equivalent of 85,000 fewer nurses.

Jonathan Ashworth: I want to talk about the spending plans for 2017, in which the Secretary of State can find £1 billion for Northern Ireland, but nothing for nurses in England. Would it not be fairer not to go ahead with further cuts to corporation tax, and to put that money towards giving our doctors and nurses a fair pay rise?

Mr Hunt: Let me tell the hon. Gentleman what extra money is going into the NHS: three years ago, £1.8 billion, which was not asked for by Labour; two years ago, £3.8 billion, which is nearly £1 billion more than Labour was promising; and this year, £1.3 billion. That is a lot of extra money. Why is it going in? Because, under this Government, we have created nearly 3 million jobs, and that strong economy is funding an improving NHS.

Dermatologists

3. **Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase the number of dermatologists in the NHS. [900176]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): Health Education England is responsible for meeting the workforce requirements of the NHS in England. The number of dermatologists in the NHS continues to grow, with 18% more consultants and 13% more doctors in training since May 2010. HEE's latest workforce plan shows a 2% increase in funded training places for dermatologists compared with the previous year. Dermatology remains a popular choice for doctors, and it typically enjoys 100% fill rates.

Rebecca Pow: I am pleased to say that, through a combined approach by the clinical commissioning group and Musgrove Park hospital in my constituency of Taunton Deane, it has been possible to prevent the long-term closure of the dermatology department and to put in place an interim service, with a full service reopening in 2018. Given the seriousness of the conditions of people coming through this department—including an increasing number of cases of skin cancer—will my right hon. Friend give further assurances about how we can ensure there is a sufficient supply of specialists in this area?

Mr Dunne: I know that my hon. Friend has campaigned actively to ensure that dermatology services at Musgrove Park hospital in her constituency have been retained following a consultant retirement, which prompted the temporary arrangements. I am pleased that, since the beginning of April, Somerset CCG has successfully commissioned regular dermatology clinics at Musgrove Park using specialists from Bristol, with a view to restoring a full service from next April. We recognise the important service that dermatology clinics provide and are committed to encouraging that speciality in Somerset and nationally.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Dermatology is one of the specialisms that is particularly dependent on doctors from other EU countries. Is it not becoming clearer by the day, whether on the staffing crisis in the NHS or the threat to our pharmaceutical industry highlighted by the Health Secretary in his letter today, that the extreme hard Brexit being pursued by the Prime Minister is disastrous for our NHS? What are the Minister and the Secretary of State doing to pull the Prime Minister back from that damaging course?

Mr Speaker: Order. In relation to dermatologists is, I think, what the right hon. Gentleman had in mind.

Mr Dunne: I cannot tell the right hon. Gentleman precisely how many of the excellent dermatologists come from the EU, but I can tell him that, since the referendum, 562 non-UK EU doctors have come to work in the NHS.

St Helier Hospital

4. **Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): When he last discussed the future of St Helier Hospital with the Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals NHS Trust. [900177]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): The Secretary of State recently met the chief executive of Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals

Trust and was impressed by the fantastic work staff are doing despite the surroundings and facilities, which are clearly in need of improvement, for which the right hon. Gentleman has been campaigning. Any significant service change must be subject to consultation with local people, be based on clinical evidence, consider patient choice and have support from GP commissioners.

Tom Brake: Indeed the Secretary of State did visit the hospital on the first day of the election campaign—nothing suspicious about that timing. The Minister will have heard that 43% of the estate is unsuitable for the delivery of modern healthcare yet, thanks to the hard work of staff, St Helier is one of the few hospitals that manages to keep on top of A&E waiting time targets. Would he like to be the bearer of good news and confirm that the Government will reinstate the £219 million that the Secretary of State cancelled to enable a new hospital to be built?

Mr Dunne: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the south-west London sustainability and transformation plan area is in the process of turning its proposals into plans, with public consultation when appropriate. It has yet to make any recommendations. As he knows, it set up four local transformation boards to consider how best to transform services, including at both Epsom and St Helier hospitals, for the decade beyond 2020. It would therefore be wrong for me to prejudge those conclusions at this stage.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): Rather than having empty political campaigns, does my hon. Friend have a sympathetic ear for an alternative, well thought-out plan for healthcare in Sutton which works clinically and financially and listens to all residents in Sutton?

Mr Dunne: My hon. Friend is right. We need to look to the proposals coming from the clinicians on the ground who are responsible for running acute services for the whole of south-west London. They have made it clear that they intend to consult the public once they have made their recommendations transparent. They intend to retain all five hospitals but to look at the configuration of services among them, and that needs to be led by clinicians.

General Practitioners

5. **Bridget Phillipson** (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of the number of GPs. [900178]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): In answering my first Health question, may I thank the cardiac intensive care unit team at Barts hospital in London, where my father-in-law, the just retired Supreme Court Justice Lord Toulson, sadly passed away last week? They did absolutely everything they could and showed the very best of the NHS.

We have committed to there being an extra 5,000 doctors in general practice by 2020 as part of a wider increase in the total workforce in general practice. NHS England and Health Education England are working together with the profession to increase the GP workforce.

We believe that that is an essential part of creating a strong and sustainable general practice, and indeed NHS, for the future.

Bridget Phillipson: In recent years, the number of family doctors in Sunderland has plummeted. All the evidence shows that doctors are more likely to stay in the areas where they have trained. Does the Minister accept that new medical school places should be created in areas such as Sunderland, where there is the greatest need to recruit and retain general practitioners?

Steve Brine: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. Since 2016, Sunderland's GP Career Start scheme has recruited 10 newly qualified GPs. A further five newly qualified GPs will be recruited each year over the next three years. I understand her point about medical school provision. Undergraduate medical education is delivered in the north-east in partnership between Newcastle and Durham universities. There are currently 25 medical schools in England offering just over 6,000 Government-funded medical school places. We are funding 1,500 additional places each year. Five hundred have already been allocated, with 24 of them in Newcastle.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Recruiting more GPs in Cheltenham is vital to share the growing workload they face, but rising indemnity costs, particularly for out-of-hours care, can act as a disincentive. Does my hon. Friend agree that this must be addressed decisively?

Steve Brine: Indeed we do. We recognise the role that GPs play in the delivery of NHS care. Following the GP indemnity review, additional money was included in the contract last year to address indemnity inflation. We said in our manifesto that we will ensure appropriate funding for GPs to meet rising costs in the short term and work with the industry to produce a longer term solution.

17. [900191] **Mrs Madeleine Moon** (Bridgend) (Lab): As the number of GPs goes down, there is increasing pressure on the time they have with their patients. One area being missed is that of suicide and self-harm. We now know there is an increased risk of suicidal behaviour for those on unstable and irregular zero-hour contracts, and that those on employment and support allowance are more than two thirds more likely to take their own life. What are we doing to advise GPs on that?

Steve Brine: The hon. Lady, who chairs the all-party group on suicide and self-harm prevention, does a huge amount of work in this area. The GP patient survey last year showed that 85% of respondents rated their GP experience as good. We are investing about £30 million of taxpayers' money in the releasing time for care programme, which we hope will increase the time GPs can spend with patients on issues such as those she raises, but in my new role I am very happy to meet her.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): GPs are the first line of defence against antibiotic resistance, which has the potential to be an uncontrollable global new black death. Will the Minister confirm that the UK will retain its position as a world leader on this issue, and will he tell us when the global antimicrobial resistance innovation fund will open for applications and when the pilot reimbursement model for drug development will begin operating?

Steve Brine: The Government have committed £50 million of official development assistance towards setting up the global antimicrobial resistance innovation fund. We are one of the world leaders on this subject. I am meeting my hon. Friend and my hon. Friends the Members for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) and for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) shortly, when we can take this forward.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I spoke to one GP last week who told me that because he has been unable to recruit help he has only been able to take one week's leave in three years. That is clearly not sustainable. The morale of GPs is at an all-time low, the number of GPs continues to fall, surgeries are closing, and patients are finding it harder and harder to get an appointment. The Secretary of State promised an extra 5,000 GPs by 2020, but given that it takes 10 years to train a GP will the Minister tell the House how exactly he is going to deliver on that promise?

Steve Brine: I thank the hon. Lady for her question and I look forward to engaging with her on such matters. The "General Practice Forward View" is a landmark document, which was published in April last year. As she knows, it sets out extra investment that GPs have been calling for for years: £2.5 billion a year for GP services. That means investment is rising. The good news, as the Secretary of State said, is that more people are coming into general practice. We want to continue to encourage that, but we also have to take action to prevent early retirements and to bring people back to general practice. We are indeed doing that.

Nursing

6. **Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con):** What steps are being taken to broaden routes into nursing. [900179]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): Developing new routes into nursing is a priority for the Government. That is why we launched, as the Secretary of State set out, both the new nursing associate role and the nursing degree apprenticeship earlier this year. They will open new routes into the registered nursing profession for thousands of people from all backgrounds and allow employers to grow their own workforce from their local communities.

Mr Fysh: My constituents welcome the manifesto commitment to expand the number of clinical staff for mental health. What more can my hon. Friend say about plans for mental health nurse training and how they will benefit dementia services, in particular, in my constituency?

Mr Dunne: Health Education England's "Workforce Plan for England" for 2016-17 indicated an increase of more than 3% in the number of mental health nurse training places. It stated:

"The current level of mental health nurse training is the highest of any nursing branch as a percentage of the workforce it serves",

which should allow for an increase of some 22% to more than 8,000 full-time equivalent staff members in the mental health workforce by 2020.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The fact is that when the Government chose to charge students record levels of tuition fees and scrap their NHS bursary, the Secretary of State and his Ministers were warned that that would lead to a fall in the number of applications, and what has happened since then? The number of applications for nursing degrees has fallen by 23%. Given that the Secretary of State has already acknowledged that we cannot continue our over-reliance on EU staff following Brexit, when will Ministers understand that the biggest challenge facing nursing recruitment is not our policy on the EU, but the Government's own health policies?

Mr Dunne: The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the fact that we continue to have a surplus of applicants for nursing degree courses in this country. The level of that surplus has fallen somewhat as a result of the change in funding structures. We shall have to see where it ends up, because at present universities are not recruiting directly outside the UCAS system, but we are confident that there will be more applicants than places this year by a ratio of some 2:1.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the Minister agree that there are opportunities for more mature students to gain access to courses easily, and that more work must be done with adult learning institutions to provide courses that allow such direct access?

Mr Dunne: The hon. Gentleman is right to point out that the more mature workforce, particularly people resuming careers later in life—perhaps, in the case of women, after they have had children—is an important source of experienced professionals, and we need to do more than we have been doing to try to encourage such people to return to the workforce.

Accident and Emergency Departments

7. **Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con):** What steps he has to secure the future of accident and emergency departments. [900180]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): Last year our A&Es saw 1,800 more people every day within the four-hour target than they did in 2010. We also have nearly 1,500 more emergency care doctors and over 600 more emergency care consultants.

Jeremy Lefroy: A&E departments and associated acute care services at district hospitals such as Stafford and Burton are a critical part of the regional emergency infrastructure, enabling the large city-based departments to deal with major trauma specialist cases as well as day-to-day emergencies. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that that vital emergency infrastructure is protected, enhanced and funded?

Mr Hunt: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that an emergency care network that works well for his constituents is essential. As he fully understands, that will mean relying on a network of hospitals. I recognise the concern at his own local hospital, for which he campaigns extremely vigorously, and I assure him that I shall be watching very carefully what happens there.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State now confirm what the Prime Minister said when she visited west Yorkshire, namely that it was scaremongering to talk of the closure of Huddersfield A&E? Will he also confirm that we should have a real plan with a gold-standard university for a new medical school in Huddersfield, so that we can really attract talent? That would do a great deal for morale, which would lead to the recruitment of good doctors and nurses everywhere.

Mr Hunt: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that it is time we had more medical schools, given that health and social care will be one of the fastest-expanding areas of the economy in the coming years. I think the Prime Minister was absolutely right to say that there should be no scaremongering about important local plans that will improve services for patients.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Will the Secretary of State reassure my constituents that the component parts of the NHS can communicate with each other sufficiently to ensure that decisions such as the one by a medical dean to remove accreditation for anaesthetic training will not lead to the closure of A&E departments in hospitals such as Houghton general, where my father was treated so well last Friday?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady's father is a splendid fellow, and he is now in another place. [*Laughter.*] I was referring to another House of Parliament.

Mr Hunt: I was concerned about the general laughter following that comment, Mr Speaker.

I am delighted that my hon. Friend's father was treated so well, and I very much enjoyed my visit to the hospital recently. She is right: where there are changes in the patterns of training, we need to be very careful to ensure that they do not interrupt the delivery of local services in a disadvantageous way.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The boundaries of the sustainability and transformation partnerships are bound to cause concern about the future of A&E and other acute departments given the nature of them. My area, south Cumbria—relatively sparsely populated and rural—is lumped in with Lancashire, which is largely urban. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the voices of rural communities will not be dwarfed by those of the larger urban ones, and in this week, as we celebrate the 25th anniversary of Westmorland general hospital, will he give guarantees that it will not be closed and will indeed not receive any downgrading as a result of the STP process?

Mr Hunt: Westmorland general hospital has a very important future in the NHS and I am happy to give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. I do not think he should be concerned about STP footprints covering both rural and urban areas. However, where there is an issue in his constituency, and many others, it is the response times for ambulances in the most remote areas, and we are looking at that.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Another threat to A&E units is the capped expenditure process, which will mean hundreds of millions of pounds

cut from NHS budgets. That was sneaked out during the election, but so far we have had nothing but silence from this Government. It is time that we had the truth: when did the Secretary of State sign off these plans and when is he going to publish them?

Mr Hunt: The capped expenditure process is an NHS England initiative to meet its statutory duty to live within its budget, and I support the principle that in a period where real expenditure on the NHS is going up by £5 billion, those benefits should be spread fairly among patients in all parts of the country.

End-of-life Care

8. **Maria Caulfield** (Lewes) (Con): What progress is being made on improving end-of-life care. [900181]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): In July 2016 the Government published "Our commitment to you for end of life care". This set out what everyone should expect from their care at the end of life and the actions we are taking to make high quality and personalisation in care a reality for everyone. By 2020 we want to significantly improve patient choice, including ensuring an increase in the number of people able to die in the place of their choice, including at home.

Maria Caulfield: I thank the Minister for her reply, and it is welcome news that there is such a focus on end-of-life care. Will she meet me to discuss the Access to Palliative Care Bill presented in the other place, to look at how we can improve access to palliative care across the whole of the UK?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I will be delighted to meet my hon. Friend, who is a committed and passionate campaigner in this area. I am keen to explore anything that improves care and choice for all patients at the end of their life.

22. [900196] **Mr Steve Reed** (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): Croydon's NHS, including end-of-life care, has been funded below the London average every year since the Conservatives first came into government. That is leading to the closure of services in Croydon that are available elsewhere, and to longer waiting times for GPs or the A&E in Croydon. When will Croydon's funding be brought up to the London average?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The amount of resource that is dedicated locally is a matter for clinical commissioning groups, and we continue to make sure that funding is fair. I suggest the hon. Gentleman takes that up with his CCG.

Healthcare: CCG Guidance

9. **Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What guidance he provides to clinical commissioning groups on decision-making processes to improve healthcare provision. [900182]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): Clinical commissioning groups, as statutory organisations, have a duty to deliver the best possible services and outcomes for patients within their financial

allocation. NHS England supports them in this by providing several sets of guidance, as do the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence and other arm's length bodies.

Daniel Kawczynski: I thank the Minister for that answer. He will know that the clinically driven Future Fit process in Shropshire could lead to hundreds of millions of pounds of investment in our local hospital. That is being jeopardised by Telford CCG and Labour-controlled Telford council. When there is this gridlock and impasse between two local CCGs over a long period of time, what more can the Government do to break the deadlock?

Steve Brine: I am aware that my hon. Friend has been concerned about this for a long time. An independent review of Future Fit is taking place, and he will know that Professor Simon Brake has been appointed as the independent chair of the joint committee of CCGs, agreed between them both. The review will report in July and be considered by the local CCGs before next steps, including on public consultation, are decided. Clear rules apply to any significant reconfigurations and I expect these to be followed in Shropshire as anywhere else.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Patients at the Manchester Royal infirmary with serious congenital heart problems found out last week that the services will now no longer be provided in Manchester, or in fact anywhere in the north-west, due to a Government review of services which means that staff cannot be retained and recruited. What has the Minister got to say to those patients who now have to go to Leeds or Newcastle to get the lifesaving surgery that they need?

Steve Brine: I understand that this is an independent review of services, and it will report in due course.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that, when political activists mislead and misinform my constituents about the future of our Princess Royal hospital, the CCG should communicate directly and clearly with residents so that they can be reassured that our A&E and our women's and children's services are safe?

Steve Brine: Yes, I do. The CCG should communicate directly with patients, and that should be clinically led when making the clinical case for any service reconfigurations. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski), there are clear guidelines that the CCGs must follow. There are now five tests that must be met before any reconfigurations are brought forward, and that should be the same for my hon. Friend's area as for everywhere else in England.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): The Abingdon community hospital is a treasured asset in my constituency, but in trying to find savings of £176 million, the local clinical commissioning group is launching a consultation on its future imminently. May I seek reassurance, on behalf of my constituents, that

the hospital will not close and that, as part of the consultation, their voices will be not only heard but acted upon?

Steve Brine: Clinical commissioning groups have a statutory responsibility to consult the public, and Members of Parliament have a key role in ensuring that members of the public engage with those consultations, as I do in my area. I will be following the hon. Lady's case closely, and she is welcome to come and see me about it if she likes.

Tobacco Control Plan

10. **Sandy Martin** (Ipswich) (Lab): When the Government plan to publish a tobacco control plan. [900183]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): The UK is a world leader in tobacco control, and we will publish a new tobacco control plan shortly, building on our success. That plan will set out new national ambitions to further reduce smoking prevalence, particularly among disadvantaged groups.

Sandy Martin: I need to declare an interest as a Suffolk county councillor. Given the health responsibilities of local government, will the Minister tell the House what can be done to deal with the situation in which the actuarial advice from local government and other public sector pension schemes is that they are not at liberty to disinvest from tobacco stocks?

Steve Brine: I will have to look into the exact point that the hon. Gentleman raises, but I should like to welcome him to his place. I worked closely with his predecessor, and the hon. Gentleman has a tough act to follow. When we publish the tobacco control plan, there will be clear local tobacco plans as part of it. We in the Government can give the best evidence of what works, but we need to recognise what is needed in each local area. I know that he has specific needs in his local area in relation to tackling this issue.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I welcome the Minister to his place. Does he agree that it is vital that anyone who approaches the national health service with a smoking-related disease should be pointed towards smoking cessation services? Does he also agree that it is vital that local authorities continue to run those services?

Steve Brine: Yes, absolutely. Local authorities have an obligation to do that, but as I said to the new hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin), it is important that local plans come forward alongside the new national plan. Local solutions are needed for different areas, and that will be the case in my hon. Friend's borough just as it is in my area of Hampshire.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Last week marked the 10th anniversary of the smoking ban across the UK, but sadly the celebration was dampened by the fact that we have yet to see the Government's new tobacco control plan, which was promised in December 2015. The previous two Health Ministers I have shadowed repeatedly said that we would see the plan shortly, but they failed to set out an updated strategy for working towards a smoke-free

society. I welcome the Minister to his new post—we have worked well together in the past on the all-party parliamentary group on breast cancer—and I am hoping that, although he has not yet given us a date for the plan, he will be able to give us an indication. Is it going to be published before Christmas?

Steve Brine: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I think I can call her that; we have worked closely together in the past. I am new to my ministerial post, but I have been through the plan, and it is I who has to stand up and defend it. I want to be sure that it is right and that I am as happy with it as everyone else in the Government. My intention is that it will be published before the summer recess.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Within East Sussex, Wealden has the highest number of smoking-related deaths. I welcome the update on the tobacco control plan, but how will my hon. Friend raise awareness and provide equal access for rural communities?

Steve Brine: Rural communities are as important as any other. It is up to East Sussex County Council to come forward with a local tobacco control plan, and I know my hon. Friend will be taking a close interest in that, as she does in all matters when representing her constituents.

Dental Surgery: Children

11. **Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to reduce the number of children admitted to hospital for dental surgery. [900184]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): Public Health England leads a wide-ranging programme to improve children's oral health. Its oral health strategy, which was published last year, showed a marked improvement across the country in the proportion of children with no obvious tooth decay—it rose from 69% in 2008 to over 75% in 2015. NHS England is finalising plans for the “Starting Well” programme, which will operate in 13 high-needs areas to improve the oral health of under-fives.

Paula Sherriff: Prevention and early intervention are crucial, but no NHS dentists are accepting new patients in Dewsbury, which has the second-worst provision in the country. Children in Dewsbury have five times the national average level of tooth decay. I have asked for help on this for two years, but absolutely nothing has been done. Can you tell me why the dental health of children in Dewsbury is so unimportant to this Government?

Mr Speaker: I cannot, but I hope that the Minister can—preferably rather briefly.

Mr Dunne: I will try, Mr Speaker.

NHS England recognises the significant challenges in dentistry in Yorkshire, which was why it ran a pilot scheme from January until the last week of June to improve access to primary care dentistry in the Bradford City, Bradford Districts and North Kirklees CCG areas. The pilot will inform the wider work that the NHS is considering across Yorkshire.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I declare an interest which is probably fairly well known.

The Minister will be aware that the answer is early-years prevention. A huge campaign, which is making progress, is being led by the chief dental officer, for whom I have considerable admiration. Is the Minister prepared to meet me and the chief dental officer to discuss that progress? In advance of that appointment, will he look at the possibility of providing additional funding from the annual dental clawback?

Mr Speaker: New Members probably will not know that the hon. Gentleman is a dentist.

Mr Dunne: I believe that my hon. Friend is the only dentist in the House, and he still practises occasionally. I would be delighted to meet my hon. and experienced Friend to discuss the issues about dentistry that he raises.

General Practitioners: Newcastle

13. **Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab):** What assessment he has made of the consistency and quality of GP services in (a) Newcastle and (b) England. [900187]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): In 2016, 85% of patients surveyed across England reported a good overall experience of their GP surgery. In the Newcastle Gateshead CCG, patient satisfaction is even higher than the national average at 88%.

Chi Onwurah: Newcastle has fantastic GPs, but many of my poorest and most vulnerable constituents suffer from GP unavailability and a constant change of providers due to the requirement to re-tender every couple of years to a market that, quite frankly, does not want them because they are too poor or too marginalised to make money from. Will the Minister meet me and my local CCG to find out how we can ensure that those people get the quality and consistency of GP services that they deserve?

Steve Brine: I am very happy to do that.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Following the closure of their GP surgery, my constituents in Brownsover have had to make do without one over the past few years. Approvals are in place for a new surgery and it is due to open next summer. Will the Minister confirm that the timeline set out by NHS England will be met?

Steve Brine: I will ask NHS England, but if that is what it has told my hon. Friend, that is what will happen.

Mental Health Services

14. **Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op):** What plans he has to improve the integration of mental health services for young people and adults. [900188]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): We are investing a record £1.4 billion in children's mental health services. The transition from children's services to adult services can cause distress, so

NHS England has prioritised transitions when offering financial incentives for improvements. We will consider that in the forthcoming Green Paper.

Luke Pollard: I thank the Minister for that answer. There is a growing crisis in young people's mental health in Plymouth and the far south-west. Despite 75% of mental health problems starting before the age of 18, only 8% of funding is allocated to young people. Will the Minister consider ring-fencing that young people's mental health spending so that the funding gets to where it is needed?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. We have to balance the need to give CCGs the flexibility to dedicate funding and prioritise in their own way. We have been told by mental health professionals that the targets for physical health are more rigorous than those for mental health. We need to keep that under review, but we have imposed additional targets, which are being met.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): I commend the Government for their work on mental health over the past few years, but when the Department of Health publishes its Green Paper, jointly with the Department for Education, may I urge the Minister to focus on the evidence of what works for young people and children, which is rigorous early intervention, often with enduring psychotherapeutic interventions? Can she reassure me that the Green Paper will look at evidence on what actually works for young people?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. Indeed, the Care Quality Commission is undertaking a thematic review to see what works. He is right to identify early intervention as key but, as the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) highlighted, there is a need to consider the transition as well.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) is not exactly standing; he is more perched like a panther about to pounce.

Norman Lamb: Thank you for the encouragement, Mr Speaker.

I have been alerted to an online posting yesterday on the social network Nextdoor by the father of a teenager who suffered awful trauma witnessing the horror at Grenfell Tower. He was after therapy for his daughter. Clearly there is an absolute need to ensure that everyone who may be in need knows how to get such therapy. What are the Government doing to ensure that everyone does know? Also, what are they doing to ensure that there is sufficient funding locally so that mental health services can provide for what will clearly be ongoing needs?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. I would be grateful to receive more details so that we can make sure that such support is going where it is needed. I advise him that, certainly in the case of the too-frequent disasters that we have had

recently, we have been relying on more intervention on the ground. In our work on mental health first aid we are prioritising exactly those areas.

NHS Improvement

15. **Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): What steps are being taken to ensure that NHS Improvement provides timely and effective support to health communities to deliver consistently high-quality care. [900189]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): NHS Improvement offers tailored support to the organisations it oversees, particularly those that have gone into special measures as a result of a Care Quality Commission review. The Department, of course, has responsibility for holding NHS Improvement to account, and it does that through me.

Nic Dakin: Northern Lincolnshire and Goole NHS Foundation Trust is in special measures for both financial and quality reasons, but the support given to date by NHSI has been neither timely nor effective. What are the Government going to do about that?

Mr Dunne: We are clearly disappointed that Northern Lincolnshire and Goole NHS Foundation Trust has gone back into special measures. It is one of a very small number of trusts that have emerged from special measures and then reverted, so this is something in which we are taking a lot of interest. NHS Improvement has appointed an improvement director and is in the process of arranging for a nearby buddy trust to provide some support. I assure the hon. Gentleman that the Department is receiving weekly updates.

Topical Questions

T1. [900199] **Bridget Phillipson** (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): Yesterday I updated the House on the action that we are taking to address delayed discharges from hospitals in advance of the winter. Since February, there has been a record decrease in delayed discharges, but faster progress is still needed to free up beds for the sickest patients and to reduce pressure on A&Es. Yesterday we therefore set out further measures to support the NHS and local government to reduce delays, including specific reductions required in all local areas, a prospective review of next year's social care funding for poorly performing local authorities, and immediate CQC reviews in the worst-performing areas.

Bridget Phillipson: The latest figures from the British Medical Association show a huge rise in the number of patients with mental health conditions who are being sent hundreds of miles away from home for treatment. Is not any talk of parity of esteem meaningless unless and until patients can access the support they need close to home?

Mr Hunt: I completely agree with the hon. Lady that that is a very important issue. It is particularly important because people with mental health conditions need

regular visits from their friends and family to help them to get over a crisis. Indeed, their chances of getting discharged and being able to go home are much higher when they are nearer home. She will be aware that we have a commitment to eliminate all out-of-area placements for children by 2020, and we are making big efforts with adults as well.

T4. [900202] **Edward Argar** (Charnwood) (Con): Leicester and Leicestershire MPs, irrespective of party and led by the hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), are united with local people, patients and medical professionals in opposition to NHS England's badly thought out and, frankly, wrong proposals to close Glenfield hospital's children's heart unit. Can my right hon. Friend reassure me that he continues to appreciate the strength of feeling on this issue and that he will ensure that the eventual decision reflects the responses received to the consultation?

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): My hon. Friend and other Leicestershire MPs have made their views very clear to me. I hosted a number of them, from both sides of the House, to discuss this issue. He is aware that the public consultation on congenital heart disease services continues until 17 July. Obviously, we will take all the comments made into account when we come to the conclusions from that report.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Today is the sixth anniversary of the publication of the Dilnot commission's report on the funding of social care. In those six years, Ministers have legislated for a cap and a floor on care costs, and then abandoned those measures. They brought forward disastrous proposals in their manifesto for what became known as the "dementia tax", and they appear to have abandoned those measures, too. Will the Secretary of State confirm that those policies have indeed been abandoned? Will he tell me, and more than 1 million people with unmet care needs, when he expects to have some new proposals for reform?

Mr Hunt: I have great respect for the hon. Lady, because she campaigns consistently on this issue, but I do not think that what she says is a fair reflection of what has happened. In the last year of the previous Labour Government, 45,000 people had to sell their home to pay for their care costs, whereas this Government have made it the law that no one has to sell their home. There is more work to do, but we have made important progress and will continue to do so.

T5. [900203] **Mr Simon Clarke** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): Nothing is more important than that people can access a GP when they need one. With that in mind, will the Minister join me in welcoming the move made by South Tees clinical commissioning group to enable 90,000 more appointments a year to be generated for people in Middlesbrough, Redcar and Cleveland by ensuring that appointments are available on evenings, weekends and bank holidays?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): I do indeed welcome that. Improvements to GP access in the NHS in South Tees have been put in place. Patients in Middlesbrough, Redcar and Cleveland

can now benefit from accessing GP appointments at a time that is convenient for them, seven days a week—that is exactly as it should be.

T2. [900200] **Ronnie Cowan** (Inverclyde) (SNP): With the Scottish Government now committed to a soft opt-out system for organ donation similar to that implemented in Wales in 2015, is it not time that the UK Government followed the lead of the Welsh and Scottish Governments by introducing a similar system south of the border?

Mr Hunt: There is a lot of merit in the opt-out system that has been developed in Wales for some time and is now happening in Scotland. We are looking closely at the evidence, but we have a lot of sympathy with this. If the system does lead to an increase in organ donations, it is certainly something we would want to pursue here.

T6. [900204] **Matt Warman** (Boston and Skegness) (Con): One-year cancer survival rates are now at a record high of 70%, but does the Minister agree that we should and can go further by improving early diagnosis and screening?

Steve Brine: Yes. Progress is really encouraging, and I am sure that Members on both sides of the House will have been encouraged to see today's press coverage about the chief medical officer's independent report on genomics—the age of precision medicine is truly here. The NHS has always been at the forefront of new technologies, and so it must be with this; we are determined that it will be.

T3. [900201] **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): Would a Minister be willing to meet the all-party group on blood donation after it has been reconvened next week and would they be able to provide an update on the work of the Advisory Committee on the Safety of Blood, Tissues and Organs in respect of lifting or easing the deferral period for gay men who want to donate blood?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): I would be happy to agree to such a meeting, and I know this issue has support on both sides of the House.

T8. [900206] **Rishi Sunak** (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con): Last week I met doctors and nurses at the Friarage, an excellent small hospital serving a rural population spread over 1,000 square miles. Will my right hon. Friend urge South Tees Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust to do everything it can to ensure the continued provision of emergency care clinicians and anaesthetists at this vital local hospital?

Mr Dunne: I am aware that my hon. Friend has taken a strong interest in the number of consultants and anaesthetists available at the Friarage hospital. I will be happy to meet him to discuss his concerns in person.

T7. [900205] **Matthew Pennycook** (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): At the height of the recent election campaign, NHS England took forward plans to merge, in effect, six south London CCGs, including Greenwich CCG, under one single chief officer. Does the Minister agree that that would be a retrograde step, not only in

terms of local accountability, but at a time when primary care has been devolved downwards and all the emphasis is on collaboration and integration at a local borough level?

Mr Hunt: I think the answer is that this varies from area to area. The CCGs grew up organically following the Health and Social Care Act 2012. Some parts of the country are discovering that the groups can be more effective if they combine forces, but these things have to be decided locally.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): In addition to the Government's welcome focus on mental health first aid, may we have equal focus on mental health keep fit, looking particularly at the Mental Health Foundation's 10 pointers, so that we can all keep our mental health in good condition?

Mr Hunt: As ever, my hon. Friend makes an important point. I think that every child should leave school as knowledgeable about how to remain mentally resilient as about how to be physically healthy.

T9. [900207] **Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): What recent assessment has the Secretary of State made of the financial sustainability of Coventry and Rugby clinical commissioning group?

Mr Hunt: Like all clinical commissioning groups, Coventry and Rugby CCG is under a great deal of pressure, but our view is that, given the recent funding increases, it should be entirely possible for it to be sustainable.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): May I return the Minister's attention to the issues facing Northern Lincolnshire and Goole NHS Foundation Trust? My constituents are worried that both Grimsby and Scunthorpe hospitals are in special measures for the second time in as many years. Will he meet me and neighbouring MPs to discuss the situation?

Mr Hunt: I am more than happy to meet my hon. Friend, but he should be confident that we have put in place a substantial support package, including a buddy relationship with another trust and special teams from NHS Improvement, to turn the situation around.

T10. [900208] **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What action does the Secretary of State intend to take to address the link between suicide and socioeconomic deprivation highlighted in the Samaritans' "Dying from inequality" report as he seeks to reduce the suicide rate by 10% by 2020?

Mr Hunt: We will look carefully at the Samaritans' report, as we always do with what the Samaritans say. I think the signs are that our policies are having an impact and reducing suicide rates significantly, but suicide remains the biggest cause of death among men under 50.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Funding our national health service to meet the needs of UK residents is one proposition; funding an international health service open to the world is another proposition

entirely. Are there any indications that advance charging for non-emergency treatment for overseas patients is putting more money into our NHS?

Mr Dunne: My hon. Friend is a doughty campaigner for ensuring that non-resident visitors to this country contribute for healthcare received here. We put in place a number of measures to enhance the appropriate charging structures and increased the funding received by the NHS from £89 million to £289 million in 2015-16. We expect similar action to result in a further increase.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): NHS Property Services has just signed a £1 million lease on a central London location. May I suggest that other properties were available? Would the Secretary of State like me to inquire in my constituency, where NHS Property Services increased Knowle West Health Park's rent threefold? Better value for the taxpayer is available.

Mr Hunt: I will be happy to look into the matter if the hon. Lady sends me the details.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I know that Ministers share my passion for ensuring that a bereavement suite is attached to every maternity unit in the country. What steps can the Government take to make that a reality?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his dedicated work. The Government understand the importance of bereaved parents having a dedicated place where they can be cared for and not hear other babies crying. We have funded better bereavement spaces in nearly 40 hospitals and continue to work with Sands—the stillbirth and neonatal death charity—to see what more we can do to improve provision.

Mr Speaker: It is always quite interesting to study the habits of colleagues. The hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) has perambulated from one side of the Chamber to the other; nevertheless, she is here and I suppose we should hear her. No? The hon. Lady had a question on the Order Paper. Your opportunity is now—get in there!

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): During the election campaign, a lady in my constituency told me that she had had to wait nearly four hours for an ambulance to arrive at her home to help her off the floor. Does the Secretary of State have confidence in the ambulance service in London and other regions where targets have been consistently missed? Will he now look at extra resources for the ambulance service across the country, which is so urgently needed by all of our constituents?

Mr Hunt: If I may say so, that was a brilliant recovery. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to focus her attention on the performance of ambulance services. They are under pressure. They are hitting around 71% for their category A calls, and the target is to hit 75%. However, there are some bigger issues with the way those targets work, which we are looking at. Her ambulance service has just had a Care Quality Commission inspection.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): As a result of the capped expenditure process, the wider Devon sustainability and transformation plan is being asked to make £78 million

of savings at short notice—within the next nine months. Does the Secretary of State share my concern about the impact on patients, the short timeframe and the undermining of savings already agreed by the STP? Will he meet me to discuss this matter and the wider CEP?

Mr Hunt: I am more than happy to meet my hon. Friend. The principle behind the capped expenditure process is that we should have fairness between patients in different parts of the country. We should not see patients in one part of the country disadvantaged because the NHS has overspent in their neighbouring area, but the way in which we implement the process must be sensitive and fair. We must ensure that we get it right.

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): What advice would the Secretary of State give to my constituents who receive their urgent care from Virgin Care, and are told that wounds should be dressed only once and that, in the event that they need to re-attend, they should purchase further dressings from the local chemist? Free at the point of delivery?

Mr Hunt: I suggest that the hon. Lady gets in touch with the details. What I would say is that when care is not satisfactory—whether it is delivered by the public sector or the independent sector—we have an independent inspection regime to root out the problems.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I was delighted to hear that, in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman), the Minister was positive about the progress of genome screening. On a recent visit to Nottingham University, I saw similar techniques applied to Alzheimer's research. Will he back using the process for that, as well as for cancer diagnosis and treatment?

Steve Brine: The chief medical officer's report—I am sure that my hon. Friend will read it in due course—is clear that this is an exciting new innovation in medicine. We will tackle cancer first, but there is real potential for applying it to rare diseases and the other disease that she mentioned.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. We must now move on.

Education: Public Funding

12.37 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State if she will make a statement on the Government's plans for the public funding of education.

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): This Government are determined to ensure that all pupils regardless of where they live receive a world-class education. Over the past seven years, we have made significant progress. There are now 1.8 million more children in schools that are rated good or outstanding than there were in 2010. Today, we saw an eight percentage point rise in key stage 2 results, as pupils and teachers rise to meet the challenge of the new, more demanding, curriculum and assessments.

Looking beyond schools, the Government have prioritised funding for all phases of education. At the spending review, we announced that we will be investing an additional £1 billion a year in early education entitlements, including funding for the new 30-hours' entitlement and funding to increase the per child rate that providers receive. We protected the national base rate per pupil for 16 to 19-year-olds in sixth forms, sixth form colleges and further education colleges in England. In the spring Budget, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced new investment in technical education for 16 to 19-year-olds, rising to an additional £500 million per year.

We have maintained funding for the adult education budget, which supports adult skills participation, in cash terms at £1.5 billion per year. We have implemented reforms to higher education to drive greater competition and teaching standards. Together that adds up to a comprehensive package of support for education at all stages of life.

We want to ensure that every school has the resources it needs, which is why we have protected the schools budget in real terms since 2010. We set out in our manifesto our intention to increase funding further as well as to continue to protect the pupil premium to support the most disadvantaged pupils. We recognise that schools face cost pressures beyond the total amount of funding going in and we know that there are two crucial questions. First, we know that how schools use their money is important in delivering the best outcomes for pupils, and we will continue to provide support to help schools to use their funding effectively. Secondly, we know that how funding is distributed across the country is anachronistic and unfair and that the current system is in desperate need of urgent reform.

We have gone further than any previous Government in reforming school funding. The second stage of our consultation on a national funding formula for schools closed in March and I am grateful to the 25,000 people who responded, as well as to hon. Members who contributed during the more than 10 hours of parliamentary debates on school funding and during many face-to-face meetings over that period. It is important that we consider carefully how to proceed and, as outlined in our manifesto, we will make sure that no school has its budget cut as a result of the new formula. We remain

committed to working with Parliament and introducing proposals that will command consensus. We will set out our plans shortly.

Angela Rayner: I thank the Minister, but there is no sign of the Education Secretary. And where is the Prime Minister? She isn't running her party any more, Mr Speaker—she is running away from her party. The Education Secretary put in a bid for extra money for schools this weekend, not at Cabinet but on the front page of the *Torygraph*, and no wonder when Arlene Foster got £1 billion—she must be the most expensive right winger since Cristiano Ronaldo. Will the Minister confirm that that was an increase in school funding of £150 per pupil in Northern Ireland? And is there any extra Treasury funding for education in the rest of the country, or not?

The Minister has said that the new funding formula will avoid cash cuts, so where is the funding for that coming from? New money, or just cuts elsewhere? When he says that no school will lose out, can he confirm that that is in cash terms, not real terms? The Conservatives promised an extra £4 billion for schools in their manifesto. Is that now Government policy, and how much of that is for each year? They were going to raise the money by scrapping infant school meals. Is that still policy? Will the Minister provide universal free breakfasts in primary schools, and does he finally have proper costings for that? Is he still planning to fund new and expanded grammar schools, or has that now been abandoned as well?

The Education Secretary was not the only one haggling with the Chancellor in the Sunday papers. Her predecessor, now the Environment Secretary, said that he always listened to public sector pay bodies. He must have forgotten that he actually abolished the school support staff negotiating body. Will the Minister now look at reinstating a pay body for support staff, and does he support lifting the 1% pay cap in education?

The First Secretary of State also called for a national debate on tuition fees, so will the Minister give us one on the Floor of the House on the Government's latest fee hike, which they sneaked through during the election campaign? Finally, will he centrally fund any safety measures for school buildings, and update the House before the recess, as well as looking at student halls? Just two years ago, the Government were elected on a manifesto that promised no cuts to the funding of any school or any pupil. Will they finally meet that promise?

Nick Gibb: We are spending record amounts on school funding: £41 billion this year, rising to £42 billion in 2019-20 with increasing pupil numbers. We will respond to the consultation shortly, but the public can be confident that what we promise in our response will be deliverable and will be delivered.

Most economic commentators know that the wild promises made by Labour during the general election to spend billions of pounds a year of taxpayers' money nationalising the energy industry, the water industry and the rail industry, and billions of pounds on promises across a range of spending areas, will simply add more than £50 billion a year to our annual deficit, leading to a crisis of confidence among those who Labour expects to lend the Government that money. That in turn would lead to catastrophic damage to our economy, an economy

[Nick Gibb]

that today, under this Government, has produced strong economic growth, record numbers of jobs and the lowest level of unemployment for more than 40 years. A strong economy funds public services; economic chaos leads straight to the International Monetary Fund and to emergency cuts.

The hon. Lady asked a number of questions. The School Teachers Review Body has submitted its 27th report to the Secretary of State, and it makes recommendations for the 2017 pay award for teachers and school leaders. We continue to consider the report carefully, and we will publish it, together with our response and a draft revised schoolteachers pay and conditions document, as soon as possible. The hon. Lady asked about universal infant free school meals. We have listened carefully to the sector's views on the proposal to remove infant free school meals, and we have decided that it is right to retain the existing provision. Universal infant free school meals ensure that children receive a nutritious meal during the day, which saves hard-working families hundreds of pounds a year and boosts educational achievement, especially among children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

The hon. Lady also asked about fire safety in schools. We are conducting a survey of all schools to find out what cladding they have on their buildings. For schools over four storeys or 18 metres that have cladding we are asking fire inspectors to conduct an urgent inspection of fire safety.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. In view of the level of interest and the other business that I have to accommodate, I appeal to colleagues to ask brief, preferably single-sentence questions. I call Tim Loughton.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): While appreciating the fact that the Government have done more to address the fair funding formula, the Minister knows from his own county, which is the worst-funded shire county in the country, that heads face urgent decisions. In view of the fact that the consultation has been put back a year, can we have an urgent steer on whether the formula is going to be resolved before the recess, because these challenges face heads now?

Nick Gibb: I welcome my hon. Friend's question, because it was precisely to deal with historical underfunding of counties such as West Sussex and other £40 counties across the country that we went ahead and consulted on a national funding formula. Other Governments who were in office before us should have done that. I accept his concerns. We have made announcements about 2017-18, and we will respond to the second phase of the consultation shortly. We will have a response to that in the normal course of events.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The Queen's Speech has seen U-turn after U-turn, with flagship policies ditched, including the policy on grammar schools, to appease Back Benchers. Those U-turns make an absolute mockery of the Prime Minister's "strong

and stable" mantra. We welcome the U-turn on the decision to scrap free school lunches but, again, we regret that the decision was made not with the interests of pupils at heart but to protect a fragile Queen's Speech from a weakened Government.

In their manifesto, the Tories planned to save £650 million from ending free school meals and use it in the schools budget. It is now incumbent on the Government to provide an urgent explanation of how they will stand by their manifesto pledge to make sure that no school has its budget cut. Where will the £650 million come from, or have they decided to scrap that additional funding?

Nick Gibb: I have already responded to that point. We have made a commitment that no school will lose funding as a consequence of moving to the national fair funding formula. We will respond in due course to the consultation, and then the hon. Lady will find the answers to all her questions. I would tell her, however, that today we have published key stage 2 results that show an eight percentage point increase, based on a new, more demanding curriculum that is on a par with the best curricula for primary schools in the world. I urge her to look at where the Scottish education system is compared with what is happening in England.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The solution to this is fairer funding. Does my right hon. Friend agree that those who argue for greater funding must be honest about where it is coming from? Every five minutes that our proceedings continue, national debt, already at £1.7 trillion, increases by £400,000. People who argue for more funding are arguing for more debt being loaded on to children in our schools.

Nick Gibb: When we came to office in 2010, we inherited an annual budget deficit of £150 billion—we were spending £150 billion more in that year than we were receiving in income, and that £150 billion is equal to about 9.9% of the total income of the country. Due to the hard work of the Government and the people of this country, and the sacrifices people have made, we have reduced that deficit to about 2.5% of GDP—about £50 billion a year. Notwithstanding those efforts, we have managed to protect core school funding in real terms, and we are spending record amounts on schools—£41 billion this year.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I invite the Minister to come to Huddersfield to look at per pupil funding and to hear what teachers, headteachers and support staff think of what he has said today. Morale is very low indeed in the teaching profession, and that is largely down to him and his Government.

Nick Gibb: As I said, we are spending record amounts on our schools—£41 billion this year. We do understand that schools are having to face cost pressures, with higher employers' national insurance contributions and higher employer contributions to teacher pensions, as well as having to fund the 1% pay rise. But we would not have had to make those sacrifices and deal with those efficiencies if we had not inherited a record budget deficit in 2010. If we had not dealt with that record budget deficit, we would not have the strong economy we have today, with record levels of employment and the lowest unemployment in 40 years.

Ms Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Will the Minister of State confirm what this means for Tatton schools in particular and Cheshire schools in general? Will there be no cuts in their funding?

Nick Gibb: It is good to see my right hon. Friend back in her place, and I am happy to confirm that no school will see a cut in funding as a consequence of the reforms to our national funding formula.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Will the Minister protect the budgets of schools such as Helsby High, in my constituency, in real terms? Helsby High faces a £700,000 shortfall because of his so-called fair funding formula. It is not fair, and we need increases in real terms.

Nick Gibb: The new national funding formula comes in in 2018-19. As I said in my opening comments, no school will see a cut in funding as a consequence of moving to the national funding formula. What the hon. Gentleman is alluding to is the cost pressures on schools that occurred between 2016 and 2017 and that will occur over the next four years. We have already incurred about 3% of those cost pressures, and we will incur between 1.5% and 1.6% of them over the next three years—those are figures from Institute for Fiscal Studies. We are helping schools to tackle those cost pressures, but there would not be those pressures if we did not have to deal with the historic budget deficit we inherited in 2010. Those cost pressures are being borne right across the public sector, but because we are prudent with our public finances, we have record employment numbers and record opportunities for young people when they leave our school system.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): The Minister is rapidly becoming my favourite Minister. At the beginning of the consultation period, every school in Southend was going to lose out, but he listened, and that is no longer the case—there is more funding overall. However, will he look specifically at bulge funding where there is a need in the medium term but not the long term to provide extra places?

Nick Gibb: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his kind comments. I hope the same response will come from Opposition Members. *[Interruption.]* Perhaps in due course. He is right that we have to deal with growth in pupil numbers, and there are provisions in the new funding formula for growth, but we will take his views into account when we respond to the national funding formula.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) on tabling this urgent question. Once again, we are seeing delusion from Ministers and Conservative Members. This discussion, and the warnings from headteachers this morning, are not about the way in which the cake is being cut, but about the size of the cake per pupil. The size of the cake is being reduced year on year because of increased costs. When will Ministers actually meet the shortfall from the real-terms cuts in schools so that headteachers do not have to cut back on teachers and teacher support staff?

Nick Gibb: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question, because she has said something we have been trying to make clear for a long time—that there is a distinction between the national funding formula and the overall level of school funding. She was being honest and making that distinction very clearly. The national funding formula is a way of distributing our funding across the school system in a fairer way, based on the first-stage consultation, which allocates significant funding on a per pupil basis for deprivation and low prior attainment—all principles that were universally agreed on when we consulted on the first measure. I have accepted that there are cost pressures facing our school system, arising from things such as increased pension contributions, general inflation and higher employers' national insurance contributions. We have already said that no school will lose funding as a consequence of introducing the national fair funding formula, and we will respond to the consultation in due course.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): I thank the Minister for recognising that the current system is flawed, and funding should be focused on where the need is. Will he assure me that funding will also go to places such as Medway, which will need further school places because it has been charged with delivering an historic number of new homes over the next 15 years?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend takes a great interest in education, and she is very experienced in the field. She is right that, as pupil numbers increase, so we are increasing the number of school places. Over the last Parliament, we created over 500,000 new school places to deal with the increasing population of primary school pupils. We intend to create another 600,000 school places over this Parliament. That is in direct contrast to the last Labour Government, who cut 200,000 primary school places at a time when we knew there was an increase in the birth rate.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): May I take the Minister back to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), because it is absolutely the crux of this? If we introduce fair funding at a time when there are greater cost pressures on schools, those that lose under the funding formula will lose doubly because of the cost pressures. May I urge the Minister to lobby the Treasury to get the extra money to grow the cake? He will have the support of the Opposition if he does.

Nick Gibb: I hope we will have the hon. Gentleman's support for the new funding formula, because we have said that no school now will lose under it. Hon. Members should not forget that we were very clear and transparent: we showed the effects of the national funding formula on every school's budget, based on 2016-17, to show people how it would affect them. It was axiomatic that there had to be losers and winners when we applied the formula to that current year. But now we are saying that no school will lose funding under the formula, even if they did when we produced the spreadsheet showing how the formula would apply. The hon. Gentleman is right that we could have decided not to introduce the new funding formula at a time when schools were facing cost pressures, but we took the view that it was more

[Nick Gibb]

important to address the unfairness in the way school funding was distributed at a time of fiscal constraint than at a time of more ample school funding.

Philip Davies (ShIPLEY) (Con): The Minister knows that Bradford district has some of the lowest outcomes in the education system, yet the Government planned to cut funding for the district in their original proposals. That included funding to every school in my constituency, leading Cottingley Village Primary School to say a week before the general election that it was considering closing on Friday afternoons—I am sure the timing was entirely coincidental. Will the Minister therefore confirm that no school in my constituency or the Bradford district will lose out on funding and that there is no need for any school to close on a Friday afternoon? That proposal is causing a great deal of angst and concern among the parents at Cottingley school.

Nick Gibb: I am happy to give my hon. Friend that confirmation. As we said in the manifesto, and as I have confirmed today, no school will lose funding as a consequence of moving to the new fairer national funding system. We are helping schools to tackle the cost pressures they face. We are helping them with how to manage their budgets. We are introducing national buying schemes to help schools to spend their non-staff spend in a more efficient way. We expect to save about £1 billion across the school system as a consequence of the national buying schemes we are introducing.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): No doubt the Minister agrees that given the financial pressures, all policy decisions should represent clear-cut value for money, and I therefore welcome the reported U-turn on grammar schools. Given that the financial case for free schools is iffy, at best, will the Government put a stop to their expansion, especially in areas with surplus places?

Nick Gibb: The free schools programme has been hugely successful, with 29% of those inspected rated “outstanding” by Ofsted. Of the mainstream free schools approved since 2014, 86% have been in areas where there was a need for more schools, and the remaining 14% in places where parents are unhappy with the quality of the school places.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): The independent PISA—programme for international student assessment—results show that England has the best educational outcomes in the United Kingdom, and Wales, which has been run by Labour for nearly 20 years, has the worst. Is it not about time that Labour Members started to celebrate our policies, which are working, and look rather more critically at their own?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I have said, the key stage 2 results published today show an increase of eight percentage points in standards of reading, writing and maths. We have also seen an increase in the proportion of children passing the age-six phonics check, with 58% passing it in 2012 and 81% passing it last year. That means that as of last year 147,000 more

six-year-olds are on track to becoming fluent readers than would have been the case had we not introduced our phonics policy.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Will the Minister please answer a direct question with a direct answer, because this is incredibly frustrating for Opposition Back Benchers? Will he say whether schools in Hull West and Hessle will actually see a cut in per pupil funding?

Nick Gibb: No school in the hon. Lady’s constituency will see a cut in per pupil funding as a consequence of the move to the new, fairer national funding formula.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend will recall, probably with gloom, my question to him two or three weeks before the general election, but, as Arnie Schwarzenegger would say, “I’m back,” and I want to ask him the same question. He told me that in Staffordshire the new funding formula would mean that two thirds of my schools would benefit but one third would receive a cut. Is he now saying that that is not the case and that all schools in Staffordshire will benefit?

Nick Gibb: I am very happy to see my hon. Friend back in his place. He is absolutely right that no school in his constituency will see a cut in funding.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Could the Minister stop playing games? What schools care about is the total amount of money they have to invest in their pupils, so will he just level with the public and admit that he has not protected per pupil funding? It is insulting to constituents to pretend otherwise. What will he say to children in my constituency who are facing a 10% cut in their funding by 2021?

Nick Gibb: They are not receiving a cut in funding. That is the whole essence of this debate, which, in my view, has not been fairly conducted. As we have said, we are spending record amounts of money on school funding—£41 billion this year rising to £42 billion next year—and we are moving to a fairer way of distributing that funding. We said in our manifesto that even where the new fairer funding system would have resulted in a cut in funding to some schools, that will no longer be the case, so no school will see a cut in per pupil funding under this Government.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): It must be wrong, historically, that children in Gloucestershire receive almost half what the highest-spending London authority receives. Will the Minister therefore tell us, so that I can reassure my local parents and governors, when we are likely to see the fair funding formula announced?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are moving to the national fair funding formula in 2018-19. The consultation, which closed on 22 March, had over 25,000 responses, and we will be responding to it very shortly.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Erdington is rich in talent but one of the poorest constituencies in the country, and yet under the Government’s own

conservative figures, 32 out of 33 schools will suffer a per pupil funding cut of £115. What does the Minister have to say to despairing headteachers facing desperately difficult decisions as to which teachers and which teaching assistants they sack, holding back the life chances of children who deserve the best possible start in life?

Nick Gibb: I have enjoyed visiting schools in Erdington with the hon. Gentleman. I have seen some very good practice in the schools that he took me to. As I have said, under the new national funding formula no school will lose funding on a per pupil basis. I have given that commitment in response to this question and I will give it every time an hon. Member asks me. I have acknowledged that there are cost pressures facing schools. Those cost pressures start in about 2016-17—the year that has just gone. That was about 3% of cost pressures, and the figure will be roughly between 1.5% and 1.6% per year for this year and the next two years. We are helping schools to deal with those cost pressures, which apply right across the public sector, in terms of how to manage staff budgets but also how to manage non-staff spend. That is why we are introducing national buying schemes and school hubs to purchase products and services such as energy and water together to help them deliver efficiency.

Mr Speaker: I am immensely grateful to the Minister. I am minded to move on at approximately 1.15 pm, which ought to allow for another 10 questions and answers, assuming that both the question and the answer are moderately brief.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): Can the Minister confirm that the many primary schools in Amber Valley that are set to gain under the fairer funding formula will get the full gain in year 1, or will it be spread over several years after that?

Nick Gibb: When we consulted on the national fair funding formula, we said that we would limit gains to 3% in order to ensure that any schools that were losing funding did not lose more than 1.5% per pupil per year, so I cannot give my hon. Friend that reassurance, but we will respond to the consultation shortly.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Is the Minister aware of the impact that increased national insurance contributions and pension contributions are having on schools in Enfield, Southgate, resulting in cuts in the classroom and impacts on learning and on assisting children with behavioural issues?

Nick Gibb: As I have said, we are spending record amounts of money on school funding, but there are cost pressures. One of those cost pressures, which the hon. Gentleman has identified, is the increased employer contribution to the teachers' pension scheme. That is part of a range of measures that are helping to tackle our historic budget deficit, which we have reduced from 9.9% of national income to 2.5% of national income, and which we have to eliminate if we are to keep the economy strong. We are determined to continue with that.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Will the Minister work with colleagues across Whitehall to persuade councils to prioritise house building in parishes and towns where schools are facing falling rolls and a resultant shortage in funds?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. We need more house building across the country to help young people get on to the housing ladder, and we are ensuring that as funding follows the pupil, as pupil numbers rise, so the funding to those schools rises.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): I represent Crewe and Nantwich, where Cheshire East Council is the worst-funded in Cheshire. My concern is that a primary school in Crewe is cutting six teaching assistants, including the only teaching assistant who can speak Polish. We have a new reception class starting in September with 23 EAL—English as an additional language—children who will have no support. I would like to invite you to come to Crewe and Nantwich and speak to headteachers, because they really are very, very concerned.

Mr Speaker: I do not think the hon. Lady wants me to visit the school, but I am sure she wants the Minister to do so, which might be more beneficial.

Laura Smith: You can come too.

Mr Speaker: Well, perhaps I can come on a subsequent occasion, if the hon. Lady is so generous as to invite me.

Nick Gibb: I would be delighted to visit the school with the hon. Lady, and you are very welcome to join us, Mr Speaker. It was precisely to tackle underfunding in schools in areas such as her constituency that we introduced, and consulted on, a national fair funding formula. For too long, too many areas have been underfunded. That is what the new national funding formula is designed to tackle. Now, on top of that, we have said that even where schools in other parts of the country would lose under that formula, they no longer will.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): A fair funding formula is needed for our schools in Dorset and Poole, which are, respectively, the eleventh-worst and second-worst funded local education authorities. The principle should be uncontroversial, but can the Minister reassure my schools, parents and teachers that the formula is on track and tell us when it will be introduced?

Nick Gibb: We are determined to press ahead with the national funding formula. There has been widespread support for the principles underlying the operation of the new funding formula. Deprivation and low prior attainment are key factors, and a large element of per-pupil funding is the same right across the system. We want to go ahead with the new formula, and we think that it attracts widespread support. We have announced that no school will lose funding under the new formula, and it is being introduced precisely to help historically underfunded areas.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister stop using this Orwellian double-speak about an increase in the budget? We know what we are talking about. In real terms, and per pupil, the budget has not increased in the last seven years, teachers have had a £3-per-hour cut in their wages and morale is at rock bottom. Will the Minister at least admit that we need urgent action to increase funding and reverse the cuts that have already taken place?

Nick Gibb: It is Orwellian to say that there has been a cut in funding when there has not. All along, I have acknowledged that there are cost pressures affecting schools over the four-year period.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): What are you doing about it?

Nick Gibb: What we are doing is helping schools to manage those cost pressures, which exist because we are having to tackle an historic budget deficit. That is imperative if we are to maintain a strong economy that delivers record numbers of jobs. We have maintained school funding overall in real terms, and it has continued to rise as pupil numbers rise.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Half of schools in Basingstoke have been losing out for years as a result of the current funding formula, and that has compounded the problem of increased costs that schools face. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that as a result of his proposed changes, this unfairness will stop not only in Basingstoke, but throughout Hampshire?

Nick Gibb: Yes, I can give my right hon. Friend that assurance. Certain local authorities, from up and down the country, have suffered from underfunding for more than 12 years, and their funding formula is based on out-of-date data. That is unfair, and we are determined to tackle that unfairness. On top of that, we have announced that no school will lose funding under the new formula.

Wes Streeting: The schools funding formula is a total red herring. Before it has even come in, schools are having to lay off staff, increase class sizes, cut back on the curriculum and cut back on enrichment opportunities; and headteachers are struggling to recruit and retain good staff. Instead of talking about a formula that is yet to come in, when will the Minister tell us what he is going to do about the cuts that are already being made, and when will he recognise that education is the best economic policy that there is?

Nick Gibb: We do believe that education is the best economic policy that there is. That is why we are improving standards in our primary schools. We have improved the curriculum and the teaching of reading and mathematics. We have revised, reformed and improved GCSEs, so that children leave our schools with qualifications and an education on a par with the best in the world.

Whatever the hon. Gentleman likes to say, we have protected school funding in real terms. I do acknowledge that schools face cost pressures over a four-year period from 2016-17, and we are helping schools to deal with those cost pressures. Those pressures are being faced right across the public sector, and they are there because we have to deal with the economic mess left by the last Labour Government.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Given that during the general election campaign, headteachers from all over the country wrote to parents to say that per pupil funding would be cut quite dramatically, what will my right hon. Friend do to make sure that parents receive the good news that there will be no reductions in per pupil funding?

Nick Gibb: We will do our best to convey the message that no school will lose funding under the new national funding formula, and I will rely on my hon. Friend to do the same in his constituency.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Yesterday, parents of pupils at the Kingsway Academy received a text message referring them to the website of the Northern Schools Trust, where they were told that their school would be closing. The Northern Schools Trust says that the school is not financially viable. Its sudden closure leaves a black hole of a quarter of a million pounds in the local authority's financing, and there is great disruption across the area. Is that any way to run a school system?

Nick Gibb: I will look into the specific case that the hon. Lady has raised. Schools have to consult before any closure occurs, and there is a process that schools have to go through. I will look at the matter, and I am very happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss it.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): It is not just about money, though, is it? The Labour party thinks that it can throw money at the problem, but that did not work when they were in government, when the number of pupils studying the core subjects necessary to get a good job fell by half. Have this Government got more good news on that?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. When we came into office in 2010, only one in five pupils took the EBacc combination of core academic GCSEs. The figure is now two in five, and we want it to rise further.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): Eighty-nine per cent. of my primary schools and all my secondary schools have told me that they are planning for real-terms cuts over the next five years. In one school the nurture unit, where children who are under pressure can take some time out, is threatened with closure. How will that help children's mental health in schools?

Nick Gibb: We take mental health in our school system extremely seriously, and we will publish a Green Paper on young people's mental health before the end of the year. We want to ensure that every child is taught about mental wellbeing and the mental health risks posed by things such as the internet. We take the matter very seriously, but, as I have said repeatedly in my response to this urgent question, no school will lose funding under the national funding formula.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): It was notable that the shadow Education Secretary did not mention standards in schools once. In the county of Nottinghamshire, which is one of the worst funded in the country, standards are rising and 90% of my young people now go to good or outstanding schools; that figure is 30% higher than it was in 2010. Thousands of young people come out of the city of Nottingham, where pupils receive 25% more funding, to go to school in the county, because standards there are higher despite schools receiving less money. Will the Government continue to focus relentlessly on standards in education?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Academic standards are key in our schools, and standards of behaviour are hugely important in underpinning a rise

in academic standards. That is why we have focused on improving the curriculum in both the primary and secondary sectors.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): The Government's current plans mean cuts of over £600 per head for students in Liverpool's schools. Is the Minister now saying that schools will face no cuts at all, in real terms, in any aspect of Government funding?

Nick Gibb: What we have said is that there will be no cut in per-pupil funding as a consequence of moving to the national fair funding formula. I have acknowledged that cost pressures—equivalent to 3.1% of the total schools budget in 2016-17, and to between 1.5% and 1.6% of that budget over this year and the subsequent two years—will affect schools in the hon. Lady's area and in other parts of the country over a four-year period, as a result of higher employers' national insurance contributions and teacher pension contributions. Those cost pressures, which are replicated across the public sector, exist because we are having to deal with the budget deficit. It is imperative that we do so if we are to continue to have a strong economy. *[Interruption.]* The shadow Education Secretary suggests from a sedentary position that we have had seven years to deal with that deficit. It was an historic deficit, and it will take as many years as it takes to get it down to zero.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. We must now move on. I know that there is extensive interest in this subject, but these matters will be treated of on subsequent occasions.

In a moment, I shall call Seema Malhotra to make an application for leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration under the terms of Standing Order No. 24. The hon. Lady has up to three minutes in which to make such an application.

Feltham Young Offender Institution

Application for emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

1.19 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to propose that the House debate a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration, namely the report on the inspection by Her Majesty's chief inspector of prisons on Feltham young offenders institution.

The report, published on 30 June, follows an unannounced inspection earlier this year. The reports on both Feltham A, which holds children and young people, and Feltham B, which holds young adults, make for shocking reading. That is particularly true of the report on Feltham A, which houses boys aged 15 to 18. Both reports raise numerous concerns about safety and education and purposeful activities in each.

The report on Feltham A has found that the prison is extremely unsafe for staff and for the boys and young people in it, and that it has become more dangerous even since the inspections in 2014 and 2015. The increased violence, combined with staffing shortages, has meant that 15 to 18-year-olds are on restricted regimes that, according to the chief inspector, have done "little or nothing to contribute to their education, socialisation or, clearly, their safety."

This is in marked contrast to the more optimistic report of the last inspection in 2015. Indeed, this report suggests that things have got markedly worse in the past two years, and a serious crisis point has now been reached.

The youth justice system is there to prevent children and young people under 18 from offending or reoffending. What is happening now is a dereliction of duty: 15 to 18-year-olds are receiving, on average, 7.5 hours of education a week; and 19,000 hours of schooling per year have been lost through non-attendance and the cancellation of classes. The regime has been described as

"quite simply, not safe for either staff or boys."

Some of the young men are being locked up for 22 hours every day. During the inspection, it was found that a third of prisoners were locked up during the school day and were therefore not receiving training or education. Indeed, the media is reporting today a High Court ruling that a 16-year-old boy's human rights were breached by his being kept in solitary confinement at Feltham young offenders institution and that he was unlawfully denied access to education and the ability to mix with other inmates.

There is an urgent need for a response from the Government on these issues and a clear plan to address them, including on whether the cuts have now led to an unsafe level of resources. Other issues include statutory duties; contracts for the provision of education in prison; staffing levels, staff recruitment, staff experience and staff retention; and factors contributing to increased violence. Another issue is whether now is not the time for an urgent rethink of Feltham's future.

Young people will be coming out of our youth justice institutions more traumatised than when they went in and with reduced life chances. This is our next generation, and we are supposed to be an advanced society. These are children and their future and their welfare should be a matter for urgent debate in this House.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for asking for leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration—namely, the report of the inspection by Her Majesty's chief inspector of prisons on Feltham young offenders institution. I have listened carefully to the hon. Lady's application, but I am not persuaded that it should be debated under the terms of Standing Order No. 24.

The hon. Lady is an experienced and versatile Member of the House, and she will know that there are other opportunities to secure attention to the issue. She will know what those opportunities are in both question and debate forms, and I have a feeling that she will probably be beetling towards the Table Office ere long to try one of those other options.

Points of Order

1.22 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In his final speech in the House, the former right hon. Member for Leigh made the very compelling case that there was evidence for criminal acts having taken place during the contaminated blood scandal, which was of course the biggest treatment disaster in the history of the NHS. Given that the criminal acts that, allegedly, took place are set out on the front page of today's *Daily Mail*, is it appropriate for the Secretary of State for Health to come to the House and say what action he intends to take? The former right hon. Member for Leigh asked the Secretary of State to indicate whether he was minded to set up a public inquiry into what happened, and said that if that did not take place, he would notify the police of the evidence he had in his possession. Mr Speaker, have you had any indication from the Secretary of State for Health about whether he intends to come to the House to make such a statement?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. I have seen the Secretary of State for Health a couple of times today—recently, in the Chamber, and much earlier this morning, when I was returning from my health-giving swim and he was arriving at the House on his bicycle; as the hon. Lady would expect, we exchanged the courtesies of wishing each other good morning. The right hon. Gentleman did not give me any indication that he planned to make a statement on this matter on that occasion; nor has he since done so.

I have to admit that I was not familiar with the headline to which the hon. Lady referred, not least because the organ in question is not part of my daily reading matter. I am sure she will readily understand that it is not ordinarily a paper of any interest to me. However, I must admit that the headline is obviously a very important one relating to a very important story.

I am not aware of any plans by Ministers to make a statement, as I have said, but clearly the issue will not go away. I well remember the final intervention of the then right hon. Member for Leigh, and very powerful it was too. I rather suspect that the hon. Lady will return to this matter, especially if she judges it to be urgent, and she will know what opportunities are open to her to raise matters that she thinks are urgent.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On 8 February, I asked the then Minister of State, Department for Exiting the European Union, the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones), about allegations that it was the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice that had led the Government to issue a notice to withdraw from Euratom alongside the notice to withdraw from the EU. In response, the Minister told the House that that was not the case, and that

“it would not be possible for the UK to leave the EU and continue its current membership of Euratom.”—[*Official Report*, 8 February 2017; Vol. 621, c. 523.]

The former chief of staff to the Secretary of State has now contradicted that statement. He has said that it was in fact the role of the European Court of Justice that lay behind the Government's decision. Mr Speaker, can you

advise me how we can find out the truth of the matter: why are the Government leading us out of the important treaty on Euratom?

Mr Speaker: I do not think it is for me to seek to penetrate the inner recesses of ministerial minds to ascertain their precise motivation in the pursuit of policy. When the hon. Gentleman asks how he should take forward this matter, my short answer is by the tabling of questions, which will probably need to be very precise and focused if he is to elicit the information he seeks. That is my guidance because, although I have indulged him on this occasion—because I could not know precisely what he was going to ask until he had asked it—what he has asked does not constitute a point of order, although it is no doubt of enormous interest and relevance to him and many other Members.

I must advise the House that it is not the responsibility of the Chair to ensure consistency of statements from any Government, or indeed from persons previously connected with a Government. If that were one of the responsibilities of the Chair, a wholly disproportionate amount of his or her time would have to be devoted to keeping up with such matters. The hon. Gentleman has made his concern clear, and that concern has no doubt been heard by those on the Treasury Bench. If a Minister felt that he or she had been inaccurate in statements to the House, that Minister would have a responsibility to set the record straight.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. With your permission, I would like to raise the motion for the 2017-18 estimates on the Order Paper today. I have notified the Government of my intention to raise a point of order. The calling of a general election only two years into a fixed-term Parliament, the resultant hung Parliament, the delay in the elections of Chairs of Select Committees and the fact that no Opposition day debates have been scheduled with only days to go before recess have combined to create an unprecedented situation in terms of the scrutiny of Government finances.

Opposition Members are deeply concerned that the Government are asking Parliament to approve, on a motion tonight, the appropriation of £586 billion without debate, so avoiding what many of us believe to be the proper and correct parliamentary scrutiny of public finances. Such scrutiny is of particular interest to the thousands of public sector workers who are currently receiving mixed messages on pay from the Government. Presumably these estimates, which were published in April, still reflect the public sector pay cap, and this is also where the money for the Northern Ireland settlement will come from.

Mr Speaker, as custodian of the House and of its long tradition of transparent scrutiny of Government spending since the Bill of Rights in 1689—not you personally since 1689—will you advise me what course may be taken to ensure the appropriate consideration of the estimates?

Mr Speaker: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's recognition that I am not quite that old—that is, it has to be said, heartening. As for his passing reference to the election of Chairs of Select Committees, the House is due to treat of that matter today. It may well be that I will have something to say on that matter today. I share the concern of the hon. Gentleman, and indeed of Members on both sides of the House, that the Chairs of Select Committees should be elected sooner rather than later, and that the Committees should be constituted as quickly as possible, so that they can undertake their important task of scrutiny. Parliament and parliamentarians will always be served by such an approach.

I understand the hon. Gentleman's concern that the House should be asked to authorise the expenditure of very large amounts of public money without an opportunity for debate, but I can assure him that there is nothing underhand or disorderly about this. It is in accordance with the Standing Orders and the House's agreed estimates procedure. This is not one of those estimates days on which the House is invited to debate matters recommended by the Liaison Committee before agreeing to the estimates.

That said, it is always open to the House to reconsider its procedures. I am aware that the Procedure Committee recently published a report on estimates procedure—a report to which a Government response is awaited—so there may be an opportunity for the House to look at these matters before too long. I hope that is helpful both to the hon. Gentleman and indeed to the House.

BILL PRESENTED

TELECOMMUNICATIONS INFRASTRUCTURE (RELIEF FROM NON- DOMESTIC RATES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Sajid Javid, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer and Secretary Karen Bradley, presented a Bill to make provision enabling relief from non-domestic rates in England and Wales to be conferred in respect of hereditaments used for the purposes of facilitating the transmission of communications by any means involving the use of electrical or electromagnetic energy; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 3) with explanatory notes (Bill 3-EN).

European Union (Approvals) Bill

Second Reading

1.31 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The purpose of the Bill is to approve four draft decisions of the Council of the European Union. All four draft decisions rely on article 352 of the Treaty on the functioning of the European Union, which allows the EU to take action to attain the objectives set out in the EU treaties, for which there is no specific power given. That can be done only with the approval of the European Parliament and the unanimous support of all member states. Before the UK can agree those draft decisions at the Council, Parliament must first give its approval. Section 8 of the European Union Act 2011 provides that a Minister may vote in favour of an article 352 decision only where the draft decision is approved by an Act of Parliament. I am pleased that Members of both Houses will have the opportunity to scrutinise and decide whether to approve such measures.

The UK is leaving the EU. Until that process has concluded, the UK remains a full member of the EU, and all the rights and obligations of EU membership remain in force. That includes exercising the UK's vote in the Council of the European Union on these four draft decisions. Whether or not those EU decisions involve the UK directly, they may make a difference to the context of the negotiations. While we are leaving the EU and its institutions, we will continue to maintain a resolute friendship and alliance with all the European countries. We have been working in peaceful partnership with EU member states for decades to build a prosperous and stable Europe.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Margot James: Yes, I will give way.

Sir William Cash *rose*—

Mr Liddell-Grainger *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. It is quite important to be clear to whom the Minister is giving way. The hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) was perfectly convinced that it was he that she had in mind, but the hon. Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) looks similarly confident that it was he. Take us out of our misery, Minister.

Margot James: I apologise for the confusion. I was referring to my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger).

Mr Liddell-Grainger: Thank you very much for that clarification, Mr Speaker.

My hon. Friend is fully aware that I am the president of the European Conservatives in the Council of Europe. We have had support from the Government and from colleagues in both Houses, and I am sure she would like to make it clear that the Council of Europe is still an

important part of what we do here. It was set up by the British in 1948 under Sir Winston Churchill and continues to play an important part through the European Court of Human Rights. I hope she will confirm that it will continue to play that important role.

Margot James: I commend my hon. Friend for all his work within the Council of Europe, and confirm that that will continue long after we have successfully concluded our Brexit negotiations.

The Prime Minister set out a bold and ambitious vision for the UK. She outlined our key negotiating objectives as we move to establish a comprehensive new partnership with the EU.

Sir William Cash *rose*—

Margot James: I will make a little progress and then give way.

That vision for a partnership in the best interests of the United Kingdom means that we will also continue to work with the EU on tackling areas of common interest.

Sir William Cash: I am much encouraged not only by the fact that the Minister is giving way but by what my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) said. It may be that we are no longer brothers and sisters in Europe, but we are cousins. Therefore to that extent we will continue to seek to maintain good relations with the EU, despite the fact that we are absolutely going to leave.

Margot James: I heartily agree with my hon. Friend that we will continue to foster good relations with our EU friends long after we leave the European Union. Keeping that in mind, we are content that all four decisions that the Bill addresses are reasonable, proportionate and in keeping with our best interests, and will not result in any additional financial burdens on the UK.

As I have said, article 352 decisions must be agreed by all EU member states unanimously. When all member states are in a position to vote on the decision, the European Council will schedule a meeting of the Council of the European Union. If all member states vote to approve the draft decisions at that meeting, the European Parliament will be asked in turn to approve the draft decisions. If it does so, the decisions are adopted into EU law. All member states apart from the UK have agreed the EU-Canada decisions, and all member states except the UK and Germany have agreed the Fundamental Rights Agency decisions. We do not believe that any of the draft decisions should be considered contentious in any way.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): It has been suggested that, as we negotiate our exit from the European Union, the United Kingdom should abstain in decisions in the Council. Will the Minister explain what the impact of a British abstention would be on those decisions?

Margot James: I assure my hon. Friend that, were we not to pass the Bill this afternoon, the draft decisions would not proceed. We are still full members of the European Union and therefore our consent is required for the draft decisions to take effect.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): The Minister is being generous with her time. She indicated one other country that has yet to ratify or vote on this—namely, Germany. Does she have, or has she been given, an indication as to when support may come from Germany?

Margot James: Any such comment from me would be speculation, which I intend to avoid, but I point out that Germany, like the United Kingdom, needs the consent of its national Parliament before its Ministers can vote on such draft decisions.

As I said, all member states apart from Germany and ourselves have agreed the Fundamental Rights Agency decisions, and we do not believe that any of the draft decisions are contentious. The Government are committed to being constructive in the UK's ongoing engagement with the EU. Holding up progress on business that is simple and uncontroversial would undermine that approach and the principle of sincere co-operation that lies behind it. It is therefore clearly in the UK's interests to approve these draft decisions. Delaying the decisions could have a negative impact on the UK's exit negotiations with the EU, including discussion on any future framework. There will, of course, be further opportunities to examine more fundamental aspects of the work of the EU in other debates. However, I am sure hon. Members will recognise that, whatever their views on EU exit, it is in the UK's interests to approve these draft decisions.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that, as part of our ongoing relationship with the European Union until we achieve our freedom, the provisions of the trade agreement secured with Canada will be implemented fully in the United Kingdom, and that we will continue to play a proactive role within the EU and beyond in encouraging further free trade with Canada?

Margot James: I welcome my hon. Friend's intervention. I remember his excellent work when he was a trade representative to Canada and I assure him that the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement negotiations, completed between the EU and Canada, will cover the United Kingdom for as long as we are members of the EU. After that point, it will be up to us to decide the terms of any future trading relationship with Canada, bearing in mind the—I won't go any further on that.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Will the Minister give way?

Margot James: I will make a bit of progress. I am concluding my remarks on Canada and trade. I will give way to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) when I have made further progress.

It is therefore clearly in the UK's interests to approve the draft decisions. Delaying the decisions could have a negative impact on the UK's exit negotiations, including discussions on any future framework. There will, of course, be further opportunities to examine more fundamental aspects.

John Redwood: Surely the Minister would confirm that the Canadian trade agreement, along with all the others the EU will have in place when we leave, will novate to us, assuming that both we and Canada wish it to do so? That will clearly be the case, so it will carry on.

Margot James: I accept the first part of what my right hon. Friend says, but I do not wish to predict what the UK and Canada may find it important to discuss in their trade relationship in the years to come.

Jonathan Edwards: Will the Minister give way?

Margot James: I will make a bit more progress and then I will give way.

The first two decisions will enable two countries, the Republic of Albania and the Republic of Serbia, to be granted observer status in the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency. Before I go any further on that point, I will give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Jonathan Edwards: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. I was not going to raise a point on CETA this afternoon, but as it has been raised by her colleagues I just wondered what estimate the UK Government have given to renegotiating a CETA-type Canada deal following Brexit.

Margot James: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I remind him of the scope of the Bill. It does not include much detailed discussion about our future trade relationship with Canada. For the avoidance of doubt, the Canadian decisions are about competition law, not trade.

The Fundamental Rights Agency was set up to support EU institutions and EU member states by improving the knowledge and awareness of fundamental rights issues in the EU, with a view to ensuring respect for fundamental rights. The agency does this through the collection and analysis of information and data. It can also formulate opinions on specific topics, either on its own initiative or at the request of EU institutions. It also has a role in communicating and raising awareness of fundamental rights, but it cannot hear individual complaints. EU accession candidate countries can be given observer status at the agency. This allows the agency to collect and analyse fundamental rights data from those countries, but it does not allow them the right to vote in decisions as part of the agency's management board.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): How does the agency differ from the Council of Europe? The Council of Europe looks after democracy and the rule of law within Europe, and it carries out exactly the same activities as the agency.

Margot James: The goal of the agency is to provide expertise on fundamental rights to EU institutions, member states and countries seeking accession when implementing EU law. The specific tasks of the agency are: to analyse and share information on fundamental rights in the European Union; to carry out scientific research and surveys on fundamental rights issues; to formulate opinions on specific topics, either on its own initiative or as requested by EU institutions; and to increase awareness on fundamental rights in the EU.

[Margot James]

Albania was granted EU candidate status in June 2014. The UK supported the awarding of EU candidate status on the condition that Albania redoubled its reform efforts, with particular focus on justice and home affairs, especially tackling organised crime, corruption and illegal migration. The UK welcomed Albania's progress in adopting legislation towards a judicial reform package in July 2016. Albania must now fully implement the judicial reform package as soon as possible, so that it can underpin other reforms.

Serbia was granted EU candidate status in 2012 and accession negotiations were launched in January 2014, with the first four negotiating chapters opened during 2016. The UK continues to support Serbia on its reform path, including through funding projects in Serbia.

James Cartledge (South Suffolk) (Con): Will the Minister comment on whether Serbia's membership of the agency would have any impact on the pursuit of war crimes in Serbia, as part of its effort to increase human rights?

Margot James: I cannot comment specifically on the likely impact on the treatment of war crimes in Serbia, a subject about which the Foreign Office is extremely concerned—as, I presume, is my hon. Friend—but I think it can only be a mark of progress for Serbia to be admitted in the way that this decision enables it to be.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): The Minister says that this is a mark of progress, but I cannot accept that. This sounds like motherhood-and-apple-pie Eurospeak. Exactly the same words were used during the accession of Croatia, but has Croatia handed over its war criminals and does it have the rule of law yet? Both were promised. It has one of the longest borders in the EU, which is used for sex trafficking and human trafficking. We heard exactly the same then, but there have been no improvements. Why does the Minister believe there will be improvements with Albania and Serbia?

Margot James: To correct the hon. Gentleman, I do not think I said that I thought there would be improvements; I said that I thought it would be a mark of progress. I was trying to limit my enthusiasm to that degree, mindful of what he says about Croatia. However, I would say that it is early days and we can only go down the path of progress. The UK continues to support Serbia on its reform path, including through funding projects in Serbia.

Serbia has more work to do on anti-discrimination policies, improving the situation for vulnerable people and ensuring freedom of expression. Observer status at the Fundamental Rights Agency should help Albania and Serbia to reform in the areas we are discussing. Albania and Serbia should also be allowed to benefit from instances of good practice and evidence from other EU member states in relation to human rights. The Government are therefore satisfied of the need to support these two decisions.

The third and fourth decisions are necessary to implement a co-operation agreement between the EU and Canada on competition enforcement. The decisions will allow the agreement to be signed and allow conclusion of the

agreement after it has been approved by the European Parliament. This competition co-operation agreement will replace an existing agreement that has been in place since 1999. It replicates and builds on the provisions in the earlier agreement by allowing the European Commission and the Canadian Competition Bureau to exchange evidence obtained during investigations, including confidential information and personal data.

The existing co-operation agreement with Canada dates from June 1999, and at that time the exchange of evidence between the parties was not regarded as needed. In the meantime, the bilateral co-operation between the European Commission and the Canadian Competition Bureau has become more frequent and deeper in terms of substance.

Jonathan Edwards: The Government have already told the Exiting the European Union Committee, on which I served during the last Parliament, that following our withdrawal from the EU we will no longer benefit from, for instance, the information exchange agreements between our competition regulator and the Canadian Competition Bureau. That renders much of the Bill rather pointless, does it not? Can the Minister explain how pulling us out of global deals such as the one that we are discussing will be helpful?

Margot James: I have explained that the purpose of the decision is primarily to support our role as a continuing member of the EU until the negotiations are complete, in two years' time. Until then we will be covered by it, but after that date we shall have to see what has been agreed during the negotiations. The existing competition agreement with Canada does not allow the sharing of confidential information, but the new one does. I shall return to that point in a few minutes.

The absence of the possibility of exchanging information with the Canadian Competition Bureau is regarded as a major impediment to effective co-operation. The proposed changes in the existing agreement will allow the European Commission and the Competition Bureau to exchange evidence that both sides have obtained in their investigations. That will be particularly useful in all cases in which the alleged anti-competitive behaviour affects transatlantic or world markets. Many worldwide or transatlantic cartels include Canada and, via Canada, the Commission will gain a good opportunity to have access to additional information concerning those cartels.

Co-operation with third-country competition authorities is now standard practice in international competition investigations. In addition to the agreement with Canada, the EU has concluded dedicated co-operation agreements with the United States, Japan, Korea and Switzerland.

I now return to the intervention by the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards). I omitted to say that even after the Brexit negotiations have been completed, the competition agreement with Canada will continue to apply to British companies if they are trading with the single market of the European Union.

The most advanced agreement is the one with Switzerland, which already contains provisions on the exchange of evidence, and the proposed update would bring the agreement with Canada to the same level as the one concluded with Switzerland.

I am sure Members will agree that the ability to share information is increasingly important for effective and efficient international competition enforcement. Access to information from other jurisdictions can be important to the reaching of a robust enforcement decision. Co-operation and information sharing between jurisdictions can help to ensure that enforcement bodies do not reach different decisions based on different sets of information.

The agreement contains general safeguards for the transfer of information, and additional safeguards for the transfer of personal data. Personal data can be shared only with the express written consent of the person or company to whom they relate. In the absence of consent, such data can be shared only when both competition authorities are investigating the same related conduct or transaction. Furthermore, the transfer of the data will be subject to independent oversight. The agreement also contains safeguards for information provided by a company under the EU cartel immunity or leniency programme. Such information cannot be shared without the express written consent of the individual or company that provided it.

As I have noted, the decisions will have no financial implications for the UK. I confirm that I do not consider that any of the Bill's provisions interfere with the rights set out in the European convention on human rights, so no issues arise in connection with its compatibility with those rights.

John Redwood: I wonder why there is no cost. Surely, if there is to be an added layer of complexity in the sharing of information—which may be a good thing—there must be a cost in respect of the time of the officials involved.

Margot James: I am assured that no costs are associated with these decisions, other than those that arise in the normal course of Government business.

It is intended that the Bill will come into force on the day of Royal Assent. For the reasons that I have outlined, I commend it to the House.

1.55 pm

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The Bill was included in the Queen's Speech. The background notes refer to helping to grant Serbia and Albania observer status at the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency, and an agreement for enhanced co-operation between competition regulators in the EU and Canada. However, I will not be the only one who was somewhat surprised that it was chosen as the second Bill to be given a Second Reading in the new Parliament. Why was it given such a high priority, given what might have happened, and given what was, at one point, in the Conservative party manifesto?

We could have suggested some alternatives. For instance, the Government could have addressed the pay cap. Members of the Cabinet and members of the Conservative party are now doing that, and quite an argument seems to be going on, but we could have been debating the subject in the House today.

James Cartlidge: The hon. Gentleman will know that the civil war in Yugoslavia was an horrific, scarring experience for our whole continent. We should not

belittle it by underestimating the importance of those nations' reaching our level in terms of human rights and so on.

Bill Esterson: Of course the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, which was why it was right for the Bill to be in the Queen's Speech. I was merely questioning why it had been given such prominence. Given that it consists of only two lines, why was something weightier not presented first?

I have mentioned the pay cap, the turmoil in the Conservative party, and the agonising over whether public servants should be given a pay rise. There is also the debate about tuition fees, the debate about whether there should be more police and firefighters—

Michael Tomlinson *rose*—

Bill Esterson: I will give way again.

Michael Tomlinson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, but I fear that he may be being a little bit churlish. He has the opportunity now to set out the Labour party's position in relation to the Bill. He is, of course entitled to go on speculating about what might or could not or should have been debated at this time—as long as you allow him to do so, Mr Speaker—but he has the opportunity to debate this subject now. What does he have to say about it?

Mr Speaker: Order. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his inquiry. I could not know what the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) would say until he had said it, but now that he has said it, I can tell him that he should not have said it.

It would be advisable now for the hon. Gentleman to return to the subject of the European Union (Approvals) Bill. I very gently remind the hon. Gentleman, who is quite a seasoned parliamentarian, that it consists of two clauses, of which—and I say this not least for the benefit of those who are attending to our proceedings elsewhere—the second is “Extent, commencement and short title”. The only substantive clause is clause 1. The question of the pay cap is a matter of enormous interest, but it is wholly irrelevant to the question of clause 1 and consideration of the Republic of Albania, the Republic of Serbia, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, and the relationship between the European Union and the Government of Canada in respect of competition law.

Bill Esterson: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. You may even have stolen parts of my speech.

Anyway, we have the European Union (Approvals) Bill, with its four draft decisions and two clauses, the second of which—as you pointed out, Mr Speaker—consists of the name of the Bill. Members will be pleased to learn that Labour will not oppose the Bill at this stage. We on the Labour Benches are committed to ensuring that the UK fulfils its responsibilities as a member state of the EU, not least in the very important matter of the progress made by the former member states of Yugoslavia. We will do so until the time of withdrawal from the EU; we will continue to scrutinise EU matters that come before Parliament.

[*Bill Esterson*]

This Bill is the enactment of provisions under the European Union Act 2011 and addresses draft decisions of the Council of the European Union. The first of those relates to the participation of the republics of Albania and Serbia as observers in the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, and the second to the signing and conclusion of an agreement between the EU and the Government of Canada regarding the application of their competition laws, which includes the exchange of information between the EU and the Canadian Competition Bureau.

The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights replaced the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia in 2007. As set out on the Europa website:

“It advises EU institutions and national Governments on fundamental rights, particularly in the areas of: discrimination; access to justice; racism and xenophobia; data protection; victims’ rights; children’s rights.”

The agency’s areas of work have been determined through a five-year framework. The main priority areas include the fight against racism, xenophobia and related intolerance.

EU candidate countries can participate in the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights as observers. This Bill approves two draft decisions on the participation of the Republic of Albania and the Republic of Serbia as observers in the work of the agency. The decision will not in itself confer observer status on Albania and Serbia, but it will establish that the Stabilisation and Association Councils for Albania and Serbia can determine the conditions of the two countries becoming observers.

As the House of Commons Library explains, under the draft Council decisions, Albania and Serbia would both appoint an observer and alternate observer in the work of the agency’s management board, on an equal footing with the member and alternate members appointed by EU member states, but without a right to vote. They would also participate in initiatives undertaken by the agency and make a financial contribution to it.

In an explanatory memorandum to the European Scrutiny Committee on 22 March 2016, the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), who was then and is now a Ministry of Justice Minister, said that the Government support Serbia and Albania becoming observers in the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, agreeing that it would assist their accession to the EU which the UK also supports subject to “firm but fair conditionality”.

Albania and Serbia will both make a contribution to the EU budget in order to participate, ranging from €160,000 to €183,000 a year. The draft decisions have been cleared by the European Scrutiny Committee and the Lords European Union Select Committee. The Minister said that this is an opportunity for us to support the progress being made on human rights in the two countries in question, and I completely agree on that.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: As the hon. Gentleman knows, Labour and Conservative Members and other Members of this House work through the Council of Europe with Albania and the Balkan states to make sure they are monitored and understood. An enormous amount of work is done by this place with parliamentarians across

Europe to continue the efforts the hon. Gentleman is talking about. I commend the hon. Gentleman and our Front-Bench team, and I know he will praise the fact that there are MPs here doing the work already.

Bill Esterson: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to make that point, and I thank him for it; I join him in praising colleagues across the House for their work on these important matters.

However, I have a particular question for the Minister, which also came up in some of the interventions: what would be the nature of our involvement in the agency both immediately after Brexit in handling transitional arrangements and in the longer term? A similar question would apply to a number of other agencies. Perhaps the Minister can address that in her concluding remarks.

There is already an agreement between the EU and Canada on competition. This decision extends the powers so that both sides will be able to exchange evidence collected in the course of their investigations.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I would like the hon. Gentleman to repeat his question in a little more detail, as my understanding of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights is that it is there to help to interpret and work on Community law in its member states, so presumably if we left the EU it would no longer be relevant in that context to the UK itself.

Bill Esterson: I had moved on to the second part, but I will come back to the hon. Gentleman’s question. We need to know what our relationship will be, given the important work—as the hon. Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) rightly described it—carried out by Members in this House over many years, which has been extremely important in making progress in the countries named in this Bill and others. It is important that we have a sense from the Government as to how we will stay involved in the work of such agencies. I am sure all Members will agree that this country still has a very important role to play whether or not we are in the EU.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that a key bulwark of human rights in this country, and indeed across Europe, is the European convention on human rights, which is not affected by this Bill at all? That has to remain the key and most important element.

Bill Esterson: I completely agree.

The EU Commission states that there is a danger that the absence of a power to exchange information with the Canadian Competition Bureau will become an impediment as co-operation between the two parties increases; the Minister made that point. Co-operation with other competition authorities is now standard practice in international competition investigations. The EU has co-operation agreements with the USA, Japan, South Korea and Switzerland. The most advanced is the one with Switzerland; it is very similar to the Canada agreement and has proved, as the Minister said, uncontroversial. Many worldwide or transatlantic cartels include Canada in their operations, and the Canadian commission will get a good opportunity via this agreement to gain additional information concerning these cartels and whether practice is anti-competitive or not.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this Bill serves as an interesting template for taking forward competitive activities post-Brexit? If we can get this right, it might serve to enable other members of the Commonwealth to look at how we can pattern a similar relationship.

Bill Esterson: That is a good point, and I will come later to further questions about arrangements after we leave the EU, so that we can continue to benefit from the sort of arrangements set out in the Bill. We certainly need to make sure arrangements are in place to address anti-competitive practices in this country and involving our interests across the world. The Minister might want to address that very good point in her concluding remarks.

Ian Paisley: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the question of establishing such a pattern impacts greatly on our nearest neighbour, the Republic of Ireland? If we can get the relationship right between ourselves and Canada, it might help in getting it right with the Republic of Ireland, which will help us to bolster our trade.

Bill Esterson: I think we are in danger of wandering away from the subject—[*Interruption.*] I have no idea why Conservative Members find that funny, but there we are. Obviously, the hon. Gentleman and the Democratic Unionist party are particularly exercised by that matter, among others, but I dare say that this is something that the Minister can pick up on, perhaps on another day.

Competition delivers benefits to consumers, to businesses and to society as a whole. Competition policy therefore contributes to boosting jobs, growth and investment. The Commission pursues this objective by enforcing competition rules, sanctioning breaches and promoting a competition culture internationally. The proposed agreement will improve the administrative co-operation between the European Commission and the Canadian Competition Bureau. Ultimately, consumers in the European Union and in Canada benefit from competition policy and from the sanctions that contribute to a stronger deterrence of anti-competitive behaviour. More effective competition enforcement results in more open and competitive markets in which companies can compete more freely, enabling them to generate wealth and to create jobs. It also gives consumers a better choice of products at lower prices.

This new agreement is substantively the same as the existing one, which has been in place since June 1999. This agreement just adds new provisions on the exchange of information. Even after we have left the European Union, UK companies operating in the EU will still be subject to the jurisdiction of the European Commission in anti-trust and merger investigations, as all non-EU countries are. Information on UK companies will still be transferable after Brexit. After Brexit, the European Commission will still share information about UK companies with Canada but will not be bound to share the information about the UK it receives from Canada with the UK. I would like the Minister to address that point.

This agreement relates to administrative co-operation between the European Commission and the Canadian Competition Bureau, so public consultation and an impact assessment were not considered necessary by the

Government, and, as the Minister has now said on a number of occasions, she does not think that there will be financial implications. The Government have noted in the explanatory memorandum that this new agreement will have no impact on UK law and no financial implications.

The European Scrutiny Committee did not at first clear the proposal. The Chair of the Committee, the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), who I dare say will make a contribution to the debate, requested further information about whether and in what way the United Kingdom could participate in the agreement following withdrawal. The Minister responded to the Committee on 24 October, stating that

“the Government will ensure that the UK is in the strongest possible position to cooperate on competition matters with our international partners...There are a number of options for securing the means for international cooperation...As the form of any cooperation agreement will depend on our negotiation with the EU and negotiations with other countries such as Canada it is too early to say what exact form international cooperation will take.”

That raises a number of questions about transitional arrangements in the longer term. In response to that letter, the Committee subsequently cleared the documents.

That brings us to the question of what arrangements will exist after we leave the EU. The Minister referred in her letter to seeking to extend the current arrangements. For how long does she think that will be necessary? What guarantee is there that it would be possible to extend them? UK companies operating in the EU will still be covered by this agreement. The difference will be that, while the European Commission will continue to share information with Canada about UK companies, that information will not be shared with the UK unless a further agreement is reached. She said in her letter that any co-operation agreement would depend on negotiation. How long does she think those negotiations are likely to take? What will she be seeking to achieve in them? We have now reached the point at which Ministers need to start answering the questions about transitional and longer-term arrangements for these and many other matters.

There is no doubt that competition is vital to our economy, to the success of our businesses and to the prosperity of the people of our country. Encouraging healthy competition is vital. The role of national Governments, and of international co-operation, is to create a fair market, not just a free market. It is also to avoid anti-competitive practices, including the creation of cartels through mergers and acquisitions which distort the market; the undercutting and exploitation of workers and smaller businesses; the use of zero-hours contracts where workers have little choice; the treatment of smaller businesses by banks that will only fund those with liquid assets; and the delays in the payment of invoices by larger firms. Those are all examples of anti-competitive and exploitative practices in which Governments—nationally and internationally—should find ways of intervening to set a level playing field. Governments should be a partner to business and to the workforce. They should encourage those wishing to start and grow a business. They should be investing, and they should have the right strategy for infrastructure and skills. They should have an industrial strategy. Underpinning all that should be the right approach to competition, which is what this part of the Bill is all about.

[Bill Esterson]

We need answers to the questions about what happens after we leave the EU and about what transitional arrangements will be in place. The nature of the Minister's comments in her letter to the European Scrutiny Committee show just how complex these questions are, and it is time we started to get some answers.

Michael Tomlinson: I am following the shadow Minister's speech closely. He has mentioned the European Scrutiny Committee several times. Will he join me in calling for the Committee to be reconstituted as soon as possible? His speech has demonstrated the important work it does, and it needs to get going straight away.

Bill Esterson: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman was in the Chamber before this debate started, when my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) made an impassioned plea to you, Mr Speaker, for the Select Committees to be reconstituted as soon as possible. Of course I agree with the hon. Gentleman.

Labour accepts the referendum result and recognises that Britain is leaving the European Union, but we need to negotiate for strong transitional arrangements to ensure that there is no cliff edge for the economy. We also need to give much greater priority to retaining the benefits of the single market and the customs union than we have seen from the Government so far. We should not accept any watering down of workers' rights and environmental standards as a result of Brexit. We will seek significant improvements to the repeal Bill to ensure that there is proper oversight of the use of new powers and no drop in EU rights and protections.

In that context, the discussions that we are having this afternoon are really important. We on the Labour Benches will seek—as, I believe, will the Minister—a strong, collaborative new relationship with the EU, not as a member but as a partner. We will seek to remain a member of common European agencies that benefit the UK, such as Europol, Eurojust and the Erasmus scheme. Perhaps the arrangements we are discussing today can be added to that list. We have to get this right, but we are not in a strong position as we enter the negotiations. I want to see the Prime Minister change her approach. She must drop the idea that “no deal” is a viable option. She must also put a much stronger emphasis on jobs, on the economy and on retaining the benefits of the single market and the customs union, and she must bring Parliament back into the Brexit process, as we have seen happening today. The fact that we are debating this Bill shows that we must retain the benefits of the co-operation and relationships that we currently have with the EU.

I said at the start that this was a Bill with only four draft decisions, but it is indicative of what is to come as we address the challenges of Brexit. As far as this Bill goes, the Minister really does need to answer the questions about transitional arrangements and negotiations so that we can continue to share information to the benefit of our economy and of the people of this country.

2.19 pm

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): As has been mentioned, the European Scrutiny Committee, of which I was Chairman for six years, has actually cleared these decisions. We did have some reservations about one aspect, however:

we wanted to know how all this would work out during the Brexit negotiations and after we have left the European Union.

Basically, there is a necessity for this Bill because, as the Minister pointed out, although we are leaving the EU, under sections 2 and 3 of the European Communities Act 1972 we are still within the framework of the requirements to comply with EU rights and obligations until Brexit takes effect. There are some who hope that all this will somehow be kicked into the long grass, that we will have arrangements that take us into a world of never-never land, and that it will all disappear. There are some in the House of Lords who certainly take that view and there may even be some in the House of Commons. I was extremely glad to note, however, that on certain matters, in particular the single market and the customs union, the decision that was taken on the Queen's Speech made it clear—subsequent events seem to have confirmed it—that the Opposition have actually begun to become extremely realistic about the single market and all that goes with it. These sort of arrangements are implicit in the Brexit negotiations and in the outcome of Brexit.

The Bill has to provide parliamentary approval of the decisions on Albania and Serbia, and the European Scrutiny Committee had no reservation or concern after we heard from the relevant Minister—the same Minister who wrote me the letter last year. The important issue here is that Albania and Serbia are not by definition countries that are likely to become candidates for EU membership during the period of our negotiation process and exit. Mr Juncker himself said that he does not think there will be any enlargement until after we have left the EU, so such decisions will not impinge upon us. We do not have to take a specific position on the candidatures of Albania and Serbia.

The Bill's briefing paper contains many references to the Fundamental Rights Agency, and one thing that has not yet been mentioned in this debate is the charter of fundamental rights, which is embedded in the Lisbon treaty arrangements and is a matter of law. I strongly resisted our being drawn into the charter, and we held a European Scrutiny Committee inquiry into how Lord Goldsmith and his negotiations had failed so dramatically. We thought that we were not going to be a member of the charter, but we ended up within that framework. The Fundamental Rights Agency, which promotes dialogue with civil society in order to raise public awareness of fundamental rights, things which would be part and parcel of the functions that would be carried through by virtue of the Bill in respect of Serbia and Albania, contains something of a vacuum because we will not be part of the charter of fundamental rights after we have left the EU, but we are part of it for the time being, so to that extent there is a problem. I will not invite the Minister to enlarge on that—I hope she is glad about that—but I want to put it on the record that the charter of fundamental rights should never have applied to us in the first place. It was a botched job by the then Labour Government, and we are now saddled with the fact that we are in it. Fortunately, however, we will be coming out of it as a result of Brexit.

However, part of the Fundamental Rights Agency's role is to fight against racism, xenophobia and intolerance, and I am sure we would agree with that role as a matter

of principle. The object of the involvement of Albania and Serbia in the process is to enable an element of self-education, so that they can become more aware than they have been previously. Take Serbia, for example. I have been in this House long enough to have been here at the time of Sarajevo and all that went with it. Milošević and Karadžić were dreadful people. However much we airbrush some of these things out of history as time progresses, the reality is that the breaches of people's rights in Serbia were so horrific that they live with us to this day. It will be important for Albania and Serbia to be, as it were, incorporated and absorbed into the processes by which fundamental rights are considered. I do not like the charter of fundamental rights, not because I am against human rights, but because I do not like the idea of some of the adjudications. That is not to say, however, that it is not important that these two countries should be involved in that process.

The Committee of which I was Chairman when these decisions were made had no reason to stand in the way. We originally asked for some information and further comment from the Minister; we got that, so we were satisfied and we cleared the documents. Indeed, the decisions were also cleared by our counterpart in the House of Lords. What the Minister has said is fair and I would not want to stand in the way of the approval of this Bill.

I referred earlier to the accession process. It will take quite a long time for Serbia and Albania to become members of the EU and they will come in after we have left. A European Parliament resolution on Brexit calls for the transition period to be no longer than three years, and the European Commission's negotiating guidelines for the Brexit talks state that any transition must be "limited in time". I will just leave that on the record, because some people seem to have got this idea that transition is an everlasting journey. It is not; we are leaving and that is that. By the time Albania and Serbia become members of the European Union—if they do—we will be out and that will be a good thing for the United Kingdom. I ought to add that the Justice Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), said on 22 March 2016—people will note that that was before the referendum—that the Government were

"committed to engaging constructively with the EU and supports the enlargement of the EU to the Western Balkans, subject to 'firm but fair conditionality'".

He then made much the same comment as I just did about self-education, saying that participation

"will assist both countries' accession to the EU."

He also confirmed that the proposals would be taken forward only after

"all Member States have concluded their own constitutional requirements"

and that is what we are doing here. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) mentioned that Germany must also give parliamentary approval, which I understand will be forthcoming because Germany has an interest in the continuation of the EU in a way that we do not.

The decision on EU-Canada co-operation in competition law enforcement was also approved by the European Scrutiny Committee.

Michael Tomlinson: I declare an interest as someone who served on that Committee in the previous Parliament. Has my hon. Friend received any assurances about when the Committee will be reconstituted? Does he agree that that is a matter of urgency?

Sir William Cash: I am glad to respond, because I have been very much engaged on that subject. In fact, one of the last things I did on the day of Dissolution was to write to the Chief Whip asking him to ensure that our Committee was reconstituted immediately after the election, because in 2015 the whole process went on until November, by which time we had a monument of documents. In the meantime, many things are being decided in the European institutions, many of which are directly relevant to the Brexit negotiations. It is therefore incredibly important that this House has an opportunity to assess the sorts of things that are being decided, subject to the Committee clearing the documents.

As hon. Members may know, if the European Scrutiny Committee imposes scrutiny reserve on a document because we think it is so important that it has to be debated, the Council of Ministers cannot conclude its consideration of those matters, and the Government cannot make a decision to carry the matter through, unless and until that debate has taken place. When we have a pile of documents—I understand there are some 200 documents in the pipeline—and a pile of explanatory memoranda explaining the Government's position on them, the position the Government adopt on the documents in the negotiations will be highly interesting.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole rightly raises the question of getting on with the job, and I am given to understand, without committing anybody to anything, that the Government are taking steps to accelerate the process because it is so important. Of course, we will discuss the other Select Committees later this afternoon. Their schedules and the allocation of chairmanships to each party will be decided, and I understand that that has been discussed through the usual channels, so I do not expect it to be terribly controversial, but for all the reasons I have set out, it is important for the European Scrutiny Committee to get going.

I entirely endorse what the Minister said about the Canada agreement, which again was discussed by the European Scrutiny Committee. We agreed that we would let it go ahead, but the explanatory notes on the Bill indicate some implications for United Kingdom companies operating in the EU after Brexit, which is the bit we should be most concerned about at the moment:

"Following the UK's exit from the European Union, UK companies operating in the EU will still be subject to the jurisdiction of the European Commission in antitrust investigations and, where the thresholds are met, in merger investigations in the same way as for other non-EU companies operating in the EU. Information relating to UK companies based in the EU would therefore still be transferable under the new Agreement."

That is becoming a bit of a hot potato. I made a representation to the Prime Minister the other day on the question of citizens' rights, and we hear a lot about the question of City regulation, and here it is coming up again.

Some people are making too much of it. An enormous amount is emerging from the commentariat and on programmes we sometimes find ourselves listening to

[*Sir William Cash*]

but that we perhaps ought to switch off. They are trying to make out that, somehow or other, the real problem is that we have to stay in the European Court of Justice, which is complete rubbish. We do not have to stay in the European Court of Justice and, far more than that, we are not going to stay in the European Court of Justice, because we will be repealing sections 2 and 3 of the European Communities Act 1972. The Labour party has made it clear that we will not stay in the single market or the customs union, which raises some of the biggest issues relating to the ECJ. Frankly, as I told the House the other day, we have to come up with a sensible arrangement that does not prejudice the regaining of our judicial sovereignty. At the same time, we must agree some form of tribunal that enables us, through a parallel bilateral “source of law” agreement, to have a decision-making process that does not and cannot keep us in the European Court of Justice. That is not a matter of opinion or of wishful thinking; staying in the ECJ is fantasy land.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): At the moment, under our current competition agreement with the EU, a British company can seek direct redress if it believes a European company is anti-competitive. Under the agreement between the EU, the UK and Canada, although we will have competition co-operation if we pass the Bill, there will be no direct redress for a British company that is concerned about the anti-competitive activities of a Canadian company. Therefore, although I completely understand my hon. Friend’s concerns about the European Court of Justice, we want enforcement that means British companies can seek direct redress from our largest trading partner, when needed. Does he think that the European economic area or the European Free Trade Association court models might be of interest?

Sir William Cash: I am not at all convinced by the EEA route. I do not want to get into all that now, except to say that the EEA involves the EU.

Vicky Ford: The EFTA court?

Sir William Cash: EFTA is a different story, and I specifically raised it with the Prime Minister only a few days ago because I have been having fruitful discussions with the president of the EFTA court and his advisers. He has been over here to talk to the Foreign Office, to me as the then Chair of the European Scrutiny Committee and to others.

It is an interesting proposition. I am not saying that we will do exactly the same in resolving those jurisdictional questions as happens at the moment with EFTA, but the great advantage of the EFTA model is that it is completely independent of the EU yet follows the decisions of the European Court of Justice for the most part, although not always—that is important. I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) noticed that, because not many people have. It is important that we have a constructive discussion about the best way of being cousins rather than brothers and sisters, as I said in my earlier intervention. We all have a mutual interest in ensuring that we have a proper jurisdictional answer to these questions.

I will not attempt to design a model here and now, but it might be something along the lines of a retired European Court of Justice judge—I do not want to be held to this, but it is a thought—together with a retired member of our Supreme Court and an independent judge, so that we get the benefit of listening to arguments that bridge the two jurisdictions. We will retain our sovereignty, judicial and legislative, but we are interested, for the sake of the companies to which my hon. Friend referred, in ensuring that we give them the answers they need. Her general point raises an important practical question, and we need to ensure that we end up with something that works, without prejudicing our legislative and judicial sovereignty, while providing an answer to the people in our constituencies and throughout the United Kingdom whom we serve as Members of Parliament.

Mr Deputy Speaker, many congratulations to you on the fact that I am seeing you here yet again. As you may have noticed, I am still here as well. So for practical purposes, let me draw my speech to a conclusion by saying that I do not in any way want to interfere with the process before us, because it is not going to affect this country in the longer term, and it is important that we act sensibly and responsibly to make sure that we do not rock the boat in the meantime.

2.40 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): As this is also my first opportunity to do this, may I congratulate you and welcome you back to the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker?

I am grateful to the Minister for setting out the provisions in the Bill. On the first two draft decisions, we welcome the opportunity to give our support to the participation of Albania and Serbia as observers in the work of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. As the agency says:

“Fundamental rights set out minimum standards to ensure that a person is treated with dignity. Whether this is the right to be free from discrimination on the basis of your age, disability or ethnic background, the right to the protection of your personal data, or the right to get access to justice, these rights should all be respected, promoted and protected.”

Those are shared values, and Scottish National party Members and the Scottish Government hold them dear. We are demonstrating that in Scotland by using our limited new powers to build a social security system with dignity at its heart. We can contrast that with the approach of the UK Government, who are rolling out a dysfunctional universal credit regime which is punishing the disabled, those on low wages and the vulnerable.

On Serbia and Albania, although there is much work to be done, this is an important step for both countries in their journey to improving the lives of their citizens. They deserve credit for their approach, and we know that joining the EU is also the will of both nations. Serbia was formally announced as an EU candidate in 2012 and has already opened 10 of the 35 chapters of accession. Last week, Serbia’s newly elected Prime Minister, Ana Brnabić, talked of a

“strategic orientation toward the European Union, which represents the values that we stand for.”

She continued:

“That is the place where Serbia should be”.

Similarly, elections in Albania this week showed, once again, a renewed commitment to the EU. Albania's two largest parties are both pro-EU, and a national survey has shown that more than 95% of its citizens support EU membership. In their commitment to EU accession, Serbia and Albania have shown a willingness and commitment to improving the fundamental rights of their citizens and to restoring peace. They see the EU as a vehicle for peace across Europe. As his name has been mentioned today, it is worth recalling Jean-Claude Juncker's tribute to the recently deceased former German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl. Mr Juncker said:

"It was on the day we decided to press ahead with EU enlargement to the east and south east. In a voice choked with tears he said it was one of the most beautiful days of his life. That he, as German Chancellor, was able to bring Europe back together after all the harm that Germany had caused."

Juncker said of his friend:

"He wept. Nobody was embarrassed by his tears. That was Europe at its best."

That we are here today playing our, albeit small, part in improving the rights of people across the Western Balkans is a great thing.

What a shame then that this UK Government are hell-bent on pulling Scotland out of the very partnership that delivers those protections; and this despite people in every Scottish local authority area voting to remain in the EU. It is also not lost on us that this Bill comes only days after the fundamental rights of people, in particular those of the LGBT community in Northern Ireland, are now being questioned—all because of a back-door deal with the Democratic Unionist party to keep this Tory Government in power.

Alex Chalk: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that when it comes to protecting the human rights of people in the United Kingdom, be that in England, Scotland or Northern Ireland, our membership of the convention is by far the most important thing in asserting those rights, and that is what we need to keep in mind?

Drew Hendry: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point about the membership of the convention, but it is also vital that we take every opportunity to make sure we are protecting the rights of citizens.

Turning to the third and fourth draft decisions, SNP Members welcome further formalisation of the working relationship between Canada and the EU in regard to competition laws. These draft decisions, in particular, serve as a reminder of the good business and trading opportunities the EU provides for the UK. A bad Brexit deal, or the fatuous, ludicrous idea of no deal, will make it more expensive and difficult for our businesses to trade with the EU—a market eight times the size of the UK market.

The people in Scotland stand to lose much, with independent estimates concluding that a hard Brexit could cost Scotland up to 80,000 jobs within a decade and that after 10 years average wages could fall by £2,000 a year per head.

Ian Paisley: For the record, will the hon. Gentleman confirm that Scotland's largest trading partner is the rest of the United Kingdom?

Drew Hendry: I am happy to confirm that, but I am also happy to point out how important Scotland is to the rest of the UK as a trading partner.

This treaty shows there are many other potential costs to a hard Brexit; for example, in respect of the protection of the rights of citizens who otherwise may also find that they face additional burdens. As the Minister mentioned, the explanatory notes state that the Bill carries no cost to the Government, but that does not mean that subsequently losing these protections will mean no cost to our citizens and businesses. Areas of EU competition regulation include anti-trust, cartel, merger and state aid measures, and the sectors covered are agriculture and food; consumer goods; energy and environment; financial services; information and communication technologies; media; motor vehicles; pharmaceuticals; postal services; professional services; sports; telecommunications; and transport.

This is yet another example—and we have heard no update today—of where we have no clarity from the UK Government over Brexit proposals on something fundamental to UK companies operating in the EU and, ultimately and importantly, to consumers and our citizens. In contrast, this agreement will mean that information obtained during competition enforcement investigations may be discussed and transferred between the European Commission and the Canadian Competition Bureau. It is intended to increase the ability of both organisations to conclude competition enforcement investigations efficiently, and should be welcomed.

We are advised that following the UK's exit from the European Union, UK companies operating in the EU will still be subject to the jurisdiction of the European Commission in anti-trust investigations. That raises an interesting question, so will the Minister confirm with whom that agreement has been met and when it was decided? As we know, following the €2.4 billion fine on Google, the EU is considering giving the Commission tougher competition powers to allow for earlier and faster intervention in anti-trust cases. After Brexit, the UK will have no say over these types of decisions, which could involve UK companies. How do this Government intend to deal with the implications for businesses and consumers of having no voice in deciding the direction of EU competition law? We need to hear some commitments here. The hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) did not want to be held to anything, but is it not about time the UK Government were held to at least some things that they are going to do in the future?

Although SNP Members are keen to support the approval of these draft decisions, the very nature of the Bill shows us how deep and wide our current protections are in the EU. In Scotland, we remain determined to give people hope for the future and ensure that the protections they currently take for granted will continue to benefit them, their families and our businesses. I believe that many people in all parts of this Chamber are as passionate about dignity, freedoms and protections as I am and as we in the SNP are. Whatever the future holds, it will be important for those voices to make themselves heard, and when they do, we will be ready to support them.

2.49 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): This is a time for everyone to congratulate you on your successful re-election, Mr Deputy Speaker, so let me do so again on behalf of the whole House.

Let us just reflect on what we are doing here. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) said, we will not be in the EU when Albania and Serbia are admitted as members, so we are using our role as members of the EU now to set out something for their benefit for the future, and that is an important point to remember. We are acting responsibly in our current membership of the EU, not simply washing our hands of those two countries.

In an intervention on the Minister, I asked what the difference is between the work of the Agency for Fundamental Rights and that of the Council of Europe. That is a very relevant question. According to the description she gave, what the agency does is exactly the same as what the Council of Europe does. I could not get a cigarette paper between the two definitions. As many Members have said in interventions, many of us, as delegates to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, are actively involved in monitoring Albania and Serbia—for example, regarding participation in their elections—and will continue to do so for many years after the UK has left the European Union, because the Council of Europe is not an EU body. The UK will, I hope, continue as a member of the Council of Europe and its subsidiary body, if I can use that term, the European Court of Human Rights. It is important to recognise that it is the Council of Europe that owns the European Court of Human Rights and the convention.

As my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) said, we should not take lightly the situation in Serbia. I have spent many years in central and eastern Europe helping countries to develop along the paths of democracy and a market economy. Only a few years ago, Serbia appeared to us to be full of warlords, and full of all the angst of the Balkans at the time. It seems a miracle that Serbia has come so far. In my work at the Council of Europe, I spent a lot of time working with Serbian Members of Parliament. That was done on a cross-party basis—it was an extreme pleasure to work with a Serbian Socialist MP. Serbia has come so far in what it is trying to do, in what it has achieved and in where it is going.

The co-operation that we had encompassed all three areas that the Council of Europe looks after: democracy, human rights and the rule of law. It is important to stress those. There are two examples of Serbia's problems in the region: one is Kosovo, which some EU members still do not recognise as a separate state, and the other is Montenegro. I am pleased to say that the last Council of Europe meeting was addressed by the Prime Minister of Montenegro, which shows the enormous respect those countries have for the institutions and for the individual members of those institutions.

Albania is a slightly different case. It was, I think, the 35th member of the Council of Europe, and we still monitor Albanian elections very closely. In fact, I was invited to be a monitor of the recent Albanian elections but was unable to do so because of our own general election. There has been an enormous difficulty with corruption in Albania. I am the Prime Minister's trade

envoy to Nigeria, which has a reputation for corruption, but I can tell hon. Members that Albania runs it a very close second in that respect. When I mentioned to an hon. Friend that I was going to say that in this debate, he warned me, "You'd better watch out. There will be gangs of Albanians wandering about, wanting to throw you into the boot of a car and do away with you." Well, I have taken the risk and said it.

The Minister set out the responsibilities of the agency: to collect, analyse and disseminate objective, reliable and comparable information relating to the situation of fundamental rights in the EU. I see no difference between that and what the Council of Europe does. In Serbia, the Council of Europe is strengthening the capacity of law enforcement and the judiciary specifically in the fight against corruption. An additional project aims to harmonise court practices and to raise the capacity of judges, to ensure consistent application of the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights. Those seem to me to be identical to the activities the agency undertakes on behalf of the EU, so I believe there ought to be considerable co-operation between the Council of Europe and the agency. It shows how far Serbia has come that it also plays an active role regionally in promoting minority protection, in particular for the Roma community, and inclusive education.

The Council of Europe's overall strategic objective in Albania is to promote the reform agenda across various sectors. Protection of human rights, anti-discrimination, the fight against corruption and organised crime, and reform of the judiciary, as well as freedom of the media and free and fair elections in line with general European standards, are all part of the effort to increase good governance and democratic participation. I know that Albania has a long way to go—it is behind the other countries of the Council of Europe and the EU in taking that agenda forward—but we are working on that.

It would be churlish of me to deny the rights of Serbia and Albania to be members of the agency on the basis set out in the Bill and in the agreements, but I do think that the European Scrutiny Committee could have looked more carefully at what the Council of Europe is doing and pointed out the overlap between that and what the agency will do. We have talked about how long accession takes. I suggest that the reason it takes such a long time is that there is little in the way of co-operation and harmonisation of aims between individual organisations.

Having expressed my belief that Serbia and Albania should be admitted, I will answer the question put earlier about what we can do to put pressure on those countries, which have emerged from horrendous periods in their history. We have to welcome them into our institutions. It is not necessarily about harmonising legislation and making it EU-compliant, as the agency does. All of that can be taken care of. What we have to do—this is where the Council of Europe works very effectively—is work with them, include them as part of our bigger European family, and press them to act in the right way in their own territories. As those other members of the Council of Europe will affirm, that is an effective practice when it comes to dealing with this issue. I welcome those countries, and cannot think of a reason to keep them out, but I do ask for more co-operation across the board.

Let me turn very briefly to the Canadian competition issue, on which many Members have commented. Personally I can see no difficulty in exchanging information and having a better system for exchanging information—whether that is via the EU or with Canada directly as a result of the activities that take place. On that note, I will sit down.

3 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I add my congratulations to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, as you assume your rightful place in this House in chairing these proceedings. It is good to see you in your place. It is also a privilege to follow some of the speeches that have been made here today, especially that of the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash). When he speaks on these issues, I often think that his constituency has been badly and underwhelmingly named. It should be renamed the rock, because he acts like a rock—he is solid on these issues—when he speaks before this House. Once again, he has shown his breadth of knowledge and skill in this particular area. I wholeheartedly concur with his point that the European Scrutiny Committee should be reactivated—and reactivated very quickly—because, as we exit the EU, we will need to scrutinise these matters very closely and ensure that we consider the details that will come up during the exiting process. The Committee is one vehicle that could be used to that advantage, and I wish him well in his quest to have it re-established.

I also agree with the hon. Gentleman on the charter of fundamental rights. It is an absolute dog's dinner. I will not invite the Minister to comment on that, but he did make a valid point. Many of the shared values that we call rights today originated from this great kingdom under our own rights-based common law. We cast that aside too quickly and think that all those rights were given to us by the EU. We actually bestowed many of the fundamental principles of rights on our neighbouring states. Last year, a display in Westminster Hall celebrated many of the fundamental rights that originated here—from employment rights right the way through to anti-slavery activities. We should take more pride in the fact that this nation is the great bastion of rights and has encouraged rights around the world. I also agree that we are not leaving the European Court of Human Rights. That is an incredibly important point. The ECHR is not affected by Brexit. People forget that. Whenever they hear about Brexit, they all too often think that we are leaving Europe. We are not leaving Europe; we are leaving an economic club that has failed us. We are not leaving those issues of rights.

The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) made a number of points about some “backroom deal” between my party and the Government of the day. I want to make it absolutely clear that, in my view and in the view of the people in my party and on this Bench, the rights of the unborn child trump any political agreement that has been put in place. I want to make that absolutely and abundantly clear. If anyone thinks that we would trade that issue of life and the sanctity of life on a political deal, they do not understand me and they do not understand my party; they need to be aware of that. For it to be characterised in that way is grossly unfair to members of my party.

Drew Hendry: The hon. Gentleman makes a point about something I said about the deal. I was making a point not about children born or otherwise but about lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender concerns in Northern Ireland. He should be willing to clarify that issue.

Ian Paisley: I am quite happy that the hon. Gentleman has clarified his comments, but given what has happened in the past week in this House—the passing of the Queen's Speech and the amendment that was not moved—I think reference has already been made to that. It should be absolutely clear that, in my view and in the view of my party, the unborn is—even in the words of Hillary Clinton—a “human being”. According to science, it feels pain, it knows emotions and it is faithfully and wonderfully made. My party will take a stand on that issue irrespective of the political agreements that are reached. I say that as a warning to others who may seek to raise the issue in the House in the weeks, months and, hopefully, years ahead.

Turning to the issue of competition, which is mentioned in this Bill, and the competitive rights, which have been identified, I welcome what has been put on page 6 of the Labour party manifesto, because it emphasises the importance of what we are discussing today. It says that the Labour party will make sure that we leave the European Union. I welcome that because, when we leave the European Union, we do not half leave it or partly leave it; we get out. It is essential that we get out of the customs union and the single market. We cannot address the competition matters identified in this Bill with Canada, for example, if we do not get out of the customs union. It is absolutely crucial that we leave the customs union. We cannot make free trade agreements with any other country unless we are free to do so, so the quest for freedom is incredibly important. That was driven home to me recently in a piece of correspondence that I received from a large steel processor here in the United Kingdom.

Bill Esterson: The hon. Gentleman is raising some really important points relating to the competition element of this Bill. He touched on an earlier intervention. Will he say a little bit about how he sees the relationship between the north and south of Ireland working?

Ian Paisley: Certainly. I will comment on it after I have made my point about the steel industry. I received a note from the managing director of John Reid and Sons. It is a massive company that has been in existence for 98 years. It said:

“to remain in the customs union would mean that we cannot do our own trade deals with the rest of the world. We have exported to over 140 countries throughout our 98 years in business; we have an idea of what we are talking about...The customs union is a terrible tragedy for Third World agriculture and fisheries, and prevents proper trade.”

That was written by someone who is at the coalface every day and knows what they are talking about. It is important that that point is reflected in this debate.

The hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) has asked me to comment on some of the points that were made about how this matter impacts on the Republic of Ireland. While you would show me great leniency, Mr Deputy Speaker, if I were to speak at length today

[*Ian Paisley*]

on the Republic of Ireland and on what a future trade deal would look like, I think that, even though you like me considerably, you would probably rule me out of order. I will try to touch on the point. I recommend to all Members of the House that they go to the Library and get a copy of the Policy Exchange document that was published earlier this month. It was written by Ray Bassett, a former ambassador from the Republic of Ireland to the United Nations. The title is: “After Brexit: will Ireland be next to Exit?” It is a very important policy paper that sets out compelling reasons why the Republic of Ireland must follow the United Kingdom out of the EU. If it fails to do that, its trade will be ruined. We have something in common with Canada on that point. For example, Canada has great fishing waters, and it protects those fishing waters for its fishing fleet and fishing companies. In the past 48 to 72 hours, the fishing rights of the United Kingdom have been discussed at some length in the media.

Of course, the Republic of Ireland’s fishing waters are currently underfished, because the Republic of Ireland is able to encourage the rest of the EU to fish in our waters. Once we claim back our fishing waters, Mr Deputy Speaker, do you know what will happen? The rest of the EU will want to fish in Ireland’s fishing waters, putting great pressure on the Republic of Ireland and stealing its catch. It is for such reasons that it is essential that we understand the commercial reasons why it is important for Ireland to exit the EU. I think that I have probably pushed you just enough, Mr Deputy Speaker, with my comments on the Republic of Ireland. I wish that the shadow Front-Bench spokesman would encourage me again, perhaps by asking me another question on the issue, as I would certainly push the matter even further—then we might not get the red flag.

We must make it absolutely clear, as I said earlier, that agreements such as that which we are discussing today impact tangentially on the pattern of how we should do commerce in the future. The Canadian agreements and aspects are very important, because if that is how Canada will be treated by the EU after we leave, we need to take cognisance of what is in the Bill regarding the relationship that we will have with Canada.

In response to the points made by the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), let me say that when the UK leaves and Albania and Serbia join—well, I almost feel like saying, “Good luck with that. It will be some club to be a part of,” but I think that would be unfair—those will, ultimately, be matters for what is left of the EU. By the time the accession rights are achieved, the EU will be a very different club from what it is now. When the UK leaves and, as I have predicted, Ireland leaves, although Serbia and Albania wish to join, the EU countries might at that point consider what is in their greater interests. The charges for membership of the EU will be immense. For example, since 2014 the Republic of Ireland has had to pay more than £1 billion to be a member of the EU. It previously paid nothing. If that is what Ireland will have to fork out, what will countries such as Serbia and Albania have to fork out under the new arrangements?

I leave those points for the House to consider and hope that the Minister can reflect on them when she sums up.

3.12 pm

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley), who speaks, as ever, with eloquence and authority. I want to pick up on just one of the issues he raised at the beginning of his speech, but first, Mr Deputy Speaker, this is the first opportunity I have had to congratulate you on your election, and I do so. It is also the first opportunity I have had to say how delighted I am to be returned for Mid Dorset and North Poole—from Bere Regis to Bearwood, Wareham to Wimborne and all points in between—and I will do my utmost to repay the trust that my constituents have put in me.

I shall make a short contribution to the debate, not least because I see that colleagues also want to catch your eye, Mr Deputy Speaker. I stand here as someone who voted to leave the European Union and who has an optimistic vision of our country outside the European Union, but the irony is not lost on me that this afternoon we are debating two countries that want to accede to the European Union while we, the United Kingdom, are leaving. Be that as it may, it is an important debate and it is important that we get this right. As the Minister has said both at the Dispatch Box and in correspondence, it is important that while we are still a member of the European Union we fully engage, and that is what we are doing this afternoon.

The rather helpful explanatory note mentioned the European Scrutiny Committee, as did the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) and other hon. Members, and it is clear that the works of that Committee permeate the Bill. Although that is not the purpose of the Bill, I am delighted to be given the opportunity to say what an important job the Committee does. I declare an interest, having served on it, and I want to reaffirm that it is essential that it gets up and running as quickly as possible. The former Chairman of the Committee—and, I hope, the next Chairman—my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), emphasised that documents were piling up even as we speak. I re-emphasise the urgency and importance of getting that Committee up and running, and I am disappointed that there is no reference to it on the Order Paper in relation to the debate later this afternoon.

Let me pick up on one point. On the first occasion, the European Scrutiny Committee did not clear this legislation from scrutiny, but required further clarification. I am delighted that the Minister provided that clarification, which enabled the Committee to clear the document and enable this process to happen. We must of course emphasise that we are leaving the European Union but, for as long as we remain members, we will play a full and sensible part in it. That is what we are doing this afternoon, and I am delighted to have played a small part in the debate.

3.15 pm

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak from the Back Benches once again, Mr Deputy Speaker—I had almost forgotten about the whole standing-up-and-sitting-down thing.

I welcome the Bill and offer it my full support, but in so doing I want to speak specifically about the provisions relating to Canada and broaden things out—remaining

within the realms of the debate—to cover our future relationship with Canada more generally. I do so as our former trade envoy to Canada, a role that I very much enjoyed until I was made a Minister, and which we probably need to fill again in the near future. I can think of one or two possible candidates—tall, dark, handsome former Ministers from the north of England, perhaps—*[Interruption.]* Where are they, indeed?

It is very nice to have a Bill before the House today that mentions Canada, as it is 150 years since the British North America Act, which established the Confederation of Canada, was enacted. Just this past weekend, celebrations took place throughout Canada. It is nice, 150 years later, to recognise Canada's birthday and, thinking about competition and business, to recognise the 200-year anniversary of the Bank of Montreal—the bank with the longest presence in the United Kingdom—which also falls this year.

The competition provisions in the Bill are sensible and operate, like the EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement, as a basis for a future relationship with Canada once we have left the European Union. I want to use this debate to explain why I feel this relationship is so important and is worthy of more attention from Her Majesty's Government over the coming years.

Of course, we have an important shared heritage with Canada which has been strengthened through conflict and war. A reminder came recently when the Bletchley Park commemorative badge was presented by our representative in Ottawa to 96-year-old Sonja Morawetz Sinclair, who escaped the approaching Nazi armies in Czechoslovakia and worked in the examination unit, supporting the important signals intelligence work that was done there. It is nice that our Government have recognised that contribution.

Of course, we have a shared legal system, a shared language, shared business practices, a shared Head of State and, indeed, a shared system of government. This is a relationship that, post-Brexit, can flourish on the basis of those commonalities. It also makes economic sense for us to develop this relationship much more closely. UK exports to Canada in 2015 were £7.3 billion, whereas imports from Canada were £7.4 billion. We have a relatively well-balanced trading relationship as a consequence of our important commonalities and agreements, not only as regards competition, as in this Bill, but as regards the recently agreed EU-Canada trade treaty. It is a good basis for a treaty between this country and Canada once we leave, but because of the nature of European decision making, I think we can do better following our exit from the EU.

We are well placed to succeed and do well from that relationship post-Brexit, not least because of the friendly business environment that I have mentioned and our shared heritage, but also because of our strong presence in the market, particularly as a result of investment from the Government through UK Trade & Investment, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and now the Department for International Trade. I saw that for myself, and saw how valued it was in my time as a trade envoy. We had an excellent team, led by High Commissioner Howard Drake, who was well regarded, and by the consul general and director-general for UK trade and investment, Kevin McGurgan, who was based in Toronto. I saw how well regarded he was and how well connected,

both at a political and business level, Her Majesty's Government were as a result of those relationships. Only two weeks ago, I was in discussions with our consul general in Vancouver, Nicole Davison, who leads a team in the west doing a great job.

I want to put a bit of meat on the bones and outline what more we need to do to get the maximum advantage from that relationship post-Brexit. I have discussed the need to recognise first—I believe the Government have done so—the importance of that relationship. We have friends at court in the Brexit process. The newly elected Leader of the Opposition in Canada, Andrew Scheer, wrote a comment piece in favour of Brexit in the run-up to the election. The Canadian Government have said that they want to be as helpful as possible to us in this process, and indeed the probable next premier of Alberta, Jason Kenney, a former federal Cabinet Minister, was an advocate for Brexit before the referendum.

That relationship is important to us, not least because Canada is campaigning for a place on the UN Security Council. I call on the Government not just to recognise the importance of the relationship at a federal level but to recognise that Canada is a country of several different economies, and that that provincial relationship with those Governments, three of whom are represented in the United Kingdom—British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec—is vital.

Broadly, my pitch on the Bill is to recognise that what we have achieved through the EU and bilateral arrangements with Canada is a close relationship. However, we need to do more to put more meat on the bones and strengthen that relationship. The Government recognise that, and there is work under way. I call on Ministers to ensure that they are fully cognisant of this important relationship, and put the required effort and attention into supporting that through visits and, as I have said, making sure that our network in the market is as strong as possible so that we get a good deal to replace CETA in the future. As I say, that requires recognition of the specifics of the provincial position in Canada, both politically and economically. I have nothing else to say, other than to end where I began and wish Canada happy birthday on its 150 years, which I am sure that the House will agree with.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I call Vicky Ford.

Vicky Ford *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Just a sec. It is worth reminding Members to get into the habit of standing up to catch my eye, so I know who wants to speak, especially as the list of Members wishing to speak is changing quicker than I have ever seen a list change before.

3.23 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Thank you for calling me, Mr Deputy Speaker. As someone who believes in open, competitive and free markets because they foster innovation, generate prosperity and create the wealth that we need for our public services, I believe we must have robust competition powers so that we can take action against companies that act in an anti-competitive manner. In the 21st-century world, the economic actors are frequently global players, especially in areas such as digital markets. It is important that we can work with other countries on competition issues.

[Vicky Ford]

A couple of years ago, I was in Silicon Valley with politicians from Germany, the Netherlands, Poland and the Czech Republic. Many players in Silicon Valley told us their concerns about how Google was acting. I went with that group of politicians to meet the head of search at Google, and I have never seen a company with so many lawyers in one room. They knew the power that countries could have when acting together. It was therefore interesting to see the European Commissioner for Competition taking action, a couple of weeks ago, on a proposed fine for Google. That case has caused some controversy, and it may create precedents for how platforms can act in future.

It is important in such cases that those who are taking the action make it clear that there is a level playing field, and that they are not singling out, for example, an American company when they would not do the same to a British or European one. One benefit of a co-operation deal, such as the one that we are discussing today, is that by working together we can help to reinforce the level playing field and the idea that we would not single out our own companies for a different type of enforcement. It removes what we call the jurisdiction bias risk. It also brings bigger resources to take on big cases, and post-Brexit the UK will want to make it clear to the world that we are prepared to take on competition cases for big players. The ability to continue to co-operate with other countries is therefore important.

Canada is a dear friend to the UK, as my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) pointed out, but the Canada free trade agreement is not the perfect model for the future UK-EU relationship. That agreement removes many, many tariffs from different trades. We voted it through in the European Parliament on 15 February, the day after Valentine's day, and I remember celebrating, as we would have tariff-free chocolate—a great benefit. However, it does not create the deep level of market access that the Government seek in our future relationship with Europe. If we chose that model off the shelf, it would create many new non-tariff barriers in areas such as digital and financial services. It would not provide the regulatory co-operation model that we seek. For example, British car manufacturers would not even be consulted in a stakeholder consultation about changes to international rules on car transactions.

We therefore need a deeper model, and we need to make sure that co-operation on competition has a dispute resolution mechanism for companies as well as countries. I was particularly pleased to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) suggest that the European Free Trade Association courts might prove to be a good or interesting basis for dispute resolution. He was sending a powerful message, given all his experience, that that might be a pragmatic solution.

Finally, picking up the suggestion from my hon. Friend that we need to move on from being brothers and sisters to become close cousins, in developing that relationship there will be things about which we will need to have serious discussions and arguments. I would suggest that this is not one of them. Allowing other countries to come together on issues such as human

rights and competition co-operation is something that we should allow to pass and not block. We should save our discussions and arguments for when they are really needed.

3.28 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Mr Deputy Speaker, may I join the long queue of those paying tribute to you on your re-election and on the outstanding role you play in this House?

As my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) said right at the start, the Opposition support the European Union (Approvals) Bill. More generally, the UK is leaving the European Union, and, in that process, the Opposition will fight to put jobs and the economy first. We will also not accept the watering-down of rights and standards, and I say to the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) that we are right to be concerned about that. To give one example from my past, I took the case of the Eastbourne dustmen all the way to the European Court of Justice 15 years ago. For 10 years, rights on the transfer of undertakings were denied to workers being privatised in Britain. Had it not been for those European mechanisms, we would never have seen those rights enforced in this country. We will be leaving the European Union, but I stress again that we will not accept anything that waters down rights and standards.

Sir William Cash: I think the hon. Gentleman is aware that, under the proposed repeal Bill, there would be a transposition of European law into UK law under Westminster jurisdiction. That would include the very rights to which he refers, and I think that is understood on the Opposition Front Bench, is it not?

Jack Dromey: The rights under TUPE and the acquired rights directive are now guaranteed in British law. What is crucial—this is not a debate for today—is what happens after leaving the European Union in terms of the continuation of guaranteed certainty for workers and their rights, as well as the enforcement mechanisms that exist in the event of a dispute.

The Opposition strongly believe in the importance of a collaborative relationship with the European Union. We will no longer be members, but it is essential that we are partners. The hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) referred to the notion of cousins, but, given the way some in the Government are conducting these debates, I sometimes think we are more akin to an estranged couple in a difficult divorce. However, at the next stage, partnership will be essential, and that is one of the principles enshrined in the Bill—a more general partnership that benefits Britain, particularly on key issues such as cross-border security or, as in this case, cross-border trade.

As we leave the European Union, it is essential that we put in place new and sensible arrangements. The Opposition support the Bill because it is right and also—I agree with the right hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) on this, although I think I have just promoted the hon. Lady—because it would, to use my words, although they amount to the same as hers, be wrong to nit-pick on a measure of this kind. This measure makes good sense, so it should be supported.

On the substantive issues—the participation of Albania and Serbia in the work of the Fundamental Rights Agency—we have heard powerful contributions, including from the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), as to the origins of the FRA and why it is so important. That is not least because it was born out of trauma and war in continental Europe and because of the role it has played over many years in advising on fundamental rights, discrimination, access to justice, racism, xenophobia, and victims' and children's rights. It is absolutely right that we should have such an agency promoting those principles, rights and values throughout Europe, and that is all the more important now.

It is deeply welcome that we will have Serbia and Albania locked into that process at the next stages. In the not-too-distant past, Serbia was wracked by war, and Albania was under a totalitarian regime for many years. Both are now candidates for European Union membership, and that will be for the European Union to decide. Both will contribute to and participate in the FRA. The proposal has been cleared by the European Scrutiny Committee and the Lords European Union Committee, so we strongly support it.

Let me move on briefly to the EU-Canada competition agreement. The hon. Member for Chelmsford was right that if we have global free trade, it is important that we also have effective mechanisms to combat anti-competitive behaviour. That has to be in the best interests of consumers and companies. Crucially, however, it needs to be effectively enforced. The hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) was right when he referred to the historic relationship we have with Canada. Looking to the future, we need, in his words, to have the economic good sense to develop that relationship.

As far as the substantive proposal is concerned, we already have arrangements in place. It is being proposed to extend the powers to allow both sides to exchange evidence and information in the course of investigations. To make the obvious point, the absence of such a power can be an impediment to effective enforcement. We therefore believe that what is proposed is right, and similar arrangements are in place, as the Minister said, with countries outwith the European Union, such as Switzerland. On that substantive issue as well, we support what is contained in the Bill.

I have two questions over and above those posed by my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central. First, what will be the transitional arrangements? Crucially, as we stand now, UK companies operating in the European Union are still subject to the same anti-trust and merger rules. In future, the European Union will share information about UK companies with Canada but will not share the information it receives from Canada about the UK with the UK. That poses a very big question about what happens post Brexit in terms of transitional arrangements and how this then works in future.

Secondly, will the Minister clarify what will be the ongoing relationship with the Fundamental Rights Agency? For all the reasons that I have spelled out, it is critical that we are part of a pan-European mechanism that is about human rights and combating racism and xenophobia—never more important in the current climate than it has been in the past.

3.36 pm

Margot James: With the leave of the House, Mr Speaker, I am grateful to have the opportunity to respond to the debate.

The Bill will approve four draft European Council decisions. The first concerns the participation of the Republic of Albania and the Republic of Serbia as observers in the work of the Fundamental Rights Agency. The Republic of Albania and the Republic of Serbia both want to become members of the European Union. This measure does not extend the competency of the Fundamental Rights Agency. Albania and Serbia should be supported to increase their human rights awareness and promote fundamental rights within their countries, and I was pleased by the support that the House gave to that position.

I will deal with a few questions raised by hon. Members on this decision. My hon. Friends the Members for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) and for Stone (Sir William Cash), to whom I express my appreciation for his work in chairing the European Scrutiny Committee, asked about the impact on Serbia's war crimes record. The decision will allow Serbia to have access to the expertise of the agency and allow data on human rights in Serbia to be gathered and shared, providing steps to improve Serbia's human rights protections. The UK continues to urge Serbia to meet its obligations to co-operate fully with the International Criminal Tribunal.

The hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) asked whether the UK could remain part of the Fundamental Rights Agency post Brexit. The Government are looking at the UK's relationship with all EU bodies, including the FRA, as part of the exit negotiations. My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) pointed out that the FRA is completely distinct from the European convention on human rights, and our membership of that convention continues post Brexit.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) spoke with considerable authority on the work of the Council of Europe, of which he is a member, and the overlap between that body and the FRA. I share his hope and belief that the valuable work of the Council of Europe will continue long after Brexit.

On the co-operation agreement between the EU and Canada on competition enforcement, the UK has a large number of companies that are well placed to compete internationally in a system of genuine free and open competition. The agreement will help to ensure free and open competition by facilitating enforcement against international cartels. There are a number of questions in this area. The hon. Members for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) and for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) asked about UK companies continuing to be subject to EU anti-trust jurisdiction. The EU has jurisdiction over competition effects within the EU single market. That will continue after we leave the EU, and UK companies will have to comply with EU competition law when they operate within the EU single market, just as US, Japanese and Canadian companies do. The key point about the Council of Europe concerns the setting of standards and the overseeing of these matters. We welcome greater co-operation on international competition enforcement.

[Margot James]

The hon. Member for Sefton Central asked whether, after EU exit, we will have to continue to share with the EU information received from Canada. The UK Government will be free to enter into their own arrangements to share information with Canada directly, and the UK and Canada will need to negotiate any such agreement. He also asked about international agreements after the UK leaves the EU, and whether this agreement provides a model. The UK will be free to enter into international agreements on competition, and we believe that this agreement is a good model.

We have had a good debate on co-operation on international competition enforcement, which will ensure that British businesses continue to compete on a level playing field. I think I have answered most of the points that hon. Members raised during the debate, and I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

EUROPEAN UNION (APPROVALS) BILL (PROGRAMME)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the European Union (Approvals) Bill:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Committee of the whole House.

Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

(2) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

(3) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

Programming committee

(4) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings in Committee of the whole House, to any proceedings on Consideration or to other proceedings up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(5) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—(*Nigel Adams.*)

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (SELECT COMMITTEES)

Ordered,

That, at this day's sitting, the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motions in the name of Andrea Leadsom relating to Standing Orders etc. (Committee on Exiting the European Union) and Women and Equalities Committee and the Motion in the name of the Prime Minister relating to Select Committees (Allocation of Chairs) not later than two hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order; such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; proceedings may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(*Michael Ellis.*)

Select Committees

Mr Speaker: We now come to the three motions on Select Committees, which will be debated together. It may be helpful to the House to know before the debate that, if the motion on allocation of Chairs is agreed to, the ballot for the election of Select Committee Chairs, including the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, will be held on Wednesday 12 July from 10 am to 4 pm in Committee Room 8.

I hope that that will meet with colleagues' approval, because it seems to me to be important that we get on with the business of electing Chairs of Select Committees and, preferably, as soon as possible thereafter with the election, by the parties, of members of those Committees. It is very much in Parliament's interest and in the interest, ultimately, of good government, that these mechanisms are established without further delay.

Nominations will open as soon as the motion is agreed and may be submitted in the Table Office and the procedural hub in Portcullis House. Nominations will close at 3pm on Friday 7 July. A briefing note with more details about the elections will be made available to Members and published on the intranet.

Just before I call the Deputy Leader of the House—he is itching to favour the House with his eloquence, as colleagues will note—I must add one other point. Specifically, I must tell the House that I have, perfectly properly, had a request from the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) for clarification of the application of Standing Order No. 122A to his position as the Chair of the Public Administration Committee in the 2010 to 2015 Parliament, and of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee since 2015.

Having taken comprehensive advice from the Clerks and reflected on the matter myself, I have decided that the eight-year term limit does apply to the hon. Gentleman, on the basis that the Committee that he chaired between 2015 and 2017 was, in effect, the same Committee as in 2010 to 2015, albeit with an extended remit. That means that, in common with several other former Chairs, if he is re-elected next week, his term of office will expire, eight years after his election in 2010, on 10 June 2018. He and others are, of course, free to put their names forward in the ballot, and if they are elected, they can seek to have the existing terms of the Standing Order amended, or indeed repealed; that is a matter within the purview of the Select Committee on Procedure.

My responsibility is not to speculate on what the Standing Order might be in the future, but to offer a proper interpretation of what it now means. That is what I was asked to do, and that is what I have done. I hope that that is clear to colleagues.

3.45 pm

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Michael Ellis): I beg to move,

Motion 4—*Women and Equalities Committee*—

That Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended by the insertion of the following line at the appropriate point in the table in paragraph (2):

Women and Equalities	Government Equalities Office	11
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Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss:

Motion 5—*Standing Orders Etc. (Committee on Exiting the European Union)*—

That for the remainder of this Parliament, the following changes be made to Standing Orders:

A: Committee on Exiting the European Union

(1) There shall be a select committee, to be called the Committee on Exiting the European Union, to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Department for Exiting the European Union and related matters falling within the responsibilities of associated public bodies.

(2) The committee shall consist of no more than twenty-one Members; and the provisions of Standing Order No. 121(2) shall apply to motions for the nomination and discharge of Members to and from the committee as if it were a committee not established under a temporary Standing Order.

(3) Unless the House otherwise orders, each Member nominated to the committee shall continue to be a member of it for the remainder of the Parliament.

(4) The committee shall have the power to appoint a sub-committee.

(5) The committee and any sub-committee appointed by it shall have the assistance of the Counsel to the Speaker.

(6) The committee and any sub-committee appointed by it shall have power to appoint legal advisers and specialist advisers either to supply information which is not readily available or to elucidate matters of complexity within the committee's order of reference.

(7) The committee and any sub-committee appointed by it shall have power to send for persons, papers and records, to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, to adjourn from place to place and to report from time to time the evidence taken before them.

(8) The quorum of the committee shall be six and the quorum of any sub-committee appointed by it shall be three.

(9) The committee shall have power to report from time to time, and any sub-committee appointed by it shall have power to report to the committee from time to time.

B: Election of Select Committee Chairs

(10) That Standing Order No. 122B (Election of select committee chairs) be amended in paragraph (1), by inserting, in the appropriate place, "the Committee on Exiting the European Union".

C: European Committees

(11) That Standing Order No. 119 (European Committees) be amended as follows:

(a) in paragraph (4) by inserting after "departments)" the words ", or the Committee on Exiting the European Union"; and

(b) in the Table in paragraph (7), in respect of European Committee B, by inserting, in the appropriate place, "Exiting the European Union".

D: European Scrutiny Committee

(12) That paragraph (12) of Standing Order No. 143 (European Scrutiny Committee) be amended by inserting, in the appropriate place, "the Committee on Exiting the European Union".

E: Public Bodies: Draft Orders

(13) That Standing Order No. 152K (Public bodies: draft orders) be amended as follows:

(a) after sub-paragraph (b) to paragraph (1) to insert

"(c) in respect of a draft order laid by a Minister in the Department for Exiting the European Union, the Committee on Exiting the European Union"; and

(b) in paragraph (2) by inserting after "departments)" the words ", or the Committee on Exiting the European Union".

F: Positions for which additional salaries are payable for the purposes of section 4A(2) of the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009

[Mr Speaker]

(14) That the Order of the House of 19 March 2013 (Positions for which additional salaries are payable for the purposes of section 4A(2) of the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009) be amended, in paragraph (1)(a), by inserting, in the appropriate place, “the Committee on Exiting the European Union”.

Motion 6—Select Committees: Allocation of Chairs—

That, pursuant to Standing Order No 122B (Election of Committee Chairs), the chairs of those select committees subject to the Standing Order be allocated as indicated in the following Table:

Select Committees appointed under Standing Order No. 152	
Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy	Labour
Communities and Local Government	Labour
Culture, Media and Sport	Conservative
Defence	Conservative
Education	Conservative
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	Conservative
Foreign Affairs	Conservative
Health	Conservative
Home Affairs	Labour
International Development	Labour
International Trade	Scottish National Party
Justice	Conservative
Northern Ireland Affairs	Conservative
Science and Technology	Liberal Democrat
Scottish Affairs	Scottish National Party
Transport	Labour
Treasury	Conservative
Welsh Affairs	Conservative
Women and Equalities	Conservative
Work and Pensions	Labour
Other Specified Select Committees	
Environmental Audit	Labour
Exiting the European Union	Labour
Petitions	Labour
Procedure	Conservative
Public Accounts	Labour
Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs	Conservative
Standards	Labour

Michael Ellis: I rise to speak to the motions on the Order Paper standing in the names of the Leader of the House and the Prime Minister, as well as of the leaders of the three largest Opposition parties. Motion 4 will make the Women and Equalities Committee a permanent Select Committee of this honourable House. Motion 5 serves to establish the Exiting the European Union Committee in this Parliament in exactly the same way as in the last Parliament, and motion 6 allocates the Chairs of Select Committees as agreed between the parties and within the proportions set out by you, Mr Speaker, to reflect the party balance in this honourable House.

Mr Speaker: Does Cat Smith wish to speak?

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): No, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. I call Maria Miller.

3.46 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I want to make a short speech in support of the motion moved by my hon. Friend the Deputy Leader of the House. I welcome the fact that the Government have decided to make permanent the Women and Equalities Committee. The Committee made a recommendation to that effect before the general election, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington) had undertaken to put it on a permanent footing, which I really welcome.

The Women and Equalities Committee has proven its worth. The scope of the work undertaken has covered everything from looking at transgender rights for the first time, and having them debated on the Floor of the House of Commons, all the way through to looking at the impact of Brexit on equalities issues. I am also glad that the Committee has retained its name, as set out in the motion, because the issues that it looks at, which are the responsibility of Ministers, are women’s issues and equalities issues.

Before I draw my comments to a close, I want to raise two points, about which other former Select Committee Chairs may equally well have questions. First, I very much want to know from my hon. Friend the Deputy Leader of the House whether the financial support for Select Committees will be sufficient for the scrutiny that will be required of Government policy at such an important time in our Parliament’s history. We need to make sure that Select Committees, including the Women and Equalities Committee, have the financial and manpower resources that they require.

Secondly, I want the proceedings of Select Committees to be treated with respect. There is a need for Committees to be able to sit, perhaps in protected time, while the House is sitting, so that they are not unnecessarily curtailed or interrupted, particularly when they are gathering evidence. There is also a need for Select Committees, such as the Women and Equalities Committee, to have a role in taking the work of this Parliament around the world, and they should be able to do so with the help and support of the Government and Opposition Whips.

I will close by reiterating my thanks to the Government, who have done more than any other to support the establishment of a scrutiny Committee for women and equalities, for which I think they should be applauded.

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab)
rose—

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP)
rose—

Mr Speaker: I call Harriet Harman. [Interruption.] Oh, I beg the hon. Gentleman’s pardon. Let us hear first from Mr Wishart.

3.49 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I am grateful, Mr Speaker. I do not want to detain the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) for long. I have just a couple of

remarks about the motions. I very much support motions 4 and 5 about the Women and Equalities Committee and the Exiting the European Union Committee. They are welcome additions to the list of Select Committees we have in the House.

I also want to support your remarks, Mr Speaker. We should get down to the business of making sure that the election of Chairs and members of Committees is done as speedily as possible. It is important that we get these scrutiny Committees up and running as soon as possible so that the Government Departments are properly scrutinised on the work they undertake. I note that the ordinary membership set-up of Select Committees will be five Conservative Members, five Labour Members and one Scottish National party Member. That is something we very much support, which reflects the fact that this is a House of minorities. That is reflected in the work of Select Committees.

There will probably be a little bit more of a detailed conversation—I am putting it as elegantly as I can—about the legislative Committees in the House. My understanding is that Committees will have nine Conservative Members, seven Labour Members and two Scottish National party Members as the ordinary membership, which again reflects the fact that no party has a majority in this House. That should be reflected in the House's Committees. I know that that is perhaps a little bit of a concern for the Government in getting things through, but I hope that any proposal is brought to the Floor of the House so that it is properly debated and not stitched up behind closed doors. It is important that, when we debate the Committees of the House, it is done on the Floor of the House, and that all Members of Parliament have an opportunity to contribute.

I also note your ruling, Mr Speaker, on the tenure of the Chairs of Select Committees. You were absolutely right. There was a conversation in the Liaison Committee, where a concern was raised about the eight-year or two Parliaments rule, which impacts on two or three Select Committee Chairs. My understanding was that that was passed to the Procedure Committee to do a quick, detailed and brief report to try to resolve some of those issues. I hope that that Committee comes forward with that at an early opportunity so that this is resolved once and for all.

I very much support the motions. We should get the Select Committees up and running as quickly as possible to get down to the ordinary, good business of scrutinising this Government and Government Departments.

3.51 pm

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): I thank the Deputy Leader of the House for bringing this motion to the House. I strongly support it. In particular, I welcome putting the Women and Equalities Committee on a permanent footing. I was Leader of the House back in the day, and I should have done it. I find myself slightly baffled but congratulate him on bringing it forward. All credit to the Government for doing that.

The Women and Equalities Committee was first established in 2015. With women from both sides of the House—and indeed three men—on the Committee, it has covered a wide area of work, from Brexit negotiations to women being forced to wear high heels. It has more than showed that it justifies being put on a permanent

footing alongside the other Select Committees, not least because of the strong and committed leadership given to it by the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) in the two short years she has been chairing it.

I am sure nobody will be saying, as some will be saying outside, “It’s all not necessary. We are all equal now.” While I wish that were the case, it is certainly not true. We have made rapid and immense progress, but there is still much further to go. Despite having a woman Prime Minister, most decisions are made by men, whether commercial decisions, or decisions in the private sector or the public sector. We have only to look at the Brexit negotiating team. God help us! There are eight of them—seven men and one woman. I ask myself, “Why on earth couldn’t they have selected that team on merit?”

Select Committees are Members working together across the House, not because we are all the same—we have profound differences in the different parties—but in recognition of the fact that it makes sense to work together when we agree, and no sense not to. Both sides of the House have expressed a commitment on childcare. I know a number of Select Committees will be concerned about that, but let us see how it is working out in practice. That is an issue for women because of the remaining, persistent unequal division of labour in the home.

There is, rightly, a shared commitment across the House to tackle domestic violence. The daily toll of black eyes, punctured lungs and broken ribs, and the weekly toll of murdered women, shames our society. We need to be certain that things are not set back; that cuts to the police, courts, councils and the Crown Prosecution Service do not make women less safe.

I think there is a shared commitment across the House on women’s income inequality. In 2005, women’s income on average per year was 55% of men’s. By 2010, it had risen to 70%. I suspect, however, that it has now stalled. I would like a gender impact assessment to be brought forward to the House at the same time as the Red Book and the Chancellor’s Budget statement.

I know we have a shared commitment across the House to tackle rape and sexual offences, but we all know that most sexual offences are not reported. We know the fear that she will be blamed prevents many women going to court, letting alone giving evidence. I hope that across the parties we can change the law to make it clear that past sexual history is not relevant to whether one has consented in a particular case. Past sexual history should never be dragged through the courts. I hope we reverse the Ched Evans ruling.

There are more women in this House than ever before—208—and I am especially proud of the 119 Labour women MPs. I warmly welcome all of them, the newly elected and the re-elected. In the House as a whole, however, we are still outnumbered two to one. We also last less long than our male colleagues, not because we are not as tough, durable or excellent as the men—clearly, we are—but because we are more likely to represent marginal seats. The turnover of women is therefore higher than that for men, so women are outnumbered not only numerically but in seniority.

I think the Women and Equalities Committee will show women in this House working together to highlight persisting inequalities and to insist that we make more progress. I am therefore very pleased to support the motion.

3.57 pm

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I had not intended to speak to the motion, but I heard the speech from the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and while I agree with some of what she had to say I want to pick her up on one or two points.

Before I do that, I want to start by agreeing with the comments made by other Members, in particular the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). I hope we can approach the new arrangement of a balanced Parliament in a sensible and less partisan way, particularly when it comes to the Standing Committees and the work of Select Committees. That will, of course, be the responsibility of the Members who sit on the Committees. I hope that is how we will progress. It is important to get the Committees established, the Chairs in place and the members elected. From my time serving on the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, the Health Committee and the Regulatory Reform Committee, I know how valuable the work can be. I am not making a pitch to be Chairman of any of those Committees, by the way. I just want to make that clear, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is important that they are established and fulfil their scrutiny role.

I also agree with a great deal of what the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham said with regard to the Women and Equalities Committee. I am very proud that the Committee has been established under a Conservative Government. I am very proud not only that it is the Conservative Government who have a female Prime Minister—the second one, of course; women in the Labour party do not do quite so well at getting elected leader—but that we have put the Women and Equalities Committee on a permanent footing.

All I would say is that when we talk about equalities, it is not just about gender. Many of us who come from non-traditional, poorer backgrounds think that the House is not always representative of those of us who come from more challenged backgrounds. Replacing a man with a middle-class or upper middle-class woman does not, perhaps, do a great deal for equality. We should always be cautious—[*Interruption.*] The right hon. and learned Lady does not like the point I am making, but it is important that when we talk about equality it is not just about gender; it is about people's backgrounds, including where they come from and even their work history. I suspect that if I had stood up and made the disparaging comments that she made about the Brexit negotiating team—at least they seemed to come across as slightly disparaging—but I had made them about a team consisting of seven women and one man, she would be on her feet having a pop.

Ms Harman *rose*—

Andrew Percy: Of course I will give way.

Ms Harman: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that there is of course a major issue of class inequality in this country. That is why I would like the Government to implement clause 1 of the Equality Act 2010, which requires all Government Departments and public organisations to take into account the importance of narrowing the gap between the top and the bottom in

all their public policy and operational decisions. If the Government care about class and income inequality, they should implement that clause.

Andrew Percy: I could not agree more. That was why, when I was a schoolteacher, before being elected to Parliament, it irked me so much that under the Government of which the right hon. and learned Lady was then a member, the gap between the top 10% best-performing and the 10% worst-performing schools widened, and social mobility decreased. I am simply saying that I do not think it helps the case for equalities to stand up and make what I thought were belittling and insulting comments about a particular negotiating team on the basis of its gender.

I agree more generally with what the right hon. and learned Lady said about the work of the Women and Equalities Committee under the chairmanship of my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), but I hope that when it is established—as, of course, it has been in the past—its members will also understand that this is a huge subject, and that huge inequalities have existed for many decades both within and without the genders. As I have said, the Committee is doing an important piece of work, but it will be better if those who pursue the agenda of closing the gap do not make inflammatory or divisive comments on the route to that end.

4.1 pm

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): Because I agree with Mr Speaker's drive to modernise the House, and to rebalance it and the power that it has against the Executive, I do not wish to detain us any further in approving the motion to establish, or re-establish, the Select Committees that have such an important part to play in that objective.

4.2 pm

Mr Gavin Shaker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): I commend the Government for tabling motion 4. It is right for them to implement the commitment that they made during the last Parliament to put the Women and Equalities Committee on a statutory basis in our Standing Orders, and it is right for them to do so on this occasion.

I was a member of the Women and Equalities Committee in the last Parliament, under the brilliant chairmanship of the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), and I think that it was a real constitutional innovation. The Committee was significant not just because it produced reports, but through its presence in our constitutional life as well. That point was made to us many times by visitors from other countries, who, rightly or wrongly, look to this place for leadership on many of these issues.

Let me say one thing about Mr Speaker. He is not present, so I feel able to praise him without his blushing too much. I believe that his modernising drive created the conditions in which a constitutional innovation such as the Women and Equalities Committee could come about, under the auspices of the last Government. His work on diversity and inclusion has been particularly

commendable, and meant that, just last week, we could discuss how the Committee might be put on a statutory basis.

Let me say a last word, as one who has served on the Committee for the last couple of years. Many people have asked why a straight white man would volunteer or choose to be a member. The answer is very simple. For as long as women's equality is an issue for women—a women's issue—it is an issue that is about our society. When we seek to hold back 50% of people in our communities, we are holding back not 50% but 100% of our population. The work done by the last Women and Equalities Committee, particularly on bringing women further into politics and into our public life, identified significant issues involving cultures of bullying and intimidation. It also identified the support that was needed, even at lower levels such as local government. Four party leaders or representatives appeared before us, and all four were men. That underlines the fact that there is much further to go.

There was area in which, in all honesty, I think we struggled. We thought a great deal about flexible working patterns, and ways in which we could make the workplace more available to people from different backgrounds. We struggled to square the circle of how to do that in areas where it is less easy to do flexible working, such as for those with low pay. I suspect that will be a focus for the Committee going forward.

All that said, I commend the motion; the Committee is an excellent innovation and we should be rightly proud in this Parliament that we are bringing it forward.

4.5 pm

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): I rise to support the motions, and also to say a few words about timetabling. It is good that the House is moving to elect the Chairs of Select Committees next week, but that does not give the House much time to elect members of those Committees before the summer recess, and there should be concern if that means members are elected in September and many Committees will not sit and start their work formally until October. There would therefore be a gap of five months in the working of Committees. In the normal course of a fixed-term Parliament Committees can prepare their workload and work towards the end of the Session, knowing reports have to be finished by then. Because of the nature of the last general election, however, many Committees, including the one I chaired in the last Parliament, have had to abruptly stop their work. If they are looking to pick up some of it, there will be a considerable gap and a change of membership.

There are also a number of other functions that Committees undertake, in scrutinising not just the decisions of Government Ministers and this House but outside bodies. I therefore ask whether consideration can be given to establishing some continuity to allow Committees to finish off work they are doing before new Committees are assembled, rather than for them to be completely disbanded between elections before new Committees can be created. A lot of valuable work that Committees can do is lost in this way, and in the current situation we may have an absence of five months without any Committees sitting.

4.6 pm

Michael Ellis: I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) that it is important that financial support is sufficient for proper scrutiny, and I can assure her and the House that Her Majesty's Government will always respect the work of the Committees of this House. It is, I think, incontrovertible that they have got stronger since 2010, and that can only be a good thing.

I thank the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) for her thanks and her comments about the Women and Equalities Committee being made permanent, and reciprocate by commending her on her work over the years.

Question put and agreed to.

STANDING ORDERS ETC. (COMMITTEE ON EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION)

Ordered,

That for the remainder of this Parliament, the following changes be made to Standing Orders:

A: Committee on Exiting the European Union

(1) There shall be a select committee, to be called the Committee on Exiting the European Union, to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Department for Exiting the European Union and related matters falling within the responsibilities of associated public bodies.

(2) The committee shall consist of no more than twenty-one Members; and the provisions of Standing Order No. 121(2) shall apply to motions for the nomination and discharge of Members to and from the committee as if it were a committee not established under a temporary Standing Order.

(3) Unless the House otherwise orders, each Member nominated to the committee shall continue to be a member of it for the remainder of the Parliament.

(4) The committee shall have the power to appoint a sub-committee.

(5) The committee and any sub-committee appointed by it shall have the assistance of the Counsel to the Speaker.

(6) The committee and any sub-committee appointed by it shall have power to appoint legal advisers and specialist advisers either to supply information which is not readily available or to elucidate matters of complexity within the committee's order of reference.

(7) The committee and any sub-committee appointed by it shall have power to send for persons, papers and records, to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, to adjourn from place to place and to report from time to time the evidence taken before them.

(8) The quorum of the committee shall be six and the quorum of any sub-committee appointed by it shall be three.

(9) The committee shall have power to report from time to time, and any sub-committee appointed by it shall have power to report to the committee from time to time.

B: Election of Select Committee Chairs

(10) That Standing Order No. 122B (Election of select committee chairs) be amended in paragraph (1), by inserting, in the appropriate place, "the Committee on Exiting the European Union".

C: European Committees

(11) That Standing Order No. 119 (European Committees) be amended as follows:

(a) in paragraph (4) by inserting after "departments)" the words ", or the Committee

on Exiting the European Union"; and

(b) in the Table in paragraph (7), in respect of European Committee B, by inserting,

in the appropriate place, “Exiting the European Union”.

D: European Scrutiny Committee

(12) That paragraph (12) of Standing Order No. 143 (European Scrutiny Committee) be amended by inserting, in the appropriate place, “the Committee on Exiting the European Union”.

E: Public Bodies: Draft Orders

(13) That Standing Order No. 152K (Public bodies: draft orders) be amended as follows:

(a) after sub-paragraph (b) to paragraph (1) to insert

“(c) in respect of a draft order laid by a Minister in the Department for Exiting the

European Union, the Committee on Exiting the European Union”; and

(b) in paragraph (2) by inserting after “departments)” the words “, or the

Committee on Exiting the European Union”.

F: Positions for which additional salaries are payable for the purposes of section 4A(2) of the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009

(14) That the Order of the House of 19 March 2013 (Positions for which additional salaries are payable for the purposes of section 4A(2) of the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009) be amended, in paragraph (1)(a), by inserting, in the appropriate place, “the Committee on Exiting the European Union”.—
(*Michael Ellis.*)

SELECT COMMITTEES: ALLOCATION OF CHAIRS

Ordered,

That, pursuant to Standing Order No 122B (Election of Committee Chairs), the chairs of those select committees subject to the Standing Order be allocated as indicated in the following Table:

Select Committees appointed under Standing Order No. 152

Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy	Labour
Communities and Local Government	Labour
Culture, Media and Sport	Conservative
Defence	Conservative
Education	Conservative
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	Conservative
Foreign Affairs	Conservative
Health	Conservative
Home Affairs	Labour
International Development	Labour
International Trade	Scottish National Party
Justice	Conservative
Northern Ireland Affairs	Conservative
Science and Technology	Liberal Democrat
Scottish Affairs	Scottish National Party
Transport	Labour
Treasury	Conservative
Welsh Affairs	Conservative
Women and Equalities	Conservative
Work and Pensions	Labour
Other Specified Select Committees	
Environmental Audit	Labour
Exiting the European Union	Labour
Petitions	Labour
Procedure	Conservative
Public Accounts	Labour
Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs	Conservative
Standards	Labour

—(*Michael Ellis.*)

Chris Gibb Report: Improvements to Southern Railway

4.8 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Chris Gibb Report: Improvements to Southern Railway.

When I became Transport Secretary last summer, the Southern rail network was already bedevilled by a deep-rooted dispute causing massive disruption to the lives of thousands of people and damaging the economy across the region, but it was not the only problem that Southern rail faced. Those problems included too many infrastructure failures and a lack of joined-up government between track and train, as well as the problems that most of our commuter rail networks face after attracting ever more passengers each year, and far more than in the days of British Rail—a massive capacity challenge. That was the background to my decision to ask one of the railways' most experienced leaders, Chris Gibb, to produce detailed advice for my Department on what we should do to get things back to normal for passengers: what was behind the poor performance on the route, and how could we solve it?

I asked Chris for his advice, because he has more than 30 years' experience in the rail industry. It is not just me who acknowledges his experience; when the RMT was demanding the publication of this report, it described him as an experienced figure in the industry, and that was absolutely right. I should like to thank Chris for his contribution. His recommendations have been assessed, and 34 of his 38 suggestions are already in train and being worked on by my Department, by the rail industry and by Govia Thameslink Railway—GTR—which operates Southern. His findings make it clear that industrial action was the main cause of disruption for Southern passengers last year, when things were at their worst.

Southern passengers know full well how much their train service has improved since that industrial action largely ceased in January. Performance has been consistently better since the new year. The public performance measure is up by more than 20 percentage points from its low of 62% last December. That is much better, but it is not the best. There is still a long way to go, but the situation is clearly much better than it was.

Things are getting better for passengers, and the railways have been working much better. That is why it is tragic that the unions' leaderships now want to carry on a battle that is meaningless and unnecessary. The performance of this railway will carry on improving only if the industrial action by those unions stops, but they seem unwilling to come to the party. ASLEF, the drivers' union, started its overtime ban again last week, with the result that Southern passengers had 25% of their trains cancelled each day. And just when passengers thought that the services had stabilised, the RMT has called yet more strike action this month. Those passengers are at the mercy of the unions. I have asked the unions numerous times to walk in their passengers' shoes and to call off the disruption of people's daily lives that results from this ongoing action.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): My right hon. Friend is well aware of the terrible inconvenience suffered by my constituents in Mid Sussex and by many

others along the line because of this and earlier strikes. Is he aware of the unions, working together, being encouraged by the Labour party? Or does he see this as a straight inter-union rivalry?

Chris Grayling: Let me stress again that I know how difficult this has been for my right hon. Friend's constituents and for others. Their lives have been disrupted and turned upside down in a whole variety of ways. It is certainly the case that, in the early stages, the unions looked as though they were working together on this, but I do not think that relations between the two rail unions are now quite as warm as they once were. I am clear now that I think there is a direct link between the actions of the Labour party leadership, in trying to cause disruption for the Government this summer, and the decision to reprise industrial action. It is absolutely unacceptable that senior figures in the Labour party are being reported as encouraging trade unions to take action this summer. The public are the ones who will suffer.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): In support of the point that the Secretary of State is making, is he aware that Sean Hoyle, the president of the RMT union, has described his objective as being to bring down the Government? Will the Secretary of State join me in saying that that is an absolutely appalling motive for ruining the lives of our constituents?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is a shocking state of affairs. The reality is that there are some thoroughly good people working on our railways—people who do not agree with the current action and who just want to do the right job for their passengers. However, their leadership is now leading them up a path that they do not want to go up, and that is not in the interests of the staff or the passengers.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Following on from that point, did my right hon. Friend hear the statement on Russia Today television from Mr Hedley, an activist in the RMT? He said:

"It's very clear in our rule book, we're in an antagonistic relationship with the managers and with the bosses. We want to overthrow capitalism and create a socialist form of society."

How does that help our passengers?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The trouble is that this is all about politics rather than about the interests of the railways or of passengers getting on with their daily lives. It is a tragedy.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Will the Minister acknowledge that page 93 of the Gibb report shows a graph that demonstrates that Southern was the worst-performing company a very long time before there was any trade union industrial action? Will he also explain why he has not got round the table with the unions and GTR? This is an absolute nightmare for our constituents, but the Government cannot pretend that it has nothing to do with them, given that Gibb also says that the Secretary of State is

"already determining the strategic direction of this dispute".

That is what Gibb says.

Chris Grayling: I am slightly surprised that the hon. Lady has not declared an interest, given that she has received donations from the RMT union.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I understand that the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) is sponsored by the RMT, so can you advise the House on whether she should declare an interest when speaking on this matter?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): It is up to each individual Member to note whether they have an interest or not. To be quite honest, I have no knowledge of whether any Member is sponsored by a trade union under the present legislation.

Chris Grayling: Since last year, we have worked to sort out some of the underlying problems with the management of this railway line, joining up the operations of the track and trains, spending more money on infrastructure, and helping to contribute to a better performing railway. Performance has been rising steadily since the start of the year. Chris Gibb rightly identified a range of problems—I have said to the House that we are working to try to solve those problems—but he was absolutely clear that the principal cause of the disruption experienced by the constituents of the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) and others was industrial action by the unions. He said that passengers would have experienced a relatively normal service had that action not taken place.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Secretary of State continues to argue that the principal reason for the delays is industrial action. Does that not mean that the £300 million pledged by the Government in January is a waste of money and that they should be sorting out the industrial dispute?

Chris Grayling: No, it does not. We have provided additional money for the infrastructure owned and operated by the public sector Network Rail—an additional £20 million last year and then a further £300 million that is being spent right now to stop regular signal failures, for example—but it is disappointing that all the unions and others can do is misrepresent the situation and claim that we are giving that money to the train operator. They know that that is not true. It is simply not the case. One part of solving the problem on this railway and ensuring that it is the good performing railway that it has not necessarily been in the past, even when the industrial action was happening, is to spend money on the infrastructure, so that we do not get points and signals failures—the things that frustrate people and cause problems day by day.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Part of the problem is that there are not enough drivers on the network, so the train operator is unable to operate its trains when drivers do not take voluntary overtime. Drivers not volunteering to take overtime is not the problem; the problem is that the operator has not trained up or employed enough drivers. I declare an interest in that I received donations from RMT, TSSA and ASLEF during the general election, because I know that we can get a better deal for our railways by working with the unions.

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman is actually quite right. At the start of this year, we launched an enormous recruitment programme and some 350 trainees are coming through the system at the moment. He will know that the system for training drivers is too tied up in red tape, union agreements and past working practices, so we cannot train drivers as quickly as I would like or bring in extra staff. It is a nonsense that we should depend on overtime to run any part of our rail system on normal working days. Our strategy is to end that situation, but it will be a blow to some of those who depend on overtime as part of their regular income. It is certainly not the case that Southern drivers are keen to see their overtime disappear in the run-up to the summer holidays.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I suppose I should thank Southern for taking me to and from the hospital at East Grinstead for an operation this morning. I have come back for this debate, and I want to ask the Secretary of State about the future and the investment that he is making. The situation in the Reigate and Redhill area needs serious investment in changes to the track layout at Croydon, and Reigate needs a 12-car platform so that it can have proper services into London. Will the Secretary of State provide the resources for Network Rail simply to produce a potential design of a proper station at Reigate? My constituents are hit by fares and by overcrowding on a service that has all the faults identified in the Gibb report by the various parties.

Chris Grayling: I assure my hon. Friend that I am currently working on what we need to do to ensure that the Brighton mainline, which has not had investment over the years, is capable of meeting the challenges of the future. We are spending far more money on our rail network today than has been spent for decades. The Brighton mainline has been neglected, which is one reason why performance has been so poor, and that is something that we have to change and will.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): It is interesting that the Secretary of State criticises the fact that there are not enough drivers and explains how more drivers are being recruited. Chris Gibb said in his report:

“I understand that at least one losing bidder...had too many drivers in their bid...but it may have been the case that the bidder with the fewest drivers won.”

It is complete nonsense for the Secretary of State to indicate that he did not realise the company won the contract with fewer drivers. Surely he must recognise that.

Chris Grayling: Actually, I was not Secretary of State at the time. The hon. Gentleman says that I should have known, but what I am trying to do is to sort out the problems we have now. I have made it absolutely clear that we do not have enough drivers on this railway—there is no dispute about that—which is why we have launched a big recruitment drive. I wish those drivers were coming on stream now but, as those with union links know, it takes 14 or 15 months to train a driver. I do not think that is sensible, and it should not take that long. That is something we have to address for the future, but we are bringing new drivers on stream as rapidly as we can, within the confines of union agreements.

On Chris's recommendations, we are doing a variety of things to deal with the problems on this railway, but we should not forget the core issue. Chris Gibb's main finding—and, yes, there are things for the Department, the train company, Network Rail and others to learn from the report—is that the principal cause of the disruption last year, which caused misery to so many people, was the action of the trade unions. Let us make no mistake, it is the union executives who call strike action and call disputes, and they are the ones who can call it off.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): It is worth reiterating that the one thing Chris Gibb was excluded from investigating in his report was industrial relations. He was not allowed to go into it, but he did say that in recent times it had been the single greatest cause of short-term inconvenience. In the section titled "How did the system get to this point?" he clearly says:

"However I do not believe any single party have been the cause."

On behalf of passengers, I beg that we get beyond the finger-pointing, the "he said, she said" of this debate. Let us all act with a degree of humility. Every single party bears a responsibility for where we are today, from the unions to the franchises and the Government. Can the Secretary of State please accept his own responsibility, act with humility and say what he—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. You all want to speak, and I am not getting at anybody in particular, but all I will say is that if we have short interventions, everybody will get to speak. We have a very long list to get through.

Chris Grayling: The point is simple. We are talking about where we are now. Two weeks ago we had a railway that was performing much better and a service that most users said was much better than it was last year. We had a joined-up management structure for track and trains operating out of a centre at Three Bridges. We had a programme of ongoing spending to try to remove the perennial breakdowns, signal failures and points failures that cause frustration. All that was moving in the right direction, and then, lo and behold, unnecessary strike action is threatened and work to rule is taking place against things that the unions have already been doing for the past six months, that have been working well and that have been delivering improvements. That is where we are now. We had something that was getting better, after a lot of work by a lot of people. It is a tragedy that we now seem to be taking a step backwards. It is not necessary.

If the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) wants this railway line to get better, he should please say to his friends in the union movement, "You do not need to do this. It is not necessary, it is the wrong thing to do and it must stop."

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that, whatever the union's concerns, whether it is rejecting the 24% pay rise or other issues, the only way to resolve its concerns is to get back round the table? Overtime bans and strike action will not resolve the situation; it just makes life worse for passengers.

Chris Grayling: I absolutely agree. On the pay deal, what I find particularly baffling is that ASLEF is now balloting for industrial action on a 24% pay rise, including

productivity changes, that it has accepted on the Thameslink and Great Northern routes. If it is not a political intervention, why would it accept the deal in one part of the company and threaten strike action in the other? Most of us now look at the situation—with the railway line getting better, with things on the mend and with a deal that most people would say is generous and that the union has accepted in the other part of the company—and ask why on earth it is now returning to industrial action.

Stephen Lloyd: Why can the Secretary of State not publicly say to both unions and the trade operator, "Let's meet together, with no preconditions, to negotiate this"? That is what happened with ScotRail, so why does the Secretary of State always want to meet the unions separately? Do it together and do it now!

Chris Grayling: We had very constructive talks earlier this year, and I want to pay tribute to the leadership of ASLEF for the way they conducted themselves back in the January and February negotiations. It is a disappointment to me now that they appear to have returned to militancy, when I thought a constructive dialogue was taking place. Those talks happened, and they were facilitated by the general secretary of the TUC and by a senior rail executive. An agreement was reached but, sadly, it did not pass the referendum. A further offer is on the table for staff. That offer of change combined with a substantial pay upgrade and productivity improvements has been acceptable to the union on Thameslink and Great Northern. It is a huge disappointment that that cannot deal with this issue once and for all.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The Secretary of State will be aware that this morning several of us from across the House met representatives from the RMT. I have to say that at the end of that meeting we were perplexed as to why still no deal had been done, given the very small number of trains that have been leaving without that second person on board and the very narrow difference between GTR and the unions on how one breaches that. There seemed to be some union enmity prolonging this strike. Can we not just get all of them round the table, bang some heads together and at last get our constituents a train service that stops disrupting their lives?

Chris Grayling: There is no reason why talks cannot start again tomorrow. I say to the unions that they should call off the industrial action and come back round the table. They are trying to turn the clock back. Sensible arrangements have been in place for years that do not require a train to be cancelled if the previous member of staff has been delayed. Ultimately, this is about whether we are going to modernise our railways or not. We have a rail system that is bursting at the seams due to the successes it has enjoyed in the past few years. Our railways are packed, and we need to look for smart uses of technology and smart ways of working to deliver the capacity that we need for the future, and we need to invest in infrastructure to make sure it is reliable. Those are things we want to do and plan to do. The unions need to work with us, and the message from Chris Gibb's report is that the unions should stop fighting change and modernisation. Nobody is losing

[Chris Grayling]

their job and nobody is having their pay cut. I believe that we will need more customer service staff in the future rather than fewer on our railways. I am not in the business of removing staff from working with customers, but we need to have an industry that has the freedom to adapt, develop and equip itself to deal with the challenges of the future. This dispute is all about preventing that from happening; it is about retaining old-fashioned union power and the ability to halt the railways at the whim of union leaders. That is not acceptable. It has been a tragedy for the people on the Southern rail network that they have been on the raw end of this for the past 18 months. Just when we thought things were getting better and the services were getting back to normal, it has started all over again, and it is a tragedy. Opposition Members should say to their union friends, “Stop doing this. Call off your action,” and then we will talk to them again.

4.28 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): May I make it plain from the outset that I am a proud member of the Labour and trade union movement, and very happy to declare the support that I have received from all three trade unions in the rail industry? I am grateful for this opportunity to debate Southern rail and the Gibb report, but it should be noted that this debate should have taken place six months ago, when the report was finished and presented to the Secretary of State. Unfortunately, he decided to sit on the report for six months and wait until after the general election before publishing it, denying this place—and, most importantly, passengers—the opportunity to scrutinise this assessment of the Southern rail fiasco. The Secretary of State should not bury reports until after a general election, when passengers deserve the opportunity to see the findings immediately.

Just last week, the Association of British Commuters went to the High Court seeking a judicial review of the Government’s handling of Southern, motivated by the Transport Secretary’s refusal to assess the force majeure claims of Southern, which is requesting that it not be found in breach of its contract for its abysmal performance—the worst in the country. Those claims were made in April 2016, more than a year ago. The High Court has now ordered the Secretary of State to produce a report on Southern rail within 14 days. Long-suffering passengers should not have to resort to crowdfunding for legal action to seek accountability, and the Secretary of State should not have to be dragged, kicking and screaming, by the High Court to do the job he was appointed to do.

Chris Grayling: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that we won the case?

Andy McDonald: Perhaps the Secretary of State would like to confirm that he has been ordered by the High Court to produce the report within 14 days, and that he would not have done it otherwise. Who won that one?

Crucially, the section of the Gibb report that would have been the most informative—appendix 9, “Recommendations regarding the GTR franchise agreement”—has been redacted. Where is it? What is there to hide? The Secretary of State has prevented us

from seeing the part of the report that would give us more details of the botched franchise design, for which his Department is responsible; the nature of the agreement with GTR, which has been cloaked in secrecy; and the changes that Gibb has recommended. That is to say that the Secretary of State has redacted the parts of the report that would present the greatest political difficulties for his Government if they were released.

It is highlighted that industrial relations are not the only issue. The Gibb report clearly identifies failures to assess accurately the number of available drivers, to train and recruit enough drivers, to anticipate turnover with any accuracy, to plan for the impact of infrastructure enhancements, to account for changes in Network Rail and for timetable expansion, to get the right trains in the right places, and to cater for growth in demand on overcrowded stations.

I do not recall the Transport Secretary doing anything but oppose every single piece of industrial action. It is wrong of him to attack the men and women who operate our railways while washing his hands entirely of the collapse in industrial relations.

Chris Philp: The ASLEF drivers have just been offered a 26% pay increase, taking their pay from £51,000 to £63,000 for a four-day week. If that is not a generous offer, I would like to know what is.

Andy McDonald: Does not that just lay bare a complete failure to understand what this situation is about? It is not about money; it is about the proper running of our railways, so that we have a safe and accessible railway. If Members on the Benches opposite could get their heads around that, we might find ourselves working towards a resolution.

Chris Philp: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andy McDonald: No. The hon. Gentleman has had a go. He can sit down.

The buck stops with the Government. The Tory Ministers who designed and awarded the franchise are responsible for the shambolic delivery of enhancement works and have directed this unnecessary industrial dispute.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way on the point of safety?

Andy McDonald: I am happy to.

Huw Merriman: The hon. Gentleman may be aware that I took a Transport Committee group to view the video operation. It was entirely clear to us that a passenger getting on or off the train is visible. Ultimately though, it does not matter what I think or what he thinks; it is the independent rail safety regulator who has confirmed that the system is safe.

Andy McDonald: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has raised that point, which I will address shortly.

We know all too well the Secretary of State’s idiosyncratic approach to workers and unions, but even so, the handling of industrial relations in the case of Southern has been especially appalling, and relations are not helped by the antagonistic behaviour of GTR, the Department for

Transport, and Ministers. In February 2016, a senior civil servant at the DfT, Peter Wilkinson, director of passenger services, told a public meeting in Croydon:

“Over the next three years we’re going to be having punch ups and we will see industrial action and I want your support... I’m furious about it and it has got to change—we have got to break them. They have all borrowed money to buy cars and got credit cards. They can’t afford to spend too long on strike and I will push them into that place. They will have to decide if they want to give a good service or get the hell out of my industry.”

Does the right hon. Gentleman honestly believe that threatening to drown ordinary workers in credit card debt is the right way to go about implementing staffing change?

The Transport Secretary has repeatedly attempted to distance himself from industrial action, claiming that it was a matter for the company, despite the unusually close relationship between him, his officials and Govia Thameslink Railway. That has never been a credible claim and the Gibb report confirmed the suspicions that the Transport Secretary was deeply involved in the industrial dispute despite his claims otherwise. Gibb said that the Secretary of State is

“already determining the strategic direction of this dispute.”

In similar disputes on the TransPennine Express and Scotrail, agreements were reached that avoided further disruption and prevented industrial action.

Huw Merriman: On Scotrail, the technology is there, but even in exceptional circumstances, a driver cannot operate the train despite 30% of the network operating in that manner. What kind of deal is that? New technology is there but it cannot be used.

Andy McDonald: It demonstrates what can be achieved when we sit down and have an intelligent conversation with people.

Where there is a willingness to talk on all sides, it is clear that agreements can be reached that benefit passengers. To put it simply, the Secretary of State’s militant anti-worker, anti-trade union stance has significantly worsened industrial relations and had a devastating impact on passenger services. While I am at it, he must come up with evidence for his allegation that the leader of the Labour party conspired in the way that he said he did because it is a complete and utter fantasy. He knows it and he should not come to the Dispatch Box and just make things up that he knows are not right.

Chris Grayling: If the hon. Gentleman’s analysis of the industrial dispute is correct, can he explain why the Labour council and Mayor on Merseyside have taken exactly the same approach as the Government on this issue?

Andy McDonald: That is not accurate and I will tell the right hon. Gentleman why. If it were not for the stitch-up with Serco and Abellio taking £17 million out of the deal and £5 million that we could use to have a guard on every train, we would not have the problem. So, yet again, he just serves this up to his mates. He does his deals with these people, extracting the value from our railway system. *[Interruption.]* Absolutely not. It is important to point out that the Gibb report makes no assessment of the merits and de-merits of driver-only

operation. However, despite a lack of assessment, Chris Gibb makes it clear that he supports DOO and thinks that any industrial action is wrong.

I would like the Secretary of State to reflect on the following passage from appendix 1 of the Gibb report. It says:

“We have undertaken this project for CLGR Limited, a consultancy company owned and operated by my family and I, and CLGR Limited has been contracted to Govia Thameslink Railway, as facilitated by the DfT. Discussions have been held under the terms of a confidentiality agreement between CLGR Limited and GTR.”

There we have it—Chris Gibb is contracted to Govia, the very company he is supposed to be reporting on. It is more than just “he who pays the piper”. Surely even this Secretary of State can see this latest blatant conflict of interest. Where is the independence in this report? It is just another stitch-up.

What is it with the DfT? Its senior civil servant, who previously told the world he wanted unions out of his industry, has his own consultancy company—First Class Partnerships, I believe—to advise the parent company of Govia, the very company that was then handed the Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern concession on a £1.2 billion-a-year gold plate. This Government would refuse to recognise a conflict of interest if it got up and bit them on the gluteus maximus.

Labour, like the staff who understand and operate our rail network, the passenger groups who have been protesting and have been motivated to take legal action, and disability charities, simply do not agree with the assumption that destaffing and deskilling our railways is a positive step. Despite being first introduced more than 30 years ago, DOO is only in use on a third of the national rail network. It was originally introduced on three or four-car trains at a time of declining passenger numbers. Passenger numbers having increased hugely in recent years, it is now proposed to introduce DOO on trains with as many as 12 cars. In the past 15 years, passenger numbers on Southern have increased by 64%, from 116 million to 191 million a year. That enormous rise in numbers means that at the platform-train interface there are inevitably increased risks to passenger safety, as anyone who travels on Southern services can see.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): Can the hon. Gentleman explain why the same union has agreed to 12-car-train driver-controlled operation on Thameslink, with the same company, and on the same lines?

Andy McDonald: It is somewhat curious, is it not, that people are being criticised for adhering to a previously achieved agreement, whereas, looking at the situation as it is now, they quite rightly want to look at it properly.

Labour believes that passengers are more at risk if they no longer have the guarantee of a safety-critical member of staff on the train to prevent something from going wrong or assist when something does go wrong. The view of Her Majesty’s chief inspector of railways, Ian Prosser, has been laid out in the Office of Rail and Road’s report, “GTR-Southern Railways—Driver Only Operation”, published earlier this year. Mr Prosser is clear that there are obvious caveats to safe operation of DOO, namely legal levels of lighting—that would be a good start—suitable equipment, suitable procedures and the competence of the relevant staff. None has been adequately satisfied, even by his assessment.

Maria Caulfield: If union members are concerned about the points that the shadow Minister raises, why will they not get back around the table to discuss them and resolve the situation, calling off the overtime ban and any ballot for strike action?

Andy McDonald: To put it quite simply, because they could not get in the door, as has quite rightly been pointed out, when the Government were holding talks at the TUC that were an attempt to divide and conquer—a typical Tory trick to keep the critically important trade union out of the discussion in the first place. Had the Secretary of State had any real intent in that regard, he would have got everyone around the table and got on with resolving the dispute—[*Interruption.*] He says from a sedentary position that it was the TUC that oversaw things. It did its level best to try to bring this to a conclusion, but not because of the assistance of the DFT or this Secretary of State, because he deliberately excluded the relevant parties.

Sadly, the inference that the Government apparently seek to draw from the ORR report—that all is well and that there is, in effect, no cause for concern over safety—does nothing to assist the process of resolution. Indeed, the Rail Safety and Standards Board has been reluctant to describe DOO as definitively safe, saying:

“DOO does not create additional undesired events but may increase the likelihood of an event occurring or increase the severity of its consequence.”

By the way, Mr Deputy Speaker, you can no longer find that entry on the website—I wonder why.

At a time when there are increased risks of terrorist attacks and a spike in hate crimes, it seems foolish in the extreme to prioritise removing trained staff from services. The safe management of a train when difficulties arise is also key: a case in point was the derailment—

Chris Grayling *rose*—

Andy McDonald: Let me make this point; then the Secretary of State can have a pop.

A case in point was the derailment near Watford Junction on 16 September last year. After a train hit a landslip caused by torrential rain, the guard evacuated the train when the driver was injured in the incident, trapped in the cab and incapable of doing so. If such an accident were to occur on a DOO service, the safety of hundreds of passengers could be compromised. Why does it take a catastrophe to bring this Government to their senses in dealing with issues of safety, rather than wanting to compromise on safety at every turn?

Chris Grayling: Can the hon. Gentleman confirm that today on Southern rail there are more on-train staff than there were before the dispute started? Is he actually saying that it is Labour policy that if a member of staff is delayed, the previous arrangement, whereby the train could carry on running, should stop, that the train should be cancelled, and that passengers should be turfed out on to the platform?

Andy McDonald: I will tell the right hon. Gentleman what Labour party policy is: to ensure that there is a second safety-critical trained member of staff on that train. [*Interruption.*] It means that they have the appropriate training and are not outsourced or sold short on training, which is exactly what the Government want to do.

The changes proposed by the Secretary of State would be retrograde for disabled passengers, whose independence would be wound back. Without a guaranteed second member of staff on board, the ability of passengers with accessibility requirements to turn up and go is severely restricted, requiring passengers to make arrangements 24 hours in advance. Southern passengers have been left stranded on station platforms because, as there is no on-board supervisor on DOO services, there was no one to assist them so that they could get on the train.

Huw Merriman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way—he has been very patient. Does not the requirement for disabled people to book 24 hours in advance relate to a completely separate service? A conductor cannot leave the train and get someone over or off the platform. The hon. Gentleman is confusing the matter completely.

Andy McDonald: The hon. Gentleman rather makes my point for me. Why on earth are we discriminating against disabled people, who want the same freedom as able-bodied people to turn up at a railway station and carry on with their journey?

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andy McDonald: No, I am not giving way again. The hon. Gentleman should sit down.

Before the Secretary of State claims that this a conspiracy theory cooked up by ASLEF or the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers, a spokesperson for Govia Thameslink Railway said:

“there is no cast-iron guarantee that passengers with accessibility requirements can spontaneously board a train in the assumption there would be a second member of staff on board every train.”

Here is another quote from a representative from a train operating company seeking to introduce DOO, in a recent edition of *Modern Railways*, on the advantages of trains that could go into service with only the driver on board:

“The good thing would be that all of the regular passengers would still be carried, it would only be the wheelchair users who wouldn’t be able to travel”.

The Secretary of State will be well aware of numerous stories of disabled passengers who have been left stranded as a result of the staffing changes that he is forcing through. Sandra Nighy, 56, of Highfields, Tarring, was left stranded in the freezing cold for more than two hours waiting for a Southern service on Hampden Park train platform near Eastbourne, because there was nobody to help her on to the train. Sandra said:

“the whole situation was horrible and embarrassing and it is unforgiveable when I had booked assistance 48 hours in advance”.

Everyone should be able to use rail services, and providing assistance to those who need it should be a top priority to ensure a good quality of life. The Transport Secretary should be ashamed that he is making our railway less, not more, accessible for disabled people. I firmly believe that the Labour party, passenger groups, staff and the disability charities are in the right when we say that the Government’s objective should be to make our railways safer and more accessible, not riskier and more exclusive.

The Gibb report paints a picture of a chaotic relationship between Network Rail, the Department for Transport and Govia Thameslink Railway, none of which has sufficient oversight or responsibility, leading to poor performance on Southern. Gibb says:

“None of the parties in the system share the same incentives or objectives”.

He recommends

“that the custodian of the overall system integrity be better identified”.

While those criticisms are clearly true for Southern, they are an accurate summary of what is wrong with the way in which our railways are managed in general. Labour has consistently highlighted the fact that privatisation and fragmentation of the railway has prevented the necessary oversight and responsibility needed to deliver upgrades and run efficient services, which is why, as part of our plans to take rail into public ownership, we will establish a new national body to serve as a “guiding mind” for the publicly owned railway, to avoid the chaos over which this Government have presided.

There is no need for the Government to prolong the suffering of passengers any longer—this industrial dispute is but one part of an unedifying scene—as basic managerial inefficiency characterises this woeful service.

It is within the Secretary of State’s power to end the industrial dispute tomorrow. He can do it by calling off his plans to expand driver-only operation and by guaranteeing a second safety-critical crew member on every train, and he should do so immediately.

As with the east coast main line, which delivered the lowest fare rises and highest passenger satisfaction of any rail service in the country, and which returned over £1 billion to the Treasury, it is time to admit defeat and to take Southern back under public control as a public service.

The privatised, franchised railway system, which allows all comers, including state-owned rail companies from across the globe—with the bizarre exception of the UK itself—to extract profits from passengers and taxpayers alike has had its day. The Government should wake up and recognise the chaos they have created. They should do the right thing and bring our railways back under public control and ownership. If they don’t, a Labour Government will.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Can I just say to all Members, apart from the Front Benchers to come, that I am working on six minutes? I am going to introduce a time limit of six minutes.

4.50 pm

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Let me start with something that I am sure hon. Members on both sides of the House will agree on: the service Southern has provided for passengers over the last more than two years has been completely unacceptable. There is no disagreement about that. Our constituents are at the end of their tethers, and the service last year, in particular, was wholly unacceptable—to the point that it was causing economic loss and real suffering on the part of our constituents.

The question, therefore, is not whether the service has been poor, but why that is the case and who is responsible. There has been no shortage of criticism on the Government Benches of Southern and Network Rail for their part in the story. Two and a half years ago, at the beginning of 2015, I and other Conservative Members initiated debates in Westminster Hall, asked questions and held a succession of meetings with Ministers about Southern’s performance after it took over the new and expanded franchise.

There were clearly serious problems. There were not enough drivers, and the infrastructure was inadequate because of the London Bridge improvements. It is an irony that the £6 billion London Bridge improvements, which will result in a better service for passengers, have caused a temporary shortage of capacity for the new franchise, which has exacerbated the problems.

In response to the criticism we made on behalf of our constituents, the then Secretary of State and the then rail Minister convened a meeting of the industry. A performance improvement plan was introduced, whereby the industry agreed that it was necessary, step by step, month by month, to improve performance in the new franchise, recognising that it was a matter for not just the operator but Network Rail, which provided the track, and which is, of course, already in public ownership—a point that those on the Labour Front Bench might do well to consider.

As a consequence of that performance improvement plan, performance steadily improved again towards the end of 2015, but it then began catastrophically to deteriorate at the beginning of 2016, and specifically from April onwards. There was no coincidence about that. The reason it deteriorated was the industrial action that began at that time. That was not just the official industrial action on the part of the RMT, but the unofficial action, which the union has denied. There were suddenly very high rates of sickness, and there was a general unwillingness on the part of the workforce to co-operate with the management. It was undoubtedly the case that the operator was already having to improve its performance and already faced difficulties—there is no disagreement about that—but its performance declined catastrophically as a result of that industrial action. That action was then joined by the drivers, whose work to rule was official, rather than unofficial. The consequence was that the service last year was simply appalling.

What was that all about? It was about the alleged lack of safety as a consequence of the introduction of a system that has been operating on a third of the railways for 30 years. The hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) implied some kind of culpability—some kind of casual response to safety—on the part of the Government, but the Labour Government were in office for 13 years when driver-only operation trains were running. These trains run on the London underground; there happens to be a Labour Mayor responsible for that now. Indeed, the Docklands light railway has no drivers at all.

Currently, according to the figures that the unions gave us in a meeting this morning, over 97% of the trains that Southern is operating still have a safety-trained second member of staff on board. There have been no pay cuts, there have been no job losses, 97% of the trains are still running with a second person on board, and fewer than 3% of those trains are not, and yet the

[Nick Herbert]

hon. Gentleman implied that there had been de-staffing. Far from de-staffing, there has been an offer of a 24% pay increase to ASLEF drivers. There is no doubt about the unions' responsibility for what happened last year.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): We heard nothing from the Opposition Front Bench about the patients, teachers, pupils and clinical staff whose lives have been wrecked as they have been forced from rail to road, which is far more dangerous. We need to get the railways working properly so that they are all safe and all can rely on them.

Nick Herbert: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend.

For those who have faced such constraints on their pay over the past few years, it will stick in their throats to see an offer given to the train drivers such that their salaries for a four-day, 35-hour week will rise to over £60,000 a year. That is a perfectly generous offer. Frankly, this has nothing to do with safety at all. The Opposition have been unable to produce any evidence that the service that is now running is unsafe, partly because it runs extensively across the national network and has done for 30 years, and partly because, as I said, there is still a second member of staff on board anyway—it is just that they are not operating the doors.

Sir Nicholas Soames: My right hon. Friend and I have been working on this for a very long time as next-door neighbours. If all that is correct, as it is, can he tell us, with all that we have examined and learned about it, what he thinks this strike is about?

Nick Herbert: My right hon. Friend's question would be best addressed to the unions themselves. I think it is about control of the railways—that is what they seek. It is certainly nothing to do with safety or the interests of passengers.

It is telling that since the industrial action fell away and the driver-only operation trains were successfully introduced on the line, the service has started to improve again. That gives the lie to the suggestion that this is only about Southern. It is not only about Southern—it has principally, although not exclusively, been about the industrial action that the unions have unreasonably taken on this railway.

There is no doubt that there is an inadequacy of investment historically on lines that have been carrying more and more people over recent years. In the 12 years that I have been a Member of Parliament, the number of passengers on Southern's main routes has doubled. I welcome the £6 billion London Bridge investment and the £300 million package that the Government introduced, quite rightly, in response to the Gibb report. However, looking forward, there will need to be substantial further investment in lines that are carrying more and more people on a daily basis, because the infrastructure is not equal to the task of carrying the numbers of people that will only increase with the development that is now anticipated in the south-east. Let us be clear where the blame principally lies for the disruption over the past year—it principally lies with the unions.

4.59 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I am sure that quite a few hon. Members are wondering what the Scottish National party Transport spokesman can bring to a Southern rail debate. I am hopeful that I can provide a more rounded opinion on the Gibb report, which is what this debate is meant to be about. The Transport Secretary stood up for nearly 20 minutes and union-bashed; he did not give us much about what was in the report, and I think he made a poor start. I say gently to the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) that his suggestion that staff are falsely taking sick days does not bode well for future worker relations. It is indicative of where the Government seem to be with the unions.

In this Chamber, we continually have debates about ideology. The Tory ethos is that the free market will always outperform the public sector, but the fiasco of GTR and Southern rail's performance over the past few years—not just the past year—suggests otherwise. Calls have been made repeatedly for the franchise to be terminated, but the Government have always refused to act. Instead, they initially helped to reset benchmarks to ensure that GTR was not in breach of contractual performance measures.

Looking back, the report by the Transport Committee complained about a lack of transparency in performance data against contractual obligations. That in itself does not help those who want to understand the contractual position and find solutions. The Gibb report was a welcome interlude, although we have to question why the Government sat on it for six months. They have brought this general debate before us, not in a constructive manner but in a politically motivated, union-bashing fashion, and that will not help things.

I touched earlier on the fact that the Gibb report identified £300 million that had to be spent within the next year to ensure that the 2018 timetable could be achieved. That is quite an eye-watering sum, and it is a massive commitment. The Government committed that £300 million in January, but we are now a quarter of the way into the two-year process, and it would be good if the Secretary of State had told us how the work was advancing. I hope that the Minister will give us an update on that later on.

It took the Government 10 months to complete the programme of work and spend the £20 million that they pledged last November. I will just throw out there the fact that it took them 10 months to get through the initial £20 million programme, but they now expect to deliver a £300 million programme in two years. I presume that some of the £300 million programme will follow on from work identified in the initial raft.

The Secretary of State admitted that the Gibb report confirmed that franchise arrangements have been completely inadequate in their understanding of how infrastructure upgrades would impact on services. That is a failing of the Department for Transport, and the Government have to get to grips with it. The Gibb report also suggested that an immediate revision was required to the overnight timetable to allow for maintenance on the Brighton main line. Again, I throw that out there. What is happening about that, and about the production line maintenance that was supposed to be brought in as a consequence of the report?

Maria Caulfield: I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman has actually read the report. The appendix sets out both the short-term and long-term infrastructure projects, all the way to 2020. If he wants answers to those questions, I suggest that he reads the report.

Alan Brown: I am asking for answers from the Government, and I expect Ministers or the Secretary of State to give them to me. The Government announced a £300 million package to be delivered over two years. I am asking what is going to happen and whether the programme is on track, because we are a quarter of the way through the time period already.

The Gibb report also called for a review of little-used stations that have, it claims, too many services, which seems incredible against a backdrop of nearly 59,000 fully or partially cancelled trains in 2016. That is an issue that the Department for Transport could have identified earlier, and it should be resolved.

In terms of industrial relations—a subject that has formed the cornerstone of the debate so far—I am pleased to see that Gibb did say that negotiations must be entered into. Again, I repeat calls from other Opposition Members to the Secretary of State to show leadership and try to lead those negotiations. I disagree with Gibb's negative comments about collective bargaining, and I do not think that that should have been within the remit of the report. His suggestion that discussions about driver-only operation could have a roll-back effect on other services that are already driver-only operation is a conclusion too far for me.

We have to be clear about the fact that safety is a key issue. The Gibb report confirms that narrow platforms at Gatwick cause overcrowding, and that the lack of station shelters elsewhere is an issue for passengers accessing trains. It is therefore fair for me, looking at this from the outside, to say that DDO can be seen as a problem for staff, because at the end of the day the staff have to deal with the consequences if an incident arises due to overcrowding or when people alight from trains. I would also say to the Secretary of State that this is a serious dereliction of duty, given that the Government are picking up a £38 million tab for lost revenues, as well as setting aside £15 million in compensation for passengers. Think what that £15 million could have done in infrastructure upgrades if there had been proper forward planning.

In Scotland, there has been far wider national scrutiny of the Abellio ScotRail Alliance, which operates Scotland's trains. It came into being in April 2015, and I must say that it came in as a living wage employer right away, which is to be applauded. However, we must also acknowledge that its early performance was below contractual levels. The Scottish Government took the lead by intervening, and a performance improvement plan was agreed. Since then, 181 of the 249 actions have been completed, and a further 180 action points have now been agreed. The plan has been reviewed by the Office of Rail and Road, which found it to be robust and deliverable, but challenging. Punctuality on ScotRail is now at 90%, and it has been ahead of the UK average for four years.

Looking ahead, the Scottish Government are now exploring a public sector bid for ScotRail when there is a franchise break. On public sector bids, the UK Government have demonstrated, with the east coast

main line, that public sector services are not only viable, but profitable for the taxman. The refusal of the Government to acknowledge this in the rush to reprivatise the east coast main line is frankly shocking. The franchise has raised £1 billion, and 2015 was rated as the best year in its history. It shows that public sector franchises can lead the way over private sector ones. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) is just delaying me further. To be fair, he made an intervention earlier that was frankly a speech, so I presume he will cut out some of his own speech. Additionally, the UK now has a franchise system that allows state-run bids from foreign countries, yet the Government still refuse to allow public sector bids. There is absolutely no logic to such a conclusion.

Finally, as was mentioned earlier, there has been some industrial action involving ScotRail in Scotland. The Scottish Government were willing to meet the unions, and they ultimately agreed a deal that the unions and the Abellio ScotRail Alliance have signed off. *[Laughter.]* That is actually what should be happening, so instead of laughing about it, the Transport Secretary should show leadership and face up to being willing to speak to the unions and getting around the table with them.

To conclude, I hope that the Gibb report will show how these matters can be progressed with GTR. In truth, the Scottish Government have shown what can be done by showing a different attitude north of the border, and I suggest that the Transport Secretary should think about that as well.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I remind hon. Members that a six-minute limit applies to Back-Bench speeches.

5.8 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Congratulations on your recent election, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Throughout this debate, we should not forget that the terrible service on Southern railway has had a devastating impact on hundreds of thousands of people. People have lost their jobs, or have had to quit their jobs. My constituent, Lee Fenton from Coulsdon, was sacked for persistent lateness due to the poor service on Southern railway. Parents have not been seeing their children because they have not been able to get home on time. Doctors have been unable to treat their patients, and teachers have been unable to teach their pupils because of this terrible service.

As Chris Gibb found in his report, which was long called for by Opposition Members and the unions, the primary cause of the problems in 2016 was the industrial action by the trade unions. The unions' claim—the nub of their contention—is that driver-operated doors are unsafe, yet 30% of UK surface trains, or 1.3 million trains a year, run perfectly safely with driver-operated doors. The whole of the London underground runs with driver-operated doors on to far more crowded platforms, and so does most of Europe. In June last year the Rail Safety Standards Board wrote:

“No increased risk from properly implemented Driver Controlled Operation has been detected in any research”

[Chris Philp]

that it has carried out. There is clear evidence that driver-operated doors are entirely safe.

The other sticking point with the unions is whether a train can still run if the second member of staff does not turn up because, for example, they are sick, late or on strike. By the way, every train that was scheduled to have two members of staff will continue to have them, but what if that second member of staff does not turn up? The company's position, which I think is reasonable, is that the train can still run. The union position is that it cannot, which leads to needless cancellations. A strike by conductors is ineffective if the train can run anyway. I believe that that is the real reason why the RMT is so keen on that point.

The hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), the shadow Transport spokesman, said that there had been de-staffing on the railway. I gently point out that 100 extra on-board supervisors have been hired since the changes were made. Therefore, far from de-staffing, there has been an increase in staffing, and in practice 98% of trains have run with a second person aboard.

I am disappointed that ASLEF has instructed its members to work a four-day week, because it is having devastating consequences for our constituents as we speak. It is completely unacceptable. There are no good safety grounds, as I just laid out, and an incredibly generous financial offer has been made: a 26% pay increase from £51,000 to £63,000 for working a four-day week. There is absolutely no justification for the strike and I call on the hon. Gentleman to prevail on his friends in ASLEF to call off the overtime ban at the earliest opportunity.

There is no question about the fact that we need to train more drivers, and I strongly encourage Ministers to put pressure on GTR to do exactly that. While this unjustified and damaging overtime strike is in place, we should make sure that trains ideally run with eight or 12 carriages and that they are not short-formed. I have had reports from constituents at Purley Oaks station in my constituency of four-carriage trains, which leads to overcrowding. I ask Ministers to look at that.

Having placed responsibility primarily with the trade unions, Chris Gibb goes on to make a number of other points, one of which, as the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) mentioned, is the £300 million programme. I strongly commend the Government for having found that money, which was so urgently needed. The hon. Gentleman asked what work has taken place. I have a note sent to me by Network Rail, which I can share afterwards, which lists the work. It includes high output ballast cleaning—I am not sure what that is, but it sounds good—and work on the Balcombe and Sevenoaks tunnels water management systems. Further particulars are available if he would like to hear them. That investment was incredibly welcome and important.

I am very excited about control period 6—the major capital works programme coming up in a couple of years. With the right investment between South Croydon station and Windmill Bridge junction, we can increase capacity on the entire Brighton main line by 30%. I strongly urge Ministers to move that project forward.

Finally, the franchise is rather too large. I entirely understand why it was let in this form—the works at London Bridge and the Thameslink transformation—but

in due course it should be broken down into its component parts of Southern, Gatwick Express, Thameslink and Great Northern, which would allow for much better management. The behaviour of people such as Sean Hoyle, who has stated that his objective is to bring down the Government, is wholly inappropriate. I call on the unions to end their unjustified strike action forthwith.

5.14 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I know that there are colleagues who are yet to speak whose constituencies have borne the brunt of the appalling state of Southern rail so I will do my best to be brief. I would like to say a few words about the impact of the Southern situation on my constituents and some of the wider issues raised by the Gibb report.

It might surprise hon. Members to hear that delays on Southern can impact on trains in Nottingham, but the linear nature of the rail network combined with forthcoming changes to the Thameslink timetable could have a hugely damaging effect on inter-city midland main line services. The Gibb report rightly states:

“Sometimes funding availability has prioritised elements of the system, without considering the welfare of the overall system.”

This appears to be the case on the midland main line, where Thameslink, long distance and freight services share the same track south of Bedford.

The December 2018 timetable change will increase the service frequency through the Thameslink core to 24 trains an hour. On paper, that is a welcome improvement for passengers, but, in an indictment of disjointed and fragmented railway planning, the new timetable is not integrated with the east midlands franchise. The intensity of the new timetable will impair the ability of operators to recover after periods of disruption. As the Gibb report points out, this problem is compounded by GTR's theoretically efficient but brittle rostering practices. This means that a single service disruption in Brighton can cause reactionary delays that travel up the line and on to the wider network, paralysing trains hundreds of miles away.

It has been reported in the technical press that there could be a nine-minute journey time penalty for services operating from Nottingham to London St Pancras, and a 12-minute penalty for journey times from Sheffield. That is obviously a real concern for passengers and the business community in Nottingham. I understand that it is not too late to make amendments to the timetable and I ask the Minister to commit to addressing the issue.

The Gibb report is long, technical and in places contentious. There are many issues arising from it that could be discussed, but I want to say a few words about the section on level crossings, which are a continued source of delays on the Southern network. The legislation that governs the closure of dangerous level crossings is archaic and hugely inefficient. It is therefore welcome that the Gibb report says that the recommendations of the Law Commission should be adopted as a new Bill. The issue has a long history and I have pressed Ministers on it in the previous two Parliaments.

Dangerous level crossings are the main cause of external risk on the railways and a major contributor to delays. The issue was referred to the Law Commission

by the Government in 2008, and the commission's recommendations were published in September 2013. In January 2015, the then Liberal Democrat Minister of State, Baroness Kramer, said in another place that the Government wanted to bring forward legislation as soon as possible. Two and a half years later, however, and nothing has changed. On the back of this report, will the Minister give a commitment today to finally bring forward this necessary legislation?

Finally, we need to talk about the lack of transparency that has characterised the Government's approach to the prolonged period of exceptionally poor service on Southern. As the Transport Committee said in October:

"Until"—

it—

"recently managed, after several attempts and considerable time and effort, to extract information from the Department, GTR's contractual performance benchmarks, and data relating to GTR's performance against them, were entirely opaque."

There are questions about the transparency of the report itself. We know that the final version was submitted to Ministers on 30 December, so the claim that the document could not be released until June because of purdah is, frankly, unconvincing.

In the minutes of the rail national taskforce meeting held on 23 November, it is recorded that Peter Wilkinson, the Department's franchising director, said that the

"Gibb report had been drafted but was not yet signed off"

by the Secretary of State. The meeting was also told by an individual with the initials "NB", who may be Nick Brown, GTR's chief operating officer, that

"GTR had had a lot of input to the review."

When the final version of the report was published, its sweeping statements about the general state of rail industrial relations and the undesirability of direct operations surprised some observers, especially as several hon. Members on both sides of the House had backed some form of state intervention. We need to know what Govia's involvement was in the drafting of the report and whether it extended beyond the provision of factual information. We need to hear why first the approval of the draft report, and then publication of the final version, appears to have been delayed. It is vital that the travelling public can place trust in these reports, so will the Minister give the House a specific and unqualified assurance that the Department did not seek to pressure, amend or otherwise influence the report in any way to politicise its content?

The situation on Southern has complex causes, but the imperative must be to end the years of misery that passengers have endured. The Government have a role to play in ending it, and part of that role must be to generate less heat and more light in the months ahead. We do not have to endorse the Gibb report in full to acknowledge that it has made some sensible and practical suggestions. It is vital that Ministers now take all reasonable steps to get the Southern rail network moving again.

5.19 pm

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): This morning I attended a meeting with representatives of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers. It was a futile and frustrating meeting, in which the unions

argued that it was proportionate and appropriate to strike because 2.75% of trains on Southern operate without an on-board supervisor. The fact that 97.25% of trains operate with one did not seem to sway them, which will mean untold damage to my constituents once again. In Wealden the service provided by Southern has been unsatisfactory for a long time, and we have raised that time and time again. While its performance has gradually improved over the past year, the behaviour of the unions has deteriorated, and the current industrial dispute is entirely irresponsible and cynical.

I welcomed the Gibb report, and met Chris Gibb last year to discuss the situation and, principally, Southern's poor management and poor communication. The report does not pull any punches in respect of either GTR's management or the Department for Transport, but the most damning indictment, by a long chalk, is Gibb's assessment of the unions. The report plainly states that the primary cause of disruption to passengers has been industrial action by the unions, compounded by incredibly high levels of sick leave among drivers. The report describes the unions' motives as "debatable" and their actions as "undermining the system". Having said that, I should add that GTR and Southern are not totally devoid of responsibility. The union's behaviour does not excuse the previously existing and ongoing infrastructural problems, which are within the control of a franchise whose financial penalties for failings are too lenient.

In any event, my constituents still have to put up with delays, timetable changes, short-form trains, extended engineering works, overcrowding, unsatisfactory compensation processes, nonsensical bus replacements, poor communication, and potential ticket office closures.

GTR's handling of the dispute does not cover it in glory. Unfortunately, the Uckfield line is known as the misery line in my constituency. The Govia "transforming rail" consultation is certainly a step in the right direction, and I am pleased that passengers will have an opportunity to comment in detail on timetabling arrangements and proposed reforms, but that simply is not enough. GTR must be made to appreciate the seriousness of the inconvenience and frustration that are being caused on a daily basis.

Let me draw the Minister's attention to appendix 5 of the report, which concerns the modernisation of the Uckfield line. I have already raised the issue with the Minister, and, as he knows, I support Chris Gibb's recommendation for the electrification of the line and a depot in Crowborough. The Uckfield line connects the towns of Uckfield and Crowborough to London, and is one of the very few routes in the south-east that have not been electrified. It is hard to believe that a major railway line in a highly developed "global" country still relies on diesel trains, which are outdated and increasingly difficult to keep on track. When they break down they are hard to fix, and it is difficult to find new rolling stock. Even in the sweetest spot, when the Southern service is running a full timetable, with a full number of cars and a full quota of staff who have turned up for work, the service is still woefully inadequate.

The Gibb report states that the current fleet is "inefficient", and that the sustained use of diesel is not viable. It points out that electrification of the Uckfield line would significantly increase passenger capacity and improve performance and timetabling, and would result in more efficient crewing and less pollution. Above all,

[Ms Nusrat Ghani]

it would provide a seven-day service in my constituency. An annual season ticket from Crowborough to London costs thousands of pounds. If my constituents are paying 21st-century prices for their rail tickets, they are entitled to receive a 21st-century rail service in return, and that means electrification.

We forget what the present situation means for people's day-to-day lives. My constituent Christopher, who lives in Uckfield, says:

"The loss of peak trains will make it even harder than usual for me to keep my commitments to work and family, including being able to reliably collect my two 6 and 8 year old boys from school or after school club."

Electrification and a depot at Crowborough would provide much-needed resilience on the line. No doubt the Minister has read the conclusion of that particular section of the report, which recommends electrification and has a solid financial case behind it. I look forward to having continued conversations with the Minister to try and secure that.

Wealden is in desperate need of a reliable modern train service that offers value for money. My constituents would like to know when the Uckfield line will no longer be known as the misery line, which will come about only once the strikes are called off. I look forward to working with the Minister to ensure not only electrification but a depot in my constituency of Wealden.

5.25 pm

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): I congratulate you on your elevation, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I am staggered that now, 18 months later, the Southern rail dispute is still going on. I find it staggering for a range of reasons, some of which are alluded to in the Chris Gibb report, which I will come on to. I remind Members that it was a resilience report; it was not about the dispute, but was a resilience report looking at Southern rail generally.

On driver-only operation, I appreciate that the unions talk about safety—which is fine; they are perfectly entitled to do that—but there are three key reasons why I disapprove of DOO. First, many female passengers in Eastbourne have contacted me over the last year as I have been campaigning against this dispute and trying to find a resolution, saying, "Stephen, we would not feel safe coming back to Eastbourne late in the night or even early-evening if we were in an empty carriage on our own and knowing there was no second member of staff." That is a very important point, because effectively it discounts about 50% of the population.

Secondly, in Eastbourne a lot of local children go to St Richard's school in Bexhill, and many parents have told me that they would be anxious if they knew their children were on a train with no second member of staff. Thirdly, as has been mentioned by Labour Front-Bench Members, there is the issue of disability access. Only a couple of weeks ago, a wheelchair-user colleague at Hampden Park in Eastbourne had to sit on the platform as three trains went through because she could not get on.

Those are three powerful reasons why I am fundamentally against DOO. I do not accept the principle and I do not care if 30% of the rail network already carries driver-only trains.

Chris Philp: The hon. Gentleman has explained why he thinks a second member of staff is important. Does he accept that 98% of trains are running with that second person on board and that the alternative for the 2% that are not is that those trains do not run at all?

Stephen Lloyd: I agree, and I will address that when I turn to the Gibb report, but I wanted to say something else before getting on to it. If we asked members of the public around the country where they have DOO—outside the underground, as that is a different kettle of fish—whether they would prefer to have a second member of staff on the train, I bet they would say that they would.

The Gibb report identified GTR as being the worst performing operator in the country, with performance deteriorating two or three years before the current industrial dispute. I grant that the report identified industrial relations as being a primary cause of the system's breakdown, but that featured on only one page of the entire 163-page document. That leads me to wonder just how impartial Gibb was in putting together the report. After all, while doing so he apparently spoke with GTR over 30 times and Government agencies over 45 times, yet he spoke with the two unions zero times. What is going on here?

When GTR won the contract direct attention was given in it to "best price", rather than deliverability. Extraordinarily, that meant GTR winning without enough drivers. Gibb himself wrote:

"I understand that at least one losing bidder"

included more drivers and that

"it may have been the case that the bidder with the fewest drivers won".

In other words, it was about cost; it was not about quality or customer care. So it was nonsense for the Secretary of State, who unfortunately has left the Chamber, to say earlier that he is trying to train more drivers and that he wants more train drivers. Frankly, the original contract was won by GTR on cost, with fewer drivers than its competitors.

Who is actually leading in the Southern rail dispute, from the rail perspective? Is it GTR and Southern rail, or is it the Government?

Maria Caulfield: The hon. Gentleman was an MP during the time when the contract was being let, while many of us were not. Did he not raise these questions and make these points at the time?

Stephen Lloyd: I certainly did! I welcome the hon. Lady's intervention and I thank her for reminding me that I was furious about Southern rail at the time. I thought it was absolute rubbish, and I said so frequently. I appreciate her allowing me to remind everyone about that. And it is good to be back; thank you.

Let me go back to the question of who is actually leading for Southern rail in the dispute, and to the Gibb report. Gibb says that the Secretary of State is "already determining the strategic direction of this dispute".

As I said earlier, I am not sponsored by the RMT. Members on both sides of the House know that the Government are behind this dispute because they want to bring in DOO. That is as plain as the nose on your face. Yes, at the minute, there is a second member of staff on 97% of the trains, as another Member said, but

that was not the intention at the beginning. The intention was to break the RMT and to bring in DOO. My priority is the customer—the rail passengers of Eastbourne who have suffered so much. This is frustrating because the Government went into this ready to have a war. They were ready to have a battle and to beat the RMT, but they have ended up with a complete stalemate in which the two sides have dug in and the passengers, people and communities of Eastbourne and the south-east are suffering.

Ms Ghani *rose*—

Stephen Lloyd: I will not give way. I am about to finish.

This is ridiculous, and it is about time that the Government and the Secretary of State showed some leadership. The Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), is in his place, so I shall ask him two questions before I finish. First, will the Government confirm or deny that the Department for Transport has never interfered with or blocked the resolution of the Southern rail dispute? I am asking the Minister that specific question in the Chamber because he has the full responsibility to answer it truthfully, and I will ask it again. Will he confirm or deny that the DFT has never interfered with or blocked the resolution of the Southern rail dispute?

My second question relates to something that a couple of other colleagues have already said, but it is crucial. If the Government are serious about ending this dispute, to the benefit of the entire south-east as well as those in my constituency, why will they not host negotiations with both the unions? We know that they have had opportunities to do that, but they have not done so. They are trying to divide and rule. I say this: Minister, pick up the phone tomorrow and say to Mr Whelan at ASLEF, to Mr Cash at the RMT and to GTR, “I want you to meet me tomorrow in my office in Whitehall. I want all the unions and all the sides together with no preconditions.” I am absolutely certain that if the Government had the guts, and the honesty, to do that, we would resolve the issue within a week. Minister, I wait to hear your answer.

5.33 pm

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): The point of agreement between me and the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) is that the service has caused heartache, distress and job losses for thousands. The report was commissioned to try to find ways to improve the resilience of the service, and I welcome it. I think everyone acknowledges the author, Chris Gibb, to be a serious, experienced individual, and he has produced a report that is thoughtful, helpful and comprehensive. The clear message that emerges from his report is that the primary cause of the appalling service that passengers received last year was the result of members of the workforce

“taking strike action...declining to work overtime and...undermining the system integrity”.

He concluded that

“if the train crew were to work in the normal manner...the output of the system, a safe and reliable rail service for passengers, would be delivered in an acceptable manner”.

The validity of Mr Gibb’s words has been reinforced by the 23 percentage point improvement in performance achieved by Southern over the past few months, when

there have been no strikes. GTR has shown that with the support of its workforce it can deliver, as Mr Gibb says, an acceptable level of service for customers.

Like everyone in this House, I am horrified that we are again seeing a return to industrial action. The Opposition were keen to lambast the Government on public sector pay restraint last week, but I am acutely aware of how many public sector workers use these trains. ASLEF, on the behalf of train drivers, rejected a pay offer worth nearly 24% over four years. Passengers will draw their own conclusions. [*Interruption.*] Is the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) trying to intervene? If he would like to get in, I would love to hear whether he thinks that that is a bad thing that is being put to members. I have offered the hon. Gentleman the opportunity to come in and say that the 24% rise is adequate, but he has declined to do so. I understand, so I will return to my speech.

Passengers do not believe that the DCO trains that have operated on our network for the past 30 years are unsafe. They do not believe that passenger trains operated in Germany, Austria or Canada using DCO are unsafe. Passengers do not want much; they simply want the drivers and the on-board supervisors to do their job, so that they can get into work to do theirs. In the helpful statistics provided by the RMT in a meeting this morning, as referred to by my hon. Friends, it was confirmed that 97.25% of the 70% of Southern trains that used to operate with a second person on board continue to do so. Those trains have a second person who is not preoccupied with opening and closing doors; they are there to help passengers. That is a high proportion, reflecting the additional numbers of OBSs that have been recruited. It is not as high as I would like, nor is it as high as GTR intends it to be—GTR is aiming for 100%—but all train users would rather see the 2.75% of those trains continue to run for the benefit of passengers. If they did not run, the negative impact to the service as a whole would be far more than the 3% diminution in service. It would lead to many thousands of passengers being wholly unnecessarily delayed.

Ms Ghani: After this morning’s meeting, I just want to clarify whether the unions are striking because 2.75% of trains are running without on-board supervisors. That will have an impact on thousands of paying passengers.

Jeremy Quin: I thank my hon. Friend. She really has to ask the unions why they are still on strike. My understanding is that it is because of the 2.75% of the 70% of trains that traditionally had a second person on board. I am convinced that her constituents and my constituents would rather that those trains continue to run. I look forward to 100% coverage, but the 97.25% figure and the recruitment shows that GTR is serious about ensuring that there is a second professional on board. Passengers have had enough. It is high time that the unions ended their action.

As the Secretary of State made clear, however, it would belittle the report to suggest that it focuses only on industrial action. It is far broader and more useful than that. What runs through the report is the difficulty of operating trains on a hugely well used and complex service. As the report states, Southern is

“simultaneously running at absolute capacity at peak times, and undergoing a period of dramatic... change”.

[Jeremy Quin]

The introduction of class 700s, new depots at Three Bridges and Hornsey, a doubling of Thameslink peak-hour trains to 24 through central London, and major infrastructure enhancements at London Bridge are all good improvements for passengers. They are vital to maintain a railway that has seen a massive increase in passenger numbers. As the report makes clear, Southern has been under strain with

“unreliable infrastructure, a timetable that is very tight and with overcrowded peak services”.

In some ways, the railways are a victim of success. In the days of British Rail, which the Opposition still seem to recall so fondly, the network was declining and, as Gibb points out, was relatively lightly used. In the 20 years since privatisation, passenger numbers have grown such that, on Southern's routes, more passengers are now travelling than at any time in the past 90 years. The emphasis that Gibb places on collaborative working is welcome, as are the practical steps that he recommends to ensure that that takes place, many of which have already been implemented. I am pleased that on receipt of the report back in January the Government immediately committed £300 million to meet the basic infrastructure requirements that were set out. It is good to hear the Department's strong commitment to ensuring that the region secures the investment it requires.

The report also has lessons for the operator, and Gibb makes clear the complexity of the Southern operator's task. There are few, and I am certainly not among them, who view the scale of the franchise as optimal. However, for those who believe that firing the operator would be a simple gain, Gibb argues persuasively that such an approach is naive. Twice operators have been replaced by Government emergency provision, as the shadow Minister said, and the report implies that this comes at greater cost. In both cases, the routes were running at steady state; Southern is going through a period of substantial change. The implication of the report is that firing the operator would be, at best, risky, and at worst could lead to chaotic failure.

However, it appears to me that the operator, in bidding for the franchise, was too optimistic about what it might be able to achieve by crewing via diagramming software. The system can be highly efficient when it works well, and in theory it should work brilliantly, but that requires perfect operating conditions, which are not what Network Rail delivers. I am therefore delighted by the Secretary of State's commitment to the additional drivers who are being trained and coming online, and I am pleased that there are now more on-board staff than at the start of this process. They will increase resilience and reduce dependence on overtime. He is determined to ensure that we have a modern, resilient railway that delivers for its passengers. I congratulate him on commissioning this report, and I thank Mr Gibb for his work.

5.40 pm

Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): I appear to have a very good hit rate with you so far, Madam Deputy Speaker. You have called me two days in a row.

I have seen great men and women stand at the Dispatch Box and take responsibility for things that were often beyond their control but within their Department's

remit. If we are honest, today's debate has proceeded along some well-worn tramlines. Conservative Members have said that the entire problem with Southern rail is caused by industrial action, and Opposition Members have tried to acknowledge that the systemic failure has wider implications. This debate was set up to fail from its opening remarks. It is important to be aware that it is not a bug within the system that the Secretary of State chooses not to take responsibility for the situation; it is a feature.

I do not have to declare an interest other than that I commute daily to this place on Govia Thameslink, and the everyday experiences of my constituents, which in some cases mirror my own, are at the forefront of my mind. The House has to take responsibility for the very real failings of the system as a whole and plot a course out of them, and I will explain why that is important right now.

How did we get here? Gibb identifies three or four major factors. First, there is no single system operator. With particular regard to Southern, he says:

“The rushed 1990s privatisation...failed to understand the critical needs of the system”.

We see that in the fragmentation across the planning and the response to critical failures. I have had conversations with the train operating companies, which revealed that they could perhaps better manage disruption if they put their own staff in the control room—so that other train operators, which are already in the control room, do not put their services in front. That is a pretty basic failing, but it underlines the fact that there is not a single point of accountability for this failure.

Peter Kyle: Does my hon. Friend not think that the Department for Transport should be stepping into that role?

Mr Shuker: My hon. Friend pre-empts my idea. We should recognise Southern rail as a critical piece of infrastructure for London, the south-east and the whole United Kingdom and treat it as such. The Government should take custody and oversee Southern rail.

Secondly, the £6 billion investment in the Thameslink programme will bring very real benefits, but unfortunately it has been bolted on to a system that has some basic failings. This major infrastructure programme is specified by DFT and led by Network Rail, but it is being put at risk because the basics are being ignored. Gibb instructs DFT to make a call in this calendar year about whether, given what we know about the system, we can turn on an increase in capacity through that £6 billion investment. That is a shocking state of affairs to find ourselves in: the basic infrastructure failures of this system could cause us to waste that money or to delay implementation.

In my constituency, in Luton, we have been trying to get a station rebuild since the Government cancelled the money when they first came to power in 2010. The need is desperate; the station is recognised as one of the 10 worst in the country. The net effect of the Thameslink programme was to make our station worse, as we have gone to 12-car platforms and we have reduced disabled access, and I struggle to explain to my constituents the benefits that will come. My fear is that we will not be able to explain to them why there is not a commensurate increase in capacity, as a result of the basic failings that Gibb identifies.

Thirdly, we have a fragmented system, with not enough focus on integration. Gibb says:

“The infrastructure on the Southern network is in a poor and unreliable condition.”

He goes on to explain that some of these things relate to pretty basic aspects of railway maintenance, such as renewing sleepers, tackling vegetation and dealing with fencing. What an indictment of a system: it does not prioritise the basic upkeep. I served on the Transport Committee in 2010 when we reported on the cold weather disruption, as did the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), who is in his place. That report identified that the third rail running south of London was a major problem, yet we have still struggled to tackle that basic thing. I hope that the Transport Committee will look at the future shape of this franchise at the earliest available opportunity, so that Members will have a chance to have an input there.

Fourthly, all of this situation was led by Government decision making. In the last Parliament, I took a view that with this major infrastructure programme coming in it was not appropriate to let this franchise in the normal commercial way. My view was that it was better for government to manage it. These stations are dealing with one third of all passenger journeys in this country. In a sense, the Government found a halfway house, as they went with a management-style contract in which they took on a large degree of risk and the incentives were changed for the operator. That was a mistake; it was neither fair nor foul, and we are trying to manage a contract that would not work in the first place. Gibb's comments in the report about why the franchisee was chosen are instructive. It is an open secret that for a long time Sunday services have been cancelled, because, for example, insufficient drivers work on Sundays. The answer to that is not to bully drivers into coming into work; a contract has been taken on and if the operator wants to change the terms and conditions, they should bring forward appropriate proposals.

If this were any kind of project other than Britain's fragmented railways, we would have an Olympic-style delivery authority taking over this network. It is key to our infrastructure, but nobody is accountable, and the clear message from the Secretary of State today from that Dispatch Box was not that he took responsibility; it was to say, “I am not to blame.” It is time we had a serious discussion. This franchise highlights the problems with our fragmented railway system, and we need to tackle them.

5.48 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I warmly welcome you to your place, and I warmly recommend and welcome the Gibb report on the performance of Southern rail. I thank Chris Gibb for posing some serious challenges for us all to consider this afternoon.

I wish to focus on a couple of those proposals before turning my attention to what the report outlines as the primary cause for the system integrity to fail: the industrial action, and the illogical position taken by the rail unions and their members. First, let me talk about the resilience in the system. Rail has been one of the great success stories of the past 20 years, but its success has caused the current problem, in that passenger numbers have

doubled, but investment in trains and track has not. With 23% of all rail passengers using the Southern network, it only takes one ingredient to fail and the entire network goes down, as this report makes clear.

The report contains difficult sections for hon. Members to consider. It recommends that trains “non-stop” at more stations; that daytime closures occur to allow for engineering; that off-peak services are reduced to give more resilience and allow preparation for the challenge of the peak period in rush hour; that Gatwick station is transferred over to the airport operator; and that depots are transferred to reduce empty trains on the network. It is important that we focus on the big prize and recognise that that series of measures, taken together, could give the system the resilience it so badly needs.

Another recommendation is that some services be transferred from Southern to Southeastern. My right hon. Friend and neighbour, the Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), has championed a project to extend High Speed 1 from Ashford to Bexhill, Hastings and Rye. With the innovation in train technology whereby expensive overhead electrification can be substituted by a system of hybrid trains that charge themselves over track, my right hon. Friend's project looks within reach. As it would require the relevant part of the network to be transferred from Southern to Southeastern, we welcome that recommendation in the report and ask the Department for Transport, Network Rail and the train operators to make the necessary investment in extending High Speed 1. As the Gibb report notes, Southern's Sussex coast line is at the bottom of the table for capacity, with only 52% of passengers satisfied that they have sufficient carriage space. We badly need to extend High Speed 1 to improve their experience.

I had a seat on the Select Committee on Transport in the last Parliament, I have a constituency reliant on Southern's services to get people to work and college, and I have had a season ticket on Southern for the past 10 years, so I have witnessed the illogical and devastating impact the industrial action has caused. I say “illogical” because no drivers or second crew members are losing their job—indeed, as we have heard, 100 additional second crew members have been recruited, and trains will operate without a second crew member only in exceptional circumstances, such as when the crew member is stuck on another part of the line. Secondly, no employees will lose pay—indeed, train drivers are being offered a 23% increase to take their pay for a four-day 35-hour week to £60,000, and most would earn £70,000 by working the fifth day.

Thirdly, the crew are not being asked to do anything novel. The dispute is allegedly about a driver controlling doors, but as we have heard, 30% of our rail network has run in that manner for more than 30 years and many of the trains have no second crew member at all. Fourthly, this practice is deemed to be safe. The report by Dr Ian Prosser, the rail safety regulator, has been mentioned. When called on by the rail unions to confirm that the practice was safe, Dr Prosser did just that. In fact, it can be argued that the practice is safer than other modes of operation. A coroner looking into the death of a passenger who fell on to Merseyrail tracks recommended that the operations be focused in one person; that the driver should control both the doors and movement of the train. That links to another argument that driver-controlled doors are even safer.

[*Huw Merriman*]

As I saw with the Transport Committee when I travelled in a train driver's cab, when carriage doors are opening and closing, it is entirely possible to see on the video display unit what is coming in and out of the train. That is what the rail regulator has opined on, but the video can also run as the train moves through the station. At the moment, a conductor cannot see what is happening on the platform once the doors have closed. Unfortunately, that video capacity is not being used at the moment, but it should be. If it were, the system would be safer than current practices.

Although the lack of logic is frustrating, it is the devastating impact on individuals, families and businesses that distresses me the most. People have lost their job because they cannot get to or from work; they have lost earnings because many earning less than £49,000 a year cannot commute to London for higher wages; and they have lost precious time with their family, which they will never get back. The economy in my area, much of it based on travel and tourism, has lost £40 million. Public services have suffered because essential workers cannot get to hospitals and schools or will not relocate to our region because they will be unable to do so. As a result, tax yields go down as well. For people such as Labour Members to call for protection of and investment in public services while supporting their degradation via this strike is rank hypocrisy and a disgrace.

I welcome the report and its findings. I hope very much that we can implement the recommendations and that the unions will cease their pointless action.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. After the next speaker, the time limit will be reduced to five minutes. I call Peter Kyle.

5.54 pm

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): What a huge honour it is, Madam Deputy Speaker, to be called to speak for the first time in this Parliament under your leadership in the Chair. I congratulate you on your elevation.

I share the frustration of my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker) that, sometimes in this debate, we have been speaking most about the thing that Chris Gibb spoke about the least. That has been an intense source of frustration. Like every passenger, I utterly despair of the situation. If the Gibb report teaches us anything, it is that there is a lot of blame to go around. No organisation is blameless and, right now, a small amount of humility would go a very long way. That is why the Gibb report is such a useful tool and a credit to him as its author. For the first time we, as parliamentarians and passengers, can finally see behind the smoke and mirrors and grasp the full extent of the dysfunction that is the root cause of today's problems.

The Gibb report states that,

“all of the elements of the system have been under strain: unreliable infrastructure, a timetable that is very tight...some key stations that are overcrowded, depots that are full and...in the wrong place, and people that are involved in informal and formal industrial action.”

This, in one paragraph, explains why the network has experienced so many catastrophic failures even before the start of the most recent industrial action. For example,

two summers ago, Southern reduced its timetable by two thirds for almost four months. It was a terrible blow for commuters. The reason was a shortage of drivers. It was inexplicable to passengers how such a stupid act of planning and incompetence could have happened, and the consequences were far-reaching.

At the time, neither Southern nor the Government would accept responsibility for the shortage, simply blaming, as the Minister did today, the length of time it takes to train new drivers. When things go wrong, passengers deserve two things: an honest explanation of what has gone wrong; and the belief that lessons have been learned and will never be repeated.

This situation has become the “new normal” for passengers. It is a “normal” that has wrecked careers, broken relationships and hampered the economy of the south-east of England. Large businesses such as Brighton and Hove Albion have lost more than £1 million in revenue, while charities such as Brighton and Hove Pride lost £140,000 last summer alone.

My point is simple: continued failure on our rail network is not a victimless situation. Its impact is felt deep and wide throughout our communities. That is the reason why an all-party group for the southern commuter was established almost two years ago. It has been an honour to co-chair the group with the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames), who is in his place. The group has transcended party boundaries, which has been incredibly important in such a difficult situation.

The Gibb report is clear on the way forward. We need better leadership, more partnership, and much more investment than has been the case for generations. On leadership, the report says that

“the custodian of the overall system integrity should be better identified, empowered and trusted.”

Gibb goes on to recommend the creation of a “system operator”. That is a logical conclusion of the leadership vacuum that has been created by a botched privatisation and an over-fragmented system. It also begs an important question: what on earth is the point of having a Secretary of State, a railways Minister and an entire Department for Transport if we now need a new person to come and give leadership to our rail network? What exactly are Ministers doing—or not doing—that is leaving such a leadership vacuum in our rail network? Rather than having a new rail boss, or “super-boss”, can the current ones not just do their jobs properly? Heaven knows, they are paid enough to do it.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Does my hon. Friend agree that if the Minister is unable to show that leadership, he should think about resigning?

Peter Kyle: It is an honour to take an intervention from my hon. Friend for the very first time. May I welcome him to his place? There have been failures right across the board. Right now, what passengers really need is for people in those positions to get a grip without delay.

Infrastructure investment is the final piece of the jigsaw. On page 5, the report states:

“The infrastructure on the Southern network is in a poor and unreliable condition”.

The blame for that rests with successive Governments, not with this one alone. Passengers are shocked to hear of the historic under-investment in their rail network. The south-east of England accounts for 30% of our country's passenger journeys but only 15% of the investment. At a time when Government are focused on HS2 at a cost of over £30 billion, too little is being spent on what Lord Adonis, chair of the Government's National Infrastructure Commission, said is the greatest transport challenge that we face, which is getting people to and from work every day in the south-east of England.

The Government have unlocked £300 million of funding for immediate investment in the south-east, but to stand a chance of delivering the robust infrastructure we need, this level of investment simply must continue into the next control period.

Sir Nicholas Soames: I agree with every word that the hon. Gentleman says, but does he agree that it is now all the more important to come to an agreement between all the parties, so that this infrastructure investment may proceed? Without it, it frankly would not make sense to create that level of infrastructure.

Peter Kyle: I could not agree more. I have said so to the right hon. Gentleman off the record, and am happy to say so in this place. I am calling on the unions to get around the table and, as I have said to the Minister in person, I hope that Ministers will be more muscular and more active in this process, rather than sitting on the sidelines. Every party needs to get around the table actively to resolve this problem for and on behalf of passengers.

It is imperative that Government confirm without delay that they will continue investment into the next control period, guaranteeing that up to £1 billion will be available for the entirety of that period. Once this industrial action is settled and the remaining structural challenges are once again the focus of our attention, passengers will rightfully demand month-on-month improvements in the service they actually experience. Right now, the infrastructure that underpins our system is too weak to offer the robust improvements that passengers deserve. We must move unrelentingly towards the point where our rail network is bulletproof.

Within a month of becoming an MP, I had asked Ministers to scrap the class 313 units from the Coastway route. Some were built in 1976 and none has a toilet. These trains are loathed by everyone. Some of the things the report finds are so blindingly obvious that they prompt the question why it took the report to say them in the first place. Then there are things that I did not know about, such as suicide hotspots, bridges being struck by vehicles due to lack of signage, and unnecessarily crowded timetabling for historical reasons.

Why we needed an independent review to tell us these things is beyond me. Government, GTR and Network Rail should have easily had the capacity to sort these things out without the need for an independent assessor, but we are where we are. At last we have the manual on how to improve our system. It is now up to the Government and their partners to make it a reality and this Parliament to scrutinise, challenge and support it every step of the way. I, for one, will not let up in that task.

6.2 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): What a pleasure it is to see you in your place, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) for all he has done, along with my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames), on the all-party parliamentary group on Southern rail. I hope that the group will reform as soon as he is ready.

This is a particularly important debate for me and it is one that is very close to my home, in the sense that I live very near a station on the Southern line, from which I take a train to get here. This situation has had a huge impact on my life and the lives of many of the people I have the privilege to represent. People around our communities cannot get home. Children cannot get to school and therefore the parents, even if they could have got to work, cannot go because they do not have emergency childcare.

I have been working very closely with my hon. Friend the Minister, who has done enormous amounts of work of late to ensure that the rail network gets the money it requires. But in the Gibb report we find many indications of why this is not just about money. It is about so much more. It is about huge amounts of time and infrastructure, and that is why I shall skip over the industrial relations that have been so adequately covered by many of my right hon. and hon. Friends and over some of the aspects of union power touched on by those who are my friends, even if they sit on the other side of the House. I shall focus instead on areas in which we need to take the Gibb report seriously.

As various people know, electrification of the Uckfield line has been spoken about since the 1970s. It was, I believe, the last track to use a steam engine for regular commuting services, right up to the 1970s, and now that legacy is coming through on the diesel line. Surely enough is enough. It is 2017, Thomas the Tank Engine is on an iPad—he is not even a book any more—yet we have diesel trains running on what should frankly be electric tracks. Please, Minister, can we have the electrification we need? Can we catch up with the iPad generation?

There are many people from Edenbridge and District Rail Travellers Association with whom I have been working very closely who have spoken about this and about how we can get this done: how to get the lines dualled—or rather, redualled, as the dual line was removed in the 1990s. Perhaps—here is the real chance—we can get the line to run beyond Uckfield. Imagine that, Madam Deputy Speaker: taking your holidays and deciding that instead of driving down—you do not want to do that, through Croydon and south London, on all those crowded roads—you will get on the tube at Westminster. You take the Jubilee line straight through to London Bridge, where you get on the train. You will travel down some of the most beautiful tracks in Kent, but then you end up by accident in Sussex. However, you will still go through beautiful parts of Kent, travelling on from Uckfield down to the coast. Imagine that, Madam Deputy Speaker, for an evening in Brighton after a day in the House. I can see that you are already desirous of those moments.

I can see that that is something that we can all aim for. There are many issues that we can touch on: the parking at Cowden and Hever; the fact that many folk

[Tom Tugendhat]

have to drive to stations such as Hildenborough or Sevenoaks, rather than getting on at the station nearest to them, which has an impact on the environment and road safety. These are narrow lanes with cyclists and horse riders. That is a danger for all of us.

Perhaps the most important issue is the fact that we have to invest in our future. Time and again, we have lived off the legacy of our great-grandparents' thoughts and dreams—those investments that built the trains, bridges and roads. They were built by the Victorian and Edwardian generations, and in this new Elizabethan age surely we need to emulate that investment, because when we spend on the rail networks we are not spending on getting to London five minutes quicker; no, we are spending on making our nation great, and we are doing it because London is not just the people who live in it. All great metropolises depend on the networks they feed off, and there is none greater than ours and there is none that requires more investment.

6.7 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Almost a century ago, the campaign to get a train station at Mitcham Eastfields began. The first questions in Parliament about a new station for Mitcham are believed to have been recorded by *Hansard* in the early 1930s. I myself was part of the campaign for a quarter of a century, so the House can imagine my delight in 2008 when the first train arrived from London Victoria at Mitcham Eastfields station at eight minutes past four on Monday 2 June. The station connects Mitcham with central London in just 19 minutes, and since it opened nine years ago, the growth of the area has been remarkable, with residents now able to commute to work in central London. Mitcham Eastfields has been a huge boost for local housing, and has enabled more students and teachers to access St Mark's Academy and other local schools. The opening of the station is one of my proudest achievements as the Member of Parliament for Mitcham and Morden.

Unfortunately, Southern rail operates the services that run through Mitcham Eastfields, as well as the other stations in my constituency, including St Helier and Mitcham Junction. My constituents comprise many of the 300,000 passengers who use Southern rail every single day, paying extortionate ticket prices for an appalling service. When Mitcham station was opened, all the tools were there for the growth of Mitcham and ease of transport for my constituents. Because of Southern rail, the reality is the worst rail disruption since 1994. A phone call yesterday from my constituent, Mark, summed it all up. In his words,

"the drivers are often missing, the trains often break down, and I don't think there is a single day that the train is on time. And that's not down to striking staff."

My constituent, Arexa, was put on disciplinary measures and subsequently lost her job in retail because of the unacceptable regularity of Southern delays. Her story is not unique. Only last month my constituent, William, left his dream job, as the company where he worked could not continue to tolerate his lateness. In fact, my constituent, Collis, uses the phrase, "daily REG"—random excuse generator—for the explanation that Southern give for their appalling service. It is not the service that he and his wife deserve, as they pay over £3,000 a year.

In the last week, services in my constituency have been slashed by even more than was publicised, and the current revised timetable has dropped direct off-peak services from London Victoria. Similarly, the proposed new timetable from May 2018 sees a reduction in rush-hour trains, and there is a gap of nearly 30 minutes between the off-peak trains. It is so frustrating to see the intermediate services fly through Mitcham Eastfields without stopping, helping the Surrey shires at the expense of suburban Mitcham.

It is clear that Southern rail is not working and shows little sign of improvement. The services should be transferred to the Mayor of London. Transport for London clearly has the experience and proven track record of running world-class public transport in the capital. In fact, the Gibb report suggests that parts of Southern would be better operated by Transport for London, and I wonder whether that is the reason why the whole of appendix 9 has been redacted from the report.

This issue is beyond politics, and it is affecting the quality of life of thousands of people—people who get up early, go to work, pay their taxes and, on top of that, pay hideously high fares. All they ask in return is for the trains to run on time.

6.10 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I welcome the Gibb report and agree with almost every one of its findings, and I will not go over many of the comments made by right hon. and hon. Members this afternoon.

My constituency has been particularly affected by the 18 months to two years of disruption we have faced on the Southern rail network. The constituency is served solely by Southern, so there are no alternative rail routes. It is also very rural, and there is no bus service in many parts, so people either drive or get the train—otherwise, they are left completely stranded.

The 18 months of sheer misery were caused by a whole range of things; all the reasons are laid out in the Gibb report, and Southern rail, which I am no fan of, has played its part in this. That has led to dangerous conditions for many passengers. Many times, we are turfed out at Haywards Heath, when the train is terminated and we can go no further. On a dark winter's night, when there are no taxis about, and there is no other way of getting around, there will be elderly passengers left there, young mums who are desperate to get home to their children, and people who are just trying to get home from work. That has been the legacy of the last 18 months.

We are a tourist destination—we are set on the beautiful south coast, and we are also in the South Downs national park—but the disruption has hit at peak times. In the tourist season last summer, we saw a 25% drop in business in many of our retail areas, and they were hit again during the Christmas period. This has been a devastating time for the tourist parts of my constituency, and businesses are only just starting to pick up now.

Things have improved. Performance rates have improved, and we are now around the 90% mark for daily performance, which has to be welcome. Passengers have started to get used to being able to rely on the train service and feel safe on it, and businesses are starting to see their customers come back and to do business.

So for the problems to start up once again, with overtime bans and ballots for strike action, is absolutely heart-breaking.

We are seeking the second person—the on-board supervisor—on trains. When I go back late at night, I see that second person, and it is reassuring to have them there. I would not support a deal that removed them completely. I absolutely welcome the work they do, and I am pleased they are still there.

Southern still has some passenger care issues to tackle. The Gibb report shows that we are on the most congested rail network in the south-east, and the trains are heavily congested. It is an hour and a half's journey to London, but time after time—even this week, with the overtime ban—first class is not declassified. We had an incident only last week involving a pregnant woman being told off for sitting in first class, but other trains had been cancelled because of the overtime ban. That is a Southern rail customer service issue; it is not something that should be acceptable in this day and age.

Facilities for disabled passengers are a key issue. In an Adjournment debate earlier in the year, I raised the issue of toilet facilities at Haywards Heath, where our trains join to go into London. There are some fantastic facilities now, and people can drive into the new car park and get the lift straight down on to the platform, but there are no toilet facilities for disabled passengers. It is that sort of customer care that Southern still needs to address. When the Minister responded to the Adjournment debate he was fairly positive in urging Southern rail to try to bring on some of the facilities that it has promised.

We also need to look at issues of the flexible season tickets that we were promised when the franchise was let. Many passengers travel to work two or three days a week and the rest of the time work from home. We were promised flexible season tickets. It cannot be right that someone has to purchase a full season ticket when they are only using it two or three days a week. We urge Southern to deliver on its promises and its commitment in the franchise.

I welcome the huge investment that is going into the main rail line, which has been underinvested in for decades, causing 50% of the delays over the past 18 months. That urgent money that the Government have put in is making a difference, and it is a significant reason why performance has improved over the past few months. My final plea is for us to look at Brighton main line 2. If we had a second main rail line, it would enable many of the works that need to be done on the line to be done and give us an alternative route from Sussex to London.

6.15 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): May I, Madam Deputy Speaker, add my congratulations to you following others that have been expressed? It is a pleasure to see you in your place.

I welcome this debate, as the Secretary of State has some major information gaps to fill and some serious questions to answer. It is a shame that he left the Chamber almost as soon as he could, because on top of the six-month delay between the Government receiving the report and its publication, we have had no serious formal Government response. The Minister's 500-word statement barely stretches to a side of A4. That is indicative of the whole attitude that we are seeing from

the Government—all hands-off and no leadership. After two years of the Brighton main line rail nightmare, my constituents expect more and deserve better. They have regularly been in tears of anger and frustration. We have heard the stories of jobs lost, relationships broken up, and businesses taking a very serious hit in Brighton and Hove. All the while, passengers continue to pay through the nose for Britain's worst-performing rail service.

I have listened to the Secretary of State today. May I point out to him that it will not help passengers to heap all the blame for our long-running rail nightmare on to the unions? The people who work on our railways every day—people who are trained to a safety-critical standard and work on the frontline—are raising specific concerns about access and safety that have yet to be answered. Moreover, the Secretary of State simply cannot keep up the pretence that this two-year-long fiasco is nothing to do with him and the Government. The buck stops with him, whether he likes it or not, and chronic problems long predate the industrial action. That action started a little over a year ago, at the end of last April, whereas we have had enduring problems for well over two years. A glance at the graph on page 93 of the Gibb report makes that very clear. Southern was the worst-performing company a very long time before any industrial action took place.

As the Secretary of State well knows, Chris Gibb says that

“all the elements of the system have been under strain”.

He says that Southern rail was attempting to run too many trains on poor and unreliable infrastructure. He makes a lot of technical suggestions on issues such as signalling, timetabling and service patterns. He says, critically, that strategic leadership is missing. That is not news for long-suffering passengers. With regard to this dispute, the bottom line is that there has been a chronic lack of leadership from this Government and from Ministers. It is plain that we are not going to get anywhere unless we get people talking together.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the hon. Lady agree that this is a case of “a plague on all their houses”—that Southern, Network Rail, the unions, and indeed, I am afraid, Ministers, have all failed passengers? Does she agree that it might be worth investigating the possibility of using binding arbitration to get them in the same room to agree a way forward?

Caroline Lucas: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I certainly agree that we need a situation where everybody is in the room at the same time, not a strategy where certain unions are picked off separately, and not one where the Government do not sit in the room either.

In his report, Gibb makes it clear:

“In GTR ‘do nothing’ is not an option, so negotiations must be entered into.”

The Transport Committee has called for all parties, including the Government, to sit down together and resolve the dispute, and that was months ago. The involvement of Ministers in the industrial dispute is often officially denied but in one phrase Gibb lays bare their central role, saying that the Secretary of State is “already determining the strategic direction of this dispute”.

[*Caroline Lucas*]

If the person in this position will not get around the table without preconditions, I really do not see how we are going to make any progress.

Can the Minister also tell us where the famous appendix 9—entitled “Recommendations regarding the GTR franchise agreement”—is? That appendix, which might just shed a bit of light on the issue, is conspicuous by its absence. My constituents think that Southern has failed, as do I, and we want to see that section of the report. Does the mysteriously missing appendix 9 actually tell us whether GTR is in breach of its contractual obligations? Is the censoring of that appendix in its entirety the reason why the report was kept hidden for half a year? Perhaps Ministers want to avoid being pushed for answers about whether GTR was in breach of contractual obligations.

In October 2016, the Select Committee told the Government to “get a grip” on the monitoring and enforcement of the franchise, to speed up their assessment of the franchisee’s force majeure claim and to be prepared to restructure or terminate the agreement should GTR be shown to be in default. Until the court case brought by the Association of British Commuters, however, no action was taken at all.

ABC is also raising interesting and important questions about the safety of the concourse at Victoria station, which I want to touch on briefly. Gibb says:

“At major stations such as Victoria, pedestrian flows, gateline and concourse capacity are all significantly influenced by commercial strategy.”

He pointed to the dangers that arise when many commuters are concentrated in very small areas of the concourse. He points to the Department for Transport as the place from where we should be getting leadership, but are we getting that leadership? Is Victoria safe from overcrowding? Can the Minister give us a timetable and a funding commitment for the works that are needed?

Finally, Gibb says that bringing the franchise into public hands would create disruption and result in projects having to be put on hold, but that lays bare the fact that the Government have allowed the travelling public effectively to be held to ransom by a failing operator. The Government have dismantled Directly Operated Railways, so if they had to strip GTR of the franchise, they would have very limited options in terms of current project delivery. That is a serious dereliction of Government duty.

The state has to guarantee that if the private sector fails, the Government can and will take the franchise back into public control. Without that, there is no stick. The Department needs to rectify the situation and must immediately start preparing a publicly owned organisation to take over on a clear and agreed date. If the industry knew that, for example, in six months’ time the GTR franchise would switch to a directly operated railway, projects could be provided without disruption and my constituents in Brighton Pavilion would have a chance of getting a better deal on the railways.

6.22 pm

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): As this is the first time that I have spoken when you have been in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, may I offer my sincere congratulations on your recent election?

It is difficult, without risking being accused of hyperbole, to describe the sheer misery that passengers and commuters in my constituency and across the south have suffered in recent years because of the significant disruption to Southern Railway services. Many hon. and right hon. Members have described people losing their jobs and facing disciplinary hearings at their place of employment because they are consistently late for work.

At the other end of the day, I have come across many accounts of my constituents being unacceptably prevented from getting home to do the simple but very important things, such as reading their children a bedtime story or sitting around the table to have an evening meal together. Lives and livelihoods are literally being wrecked by the disruption. I have yet to cross you in this way, Madam Deputy Speaker, but many times I have been late to Question Time and debates in this Chamber because of delays to the Southern service that I regularly use to get to Westminster.

Why has this situation come about? I think the reasons are fourfold. First, the franchise structure has been bizarrely established by the Department for Transport. The Government need to learn some serious lessons about the structuring of train franchises. Secondly, as many hon. and right hon. Members have said, the network is by far the busiest in the country, and it is at capacity, or over capacity, on too many occasions. On that point, I particularly welcome the £300 million of investment for Network Rail that the Government are putting in to ensure that the engineering problems are addressed.

Thirdly, Southern and the parent company GTR have, frankly, not performed very well at all. Without repeating the stories that were told earlier, some of the ways in which they have treated their customers have been quite appalling. Lastly, as highlighted in the Gibb review—I congratulate the Government on initiating it last year—militant unions are determined to exploit the misery of passengers and this situation for their own political ends.

There is blame on all sides on this issue, but the people who are suffering—they are standing, often on cold platforms, in the middle of this argument—are the travelling public from my constituency and elsewhere in the country. [*Interruption.*] My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) says people are also standing on trains, and that is certainly my daily experience.

This situation needs to be addressed. There have been improvements, and I welcome the millions of pounds of additional investment at Three Bridges and Gatwick stations in my constituency, which is important. Quite frankly, however, there is the issue of the image of Britain that is created when people arrive at London Gatwick airport and try to get to our capital.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Will my hon. Friend comment on the impact on Gatwick? There are problems for my constituents commuting from Southampton to Brighton who decide to travel that way to avoid the M27, and indeed for people trying to get to Gatwick for flights, who are missing them after simply being left on the platform.

Henry Smith: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There has been a massive impact on the economy, for people trying to do business in the capital or around the

south-east, and on lives, when people miss flights to go on holiday. That aspect has not always been highlighted, and I am grateful to her for giving me the chance to do so in the House today.

As I have said, this situation needs to be resolved. I call on the unions to stop their industrial action. A very generous offer is on the table, with over £60,000 for a 35-hour week for drivers. As we have heard, driver-operated doors have had a proven track record for over three decades on the London underground and many other rail systems around the world. As we have also heard, most of the guards on trains will simply be redeployed to more customer-focused efforts, which is very important, particularly in enabling them to help disabled passengers on the network. That means that rather than just standing by the doors that they are opening and closing, they can engage with and support customers better, which is very important.

I urge the unions to get fully back to work, and to support my constituents and other commuters. I urge the Government to continue their investment in our railway, particularly on the London to Brighton main line, and I urge Southern and GTR, as the operators, to be much more customer-friendly in the way they operate so that this misery can finally be ended.

6.28 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to be called by you for the first time, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The reality is that this franchise has been a bad franchise for a significant time: it has not worked. I find the finger-pointing at the unions slightly hypocritical, given that Peter Wilkinson, a senior official at the Department for Transport, said only last year:

“Over the next three years we’re going to be having punch ups and we will see industrial action and I want your support...we have got to break them.”

He said that employees had borrowed money for cars on their credit cards and could not afford to go on strike, and he went on and on. If that is not a political motivation to aggravate this strike, I do not know what is—it is a clear ratcheting up of the dispute. Of course, there is always blame on all sides, but the Government and the Department for Transport are in a position of responsibility.

Ms Ghani: We all want a resolution because we want to ensure our constituents can take the journeys they have paid for. The hon. Gentleman has talked about how much friction there is. I will read a quote from Mr Hedley, the RMT union assistant general secretary. He said on LBC:

“I think all the Tories are an absolute disgrace. They should be taken out and shot to be quite frank with you.”

Is that the new, gentler kind of politics that the Opposition agree with and believe will bring a resolution to this problem?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: It does not help when the Government have not been getting the unions around the table in the same room without preconditions. That is how we de-escalate things. People in positions of responsibility, such as the Minister, need to come forward and de-escalate it, and not just point fingers and quote from the radio but actually show leadership.

The reality is that this dispute is not about money. We have heard a lot from the Conservatives about trying to shove cash into the mouths of drivers. This dispute is about safety and accessibility. The unions have put a clear proposal on the table. They have offered to come to a deal that will ensure that disabled and vulnerable people can turn up to the train station without having to give notice, and that there will be safe conditions on the trains. The unions would then withdraw their action. That offer has been disregarded by GTR and its puppet masters in the Government. I call them puppet masters because this is a rigged contract that allows GTR to continue to get the cash incentive to run a service that it fails to run—it does not lose a penny when ticket sales are not made. It does not have to bear the risk. The problem is the contract.

The Government clearly need to bring the contract in-house. Gibb says that that would be disruptive but, as the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) said, that is because the Government wound down the direct operator and have left themselves with their pants down. They are unable to run a service and they are unable to hold the contractors to account.

Tim Loughton: The hon. Gentleman has spent most of his speech panning the role of the Government and the Department for Transport and now he is saying that he wants the franchise to be brought in-house, to be run by that same Government and Department that he has been panning. I have no problem with the franchise being removed, but he has to have a care that whoever is taking it over can do a better job of it, and that is not clear at the moment. Could it be a case of out of the frying pan, into the fire?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: The hon. Gentleman is quite right—I would not want the Minister to be directly running the railways. It seems that the Minister is barely able to run his own Department and get people around the table to negotiate, which is one of his key responsibilities. Directly Operated Railways operated well on the east coast franchise and the franchise taken off Connex South Eastern. The service improved and it brought money back to the Exchequer. That worked then, and I see no evidence why it would not work in future.

Of course, hon. Members can point fingers at each other—I will be pointing fingers at the Government—but we must try to resolve this without preconditions. That means getting the unions around the table. We must not say that they are welcome around the table only when they have called off their strike. The Government have not got them around the table and we need to make sure that that is done.

If I was a headteacher in a school and had to send my children home because I could not organise supply cover, I would be blamed—not the teachers or the supply teacher who did not turn up. The blame needs to be on the management and on the Government. They need to step up. Our constituents are suffering every single day because of their failings.

6.35 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I congratulate you, Madam Deputy Speaker, on taking your place.

When I was first elected two years ago, I was campaigning to bring a number of extra train services to Sutton, including by extending the London Overground, but I

[Paul Scully]

was rightly told by many passengers—mainly Thameslink passengers, at that time—that they just wanted the trains that were already there to run on time. If we fast forward to today, the complaints about Thameslink in my postbag and my inbox have been clearly overtaken by complaints about Southern. One thing that I knew I was going to hate about being elected as an MP was the return to commuting, which I had not done for a little while. I have been furiously tweeting about the complaints I have received and about my own experience. I even missed a “meet the manager” event at London Victoria station, because I could not get there on one of its trains.

It is predominantly the Brighton main line that causes a lot of the problems in terms of infrastructure and poor linkages. A lot of the problems start when Sutton services link at Selhurst. That is where we need investment. All the trains that go through Sutton at the moment are driver-only operated, and they all work reasonably well until they get to that point.

In the short time I have to speak, I would like to make four points on how we need to sort this out. No one component, institution or organisation in this dispute has come out of it particularly well. The Department has to my mind built up a very unwieldy agreement that takes up 22% or 23% of the entire rail network within its structure. I would like that to be addressed when the franchise is up for renewal.

I would like the Mayor of London to have a greater say in the management of the suburban lines. Now, that is not the Kent line or the Sussex line.

Henry Smith: I am glad my hon. Friend is clarifying the fact that he does not include in that the Sussex, Surrey or Kent lines, because of course we do not have a chance to vote for the Mayor of London.

Paul Scully: I totally agree and I was very specific about that. The Mayor of London did himself no favours by overstepping that mark.

We need, with the congestion on the lines and the poor quality of the rail, to invest in the lines. The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) talked about the time it takes to get to Mitcham Eastfields. That is great in theory, but sometimes the trains go so slowly. Today, I was going to London Bridge and I might as well have been on a milk float, frankly, with the speed we were going—and then I might have even got a seat, which would have been a bonus.

Southern has been very abrasive in its approach to union matters, especially at the beginning. There are clearly too few carriages so we often have breakdowns, and there are too few drivers, hence the staff shortages, but we must come back to the unions. That is for no other reason than that they are the pressing issue. Chris Gibb said:

“The fact that nobody is being made redundant or losing pay against their wishes, that there will be more GTR trains operating with two people on board, and that safe Driver Only Operation is already extensive in GTR, the UK and Europe, just serves to make this dispute more difficult to comprehend, especially for passengers.”

Let us work backwards and get the unions around the table. Let us sort out this dispute and get a terrible service back to being just an incredibly poor service.

From there, we can then make it to the next stage and get it to be a good service. As we have heard, the punctuality figures are starting to come up at the end of the dispute as drivers and new carriages are starting to come on stream. Let us get the £300 million investment in and, when the franchise comes up for renewal, let us look at it in the round and break it up so that it will be more manageable.

6.39 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for calling me, Madam Deputy Speaker. I welcome you to the Chair, and thank you for chairing the debate. May I also put on record my proud relationship with working people through the trade unions, and declare my interest in that regard?

Today’s debate started abysmally. The Secretary of State for Transport failed to mention safety or access for disabled people once. His prejudices against working people came to the fore, clearly not from a party for working people. Thankfully, my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) brought us back to the Gibb report, and we heard a total of 19 contributions.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) for highlighting the consequences of brittle rostering and the problems caused by level crossings. My hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker) spoke of the bullying that drivers experienced in attempts to make them come to work on their days off. My hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) called for humility, and a focus on the breadth of the issues in the Gibb report. He also identified the Government’s failure of leadership. My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) talked of rail chaos, but stressed that it was not due to industrial action. My hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle), who made the 18th contribution, focused on the issue of disability access.

The scene was set for the perfect storm. Today we have heard about the consequences for constituents, the industry and staff. Ageing infrastructure is failing because of a lack of resources and critical management to address vital maintenance. Heavy demand and over-capacity manifest themselves in overcrowding. New working practices—new timetables, new commencement of routes, new trains and technological advances—have been recommended, but there has been no strategic co-ordination to date. Above all, we have failed and fragmented franchises. Collaboration and strategic oversight were the last considerations, and the very worst outcomes from a profit-driven privatisation process have been apparent. Putting profit before passengers has resulted in their paying heavily: financially, for their tickets; in terms of the worst effects of overcrowding; and—Mr Gibb mentions this at every turn—in terms of having to deal with the complete unpredictability of the service. It has been utterly chaotic. The buck stops with the Government and the Secretary of State, whom even the courts have now told to exercise his force majeure to find a resolution.

It has all been matched by a safety-critical industry. Staff rightly fear that they will find themselves before an inquest following an incident involving a passenger, for whatever reason—perhaps because the technology has missed what a second, human, eye would see. It is all happening in a high-risk setting in which there is the

potential for an accident, a landslide or terrorism, and the possibility of a driver or passenger falling ill, antisocial behaviour, or some other incident. Those with disabilities are pushed to the back of the queue when it comes to ensuring that people's needs are met throughout their journey. As we have heard, only 3% of trains do not have a second safety-critical member of staff. We have to wonder why the Government cannot resolve this dispute, and give priority to the dignity of a disabled person who could be left on a platform.

All this is happening in a charged industrial environment in which the Government's agents, and the Government themselves, have declared that rather than resolving the dispute, which would be easy to do, they are deliberately trying to fuel it—

Jeremy Quin: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachael Maskell: I do not have time.

They are deliberately trying to fuel the dispute owing to their ideological aversion to trade unions—wanting to “break them”, in the words of Mr. Wilkinson, the Department for Transport official—as opposed to listening and addressing the real concerns that have been raised and are apparent for all others to see.

The stakes are high, and the Gibb report, although conflicted, recognises that. It is a serious attempt to analyse the multiple problems with the network, focusing on 10 different areas of failure, and then bring those findings together.

Cutting through the layers of self-interest—and no part of the network comes out particularly well—Gibb's recommendations have sought to put passengers at the centre and he has pragmatically analysed the steps that need to be taken to build one Southern rail service which collaborates across operators, infrastructure bodies, the regulator and contracted services such as maintenance companies, with a reform programme that not only challenges behaviours, but sets a template for the industry to refocus.

The immense task set requires all parties to take a step back and listen to what Gibb is actually saying between the lines of text. This is an immense challenge. There has to be transition. Problem solving and working together is the only way through this and a new approach must be adopted by all. There has to be space for everyone to raise their concerns and, instead of being met by a wall of denial, a bit more flexibility would provide a win for everyone. When people talk about staff shortages, that must be addressed; and when people talk about safety challenges, they must be heard.

I want to return to the fact that we live in critical times and throw this challenge down to the Government. Technology is advancing at a pace, and this is something that we can be immensely proud of. Over the next decade, engineering and digitalisation across the rail industry will take us to new places that even today are unimaginable. But the rail industry is ultimately about people and, as we progress from generation to generation, the reassurances we seek do not change. In a safety-critical environment, passengers want safety guaranteed.

Incidents do occur, and I will never forget working in intensive care as the Potters Bar tragedy happened, and the carnage that I faced as a clinician trying to save lives and put bodies back together. Life is too important.

We lose 40 people on the Southern rail network each year through suicide. That is traumatic for our drivers and of course tragic for those involved. Passengers, or even drivers, take ill. Threatening and antisocial behaviour still occurs. Women can still feel unsafe travelling alone at night, as the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) reminded us—and I note that there is no woman's voice in the Secretary of State's team; perhaps that would have been helpful to understand those safety-critical issues.

Terrorism is now a reality that hovers in all of our minds. Overcrowded stations and overcrowded trains do create risks. A disabled person may need assistance, not just with boarding and alighting, but throughout their journey. Who will be the passenger champion on each train? Who will keep them safe? Who will have the vital training in order to carry out those vital tasks? Who will provide the second set of eyes to support safe departure and keep the public safe? Those are the real questions the workers are asking and the Government are refusing to hear, and these are the issues that must be addressed for the sake of the public.

The Government would never dream of taking away cabin crew on a short flight, and yet, on journeys which may take a lot longer, removing the one person who keeps us safe, can answer our questions and concerns, and can help meet our needs, is doing the reverse of establishing what Gibb is calling for: a passenger-centred service.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) said, none of us want to stand at this Dispatch Box and lament, “if only”, and recite that “lessons must be learned.” That is why Labour would build a united, integrated, safe, accessible and functioning service for the passengers, and we would also champion the rights of passengers.

6.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time in your new role. I also welcome the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) to her place as a new shadow Minister. Having had to face the Transport Committee on this very issue on day two of my job, I know the challenge of taking up this complex issue at short notice, and the hon. Lady has acquitted herself well in her performance at the Dispatch Box. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members across the Chamber for participating in this helpful debate today, particularly those whose constituencies are on the line of route—whatever party they represent—who have worked so hard to support their constituents and deal with the impact of the disruption over the past months.

I believe that we have to continue to apologise to all those passengers who have been affected by the disputes and the disruption. We have heard many Members speak eloquently today about lives that have been disrupted, jobs that have not been a success and people who have been unable to get the treatment they need. We have heard so many examples, and my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) spoke most eloquently about the impact on her constituency.

It is worth reflecting on why we asked for this report in the first place. The hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) seemed to suggest that I should have sufficient

[*Paul Maynard*]

knowledge of these matters to know precisely what was wrong immediately. I think we can all agree that Mr Gibb was a powerful and persuasive performer when he met the all-party parliamentary group on Southern rail, and I brought him in precisely because, in my early days in this role, I wanted to understand what the real issues on the network were. We were having an epidemic of finger-pointing, and I wanted someone with a lifetime's experience on the railway, in whom everyone on all sides had confidence, to come in and analyse the situation. I think that that is what Mr Gibb has done, and I was surprised to hear some Opposition Members express surprise that he had sought to meet representatives of GTR. I do not think he could have written a proper report without doing so.

It is worth restating the central finding of the report, which is that, were it not for the actions of the unions, passengers would have experienced a much better service. Ultimately then, the quickest and surest path to improvements on Southern is for the unions to refrain from their intransigence. Members on both sides have said that many factors lie behind the poor performance on Southern, and yes, there are lessons for the Department, but one thing is abundantly clear: when the service is not subject to industrial action, performance improves because of the actions that Mr Gibb has recommended.

Peter Kyle: The Minister is quite right to say that the service has improved over the past six months when industrial action has not been running. However, in the previous two years, service levels were falling without any industrial action taking place. The central finding of the Gibb report is that we need another £1 billion in the next period after this funding agreement. Will the Government provide it?

Paul Maynard: I will come to that in a moment. The hon. Gentleman has spoken sensibly on this issue, as did the hon. Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker). They both made thoughtful contributions to the debate. I will do my best to answer all the points that have been raised, but I doubt that I will succeed in the eight minutes remaining. I will do my best to write to anyone I miss.

Tim Loughton: I am grateful to the Minister for taking my intervention. I did not speak earlier because I missed most of the debate. I would just ask him to mention one thing that was not covered. We made a manifesto commitment to customers to establish a railway ombudsman to ensure that the operators are properly penalised when they provide a rubbish service, so that customers do not have to jump through all sorts of hoops to get the compensation to which they are entitled.

Paul Maynard: I am glad that my hon. Friend mentioned that. It was indeed a manifesto commitment, and it is my personal crusade. I am determined to ensure that we bring it in, partly because of what I have seen for myself in dealing with the issues on Southern. I have had meetings today and—as they always say at the Dispatch Box—I will have further meetings in due course. I believe that this proposal is on track, and we hope to deliver it as soon as possible. I am sure that it will be welcomed across the House.

We have talked about some of the wider pressures on the network. The £300 million investment that we announced in January was a specific response to many of Mr Gibb's recommendations, but I recognise that more will be needed. The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), who spoke for the Scottish National party, asked about the speed with which it would be spent. We made it clear from day one that it would be spent up to the end of control period 5—that is, until December 2018. That money is being spent at the moment, in addition to the £20 million he referred to. It is, for example, being spent on replacing old tracks, points and signalling. That is not just a matter of replacing bits of old kit; it will result in 15% fewer delay minutes and a more reliable and resilient railway.

There are other examples. My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) showed interest in high output ballast cleaning, and I can happily share with him that that is about replacing the ballast on the track. One might think that it is just a matter of cosmetics—not at all. Not only does it provide a smoother journey, but it reduces the number of temporary speed restrictions that increase perturbation on the network and make it harder to adhere to the timetable. Some £17 million has been spent on vegetation clearance, which may also appear to be a matter of cosmetics, but two of the five most recent incidents in the last control period that caused significant delays were due to trespassing. There is a clear link between vegetation management and the likelihood of trespassing on the railways, and that causes delays on the railways.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) mentioned the Uckfield electrification. We are well aware of that project, and we are looking at it closely to ensure that we have the best possible business case. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewes referred to BML2, and I know that the Secretary of State has met with the group and is urging it to carry on its work. Others have mentioned issues at stations. A particular finding about Victoria of Mr Gibb's is that we need single station leadership, much like that being developed at London Bridge. A problem at stations is when train operating companies and Network Rail are all trying to make different decisions at the same time. We need single station leadership at our major termini.

We also recognise—I recognised it on day two at the Transport Committee—that the number of drivers at the start of the franchise was inadequate. We needed to understand why that was. Some of it was down to unexpected departures—fine—but I wanted to be clear about what procedures the Department had in place to ensure that any franchise handover involved adequate driver numbers. I am delighted that we now have over 322 drivers in training across the GTR network, but it takes 18 months to train a driver adequately with the route knowledge they need to operate safely on the network. I look forward to those drivers being part of the GTR network, reducing the reliance upon overtime and reducing the impact of any ASLEF overtime ban.

As we have heard, performance has been significantly better when we have not been facing industrial action. Back in December, it was as low as 62% on the PPM measure, but it is now at 82.5%. That is positive, but it came about only because so many of Mr Gibb's recommendations have already been put in place. Many people referred to the benefits of smart ticketing.

I constantly urge GTR to do more with its key and keyGo smart cards, and I look forward to that benefiting constituents, particularly those in Lewes, soon.

The hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) mentioned the Thameslink programme, and my understanding is that many journeys on the East Midlands Trains franchise will be significantly shorter due to the new Thameslink timetable. That is why Mr Gibb is continuing in his role for the Department and is looking at the Thameslink readiness board, ensuring that all the different actors work together in that complex interaction, which will deliver a significant enhancement to the railway. I look forward to sharing more information with the hon. Lady. Mr Gibb's willingness to chair the Thameslink readiness board is a sign that an approach to rail where we use expert knowledge and bring it to the table ensures that both Network Rail—many Opposition Members seem to forget that it is publicly owned—and train operating companies point in the same direction and have aligned incentives. She also briefly talked about level crossings, which I take seriously. We must ensure that the Law Commission proposal does what it seeks to achieve, but we also want to address safety around level crossings more widely—not just how we close them more quickly.

We will continue to do all that we can to try to bring an end to the dispute. We have no magic wand, but some evidence that a resolution can be reached is that ASLEF and GTR met for 32 days and managed to reach agreement on two occasions. That proves that things can be done without a Minister having to sit in the room. They are actually grown-ups, and they can reach agreement.

Stephen Lloyd *rose*—

Paul Maynard: I am afraid that I have already given way.

In conclusion, a lot has gone on already, but there will be a lot more to do. There is far more to do to ensure that all passengers get the timely, punctual and reliable service that they deserve on this railway. My Department will work hard to ensure that that happens. I thank everyone for their participation today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Chris Gibb Report: Improvements to Southern Railway.

Business without Debate

ESTIMATES 2017-18

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 55(1) and (3)),

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2018:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £288,994,619,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 1083, HC 1119, HC 1127, HC 1128, HC 1138, and HC 1139,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £32,828,001,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £264,243,414,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—(*Mike Freer.*)

Question agreed to.

Ordered, That a Bill be brought in upon the foregoing Resolution;

That the Chairman of Ways and Means, Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer, Elizabeth Truss, Mel Stride, Stephen Barclay and Andrew Jones bring in the Bill.

SUPPLY AND APPROPRIATION (MAIN ESTIMATES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading

Mel Stride accordingly presented a Bill to authorise the use of resources for the year ending with 31 March 2018; to authorise both the issue of sums out of the Consolidated Fund and the application of income for that year; and to appropriate the supply authorised for that year by this Act and by the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Act 2017.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 4).

Neighbourhood Planning

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mike Freer.)

7.1 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I have been involved with neighbourhood planning since I first entered Parliament almost 10 years ago. I am the author of “Open Source Planning,” which has guided many of the planning reforms initiated by the Conservative party in government. When I was Parliamentary Private Secretary to my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), we introduced neighbourhood planning. When he was Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, he appointed me as the Government champion for neighbourhood planning, a role in which I was confirmed by the current Secretary of State only last week. In this role I have been to numerous Members’ meetings to discuss neighbourhood planning. I say all that to illustrate that I have some experience of this subject.

I will particularly address two groups of points this evening. The first is on when neighbourhood plans carry weight. The Minister’s predecessor introduced a helpful change—albeit only temporary, and it is currently subject to challenge—to ensure that when councils do not have a five-year land supply, those places with neighbourhood plans that allocate sites need only demonstrate that they have a three-year land supply. We also looked at changing the time when neighbourhood plans carry full weight and bringing it back to when the document is submitted to whoever will inspect the plan, but even that is not early enough.

Let me give examples from my constituency of why that time is not early enough. The initial attempt of two villages to put together neighbourhood plans was unsuccessful. Almost immediately, developers moved into the villages and put in planning applications, not for just a couple of houses but for large-scale developments. The developers did nothing wrong in targeting two villages that had not been able to produce a neighbourhood plan, but in other cases developers are targeting villages that have just started the process of putting a neighbourhood plan together, so that they can get in before the community can decide where it wants the housing to go. That amounts to sharp practice, as in many cases it forces a race between those putting the neighbourhood plan together and the developers attempting to get the planning application through. With more and more communities now moving to put a neighbourhood plan together, this creates a situation where developers are trying to beat a neighbourhood plan and to frustrate its intention by putting the housing where the developer, not the community, wants it to go.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for all his work on neighbourhood planning, and particularly for supporting and advising me in Mid Sussex, which is in exactly the position he describes. Does he agree that all the hard work and effort of our constituents in putting together these plans, voluntarily, needs to be reflected and recognised, as our right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) originally intended?

John Howell: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The thing we need to remember is that the people who have put these plans together are all volunteers—they all do this work for nothing and they all do it for the future of their village. I shall say a little more about that in a moment.

I should say at this point that in the main we are not talking about communities who are anti-development; we are talking of communities who want to embrace new housing for the long-term sake of their communities and to ensure that facilities such as pubs and sports clubs do not fall into disuse. They also want new housing above all to cater for younger people and families. There is nothing for the Government to fear here about being in the world of the nimby; neighbourhood plans have allocated some 10% more housing than it was originally suggested they should provide by their district or borough councils. From that point of view, they have been a great success.

An emerging neighbourhood plan can be a material consideration according to the national planning policy framework. The Department for Communities and Local Government’s own guidance suggests that factors to consider include the stage of preparation of the plan and the extent to which there are unresolved objections to relevant policies. It goes on to suggest that although a referendum ensures the final word, weight should be given to evidence of local support prior to the referendum and the quality of the consultation should be taken into account. I want to add that the consultation on neighbourhood plans is normally very good, which is why they pass their referendums with almost North Korean levels of approval, and this level of consultation goes on throughout the process of putting the neighbourhood plan together. However, in actual fact little weight is given to such neighbourhood plans until the referendum has been passed.

The findings of research conducted in Cornwall show that emerging neighbourhood plans should be given weight in the decision-making process, but that the amount of weight must still be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I had sought the hon. Gentleman’s permission to intervene on this issue, Madam Deputy Speaker. In my constituency, Ards and North Down Borough Council has initiated a regeneration plan for the area and also a neighbourhood plan, in that it has sought the opinion of the general public by holding public meetings. Is the hon. Gentleman telling us that the general public’s opinion is being ignored?

John Howell: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. The point I would make is that we have initiated a process whereby public opinion is taken into account throughout the process of putting a neighbourhood plan together, and that is reflected at all stages of the neighbourhood planning process. Whether that is the same in Northern Ireland I will leave for him to judge.

In the Cornish case, it is harder for the council to refuse permissions for proposals that conflict with an emerging neighbourhood plan, although this may have now been taken care of if the three-year land supply required for the neighbourhood plan areas still stands. But what this shows is how precarious the weight to be attached to neighbourhood plans really is, because it is

still for the decision maker, whether that is the council or the inspector, to assess the application on a case-by-case basis. There appears to be a great discrepancy between the emphasis given to neighbourhood plans by the Secretary of State and that given by the Planning Inspectorate. I suggest, therefore, that we need to put neighbourhood planning on a firmer basis.

The fact that there are so many cases where a neighbourhood plan has not been given weight causes great frustration. It is a cause of much frustration that so much work has been put into producing a neighbourhood plan and yet it has been overturned. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) said, that work is undertaken by volunteers, to whom we all ought to give our grateful thanks.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on initiating this debate and I agree with everything he has said. Is not the danger that if neighbourhood plans are undermined in this way, confidence in the whole process and the willingness of volunteers to undertake the process of putting together a neighbourhood plan will be damaged?

John Howell: My right hon. Friend makes a valid point. That is the last thing I want to see. I want neighbourhood plans to continue to flourish and contribute to house building and to the development of communities.

Of course, not all developers behave as I have described. Many follow what I set out in “Open Source Planning”. They try to reduce tension between themselves and the community and to work effectively with the community. However, there are those who play the game of getting in before the neighbourhood plan is fully made and frustrating the work that is going on.

I suggest that the Minister considers introducing a moratorium on new house building where a neighbourhood plan is being put together. To prevent communities from cheating and claiming that they are producing a neighbourhood plan when they are not, rules would be needed that show that the plan is genuine. There would have to be rules to make sure that communities are allocating sites for development, not using the plan as a nimby charter. That could be done by strengthening the guidance to the Planning Inspectorate and making sure that it is applied consistently, or ensuring that neighbourhood plans are given more weight when, for example, they include a list of sites or the initial consultation has taken place.

Although I say it myself, neighbourhood plans are a great success. They are giving communities a real say and responsibility for new housing by allowing them to work in partnership with their district or borough council and decide where that housing should go. Villages that were once hostile to development have become pro-development. A neighbourhood plan can take up to two years to put together and it represents a lot of hard work for the community—all done by volunteers—but so it should. It makes a major contribution to the future state of any village and cannot be written on the back of a cigarette packet. However, we have to make sure that the effort is not taken for granted or wasted by allowing some developers an opportunity to move in ahead of a neighbourhood plan. Anything the Minister

can do to strengthen guidance or advance the time when neighbourhood plans carry protection would be much appreciated.

One of the major things we need to do as a Government is to provide housing for younger people. The average age at which people acquire their first home is now over 30. As it was put to me, one cannot expect people to be capitalists if they do not have any capital. We need to provide people with houses to buy, and there are two issues here—first, the number of homes and secondly, affordability. On the first, I encourage the Government to move ahead with the consultation on the changes to the calculations being made by councils of their housing numbers.

I was part of the local plan expert group—I am localist through and through—and the suggestions that we made to change how housing numbers were calculated were not anti-localist. Serious problems are generated by the lack of an agreed approach to strategic housing market assessments, which have become one of the most burdensome, complex and controversial components of plan making. We set out detailed recommendations for a shorter, simpler standard methodology for strategic housing market assessments, in particular for assessment of housing need, with the aim of saving significant time and money, and—most important—removing unnecessary debate from that aspect of plan making. I recommend the LPEG report to the Minister. I know he is new to his position, but I urge him to read it. It would help if a table of recommendations and how they are being dealt with were produced by his officials. The thinking behind that uplift is that allocating more housing land will lower prices, increase development and improve viability. Of course, the sites allocated need to be actually developed.

This is not entirely a district or borough council problem. As I have said, neighbourhood plans allocated more houses than was originally intended. We need to encourage neighbourhood planners to look to the future of their area when they plan and to be part of the solution, rather than being held at a bit of a distance as they are now.

We can be more localist by stressing to neighbourhood planning groups that they can and should have much more say over the type of housing they allocate. The need in my area and that of the Minister is not for vast swathes of council housing, but for affordable market housing. It is not for more developments of four-to-five bedroom housing, but for more developments of genuinely cheaper one-to-two bedroom houses.

I want to suggest to the Minister that it is time to be radical about the future and to be ultra-localist. The steps we have taken so far have given only some of the involvement to local communities. That process needs to go further and bring neighbourhood planning groups into the equation, so that they may stress the types of housing in terms of the number of bedrooms, and have some say over affordability. Schemes such as Help to Buy have actually touched very few people—some 360,000. We need to find a way of involving local communities in tackling the issue of affordability or they will simply blame us that houses continue to be unaffordable.

We need to stress that this is a dynamic part of the planning system. It is very unlikely that we got it right the first time and we should have the courage to make changes as we go along and seek to expand the scheme as it proves to be ever more successful. But it is essential

[John Howell]

that we do not row back on our commitment to involving communities in the decisions over where the houses should go, what they should consist of and, crucially, what they should look like—their design. To that I would add that communities should also have a role in ensuring affordability.

7.16 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government (Alok Sharma): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) on securing this incredibly important debate on neighbourhood planning policy. As he himself has noted, he has made an enormous contribution to developing our approach to neighbourhood planning, and I pay tribute to him for his enormously hard work.

My hon. Friend mentioned his booklet “Open Source Planning”, which was crucial in informing the 2010 Conservative manifesto and the Localism Act 2011. He has played a leading role throughout that time as my Department’s champion for neighbourhood planning. He has also done an enormous amount of work in his own constituency to promote neighbourhood planning. In Woodcote, in his constituency, homes identified in the neighbourhood plan are now being lived in. It is a fantastic example of the real power of neighbourhood planning and of letting people decide where homes should go.

There are many other examples from around the country which have shown what neighbourhood planning can do to deliver more homes. Communities such as Winsford in Cheshire have planned for more than 3,300 homes. In Newport Pagnell, Milton Keynes, there are plans for 1,400 homes. I congratulate all groups across the country on carrying out this incredibly valuable work.

I am proud to say that thousands of community-minded people across England have turned the legislation passed by this House in 2011 into a reality. My right hon. Friends the Members for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) and for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) both noted that in their contributions.

Those community-minded individuals are now creating plans that make a real difference and are benefiting the places in which they live. My hon. Friend will of course be aware, because of the work he has done on this, that, since 2012, more than 2,100 groups have started the neighbourhood planning process, in areas covering nearly 12 million people. There have been more than 360 successful neighbourhood plan referendums, and over 500,000 people have taken the opportunity to vote on those plans.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I see a different side to this. We have big issues in my constituency, with many keen groups who want to create plans, but who are very cynical about the planning process. We have two particularly large developments. In north Abingdon, we have 950 homes on the green belt. In Kidlington, the development involves four villages that will coalesce with a plan for 4,400 homes—an enormous number of homes. Local groups are rightly very worried not just about infrastructure, but, mainly, about their voices not being heard. Does the Minister

understand that local people now feel very cynical about all levels of planning and that that is the main reason why they are not taking up neighbourhood planning?

Alok Sharma: May I make a general point to the hon. Lady that I hope will help other colleagues too? Local authorities need to consult their local communities in reaching these decisions on housing and, of course, they are accountable directly to them. The White Paper stated that we will amend national policy to make it clear that authorities should amend green-belt boundaries only when they can demonstrate that they have examined fully all other reasonable options for meeting their identified development requirements. The hon. Lady may well have noted that today the Secretary of State has launched a £2.3 billion housing infrastructure fund that is now open for bids from local authorities to fund much-needed infrastructure. I encourage all local authorities to consider this.

Let me turn to a number of the extremely important and valid points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Henley. I want to begin by making it absolutely clear that this Government remain firmly committed to neighbourhood planning. We all recognise the significant effort neighbourhood planning groups make and that is why we are keen to support them. The Government have made £22.5 million available through a support programme for neighbourhood planning for the period from 2015 to 2018. All groups can receive grant funding of up to £9,000 and priority groups, such as those allocating sites for housing in their plan and those in deprived areas, can receive up to £15,000 as well as full technical and professional support. The housing White Paper, which I know hon. Members will be familiar with and which was published in February, set out our commitment to further funding for neighbourhood planning groups in this Parliament.

My hon. Friend spoke of the importance of bringing forward the point at which neighbourhood plans start to influence planning decisions. As he will know, as plans are progressed they will gain increasing weight and our planning practice guidance makes it clear that decision makers must consider emerging neighbourhood plans. I will look carefully at his suggestion of changes to strengthen guidance to ensure that decision makers are in no doubt of the importance the Government attach to neighbourhood plans.

When the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017 comes into force, it will further strengthen the position. It will ensure that neighbourhood plans have full effect straight after a successful referendum. That is earlier than at present, when neighbourhood plans only have full effect after they have been made by the local planning authority. I can confirm that I have asked my officials to prepare the necessary orders to start this provision as soon as possible. The Neighbourhood Planning Act will also require local planning authorities to notify neighbourhood planning groups of planning applications in their local community. I know that many groups feel that that is incredibly important.

On my hon. Friend’s comments about a moratorium on planning decisions while a neighbourhood plan is being produced, I recognise his concerns about those who seek to game the system and I know that other right hon. and hon. Members have made similar points

in previous debates. I absolutely understand the frustrations felt by communities around the country when plans they have worked hard to produce are undermined. That is why the Government issued a written ministerial statement in December 2016 concerning an important policy for recently produced neighbourhood plans that plan for housing.

The statement sets out that relevant policies for the supply of housing in a made neighbourhood plan should not be deemed to be out of date under paragraph 49 of the national planning policy framework where all of the following circumstances arise at the time the decision is made: the neighbourhood plan has been made within the past two years; the neighbourhood plan allocates sites for housing; and the local planning authority can demonstrate a three-year supply of deliverable housing sites.

I know that all Members will agree that it is important that we strike the right balance so that we do not inadvertently create delays in planning for the homes needed. Of course, we keep these matters under review.

Sir Nicholas Soames: I welcome my hon. Friend to his new job and look forward to working with him. Does he agree that what is extremely important is, as my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) said, that although many developers behave perfectly properly, there are others who game the system? That is extremely prevalent in Mid Sussex. May I ask the Minister whether or not what he has just said will protect the district council and all those who work to secure their neighbourhood plans in the public inquiry, which will continue in late July?

Alok Sharma: The Government are absolutely committed to neighbourhood planning. As the new Minister, I am completely committed to it. We want this to work, and it is important for the communities that we represent. I hope that that demonstrates to my right hon. Friend the

strength of feeling in the Government when it comes to supporting neighbourhood planning.

The best protection against unplanned development is to get a local plan in place. The best local plans are those where the local authority has engaged proactively with the local community. A local plan provides certainty for communities, developers and neighbourhood planning groups. It also removes the pressure on neighbourhood planning groups to fill the vacuum created by the failure of local planning authorities to keep their local plans up to date. As my hon. Friend the Member for Henley knows, the housing White Paper sought views on what changes are needed to ensure that all forms of plan making are appropriate and proportionate. We will consider how we can further speed up the neighbourhood plan process so that communities get the plans they want in place as quickly as possible.

My hon. Friend touched on the wider recommendations of the local plans expert group, to which we responded alongside the housing White Paper. He made a strong case for the introduction of a standard methodology to assess housing requirements. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government confirmed earlier today in his speech to the Local Government Association in Birmingham that a consultation will set out further details later this month on our proposals for a new way for councils to assess their local housing requirements.

To conclude, I thank my hon. Friend for securing this valuable debate and for his ongoing contribution to neighbourhood planning. I have listened carefully to the contributions made by right hon. and hon. Members and I welcome further suggestions on how best we can support neighbourhood planning in practice.

Question put and agreed to.

7.27 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 4 July 2017

[DAVID HANSON *in the Chair*]

Persecution of Christians: Role of UK Embassies

9.30 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered persecution of Christians and the role of UK embassies.

Today is 4 July, independence day for the United States of America, which enshrined religious freedom as one of the most fundamental constitutional rights. Despite the fact that it is a celebration of victory over us British—every person in this room—it also celebrates the concept of freedom, which must always be celebrated and cherished. Today's debate is about the right to religious freedom and how the House can best help achieve that.

Both at home and abroad, conflict along religious lines remains a consistent feature of human life and a considerable barrier to building stable societies. Although religion is not necessarily the driver of global conflict, conflict often manifests along religious lines, and those who suffer violence are often targeted because of their beliefs or because of the faith group with which they identify. Even when certain groups do not experience violence, they can often be discriminated against in terms of work, education, healthcare and in many other ways that can limit their chances of improving their lives.

Although there are many complex and interconnected factors that lead to violence within a state, there is a correlation between states with high levels of freedom of religion or belief violations and states considered to have had low levels of peace or high levels of terrorism—the correlation between the two is clear. The Pew Forum Research Centre assesses that out of the 16 countries with high hostilities towards religious groups, 11 have low or very low peace levels and nine have high or very high incidences of terrorism, according to the Institute for Economics and Peace global terrorism index. That makes them some of the most violent countries on the planet.

I am very pleased to have secured the first debate in Westminster Hall in this new Parliament; I am sure I will be back once or twice, but that is by the way. It is important to have this debate. I should have declared an interest at the beginning; I apologise for not having done so, Mr Hanson. I am chair of the all-party parliamentary groups on international freedom of religion or belief and on Pakistan religious minorities, so the issue is very real for me. I thank Members for the turnout; there is a good balance here of Members from all parties.

A failure to recognise the role of religion and to promote freedom of belief will make much more difficult—if not impossible—the work of embassies and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Department for International Development and other

Departments as they try to build more stable societies. The roles of the Minister and our Government are at the crux of the debate.

I will mention a few brief cases that outline the depth of persecution across the world. It is sometimes good to remind ourselves of what we have that other people do not. People do not take note of our car registrations and take pictures of us as we go to our churches on Sundays, but there are places in the world where that happens.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Before he goes on to itemise some aspects of persecution, does he agree that in addition to the various departmental responsibilities and the good work that has been done there, there are various non-governmental agencies such as Open Doors and other groups that have highlighted the topic he is discussing today? They are to be highly commended for so doing.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. In the Gallery today are people with a particular interest in this issue: Open Doors, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Release International, Premier Christian Radio, and people who highlight this issue across the world. We thank them for their work. As my hon. Friend said, their work is good as well.

The Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch, His Holiness Abune Antonios, aged 89, has spent more than 10 years under house arrest. His continued imprisonment coincides with an increased crackdown on Eritrean Christians by the Eritrean authorities, 122 of whom were reportedly rounded up and detained in May. Many of those detained have been subject to torture—by being kept in metal shipping containers without water and flogged, for example. In May, all members of the Kale Hiwot Church in Adiquala were detained, including 12 children. Children are seen as a threat by some Governments, even though they are young. They are young enough to understand the powerful words of the Bible, but at the same time Governments see them as a threat, which annoys me.

Russia's Supreme Court in Moscow recently declared that the Jehovah's Witness national headquarters in St Petersburg and all 395 local organisations were extremist. The court banned all their activity immediately and ordered their property to be seized by the state. That is the first time a court has ruled that a registered national centralised religious organisation is extremist and banned it.

So-called Islamic State has led attacks against Egyptians on the basis of their beliefs, heavily targeting Coptic Christians since the attack of June 2016, in which Father Raphael Moussa was shot dead in North Sinai. In December 2016, 29 people were killed in a bombing near Cairo's St Mark's Cathedral. On Palm Sunday 2017, 47 were killed in twin attacks on churches in Tanta and Alexandria, and in May at least 28 Coptic Christians were killed when their bus was targeted by ISIS. Hundreds were injured in those attacks.

In February 2017, ISIS released a video vowing to kill all Egyptian Christians. ISIS is a real threat to everyone in that area. The House and the Government need to express solidarity with Christians wherever they are in the world.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): The case of the Coptic Christians highlights what this debate is focused on. It is difficult for people in Egypt to speak up publicly about the persecution, which puts responsibility on Government-to-Government relationships and the pressure that can be applied behind the scenes.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. We both had an opportunity to visit Iraq and to understand the issue he has highlighted. As he rightly says, we must speak up on behalf of those who cannot be heard and who have no voice. Today in this Chamber, we will be their voice.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I am sure my hon. Friend agrees that the persecution of Christians is nothing new. Those who believe in the biblical truth of the gospel have always been persecuted. We do not have to go to other countries to see that; we see it in the British Isles, where street preachers and others are told to remove themselves from the streets. If we live in an age of equality, that should be rectified.

Jim Shannon: That is a timely reminder from my hon. Friend. We do focus on Christians in other parts of the world, but sometimes we need to focus on what happens at home as well, as my hon. Friend said.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On the hon. Gentleman's campaign for equality and freedom of expression and on the British Government's advocating human rights abroad, should not the Government advocate the rights of homosexual men—for instance, those in Chechnya who are being tortured and killed because of their homosexuality—as well as the rights of Christians?

Jim Shannon: I agree. This debate is about the persecution of Christians, but I wholeheartedly support what he says. I have no issues with that.

Christians have lived in Iraq for two millennia, but are currently on the verge of extinction. Many have fled areas controlled by ISIS and other Islamic extremists. Overall, persecution in Iraq is characterised by impunity, the threat of attacks and second-class treatment by the authorities. The Christian population, which before 2003 numbered as many as 1.4 million, dwindled to 350,000 and is now estimated to be around 250,000.

As in Iraq, the Christian population in Syria has fallen dramatically in recent years, from 1.25 million in 2011 to approximately half a million. The situation in Syria is characterised by heavy persecution of all types of Christians in areas held by ISIS and other Islamic militants. In those areas, Christians are often given the ultimatum: convert to Islam or die.

Can you imagine, Mr Hanson? What would we in this House do, as Christians, if we were given that challenge? I would like to think we would stand firm in our beliefs. That has been the stark and cold reality for Christians in Syria, and they have fled from areas held by Islamic State and areas destroyed during the conflict.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I happily served with the hon. Gentleman on the Defence Committee. It is absolutely right that Britain should stand up for human rights and the right of expression of religion right the way across the world. Many from the various Christian denominations

in our constituencies believe that, because of our historic and cultural heritage, we should play a particular role in standing up for Christians' rights to exercise their freedom of belief or religion in various parts of the world. Does the hon. Gentleman agree?

Jim Shannon: We are honoured to have the right hon. Gentleman here. He brings his years of wisdom and knowledge to the debate. His words are exactly what we need, and I thank him for them.

Turning back to China—in my Ulster Scots accent, some of the words and names will never sound like Chinese—Pastor Zhang Shaojie was sentenced to 12 years in prison for fraud and for gathering a crowd to disturb public order. He was detained without formal documentation on November 2013, along with 20 other members of the Nanle county Christian church. Church members, lawyers and Christians visiting the family of the detained Protestant pastor were beaten, harassed and detained by hired thugs, police and Government agencies. In December 2013, there were significant questions about the fairness of his trial. Reports from the pastor's daughter are that he is on the verge of death after suffering various forms of torture while serving his 12-year sentence.

In Burma, following hundreds—probably thousands—of allegations and the co-ordinated documentation by Rohingya groups of mass killings, mass rapes and the destruction of whole villages, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights sent a team to interview Rohingya refugees who had recently fled to Bangladesh. Some 70,000 had fled. Based on more than 200 interviews, which is a substantial evidential base, OHCHR issued a damning flash report on February 3, complete with harrowing tales of the burning alive of elderly Rohingya men and the slitting of children's throats—unspeakable wickedness. The UN estimates that Burmese authorities may have killed as many as 1,000 Rohingya men in recent violence alone.

The Conservatives' 2017 manifesto declared that they would

“expand... global efforts to combat... violence against people because of their faith”.

In the recent Shrove Tuesday, Easter and Finsbury Park mosque attack statements, our Prime Minister said that we must take measures

“to stand up for the freedom of people of all religions to practice their beliefs openly and in peace and safety.”

With that in mind, I look to the Minister, with whom I spoke beforehand. I wish him well in his new position. I know that he knows the issues well, and I have no doubt that his response will be exactly what we in this Chamber want to hear. I am anticipating a good response; I believe and know from our conversations that that is how the Minister's mind works and his heart thinks. I would be grateful if he clarified what the measures will be, and I offer the APPG's assistance in taking them further. We are here to enable Government to take such things forward. We had a meeting last week in which we had the opportunity to hear from Government officials about how the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Department for International Development and other bodies work together. In his intervention, the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar) mentioned the Defence

Committee. I think there is a role for that Committee on where we go and how we can collectively work together better.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): At that excellent meeting with the Minister, it was important that the Members present stressed the need to take a cross-departmental approach and to explain to the British public why using taxpayer funds to tackle things such as the persecution of religious minorities abroad is important for security back home.

Jim Shannon: I thank the right hon. Lady for her intervention, and for her contribution to the meeting we had with the Minister. I think all of us at that meeting were focused on how we could do better.

I come to what I hope the Minister and his Department will be able to do. Will he ensure that displaced communities in Iraq and Syria are able to return home safely? I think that would be an aspiration of us all, but how will that happen? I am ever mindful that the Minister has just taken up his role, but knowing his history and past comments, I am sure he will be able to respond.

In the light of the above cases, we ask Her Majesty's Government to ensure that UK embassies are resourced to have a human rights focus incorporated in the work of the embassy and, specifically, to report and monitor on freedom of religion or belief. That is one issue we spoke about last week. In his response, the Minister indicated a willingness to make that happen; for it to happen, we look to the Minister for those resources. We need the people in those places to have the necessary training. If done properly, that will allow UK embassies to assess the appropriate time to intervene on issues of persecution, before they escalate too much, and will also allow embassies to assess the appropriate means of raising cases.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office toolkit on freedom of religion or belief has been sent to all FCO country desk officers and embassies to help in situations of persecution. The toolkit explains what to look out for in potential cases of persecution, providing a list of questions to check against. It provides guidelines on what can be done to ameliorate the situation. The toolkit outlines the methodology of response, but we ask the Government to ensure that embassies are asked what they are doing to use and implement the toolkit. It is all very well to have it in the armoury, but if it is not used or used incorrectly, we will fail to move forward in the way we should.

Embassies are due to take a lead in determining projects for the human rights and democracy fund. In his intervention, the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) referred to human rights. The embassies have the opportunity to address that now, and we need to be using the toolkit regularly where it is possible, necessary and applicable. The hon. Gentleman is right, and I support that wholeheartedly. Considerable consultation should be taken up with civil society and faith-based actors on this matter. That is a way forward.

Ensuring that FCO and DFID partners and projects do not discriminate based on religion or belief is crucial. We need the mindset in the FCO, DFID, Defence—in Government policy singularly and collectively—to ensure that discrimination based on religion or belief does not take place. That means ensuring that the UK is not

supporting any programme that provides humanitarian or other support to one group of people based on their beliefs, while withdrawing it from another.

When I first came to this House in 2010, there was a statement about the floods in Pakistan. I was aware from my own church, the Baptist church, that some of the people who were Baptists in Pakistan were not receiving the humanitarian aid that they should have received. It was discussed in our church the Sunday just before that, and it was coincidental that there was a statement. It was clear to me then that some of the authorities in Pakistan were withholding humanitarian aid from Christians. I want to see that stopped, and I believe the Minister will be able to respond on that.

In a world where nearly 85% of people globally adhere to a religion, if the FCO and DFID are to meet their commitments to promote peaceful, inclusive societies—that has to be the goal—they will need to engage with religious actors and communities, and support initiatives that build respect and trust between people of different faiths. The APPG on freedom of religious belief is there for those with Christian beliefs, with other beliefs and for those with no beliefs. We need to make sure that that is our focus. It is exactly such initiatives, led by local civil society groups, that embassies need to ensure are financially supported and provided with space to operate. Such programmes are crucial for breaking down tension between different religious groups, promoting understanding between people and reducing the drive and desire to persecute Christians and people of other beliefs.

We hear about what happens to the Baha'is in Iran and Iraq, to the Shi'ites in Pakistan and to those of other religions in Indonesia. We hear about what happens in the middle east—my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) and I were talking before the debate about how Egyptian Coptic Christians are treated—and to those in Algeria, Morocco and many other places across the world, such as south and central America. In all those places, our focus has to be on having a society in which people understand, appreciate and accept that others may have a religion that is different from the one they hold to, and that they must have access to education, healthcare and support for their children, and the opportunity have a business.

Julia Dockerill (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that clampdowns on religious freedom often go hand in hand with an oppressive approach to free-thinking in general, and in particular to the press? I have worked a lot with the Bangladeshi community, and in Bangladesh there are a lot of problems with sectarianism, which goes hand in hand with a vicious clampdown on bloggers. Has work been done with advocates of a free press, in a similar way to what the hon. Gentleman is doing?

Jim Shannon: I wish the hon. Lady well in her new position, and I thank her for that intervention. We need to look at what the media's role will be in the future. The media have a physical relationship with people and a critical job to do, and how it is done affects what happens in a country. We need a responsible, respected free press.

Engaging with human rights and faith-based organisations, religious actors and communities, and programmes of reconciliation will help to achieve the

[*Jim Shannon*]

FCO and DFID's goal of tackling the causes of insecurity, instability and conflict. There is a role for the media there.

I will conclude with this comment, because I am very conscious that all those who have made an effort to be here deserve to speak, and I look forward to hearing all their contributions. We cannot be responsible for the problems of the world, but evil triumphs when good people do nothing. I believe that, in this debate, we as Members of Parliament have a duty to convey our concerns directly to the Government and to ask for the help of the FCO, DFID and all the other Government bodies across the world. It is clear that we must use our influence to do something. We need to be the voice of the voiceless—those in the Public Gallery will understand that they are also a voice for the voiceless, as we are here. Our embassies and ambassadors have a role. I believe that, with respect to previous Ministers, this has not been fully utilised in the past, but it must be utilised now. How does the Minister think this will be done, and done soon? Every day that passes, there is a new case of persecution due to religious belief. Every case is one too many. Let us do today all that we can.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

David Hanson (in the Chair): Order. As is self-evident, a number of right hon. and hon. Members wish to participate in this debate. The wind-up speeches will commence at 10.30 am and I intend to try to call everybody, so it will be very helpful if Members exercise self-restraint.

9.53 am

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I will be mindful of your guidance and keep my remarks relatively short. It is a pleasure to be here at a 9.30 am Westminster Hall debate led by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I am a former member of the Backbench Business Committee, and it is apt that he secured this debate, given the number of times he has appeared before us.

It is very sad that we have to have this type of debate. Today, we celebrate—or remember, as some might say—4 July 1776, when the then American colonies looked to break away from a system of government that they thought did not give them their fundamental rights. Yet here we are more than 200 years later talking about many countries around the world where people still do not have the most fundamental right to come to God as they see Him and as they believe He is, and not to have sanctions imposed upon them merely because they disagree with the prevailing view in their local community or nation.

It is easy to think that we are just talking about Iraq and Syria, but Open Doors' great work shows that the countries where it is worst to be a Christian are North Korea and Somalia, closely followed by Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sudan. We know about Daesh's appalling crimes, including its genocide in the middle east, yet the countries that are the most oppressive of their citizens' political rights are just as oppressive of their religious rights. People's freedom of choice in anything is a threat

to the leadership of those countries. I hope the Government, through our embassies, will be active in tackling that mindset.

Anyone who is as strong in their faith as they claim they are has nothing to fear from anyone else's beliefs. The fact that there are other faiths in this country does not affect my Christian faith. I am free to believe what I wish to believe, without feeling threatened by the fact that some other people believe something else. We need to promote that to ensure that other nations start to understand that this is not about our requiring them to convert or change their beliefs, but about giving people the fundamental right to choose what they believe and to approach God in their own way. That right, which seems literally God-given in this country, is sadly so precious in others.

On Friday my church, St Matthias in Torquay, will be hosting the south-west Open Doors evening of prayer. We will be reflecting on the fact that every Sunday we take for granted the ability to go to church without fear and without worrying if our employer will fire us or if the state will want to interview us about why we were there. We hope many other Christians will soon be able to enjoy that right.

I am delighted we have had the chance to debate this issue. Just standing here and bearing witness for those who are not able to express their faith as freely as we can is as important as any action we take. I hope they take inspiration from knowing that there is again a debate in this House about this issue. They do not walk alone; their Christian brothers and sisters in this House are standing side by side with them even as they go through their darkest time.

David Hanson (in the Chair): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for keeping his speech within four minutes, which is about the time limit we have to have to get everybody in.

9.57 am

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted that my first contribution is on this topic. Having been away for seven years, my knowledge will be somewhat dated, but hopefully the spirit and the faith I have always tried to demonstrate are still there.

I would like to say two things in my very short contribution. First, I have always seen it as the role of MPs to take up the position of minorities in various parts of the world that are being discriminated against, persecuted and even worse. Secondly, I was pleased to go with Christian Solidarity Worldwide on a number of visits. Pakistan and Nigeria were two of the main ones, but when I was previously in this House I was able to go to Geneva to make representations on behalf of a North Korean who had escaped from that regime. Likewise, I have demonstrated outside a few embassies, including the Eritrean and Burmese embassies, because of the way their countries have deliberately persecuted not just Christians but all manner of minorities. The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) said it is a tragedy in this day and age that we have to have such debates, and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made that point eruditely.

My experience of embassies abroad comes from the country I was most concerned about, Sudan—now, of course, there is South Sudan as well as Sudan. Whenever

we went on a visit there when I was the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on Sudan, my experience was that the embassy was very helpful. It flew us about and gave us an enormous amount of time. On the third visit, the ambassador, Sir William Patey, went beyond the call of duty. My only criticism of him is that he went on to become chairman of Swindon Town Football Club, who are our rivals—I am a former chairman of Forest Green Rovers—so he went on to do things that were not as good as those he had done as an ambassador.

It is vital for the role of the embassy team to do research, to make representations and, when it receives delegations, to ensure that those delegations can see what is happening, despite how difficult that is—at times in Sudan it was dangerous. It is the role of the embassies to ensure that that is carried out to the best of their ability. I had that experience in Sudan certainly. I do not know what it is like now, although I imagine it is even more difficult. To my mind, that is why we as parliamentarians have a role to play. When we make such visits, which are important, we must ensure that the embassies make our visits not so much seamless but as instrumental as possible in enabling us to obtain information that we can bring back to debate and on which, we hope, we can make some representations to our own Government.

10.1 am

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Thank you, Mr Hanson, for calling me because I omitted to put in to speak last night, for which I apologise. It was an oversight, but one that I should not have committed.

An interesting cross-section of Members of Parliament is in attendance to support my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) who, as chair of the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief, had the foresight to call for this debate. We welcome to the Chamber new Members who are showing their concern for the persecuted, and returning Members who we know through their faith will take a stand for the persecuted. As my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) so eloquently put it, we are all here to show our solidarity, and that is the important point. Some Members may not even speak, but we are numerous and we wish the persecuted out there to know that.

I will focus briefly on the role of the Foreign Office and embassies. Thanks to the foresight of my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford, we were lucky enough to have Lord Ahmad speak to the all-party group. He underlined the fact that freedom of religious belief is a priority for the Foreign Office, but in welcoming my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field) to his new role as Minister for Asia and the Pacific, I want to inquisition him about what that means in practice.

We are delighted that the Foreign Office has reissued its toolkit and that there are guidelines for every embassy around the world about what they should be doing to make freedom of religious belief a priority. We want to be absolutely sure, however, that that book of guidelines does not sit on the shelf gathering dust. I urge the Minister to give us answers in the debate, if he can, so I am interested to know what percentage of the discretionary funds that embassies have to spend on local projects is

in fact spent on projects to support the freedom of religious belief. I want to know whether, in practice, the Foreign Office thinks in such terms, when some countries—16 in particular, as my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford said—are seeing a rise in the persecution of Christians.

The background is one of increasing persecution of Christians in parts of the world where we are significant donors of aid. How recently has the Foreign Office had a systematic review of its human rights interventions to assist persecuted Christians? We may not get the answer in the debate, but perhaps it will be possible to give interested Members some hard evidence of freedom of religious belief being made a priority.

I will finish by focusing on a test case. On behalf of the Church of England, of which I am the Second Church Estates Commissioner, may I ask where the Foreign Office is taking bilateral decisive action? We are looking closely at a recent case that occurred on 10 June in Pakistan, which is the second largest recipient of our overseas aid. The Pakistani anti-terrorism court convicted Taimoor Raza of committing blasphemy on Facebook and he has been given the death penalty. It is the first time that someone has been charged under article 295C of Pakistan's penal code, which makes blasphemy on social media an offence. I cannot help but contrast that with restrictions that are not in place in other parts of the world, including at home—not that I wish anyone to go that far, but I would like to see some better policing of social media.

The Church of England will be paying close attention to that case. The Bishop of Coventry has tabled a series of written questions to highlight it. I, too, have a request, although it may be one that needs to be left pending, because it needs time for a response—we would all like to see what, in practice, it means to make freedom of religious belief a priority.

10.5 am

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for bringing this extremely important debate before the House: the first debate of the Parliament in Westminster Hall—

Jim Shannon: The first of many.

Dr Cameron: Yes—the first of many, I am sure. I commend the hon. Gentleman on his 4 July tie, which has brought a great splash of colour to Westminster Hall. I must declare an interest in this important debate: I am a practising Christian and a member of the all-party parliamentary group on Christians in Parliament.

As we have heard, individuals are persecuted throughout the world for a variety of religious beliefs, not just for Christianity. It is important to stand up for freedom of religion everywhere in the world and for all religious beliefs, and to teach future generations tolerance of religious belief.

Only a few years ago, I enjoyed a family holiday in America—in Pennsylvania—and my children were able to meet Amish communities and to learn about other religions that we might not have much contact with in the UK. The message is that we must have religious

[Dr Cameron]

tolerance and teach our children it from the word go. That is an important lesson to learn and it will set them up for the rest of their lives, as well as giving them such interesting learning experiences. We can cherish meeting those with different beliefs from around the world.

I want to speak briefly about the role of the Department for International Development. I was a member of the Select Committee on International Development in the previous Parliament and we were fortunate enough to visit Lebanon and Jordan to see the good work being done there. Our aid money is helping some of the most vulnerable refugees in the camps, and I very much appreciated that work. However, when preparing our report, we heard evidence to the Committee that Christians are often fearful of going to refugee camps—they fear persecution and being singled out. They hide their religious beliefs in the refugee camps, and some are so much in fear for their lives and of the potential danger that they will simply not go to the camps.

In countries where we are working with refugees, our work in the field and our aid are important, but we must also ensure that we reach out to marginalised groups, including the Christians whom we heard about in Committee. They might not otherwise figure in our work, so might not benefit from relocation programmes such as those of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. I ask the Minister: what percentage of Christians will feature in those programmes and, wherever possible, will refugees from all religious backgrounds be included in our relocation work?

I have also heard from local churches in my constituency. At times Church groups can feel that their beliefs are marginalised in this country, too. It is extremely important for us to stand up and to say that all faiths have a place in society—their beliefs should never be marginalised. We are an open and multicultural society. It is also important that families with strong religious beliefs are able to access religious education where they feel that that would benefit their children.

I echo the request made by the hon. Member for Strangford: a cross-departmental approach by the FCO, DFID and so on to this very important issue is much needed. We must highlight religious persecution wherever it happens right across the world, but we should also effectively resource our embassies to monitor and ensure freedom of religious beliefs, and advocate that freedom wherever we are in the world.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

David Hanson (in the Chair): Order. Five Members are standing and there are 20 minutes left, so self-evidently each Member has four minutes each. I call Fiona Bruce.

10.10 am

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I welcome the Minister to his place and thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for bringing this issue to the House once again.

It is about five years since we stood here and spoke about this issue for the first time in a debate about the persecution of Christians in the middle east. I am pleased that there have been positive developments since then. The FCO has recognised that this issue needs to be addressed. There has been religious literacy

training for FCO staff, and the Department held an excellent one-day summit. Ministers now raise issues as they go around the world, and they come to debates. Lord Ahmad's appointment is another indication that the FCO takes this issue increasingly seriously.

However, as colleagues have mentioned, DFID needs to do much more. The FCO has led on addressing this issue, but DFID is way behind the curve. I know from trips with the International Development Committee that, in many parts of the world, DFID staff share embassy sites with FCO staff. I believe that they could do much more to address the serious and deteriorating position across the world.

In its most recent review of religious freedom in 196 countries, Aid to the Church in Need clearly indicated that religious freedom has declined in 11 of the 23 worst offending countries and stated that in seven others, "the problems were already so bad they could scarcely get any worse."

The tragedy is that, of the 23 countries with the worst religious freedom in the world, which contain 4 billion people, no fewer than 17 receive UK aid.

DFID has promised to "sustainably address the root causes of poverty and exclusion", but it will never do so unless it addresses religious freedom much more seriously. Lack of religious freedom is a root cause of poverty, displacement, violence and death across the world, including in many places where DFID operates. The 21st-century phenomenon of the rise of hyper-extremism is concerning. The hon. Member for Strangford referred to recent atrocities against Coptic Christians in Egypt. Hyper-extremism was illustrated graphically by a video released by IS in February 2017, in which it vowed to kill all Egyptian Christians. Hyper-extremism is a wrecking ball. It is primarily, but not exclusively, violent Islamic hyper-extremism. It is determined to do nothing less than eliminate all other beliefs, including moderate Muslim beliefs, and to develop a monoculture.

Of course, women suffer particularly from the elimination of religious diversity. That is why it is so important that we ask DFID to address religious freedom when it addresses sustainable development goal 16, which states:

"Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels."

DFID needs to be much more proactive. It needs not just to stand alongside civil society and deal with individual cases but to take a lead globally and, in countries where we work, proactively prevent civil disturbances where the root is lack of religious freedom.

I am afraid that, as I have travelled the world with the Select Committee, I have found that that is not the case. In Nigeria, for example, I had to fight for someone from a leading Christian organisation to get round the table at a meeting with non-governmental organisations that DFID had organised. It seemed that there was an elephant in the room with regard to civil disturbances that DFID simply did not want to address: religious freedom. That must change.

10.14 am

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I am delighted that you are here in Parliament, Mr Hanson, let alone chairing this debate. I welcome the debate, which the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) secured.

I hope Members will not mind if I refer a bit to the Bible, as I think I am the only former priest in the room. Chapter 19 of John's Gospel states that when Jesus was on the cross, the soldiers decided that since the robe that he wore was seamless, they would cast lots for it rather than tear it apart.

The fundamental point that I want to make to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is that human rights are a seamless garment: we cannot split the different elements that we try to stand up for—religious freedom, personal freedom, sexual freedom and, for that matter, the rights of women. In many of the societies that we are talking about, women are not allowed to go to school and be educated, to go on to university or to drive a car, and they are often treated terribly in their marriages. They are still effectively treated as a chattel, as they were in this country in the 19th century.

Although I fully endorse all the comments about how the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and DFID need to stand up to try to do what they can in relation to religious freedom all around the world, I differ slightly from the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) in that I do not want religious tolerance; I want religious respect. Tolerance always seems to me like putting up with people being different from me, whereas respect is far closer to the Christian gospel. I hope that the Foreign Office will take away the point that human rights are a seamless garment. We as a nation stand by human rights and the rule of law. That is a key part of what we offer to the international community.

If we simply focus on one element—freedom of religion—we undermine the historical truth of the Christian faith. In the Epistle of James, the answer to the question, "What is true religion?" is

"to visit widows and orphans in their affliction".

That is fundamentally what our international aid budget is all about. If we try to say, "We won't give you money if you don't honour religious freedoms," we fundamentally undermine what all the churches campaigned for in the run-up to the millennium: a set of goals to tackle poverty around the world. I am delighted that there is cross-party agreement that we should stick with the 0.7%, but that should be focused on alleviating poverty above all else, not on any other political goals.

10.17 am

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): As we have heard, it is right that our Government and Parliament stand up for the human rights of people of all faiths and people of no faith, but it is also right that, as a Christian country in which all are welcome, we debate this issue. There was quite properly an urgent question recently about the appalling treatment of homosexual people in Chechnya. It is right that, as Christians, we raise concerns about our Christian brothers and sisters around the world.

I do not think we have quite registered the scale of the problem and the fact that it is getting worse. The fact is that more Christians are being killed for their faith in more countries around the world than ever before, and the global persecution of Christians is getting worse, not better. Many Christians are being forced to leave their homes; displacement is a massive issue all around the world. That is extremely serious, too.

We have heard about the top five worst countries in the world—North Korea, Somalia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sudan—but it is concerning to note that the situation is getting worse, not better, in Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, the Palestinian territories, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates. It is a grim picture, so it is right that the Foreign Office and DFID, and the whole Government, take this issue increasingly seriously. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Minister; it is excellent to see him in his place, and I know that he will take this issue seriously. I hope that he will go back to the Foreign Office and convey the strength of the concern expressed by Members across the House, and that that will be conveyed to our diplomatic staff, who do excellent work on our behalf around the world.

Talking of the work that they do, major trade negotiations are of course coming up, as part of the Brexit arrangements. As has been said, freedom of religion and belief contributes not only to countering extremism, but to encouraging economic development in the countries in question, and to making them prosperous, so that they can be markets with which we can trade well in the future. The Foreign Office will be looking for trade deals with countries such as China, India, Saudi Arabia, Mexico, Indonesia and Turkey, in all of which there are issues of the kind we are discussing. I hope, therefore, that it will not be with a sense of embarrassment, or as an afterthought, that the issue of freedom of belief is mentioned in the negotiations. The evidence, as has been said, is that when it is properly dealt with, prosperity increases, here and around the world. Those things are not opposed to each other; they are all of a piece.

Similarly, one thing on which I think there would be absolute agreement across the House is that there should be equal access for everyone to the work of the Department for International Development. We would rightly be appalled if DFID aid were denied to homosexual people in certain parts of the world, so we should be equally appalled if it is denied to certain groups because of their faith—and if it is denied to Christians. I hope and believe that the Foreign Office and DFID hold to that line and enforce it, but I should be grateful if my right hon. Friend the Minister would respond to that point.

I want finally to mention a small practical point. I have the Open Doors World Watch List map up on my office wall in the House of Commons. It is a great little aide mémoire to remind us day by day how fortunate we are in the freedoms we have, and it would be a great thing for all the churches in our constituencies to have one, perhaps in the porch where people go in.

10.22 am

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I extend my thanks to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for bringing forward this important debate. Freedom of religion—the freedom for people to worship their God, however they perceive him or her to be—should be an absolute right. If any society exercises censorship over which God its members may worship, prohibits a particular religion or compromises on freedom of religion, that is a threat to all that society's freedoms.

The 300,000 Christians in North Korea are deemed to be enemies of the state, in a country where worship must be reserved exclusively for the nation's leader.

[*Patricia Gibson*]

Christians face being tortured and executed. It is a society that looks like something straight out of a George Orwell novel. In Somalia, the state religion is Islam, and converting to Christianity or any other religion is illegal. Indeed, the Islamist group al-Shabaab has stated that it wants to rid Somalia of all Christians. Those suspected of following Christianity are killed on the spot. In Iraq there are 300,000 Christians, and there have been public execution-style killings of them by ISIS—some of which have been recorded for propaganda purposes. Saudi Arabia, with its 1.25 million Christians, punishes conversion to Christianity with death.

India also has a poor record on freedom of worship for its 59 million Christians, and so does Qatar, which has 900,000—not to mention Pakistan, whose 5.3 million Christians are often treated as second-class citizens. Christian women and children there are often the targets of sexual abuse, and blasphemy laws are abused to attack Christian churches; those churches are monitored and often attacked. Even in the Maldives converting to Christianity means forfeiting citizenship, and owning a Bible is punishable by death. I could go on with my examples, of course, but there is not time. The list is unfortunately far too long. What a world we live in.

I want to add my voice to the praise that has been directed today to the work of Open Doors. It has often visited Parliament to reveal its World Watch List of countries in which Christians face awful persecution. Sadly, it seems that the western media frequently under-report such persecution. The suspicion that I have heard expressed is that that is because of a fear of offending cultural sensibilities. I do not know whether that is true, but I certainly hope not, because there is no room for cultural sensitivities when it comes to basic human freedoms. Persecution and violence are wrong and unacceptable, and we must all have the courage to say so.

While democratic countries celebrate their freedoms we cannot turn away as minority groups abroad are bathed in violence and blood. The UK Government and specifically the Foreign and Commonwealth Office need to support the efforts of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief. We need to ensure that there is proper support for the work of Open Doors and other non-governmental organisations that work on the frontline to help Christians who are persecuted. We cannot afford to stand by. An attack on religious freedom is an attack on all freedoms and we in the west, particularly, who believe in those values and take them for granted must stand up for them wherever they are attacked.

10.25 am

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hanson. I find myself in the familiar position of paying tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), not only for his leadership on this issue but for his diligence, once again, in Westminster Hall.

In the couple of minutes for which I intend to speak, I want to draw the Minister's attention to one issue to do with religious freedom that has not yet been mentioned, but which is still a problem for those who face it. In the Open Doors World Watch List that comes out every

year, the “usual suspects” are mentioned, and the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) mentioned some of them. However, I was surprised this year to see Colombia and Mexico included. I asked why it was, and it would seem that there is a problem with organised crime targeting religious groups—particularly church groups, and particularly in rural areas—and with the violence to which organised crime necessarily resorts to make its way, such as extortion.

Surely there is a role for the UK to help to develop civil society structures in those countries, to help with law enforcement to take on organised crime, in areas in which we have experience. For example, the hon. Member for Strangford and other Northern Ireland Members have been extremely supportive of the continuing peace process in Colombia, which has taken lawlessness out of some rural areas, and thus has, hopefully, helped the religious groups that have been affected. That was an earlier example of coalition-building by the DUP and others, which was successful in bringing peace to Colombia.

I ask the Minister not to take his eyes off the ball in relation to such criminal-based persecution of Christians. It is surely an easy hit for us to make, to improve the lives of those who want to worship in those countries.

10.28 am

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson, for my first ever Westminster Hall debate. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing the debate.

Although I am a new Member, I am not unfamiliar with the House, having been a researcher for my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). Often in my previous role, I would remark on how often the hon. Gentleman pops up in the Chamber, leading me to believe that he is the Member for Westminster Hall rather than for Strangford. However, in all seriousness I am grateful to him for allowing us this important opportunity for debate. He is a tenacious and diligent Member of Parliament and a credit to the people of Northern Ireland.

I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate. I shall keep my remarks focused within the parameters of the motion, but I recognise that there is persecution of people of all religions—and, indeed, of those of no religion at all. In particular I should like to highlight the plight of the Ahmadiyya community, which faces intolerable oppression the world over. I commend the work of hon. Members in that regard, including that of the all-party group on the Ahmadiyya Muslim community.

Like other hon. Members, I pay tribute to the sterling work done to highlight the persecution of Christians. I have been familiar with the work of Open Doors since about 2009, when I came to faith. I should declare an interest, as I am a member of a Baptist church. The profile of Open Doors, at events such as Christians Linked Across the Nation, led me to look more closely at the persecution of men and women of faith. Of course Aid to the Church in Need has also done excellent work, and I regret that for reasons of time we cannot go into that so much.

Although we value freedom of worship and religion in this country, far too many places do not. The prayers of many in the Church have rightly focused on persecuted

Christians who are being slaughtered at the hands of Daesh in Iraq. It is heartbreaking—sometimes, I confess, it is too easy to just turn off the TV—when we see the situation in Iraq: the sheer brutality of being a Christian in that region and, as has been said, its impact on women and children.

We know that Christian women in Baghdad and Basra have been forced to veil themselves in order to feel safe outside their homes and that greater pressure is being forced on Christians to observe Ramadan. More concerning is that Iran now exerts increasing influence within Iraq, and that Christian converts who previously followed Islam are said to be being monitored by the Iranian secret service. I will be grateful if the Minister responds to that particular point and clarifies whether it has been factored into discussions and considerations within the Foreign Office.

I have briefly touched on the situation in Iraq. The situation in North Korea also rightly garners a lot of attention and interest, but I will use a few moments to focus on a country of a lesser international profile, but which is still cause for grave concern: Tanzania, and particularly its coastal region of Zanzibar. At this juncture, I should declare an interest as the vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Tanzania. I saw that the chair, the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), was here; I pay tribute to his work with the APPG.

With a population of almost 57 million, and a Christian population of more than 31 million, it is perhaps difficult to believe that Christians could be persecuted in Tanzania—particularly given that they make up the majority of the population. However, radical Islamic extremism in certain regions of the country, including Bukoba, is leading to immense hostility against Christians. Again, I will be grateful if the Minister will reference Her Majesty's Government's efforts to discuss the protection of Christianity and the upholding of freedom of religion with the Tanzanian authorities.

The purpose of the debate is to consider the role of embassies in foreign relations and in protecting Christians. It is perhaps no surprise that, before I sum up the debate on behalf of the Scottish National party, I will talk about Saudi Arabia. For reasons of not only geopolitics, but also, in my view, trade, Saudi Arabia remains one of Her Majesty's Government's closest allies. I continue to feel that Saudi Arabia's inexcusable—I repeat, inexcusable—human rights record at home and abroad, including in Yemen, has far too often been overlooked by Her Majesty's Government. Quite frankly, the British state is far too quick to lower its flags to half-mast on the deaths of Saudi monarchs. However, seldom does a day go by without the brutality of state-sponsored torture, human rights abuses and murder by the Saudi authorities; no flags are lowered to half-mast in those cases.

I am greatly encouraged to hear of more Christian converts in Saudi Arabia—a state that, even today, can punish by death anyone who leaves Islam. However, the fact remains that Saudi Arabia is still one of the most dangerous countries on earth in which to follow Christ; today in 2017, converting to another faith is punishable by death. Christians risk arrest, imprisonment, lashing, deportation and, in some cases, torture.

Given that record, I have often wondered in recent months and years what exactly the UK is getting from its relationship with the Saudis—other than arms sales.

It strikes me that we are not exerting much influence in Riyadh when it comes to promoting our values of freedom and human rights for those of all faiths and none. In Christianity, the Bible commands us to turn the other cheek. However, in too many cases, particularly in Saudi Arabia, it feels as though Her Majesty's Government are turning not only the other cheek but, in some cases, a blind eye.

I will sum up some of the remarks from colleagues, who have contributed to an excellent debate. The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) spoke of the situations in Egypt and Nigeria. The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) was quite right to put on the record the situation in Chechnya. It is important that we consider that and that we do not forget it; it feels to me that it has fallen off the agenda a little bit, and he is right to bring it back up. The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) spoke of trade deals and the FCO's work, and I touched on some of that in my remarks about Saudi Arabia.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) gave a very honest overview of a lot of the country profiles. I was particularly glad to hear her mention the situation in Pakistan, because Her Majesty's Government have to hear that news. The hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) spoke of the situations in Colombia and Mexico, and it is concerning to see those countries coming on to that list of shame. I am grateful to him for bringing that to our attention.

The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) spoke about the work of his local church. As a new Member, it is important that I place on the record my thanks to my own church, which supported me as a candidate throughout the general election. I am particularly grateful to my pastor, Rev. Michael McCurry, for leading congregation and prayers during my election campaign.

It is good to see the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) back in the House and speaking so passionately about his work in Sudan. The right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) quite rightly talked of discretionary funds for local projects, and I hope the Foreign Office takes that forward. My hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) spoke about working with children and teaching them about tolerance. That is important, and is something that, as the parents of a two-year-old, my spouse and I are now looking at. Having had him not baptised but dedicated, we are considering how we teach our son about the role of Christianity, of religion and of freedom of speech.

I want to make sure that there is plenty of time left for the Minister to respond to my points and those from other hon. Members. I also hope that drawing my remarks to a close early will afford the hon. Member for Strangford the final word on what has been an excellent debate. I simply conclude by thanking him for bringing the matter to the Chamber and thanking you, Mr Hanson, for your forbearance.

10.35 am

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure as always to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. It is also a pleasure to sum up for the Opposition in the first Westminster Hall debate of the

[Liz McInnes]

Session. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for bringing the debate and for wearing that magnificent tie on what is American independence day. Despite the ruling that ties are no longer necessary for hon. Gentlemen in the Chamber, it would take away from the gaiety of the nation if he were not allowed to express himself in that way. I thank him.

The hon. Member for Strangford has brought a very important subject to this Chamber. He made the important point that worldwide discrimination against Christians includes not only violence but other forms of discrimination, including that relating to access to work, education and healthcare. We need to remember that discrimination is not necessarily overt and violent; it can be subtle and sometimes quite difficult to identify. In his introduction, he highlighted cases that we are sadly all too familiar with: the treatment of Christians in Eritrea; the declaration of Jehovah's Witnesses as extremists in Moscow; the attacks on Coptic Christians in Egypt by ISIS or Daesh—whichever term hon. Members prefer; persecution in Egypt, Syria and China; and the treatment of the Rohingya people in Burma. The list goes on and on, and I am pleased that we are debating the issue and that so many Members from different parties are here to express concerns.

The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) identified the work done by Open Doors. We have already heard the list of the worst places in the world to be a Christian, which includes North Korea, Somalia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sudan. My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) highlighted the role of Members in representing minorities, and referenced his particular experience in Sudan. One of our jobs as MPs is to highlight and speak up for those people who cannot speak up for themselves. I hope the Minister will reference that in his closing comments. I was very pleased to hear the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) raise the issue of Taimoor Raza, who has been sentenced to death for the crime of blasphemy on Facebook. I have also written to the Minister on that issue—I am sure that I am not the only Member to do so—and the response I received was that the Government are urging Pakistan to honour its human rights obligations.

At the heart of all of this is the role of the FCO, DFID and our embassies as part of our diplomatic mission. We have to be diplomatic in the way that we deal with these things, which may be one reason why it sometimes feels as though progress is quite slow; our representatives—ambassadors and high commissioners stationed in countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan and North Korea—have to proceed with diplomacy, which can sometimes look like inaction. I will be interested to hear the Minister's view on that.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) and many other hon. Members talked about the role of DFID. She also highlighted the important issue of Christians being reluctant to go to refugee camps; they might get help in those camps but are concerned about being discriminated against. Again, I hope we will get a response from the Minister on that. The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) also mentioned the role of DFID and expressed her clear view that it could do much more.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) made an important point about religious respect, not tolerance. I support that view. Tolerance implies that we are just putting up with things and not necessarily paying them due respect. We should use the word respect, rather than tolerance.

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) highlighted the important fact that in seeking trade deals outside the EU following Brexit, human rights issues should be uppermost in any negotiations. Those discussions should always take place in any trade deals we try to strike with other countries.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) highlighted that the list of countries the world over where Christians are being persecuted is sadly far too long. Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) mentioned the new aspect of organised crime that targets religious groups in places such as Colombia and Mexico, which I am sure will be addressed. We have to remember that religious freedom is a constitutional human right, and we in the UK must fight for it worldwide. It is absolutely right that we in the UK stand up for human rights and particularly Christianity. The right hon. Member for Meriden made the point that we must address this issue for our own security; that is really important.

We must not forget the NGOs. UK embassies should be given the resources they need to have a human rights function and to report on human rights issues. They should be given help with raising appropriate cases and implementing the toolkit. We must also ensure that the partners who we work with do not discriminate on the grounds of religious belief.

I would like to give the Minister a chance to answer the various points that have been raised, so I will finish with a quote from India's most famous member of the Dalit caste, Dr Ambedkar, who renounced Hinduism to escape the caste system and converted to Buddhism. He said,

"where equality is denied, everything else may be taken to be denied."

That sums up the issue of discrimination worldwide, on whatever basis. Christians worldwide who are discriminated against are being denied equality.

10.43 am

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I thank the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) for giving me plenty of time to address the important issues that have been raised today.

First and foremost, let me congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate. I am pleased to announce that his tie will be going into cold storage for the next 366 days, because next year is a leap year, but we look forward to seeing it in future. There is some relevance in his wearing that tie. Although many of us in the Chamber may feel that the ideals behind the United States of America are not as strong today as they have been at some point in the last 250 years, those ideals have been a fundamental approach towards freedoms that should be promoted across the globe. I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his important work and his consistent and persistent

commitment to the freedom of religion or belief, as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on the issue.

I hope that Opposition Members will allow me to quickly mention two former Members of the House who are not here because they lost their seats, David Burrowes and Caroline Ansell, who I think would have been here, playing an important part in this debate. We very much miss them, but I know that their commitment to Christianity means that they will play their part.

Like all hon. Members here today, I am appalled by the persecution suffered by countless millions of Christians across the world who seek only to practise their deeply held beliefs openly, in peace and safety. Here in the west, as has been rightly pointed out, those freedoms are all too often taken for granted. We need to utilise this opportunity, particularly on such a robust all-party basis, to make the case that has been referred to.

I agree wholeheartedly with the sentiments of my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) and the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar). Here in the UK, we rightly recognise that we have a special responsibility for protecting and upholding the rights of Christian communities across the globe.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) is absolutely correct that Her Majesty's Government should redouble their efforts to work on a cross-departmental basis. My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) rightly pointed out that there has been improvement, but Members can rest assured that I regard it as an important priority to ensure ever closer work between DFID and the Foreign Office in this area and, indeed, a number of other areas where there should be closer co-ordination.

Fiona Bruce: I welcome that. The Foreign Office and DFID work closely together, so will the Minister kindly assure us that he will refer his ministerial colleagues at DFID to the comments made by many Members in the Chamber today? DFID needs to follow the FCO's lead in addressing the human rights issue of freedom of religion and belief in a much clearer, more comprehensive and structured manner than it has done to date.

Mark Field: I entirely understand that, and I will come on to the comments made by my hon. Friend and my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden about that issue. They can be assured that there is, in ministerial terms, rather more co-ordination now between the Foreign Office and DFID, given that two Ministers are double-hatted. That will assist particularly in parts of Africa and the middle east where there is a part to play. I also will ensure that in the most evident problem hotspots, we make clear to our embassies the expectations about what we need to work towards.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden asked how much is spent on freedom of religion projects. We shall, during this tax year, spend some £758,000 on such projects worldwide, including in Pakistan and Iraq. We also lobby Governments across the globe on a regular basis. She rightly pointed to the case of Taimoor Raza in Pakistan—which has already come across my desk in the two and a half weeks since I took on ministerial office—and the appalling death sentence that has been passed after his blasphemy conviction. The reality is

that more often than not, or almost invariably, such a sentence is commuted to life imprisonment—bad though that is.

We need to have a debate about the issue that my right hon. Friend raised. She is quite right that Pakistan is the second largest recipient of aid from the UK Government through DFID. I have some sympathy with her view that we need to, in some diplomatic way at least, link the two. However, I also have some sympathy with what the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) said. I would be very reluctant to withdraw from any ongoing aid or development projects on the basis that there were concerns here. We should openly try to suggest, in a cross-departmental way, that a number of Her Majesty's Government's priorities, particularly in relation to freedom of religion, need to be an integral part of any ongoing aid and development work. We are spending significant sums of money, but a number of projects could happen in various other parts of the globe.

I very much take on board what my right hon. Friend said, and she can rest assured that through diplomatic channels, in our work between London and Islamabad, we will ensure that the Pakistani Government are made well aware of what we regard as being not just our priorities but their responsibilities in relation to DFID expenditure.

I want to touch on the issues raised by the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) about Colombia and Mexico and by the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), whom I congratulate on his debut on the Front Bench, about Tanzania and the terrible plight of Zanzibar. I have to confess that I have no data to hand about issues of freedom of religion in those areas or the particular issue referred to of organised crime, but I will write to both hon. Members once I have been able to get more information from our embassies.

I am particularly concerned currently about the plight of Christians in Burma, Iraq and Syria, where the Christian population has fallen dramatically, from 1.25 million as recently as 2011 to approximately 500,000 today. I recall my parliamentary visit 14 years ago to Aleppo, Palmyra and Damascus in Syria. We drove for a mere half an hour from the centre of Damascus to visit some of the ancient Christian villages where St Paul proselytised some 1,900 years ago. I shudder to think what has become of those ancient Christian communities today.

The right to practise one's religion peaceably—or, indeed, to follow no religion at all—is and must remain a fundamental entitlement, and the UK Government will continue energetically to defend and promote it. As a number of hon. Members pointed out, it is a sad indictment of our 21st-century world that we still have to defend that right, but we do have to, because, as we have learned, it is increasingly being violated.

In 2013, I spoke from the Back Benches in another debate, which I think was led by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton, about the persecution of Christians. The fate of Christians and other religious communities in the middle east and the north Africa region is complex and often compounded by their minority status. In Syria, Assad's actions have helped to fuel the worst sort of sectarian violence. Although at one point he was perhaps seen as someone who could stand up for minorities, the truth is that he has now shown himself incapable of

[Mark Field]

maintaining control of his country or of effectively countering the threat from extremists. In so doing, he has put at risk communities including Christians, Mandaeans, Yazidis and all other minorities, as well as the interests and safety and security of the Sunni majority.

The UK Government remain determined to promote and defend human rights more generally. Failure to do so has an impact on Christian and other religious minorities. As the hon. Member for Rhondda powerfully reminded us, where freedom of religion or belief is under attack, other basic rights are threatened too. It is in all our interests to promote religious freedoms and human rights more generally, so I welcome this opportunity to set out briefly what the Government are doing to promote freedom of religion or belief across the world.

Our activity is both multilateral, through institutions such as the United Nations and its Human Rights Council, and bilateral with individual countries. In the multilateral sphere, we strive to build and maintain consensus on this issue by lobbying other countries and supporting UN resolutions such as the one recently sponsored by the European Union. We also engage closely, through our extensive diplomatic network, with individual countries. We promote the right of freedom of religion or belief and we raise vigorously—if often, for obvious reasons, behind the scenes—individual cases of persecution.

In relation to Pakistan, which we have discussed, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs continues to raise the rights of all Pakistani citizens, including religious minorities, and did so very robustly during his visit last November.

In relation to Iraq, we remain deeply concerned about the atrocities committed by Daesh or ISIS against individuals and religious communities, including Muslims, Christians, Yazidis and others. We continue to engage closely, and with a specific cause in mind, with religious leaders both in the UK and in Baghdad and beyond. In the last financial year, we have provided £90 million of humanitarian assistance to Iraq alone. That takes our total commitment to £169.5 million since June 2014. A significant, ring-fenced element of that support will help to protect displaced religious minorities. I take to heart some of the criticisms by the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Carey, about the Government's approach to religious minorities in the middle east, but it is the case, as has been pointed out in this debate, that an avowed policy of giving preferential assistance to any single religious group might make it more vulnerable to discrimination in some of the more ungoverned spaces of the world.

In Syria, Christians, Mandaeans, Yazidis and other minorities, as well as the Sunni majority, as I pointed out, have all been victims of Daesh atrocities. Ultimately, as I think we all know, the only way to stop that abuse is to defeat Daesh, and we continue to play a leading role in the 67-member global coalition in that regard.

The hon. Member for Strangford and my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) were right to highlight the plight of the Coptic Christians in Egypt. They are a minority, but a very significant minority—some 8 million to 9 million out of an overall population of 90 million.

We have touched on Yemen and the treatment of the Baha'i community, and on the treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, which the hon. Gentleman rightly pointed out. Officials from our mission in Moscow attended the various court hearings there, and members of the Jehovah's Witnesses in the UK noted that the presence on the ground of diplomats from the UK had a positive effect on how individuals were treated and how the process was undertaken. We shall continue to monitor that case particularly carefully.

More generally, our project work overseas is an important part of our effort to promote and protect religious freedoms. One project is helping to develop lesson plans for secondary school teachers in the middle east and north Africa. The aim is to teach children about religious tolerance, religious acceptance, and the absolute right to freedom of religion or belief. We strongly believe that teaching children in that way is a vital part of promoting tolerance and respect at grassroots level and of helping to build future resilience against extremism.

David Linden: I note that the Minister has mentioned a number of countries in which work is ongoing, but before he concludes, and while he is talking about tolerance and respect, will he address my specific remarks on Saudi Arabia?

Mark Field: Yes. The hon. Gentleman will forgive me, but we are talking about a different debate, and I am sure that we will have plenty of debates on Saudi Arabia. It is also not within my responsibilities in the Foreign Office. I will therefore try to address the issues in writing and get my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East to do so.

Our staff in embassies across the globe are essential to the success of our work, and I hope that the debate today will help to redouble some of their efforts. It is important that we make clear the strength of feeling across the party political divide. We need to promote religious tolerance, human rights and religious rights, which are an integral part of our work. To support those staff, we provide training in religious literacy and have created a freedom of religion or belief toolkit, which was referred to earlier and provides useful information on addressing freedom of religion or belief.

In conclusion, I assure the hon. Members present of the Government's and, moreover, my personal determination to continue supporting, defending and promoting the right to freedom of religion or belief. We will use our influence to promote that fundamental right across the world and to support Christian minorities, including in the middle east, through our engagement in multilateral institutions and with individual Governments and civil society.

I thank all hon. Members for their contributions today, but I hope that the House will indulge me if I single out my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Dockerill) for her first contribution in the House. My hon. Friend is also my very good friend, having worked in my private office, most recently as my chief of staff. She has worked with me for 11 years and learned about all the bad habits of politics from me, and I hope that learning from those mistakes will mean that she has a far more meteoric career in this place. It is a pleasure to be able to mention that.

I also take this opportunity to thank all hon. Members here. Their often unsung work is an important signal of the UK's determination to stand up for religious freedoms and in particular for Christian communities in some of the most politically unstable and unpredictable corners of the globe.

10.58 am

Jim Shannon: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members, both new Members and those who have been here for a while, for their significant and helpful contributions on an issue that is very important to all of us—it is why we are here. It is good that there has been comprehensive political representation, from all parties, in Westminster Hall today. That has ensured that we have highlighted the relevant issues.

I think the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) summed up, in her response to the debate, the feeling of us all in this Chamber. I found out that the shadow Minister for the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), is a fellow Baptist, so there is more than just me in the House as a Baptist. It is always pleasing to see someone from a similar denomination in the House, and we wish him well in his new position.

The Minister, in his reply, summed up the things that we all want to see in place, and I thank him for that. He referred to his personal commitment to the issue, and I know that he is committed.

I will leave the last word to Matthew in chapter 5, verse 10:

“Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

David Hanson (in the Chair): Order. We must now move on to the next debate. I call Alison Thewliss to move the motion. Would Members who are leaving please leave quietly, including officials?

High Court Judgment: Benefit Cap

11 am

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I beg to move, That this House has considered the High Court judgement on the benefit cap.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hanson.

On 22 June 2017, a ruling was made in response to a judicial review of the imposition of the benefit cap brought by four lone-parent families who had three children under the age of two. This was supported by Gingerbread, Shelter and the Child Poverty Action Group, all of whom I thank for their briefings on the matter. The judgment was damning of this Tory Government. In my speech I intend to refer to Mr Justice Collins's judgment and I absolutely commend it to anybody with any interest in this issue.

Mr Justice Collins was quite clear in his findings:

“Whether or not the defendant accepts my judgment, the evidence shows that the cap is capable of real damage to individuals such as the claimants. They are not workshy but find it, because of the care difficulties, impossible to comply with the work requirement. Most lone parents with children under two are not the sort of households the cap was intended to cover and, since they will depend on DHP, they will remain benefit households. Real misery is being caused to no good purpose.”

In response, the Department for Work and Pensions says that it intends to appeal the decision. I find that truly shocking and urge the Minister to reconsider, unless she supports misery being caused to no good purpose.

Back in the Government's own assessment before the 2015 Welfare Reform and Work Bill, there was an acceptance that the policy of reducing the cap from £26,000 to £20,000, or £23,000 in London, would have a disproportionate impact on women. It even stated:

“Most of the single women affected are likely to be lone parents: this is because we expect the majority of households affected by the policy to have children.”

The Local Government Association says that this lower cap is being implemented without a full understanding of the impact of the original cap. I ask the Minister, what did they expect to happen? Mr Justice Collins found that the policy is unlawful and discriminates against female single parents.

The Supreme Court has said previously that the benefit cap breaches the UN convention on the rights of the child and that:

“It cannot possibly be in the best interests of the children affected by the cap to deprive them of the means to provide them with adequate food, clothing, warmth and housing, the basic necessities of life.”

Mr Justice Collins reiterates that point in his findings, stating in paragraph 40:

“the effect of the cap means that the children and their parents have restrictions on what can be provided by way of housing, food and other things that an average child should have available. Further, as the ministers have said, it may be necessary to try to move to cheaper accommodation to avoid the effect of the cap so that there will be an upheaval for the family. I have set out the evidence of the damage to both family and private life which the cap has produced and will continue to produce.”

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I commend my hon. Friend for her sterling work on this campaign. In her conversations with the UK Government, have they indicated how this policy is compatible with their family test?

Alison Thewliss: They have not. The family test would appear to be something the Government have said in some grand papers and then not implemented at all.

According to the most recent DWP statistical release from May this year, 66,000 households were capped as of February, up from 46,000 in November 2016, because of the lower cap being applied. Some 74% of them were capped only because of the introduction of the lower cap levels, and 72% of capped households, or some 48,000, are single-parent families. Some 79% of single-parent capped households, or 38,000, have at least one child aged under five years old, including 15%, which is 7,200, with a child aged under one at February 2017. At February 2017, 83% of capped households, or 55,000, had between one and four children, and 10%, or 6,800, had five or more children. That is a very small number in that whole pool of people, but those are significant figures and each of them is hiding its own tale of misery.

I am not even convinced that this policy will save money as there are significant consequential costs: the cost of bad debt to councils and housing providers when the rent costs can no longer be met by the tenant—that single parent in a household—who has been capped; the cost of court proceedings to go through the process to evict that individual and to reinstate the property after eviction and bring it back on to the market; and the cost of temporary housing for that family once they have been evicted and have presented themselves to social workers as being in need of housing. The LGA estimates that the cost of temporary housing is £2 million per day—£2 million per day that we do not need to be spending because of people being evicted as a result of this cap.

There are also the costs to children's services and mental health services due to the stress on families—the stress of not being able to pay the bills, of going into housing arrears, of eviction and homelessness and of all the other things such as maybe having to leave their homes and the support networks around them. There is the cost to the education of the children involved as they are forced to move schools. This is not just about the younger children, as their older siblings in the family might have to move schools and go to a different area away from family and support networks. All of those are costs, and we must bear them in mind.

Single-parent families of young children are forced by this Government into a no-win situation. They cannot earn enough via work because they cannot take on a job that will pay them enough to get out of the cap—they cannot take on more than the 16 hours that they need because they have childcare obligations to children under two. Some of the mothers involved in this case are breastfeeding. It is more difficult to go out and start work when someone has obligations to go back and feed their child, and we should not be forcing them to do so because, as we know, those early years with a child are extremely valuable. The families are also trapped because they cannot get enough support from the state. Sadly this leaves them with destitution, food banks and both physical and mental ill health. These are women who are doing their best and struggling to provide a better life for their children. We should be helping them, not cawing the legs from under them.

The Scottish Government's independent adviser on poverty and inequality, Naomi Eisenstadt, said yesterday that

“life outcomes are largely determined by the wealth and social class of one's parents at birth... it represents not just fundamental unfairness, but also significant waste of talent and opportunity for the economy and social cohesion of Scotland.”

I would argue that that applies more widely to the UK as well. By taking parents' circumstances and punishing them—not allowing them the means that they need to feed their families—we are stunting the life chances of the children throughout their lives. We are punishing people for the circumstances they are in.

The UK Government will say, as they always do in these types of debates, that the best way out of poverty is work, and that those receiving benefits should face the same choices as those supporting themselves solely through work. If those phrases are on the Minister's sheet today, I advise her to cross them out now. Mr Justice Collins stated:

“those observations are entirely irrelevant in relation to lone parents such as the claimants who find themselves in real difficulty in being able to enter work because of the need to care for a child under 2.”

The circumstances of the parents in this case are worth reading out in full, just in case those looking at *Hansard* or watching at home have not had the chance to read through some of the circumstances. The first claimant, “DA”, was

“homeless, living with her four-year-old son in a refuge in north London as a result of serious domestic violence from her husband, which led to her having to leave her council flat. She is due to give birth in mid-June. When living in the refuge, she was not subjected to the cap since it does not apply to those victims of violence who have to live in a refuge. It was submitted that she was not able to be a claimant since she was not a lone parent with a child under two and was living in a refuge. That objection has not been seriously maintained since she will become subject to the cap when she gives birth on leaving the refuge. Furthermore, I was informed that she has now been given emergency accommodation for those who are homeless which costs £247 per week. She has investigated the possibility of private accommodation but has found, as is confirmed by her solicitor who has made a statement based on her experience of dealing with many clients who are homeless or suffering the effects of the benefit cap or the bedroom tax, that very few private landlords are prepared to accept tenants who depend on housing benefit particularly if they are capped. As must be obvious, when she gives birth she will not be able to work particularly as she wishes to breastfeed. Furthermore, the council has refused to allow her to join its housing list since she came from outside its area as she was fleeing violence and does not have the necessary four year residence in the borough. She has been informed that when capped she will have £217 per week available for rent. She has mental and physical problems as does her son. She is anxious to work when she can.”

The other claimants are equally worthy cases and worthy of the attention of everyone in this House, but I would like to mention the last one, a parent who has four children:

“WBA has four children, aged 17, 14, 13, 7 and 14 months, the youngest also being a claimant. The youngest child was conceived following a rape by her husband: she has indeed been the victim of an abusive relationship over the years. She has since February 2017 been living in suitable accommodation, but the cap has resulted in a shortfall of £151.76 per week. She was able to obtain DHPs but only for short terms and with no promise that they would continue. On having been granted a DHP on 20 April 2017, the council wrote a letter dated the same day saying it had been cancelled. The way she has been treated has distressed her. She wishes to work when she can.”

I should mention another campaign that I am involved in, which is on the rape clause. This family will potentially lose the rights to child tax credit and universal credit unless the mother fills in the form to say that she has been raped. This is a family who are already under significant pressure. They deserve support, not further demonisation and stigmatisation.

The Government will talk about childcare. They will say that they are offering childcare to people, and that that is an important point. Actually, it is not an important or relevant point in this case. The money they are offering for nursery places is not for this specific group, the under-twos. The cost of nursery places, particularly for under-twos, can be prohibitive in a lot of cases. The childcare ratios for under-twos bear a higher cost, and some nursery providers will charge more for an under-two's childcare place than for a three or four-year-old's. Some nurseries do not deal with under-twos at all—they do not take babies.

There are issues of availability and flexibility as well as cost. If the parent goes out to work, they are essentially working to pay for the nursery place, not to bring extra money into the house. They cannot always rely on family, because they may have had to leave home and move to a cheaper part of the country so that they can afford housing—the Government have put them in that situation as well. They cannot rely on older family members, who might be WASPI women who have been forced back to work and cannot carry out childcare tasks as they might have before. This is not really a choice for a lot of these women.

The Government expect women to make the same choices regardless of their circumstances, but some of the women in the cases I mentioned do not have the choices that we would all like. They may not have a choice over their reproductive rights. They may have been raped. They may not want to have a termination. They may not have all the choices they would want. It is interesting that the benefits charity Turn2us, which runs a helpline, has reported an increase in inquiries about whether or not to proceed with a pregnancy, as a result of the benefit cap. That is absolutely appalling. The Government are forcing women into such choices.

The women in these cases did not become single parents by choice, but by circumstance. These things happen in life. We cannot always choose to end up how we set out in life. The benefits system should be a supportive safety net, not something that punishes women for their circumstances, particularly if they are facing domestic violence.

The chief executive of the Women's Aid Federation, who gave evidence in the case, mentioned that because of the perverse nature of the system, there has been bed-blocking in refuges. Women are not subject to the cap while they remain in the refuge, but the second they leave it, they are. That creates unfairness in the system: there are women who cannot come into the refuge because other women literally cannot afford to leave, since they will lose so much money if they do. It is appalling that women are forced to make that choice. It also forces women into making the choice of leaving in the first place, because if they know that with the benefit cap and with the children they already have they cannot possibly afford to support themselves going into housing—possibly expensive private lets—they will stay, risking their own and their children's safety. The Government should take heed of that, if nothing else.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It cannot be possible that any Minister listening to these cases could intend people to live in such circumstances. To be generous to the Government, is it not more likely that the ideology of austerity and of arbitrary caps is forcing people into them, through policy?

Alison Thewliss: Absolutely. The entire policy and the way that people end up as a result of it need to be reviewed. It is causing genuine hardship to no good purpose, as the judge pointed out. We need to look at the whole policy in the round.

The Government will say that there is the discretionary housing payment. Yes, there is, but the savings from the benefit cap amount to £155 million, while the amount put towards the DHP by the Government is £37.1 million, so there is no way that the money can be made up in that way.

The Local Government Association has found that the

“cumulative impacts of welfare reform are contributing to a...housing affordability crisis.”

The Government have a huge part in that. There is a lack of rehousing options for women. Where can they move that is cheaper than where they are now? If they live in a city such as London, they would probably have to leave it altogether, which would mean leaving the family, school and other support networks they might have. There is a lack of social rented housing, particularly in some parts of England. A lot of it used to be local authority housing that has either been bought under right to buy or has gone to housing associations or other areas where there is less control over it. Not enough new housing has been built in its place, so there are fewer options for people. Private lets are extremely expensive. When private landlords see someone who they think will not be able to pay the bills in a few months' time, they will not take them on. As the judgment states,

“the reality is that DHPs do involve short term payments and give those affected no peace of mind.”

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): May I say how grateful I am that the hon. Lady secured this debate? I would like to cite one extra figure: 3,270 children in Scotland have been affected by this cap. We have heard harrowing tales about individuals who have suffered because of it, and about the difficulty that the Government are placing them in: an ultimate Hobson's choice that single parents, predominantly mums, have to make over their children. In Scotland, 3,270 individual children are being made subject to this cap. They are under 18, they do not vote, and their parents have to make the choice.

Alison Thewliss: I agree.

The judgment further notes that inquiries were made “of local authorities about their practices in dealing with DHPs. Of the 235 who responded, none had ever made a permanent award nor had any agreed to make a payment before a tenancy commenced.”

So somebody who goes into a new tenancy cannot expect to get that payment, and neither can the landlord expect to receive it. It is not enough of an option. By their very nature, discretionary housing payments are discretionary—they are at the discretion of whoever the

[*Alison Thewliss*]

person applies to. They are also oversubscribed in many areas, because people know that they are their only option to try to top up an income that is dwindling as a result of Government policy.

The other problem with moving people to so-called cheaper areas around the UK is that those areas also tend to have higher rates of unemployment. People are not moving to areas where they are more likely to get work; they would get work in areas where rents are higher, because there is more demand for it there.

The issue of private landlords is particularly worrying. The judgment mentions evidence from the Residential Landlords Association and the National Landlords Association that

“private landlords are very reluctant to take on tenants who were capped and many would seek to evict such tenants.”

It is not even that people will not get a tenancy, but that they will be evicted from the tenancy they already have. That seems particularly cruel.

All these problems are avoidable. They are a result of Government policy, and there is a choice here for the Government. We are in a very different situation now from the one before the election. There is no longer a majority for austerity in this House. The Government have a choice. They do not have to waste further money on appealing the judgment. I understand that they have already wasted at least half a million pounds on other appeals relating to the bedroom tax and the carer's allowance, but they should not waste more public funds appealing a case that has already been proven to be an injustice. They should put their hands up and say, “There is an injustice here, and we will put it right in the interests of the children who are affected.”

The Government have a choice. The Chancellor has stated that the British people are “weary” of austerity. I urge the Government to do something about it for these women, for their children and for families across the UK. If money can be found on the magical money tree for £1 billion to prop up the Government, it can be found for women and children across these islands.

11.20 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Caroline Dinenage): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (*Alison Thewliss*) on securing this important debate on the benefit cap High Court judgment.

The hon. Lady is absolutely right to bring the issue to the House. As she knows, the Government are committed to building a country that works for everyone, and that means taking action to help and encourage people into work and away from a life of welfare dependency and to restore fairness between those who pay into the system and those who access it. We believe that those out of work should not receive more in benefits than many working families are able to earn. Before the cap, the Department for Work and Pensions disproportionately spent £10 million a year on just 300 families.

As the hon. Lady said, we introduced the benefit cap in 2013 at a national rate of £26,000 a year. Its aim was to encourage people to find work, and that is exactly what has happened. We did that on the principle that

work not only pays, but brings self-esteem, better health, better happiness and improved self-confidence, as well as much more opportunity for social mobility for children in such households. The evaluation of the original cap shows that that is what has happened.

Capped households are 41% more likely to go into work than uncapped households, and 38% of those capped who were interviewed said that they were doing more to find work. The original cap met its aims, but the change was mainly felt in London and the south-east. To spread the work incentives across the country, we introduced a lower tiered cap in November last year. It aims to build on the original successes. The new tiered cap is set at £23,000 for couples and lone parents in Greater London and at £21,000 for other parts of the country. That is an equivalent salary of £29,000 in London or £25,000 in the rest of the UK. We know that four out of 10 households in London and in the rest of the UK earn less than those respective amounts. That system is fair to those who use it and to those who pay for it.

The cap levels continue to provide a clear incentive to work. Households are only required to work part-time hours to be exempt from the cap. Households that claim working tax credits are exempt from the cap if they work just 16 hours a week for lone parents or earn £520 a month on universal credit. However, we acknowledge that the move into work just is not appropriate for some people. That is why there is a range of exemptions for vulnerable groups, including households in receipt of most disability benefits, carer's allowance, the equivalent universal credit carers element and the guardian's allowance.

We were disappointed by the High Court judicial review decision, which challenged the application of the cap to lone parents with children under the age of two. The Court gave the Government the ability to appeal, and we will be appealing the decision, as we strongly believe that work is the best way for people to raise their living standards. We know that children whose parents work benefit from increased life chances. They are less likely to grow up in poverty. Evidence shows that one of the biggest drivers of child poverty is long-term worklessness and low earnings.

I want to respond to some of the issues that the hon. Lady raised. The latest labour market statistics show that we continue to have a record number of people in work. In April, nearly 32 million people were in work. Evidence shows that work is the best route out of poverty. There are also record numbers of lone parents in employment. It is not easy. In life, very few people choose to be a lone parent, as I know. I never made the choice to be one, yet I was a working lone parent, making the same difficult decisions that lone parents, particularly mothers, have to make every single day.

An evaluation of the previous benefit cap showed that it changed attitudes and behaviours. One in five of all capped households went to work after a year, compared with just 11% of similar uncapped households previously. Importantly, capped lone parents were 51% more likely to be in work after a year as compared with similar uncapped lone-parent households. Those surveyed said that the new employment had brought financial rewards—some felt better off and able to afford extra treats for their children—and other rewards in health, happiness and self-esteem.

The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) talked about the family test, but he is mistaken about what it is. He has a far too pessimistic view. It is not a tick-box exercise, but a way of assessing the impact of a policy on a whole range of family measures. It is not in children's best interests to live in workless households. Children's life chances and opportunities can be significantly damaged by living in households where no one has worked for years and where parents do not consider work as an option.

Let us face it: we are only requiring people to work for 16 hours a week. Children in households where no parent or carer is in work are much more likely to show challenging behaviour by age five. Parental worklessness has been shown to be significantly associated with poorer academic attainment and greater behavioural problems in children aged seven. Growing up in a workless household is associated with a higher risk of being not in education, employment or training in late adolescence.

David Linden: The Minister is talking about the importance of ensuring that we do not have households with worklessness, but part of the problem is that the Government have done very little to tackle pay inequality. They are bringing forward a living wage that does not support under-25s. Nothing the Minister is saying reassures me that the Government are making any attempt to tackle pay inequality, particularly for under-25s. This Government will be actively discriminating against them with their false living wage.

Caroline Dinagen: I am afraid the hon. Gentleman is just wrong. Some 1.3 million people on the lowest incomes have been taken out of income tax altogether since 2015. In April 2017, we increased the national living wage to £7.50. That will directly benefit 12 million workers this year. A full-time worker on the national living wage will see their annual pay increase by more than £500.

One issue raised was that the benefit cap is forcing people to move. Our evaluation of the original cap found that very few households moved house. Where they have moved, the vast majority have moved locally.

I am particularly concerned about the arguments that the hon. Member for Glasgow Central made in respect of vulnerable women. Before doing this job, I was the Minister for Women and Equalities, and the violence against women and girls agenda is close to my heart. That is why I am delighted that the Government have committed more than £100 million to tackling violence against women and girls. Such violence is absolutely unforgivable in any circumstances.

We recognise that some groups, such as pregnant women, new mothers and victims of domestic violence, find it harder to adapt to benefit caps. That is why we

have explicitly stated in the guidance that direct housing payments should provide targeted help to women within 11 weeks of an expected birth and to households with children under nine months. Women who need safe accommodation, such as sanctuary houses, are prioritised. Housing benefit can be paid for both the home a victim has fled and the refuge or other temporary accommodation for up to 52 weeks. That 52-week limit is to avoid the blocking issue that the hon. Lady specified. It is also disregarded from the benefit cap.

In regard to Scotland, 7,300 households have been capped since the benefit cap was introduced. Of those, more than half are no longer capped, with 21% moving into work. The cap is having a positive impact. We can always find negative and distressing stories; when those happen, the hon. Lady is more than welcome to bring them to my desk and to my attention, but we have to look at the vast majority of people who have been assisted by the cap.

Both the cap and the policy limiting entitlement to the child element of tax credits were subject to detailed impact analysis throughout their development. We know that children whose parents work have improved life chances and are less likely to grow up in poverty. Parents receiving universal credit can get help with up to 85% of their eligible childcare costs. That is not just for children over the age of two or three; there is no minimum child age requirement for claiming costs through working tax credits or universal credit.

Our new childcare offer is backed by unprecedented levels of investment. Spending on childcare will increase to £6 billion by 2020. I was the Minister for early years education, and we are spending more than any previous Government on early years education and support for childcare. Finally, the flexible support fund can be used to help those working fewer than 16 hours a week with childcare costs for a child of any age, when those costs would otherwise present a barrier to work.

Lowering the cap emphasises the message that it is not fair for someone on benefits to receive more than many people in work. The hon. Lady may say that I should cross through those lines in my speech, but they are the most important. Even when claimants remain capped, they are better off from any work they are able to do. In some cases, a relatively small amount of work can be sufficient to mitigate the effects of the cap. For those impacted by the cap, we have made discretionary housing payments available to people who may need extra help.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Kurdistan Region in Iraq

[PHILIP DAVIES *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Kurdistan region in Iraq.

Mr Davies, it is indeed a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I begin by declaring an interest. I travelled to Kurdistan in November 2016 as a guest of the Kurdistan Regional Government and I am now chair of the all-party group on the Kurdistan region in Iraq.

It is three years since the last debate here on the Kurdistan region, and everything has fundamentally changed in that time. The Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), earned much respect in his first stint as the Middle East Minister, and his wisdom, experience and expertise, not least with the Kurds, will be major assets in his second stint.

I have visited Kurdistan twice with the all-party group, which has done much in its 10 years of service to improve and increase understanding of Kurdistan issues. I use the term “Kurdistani” because Kurdistan contains non-Kurds as well; however, I refer only to the Kurdistan region in Iraq. I will start by testing key points and end with the measures that I believe require our Government’s help.

My basic points are that Iraqi federalism has sadly failed and cannot be revived, because the Shi’a majority has no appetite for federalism or minority rights. The Kurds voluntarily re-joined Iraq in 2003, on the basis of western and Iraqi promises that Iraq would be federal and democratic. This exercise of their right to self-determination did not expire on its first use. They cannot be forced into subordination by leaders in Baghdad. In effect, Iraq has severed itself from Kurdistan—it pays no budget contributions and does not help Arabs sheltering there—but recent co-operation between their separate militaries have been very successful indeed.

The Kurds have rejected the option of making a unilateral declaration of independence and wisely seek a reset of relations with Iraq, which could be much stronger without the constant internal disputes between Baghdad and Irbil. Sectarianism and centralisation caused the rise of Daesh and could do so again. A yes vote in September’s independence referendum in the Kurdistan region will lead to negotiations. The west should help, not least over the disputed territories, and the UK should send observers to the region during the referendum. In any case, the west should continue to nurture relations with the Kurds, as they are a beacon of moderation and pluralism and support for western values.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. Does he agree that the Kurdish people have helped to fight Daesh and have been a key ally to the western world?

Jack Lopresti: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I absolutely agree. I will return to the peshmerga and the fight against Daesh later, but we owe the Kurds a huge debt of gratitude for what they are doing on a daily basis, including as we are here today.

I will briefly give some history. The treaty of Lausanne in 1923 led to the Turks formally ceding all earlier claims on Syria and Iraq and, along with the treaty of Ankara, settled the boundaries of the two nations. The earlier post-world war one discussions about a Kurdish state being formed after the break-up of the Ottoman empire, which had been nominally supported by the British, including Sir Winston Churchill, were absent from the treaty of Lausanne.

The Kurds have a long history of suffering second-class citizenship, and in the late 1980s they experienced genocide at the hands of Saddam Hussein—a genocide that was formally recognised by this House in 2013. From 1991 onwards, Sir John Major’s no-fly zone and safe haven protected the Iraqi Kurds from further attack by Saddam Hussein, and Tony Blair and George Bush’s overthrow of Saddam Hussein was welcomed by the Kurds as a liberation. Indeed, on my visits to the region I have personally been thanked for the British contribution to the liberation of Iraq.

The Kurds re-joined Iraq in 2003 and they have tried to make that arrangement work. They brokered a federal constitution, which was agreed by 80% of people in the Iraqi referendum in 2005. It enshrined a binational country of equals and, for instance, agreed a mechanism for resolving the status of the disputed territories. The deadline for that resolution was supposed to have been 2007, but it has still not been carried out. The end to federalism was demonstrated in February 2014 by Iraq’s Prime Minister Maliki, who unconstitutionally cut all federal budget transfers to Kurdistan.

In June 2014, Daesh captured Mosul, took a third of the country and seized sophisticated American military kit, including lots of vehicles and heavy weapons. A Kurdistan offer of help before the attack was spurned. Maliki failed in the most vital duty of any leader, which is to uphold the security of the state and protect its people. So the Kurds suddenly acquired a 650-mile border with Daesh and there was an overnight influx of Iraqi Arabs from Mosul, who increased the population by a third, straining all public services to breaking point. Daesh attacked Kurdistan in August 2014 and came within 20 miles of the capital, Irbil, which was only saved by immediate American air strikes and other assistance.

Then, a massive slump in the price of oil exposed the inefficient nature of the Kurdistan economy—massive state employment, little productivity, a miniscule private sector and an almost complete reliance on energy revenues, which now came through independent exports via Turkey. The Kurds faced a perfect storm of crises and came through, not unscathed but in one piece. This highlights their great resilience.

The story of how the Kurds eventually united with the Iraqi army against Daesh is instructive. When I visited the Kirkuk frontline in November 2015, I was told that there was no co-ordination, or indeed any communication, between the peshmerga and the Iraqi army. A year later, with western support the two forces concluded a deal to continue to drive Daesh out of Mosul, and I saw for myself the result of that deal last November, both on the road to Mosul and inside Mosul. This unprecedented military partnership came despite the historic bad blood and bad feeling between the Kurds and the Iraqis, which largely exist because of the

Iraqi army's chemical weapons attacks on hundreds of villages and the extermination of nearly 200,000 people in the 1980s.

I will not focus on the moral reasons for airing arguments for Kurdish independence; instead, I will address the strategic gains for the west. Once Daesh is defeated in Mosul and later in Raqqa, the key question is how to prevent any such force re-emerging and how to undermine the ideological and political appeal of such "vile fascism", as the KRG's High Representative to the UK, Karwan Jamal Tahir, has put it.

We have to understand why many Sunnis came to believe that Daesh was less awful than Baghdad. Many could not accept the loss of the privileges they had enjoyed under Saddam. Thanks to the Kurds, however, Sunnis joined power-sharing Governments in Baghdad, and their militias and tribes helped to defeat the al-Qaeda insurgency in 2007-08.

However, the immediate consequence of the disastrous American decision to withdraw all its forces, a decision favoured by Maliki, was that Maliki brutally repressed Sunni civil rights protests. Sunnis had seen how badly Shi'a politicians had treated the Kurds and concluded that they themselves could face worse.

The central task now is to eradicate the drivers of Sunni radicalism and protect minorities, who have suffered rape, murder and dispossession by Sunni neighbours, as well as facing the massive cost of reconstruction and the need for a "Marshall plan of the mind" to tackle the deep traumas of those who were raped in their thousands and saw their menfolk slaughtered. The Kurdistanis also need devolved governance.

Already, we see that the old centralising is in contention; and it would be odd—bizarre, even—if the status of Kurdistan was not part of the conversation after Daesh. There are those who say that this is the wrong time, citing internal division in Kurdistan, the starkest symbol of which is the paralysis of its Parliament. I hope that the continuing negotiations, which have involved our diplomats, will resolve the dispute. As candid friends, we must continue to put pressure on the Kurds, so that their Parliament sits again and there is a functioning democracy as quickly as possible.

The state of the economy is another reason why some people say that now is the wrong time for the Kurds to consider, ask for and seek their own independence. However, I take the point made by the Kurdistan leader and former Iraqi foreign minister, Hoshyar Zebari, that

"if we wait for all the problems to be resolved, we will have to wait forever".

I commend the reforms of Prime Minister Barzani and Deputy Prime Minister Talabani: aligning revenues with state spending and introducing better forms of identification of the work force, to eliminate double-jobbing and ghost workers. They have much further to go, but statehood could end excuses for neglecting reform and allow access to development funds that are conditional on such reform.

The Kurds reckon that old foes are weaker or amenable to a potential independence deal, agreed with Baghdad. Turkey, Kurdistan's major trading partner, could see Kurdistan as a major source of secure energy supplies, an interlocutor with the Kurds in Turkey, and a buffer between Turkey, Sunnis and Shi'as. Iran, of course, is

resolutely opposed, but it is, thankfully, under intense pressure from America and the Gulf states and has absolutely no right to veto Kurdish independence. Arab-Iraqis adore Kurdistan, as *Shimal Habib*—the beloved north—thanks to the holidays they have there, enjoying the temperate climate and the hospitality. But Baghdad has refused to treat the Kurdish region fairly or with any good will. As for the bilateral relationship, the Kurds see us as a partner of choice, and the APPG supports a bigger British footprint in Kurdistan.

There are three specific issues I would like the Minister to address in his remarks. The first is the peshmerga. The gallant, brave, wonderful peshmerga are fighting Daesh on the ground, and that helps to secure our own security, freedoms and way of life. One of my most moving visits was when I went to see wounded peshmerga soldiers in Irbil. Many seriously injured soldiers are beyond the capacity of the medical facilities and the health system there, and I have asked two Prime Minister's questions urging the British Government to supply a small number of beds at Queen Elizabeth hospital Birmingham because, as I am sure we agree, we owe the peshmerga a huge debt of honour and gratitude.

The second matter is visas. The visa application system is a vexed issue and the rejection rate has increased from 55% to 66%. We need up-to-date figures, and I ask the Minister to help with that. Entry clearance officers have perhaps three minutes to examine an application, and any small query means a no. One application was rejected due to a small discrepancy over claimed income, even though exchange rates had moved in the intervening days. Such issues are not clarified because we no longer interview and our diplomats and Ministers can no longer intervene to assert a national interest. We should, of course, police and secure our borders, but we must, looking forward to a post-Brexit world, encourage people to do business and holiday here, and not make it excessively difficult for them to do so.

Thirdly, on bilateral relations, the KRG's Prime Minister visited the UK in May 2014, and we established a joint committee, which was obviously then overtaken by events. When will the committee begin to function or a new committee be set up? I urge the Government to invite the Prime Minister or the new President of Kurdistan to meet our Prime Minister.

Today's debate coincides with independence day in the United States. The Kurdish people will decide in their referendum in September whether they, too, want to be an independent state.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I think I have been following the hon. Gentleman's speech carefully. Is he really saying that a vote for independence by the Kurds in Iraq would be welcomed in Ankara?

Jack Lopresti: What I am saying is that the moods have shifted. I am not saying it would be welcomed, but I hope that, looking towards perhaps more co-operation and trade, we might get a better response than we had anticipated.

We can be optimistic and helpful in whatever discussions and negotiations follow on from the referendum, but whatever the people decide, the UK and the KRG have a lot in common, and our special relationship must be nurtured and developed.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Philip Davies (in the Chair): Order. It might help new colleagues if I just let everyone know the format. I plan to give the Scottish National party spokesman, the shadow Minister and the Minister 10 minutes each at the end of the debate, so I will want to get to them just before 3.30 pm in order to allow the proposer of the motion to wind up for a couple of minutes at the end. I say that so that people can realise what timescales we are working to.

2.43 pm

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) on securing the debate, on his excellent and passionate speech and on being elected chair of the all-party group on the Kurdistan region in Iraq.

Unlike many Members here, I have not yet visited the Kurdistan region, but I have attended many all-party group meetings with the Kurdistan Regional Government's High Representative, Karwan Jamal Tahir, and others, to gain insight into the region. I, too, would like to thank the peshmerga for their bravery in resisting so-called Islamic State, and I am relieved that Mosul is near to full liberation from a ghastly organisation whose brutality is beyond reasonable comprehension.

Through the all-party group I have heard disturbing direct testimony about girls who were enslaved and raped multiple times but managed to escape. Sadly, I am sure that their psychological traumas will last forever, but at the very least they can be treated. I understand there is just one university department of clinical psychology in Kurdistan. I fear that the department will be overwhelmed by the anguish that will become ever clearer and more in need of urgent attention over the coming weeks. Therefore, I appeal to the Government to play any role they can in increasing the number of clinical psychologists in Iraq and Kurdistan. Those young women—those victims—deserve nothing less than being able to look forward to a future when they can at least manage their traumas, and so manage their lives.

We know that there are more than 1 million internally displaced persons—IDPs—currently accommodated in the Kurdistan region, as well as more than 200,000 Syrian refugees. Resettlement is limited because of poor security and the lack of basic services. However, the Catholic Church, working in the region, has played a significant role in helping IDPs and refugees since the beginning of the crisis. The diocese of Irbil currently supports about 70,000 people with accommodation, subsistence, education and employment. Many of those people are from religious minorities, including Christians and Yazidis. Cardinal Vincent Nichols, Archbishop of Westminster, has welcomed the Government's recent decision to extend the vulnerable person resettlement scheme to non-Syrian refugees in the region. I hope that the Minister can say what support the Government plan to provide, during this Parliament, for Churches and religious communities that are helping IDPs and refugees in Kurdistan.

I join colleagues in supporting the right of the Kurds to express their self-determination through the referendum in September. I commend the Kurdistan leadership's decision to ask the people for a mandate to negotiate

full independence and new relations with Iraq. I also understand the position of the British Government, as set out by the Foreign Secretary, who visited Kurdistan in January 2015 as the then Mayor of London. He visited British troops training the peshmerga and was even pictured alongside one of them with an AK47. He wrote that he had previously met

“a dynamic and forward-looking young politician”—

Nechirvan Barzani—

“the prime minister of the fledgling state of Kurdistan.”

He further stated:

“Then we should help because we have a moral duty to that part of the world. It was the British who took the decision in the early Twenties to ignore the obvious ethnic divisions, and not to create a Kurdistan”,

which he described as

“one of the few bright spots in the Middle East.”

I accept that such solidarity and the right hon. Gentleman's recent statement as Foreign Secretary are not incompatible, but I also recognise that the referendum will proceed. We will see whether the long negotiations achieve independence or a firm guarantee of equality in a new Iraq. It is not for me to say what is best for the Kurds, but I suggest that the UK and its diplomats use their experience and expertise to facilitate progress.

I want to highlight how the struggle of the Kurds has captured the hearts and minds of many ordinary British people who are practising their own version of diplomacy, and I am proud to speak about an example from the north-east. The Newcastle Gateshead Medical Volunteers have held charity fundraising events in both Gateshead and Newcastle. Its founder, Kurdistan-born Professor Deiry Kader, mobilises health professionals from the north-east to visit Kurdistan two or three times a year, to provide free orthopaedic care. He and his colleagues are literally putting Kurds back on their own two feet through many free hip and knee operations, which are beyond the capacity of the health system there, or for which people would have to wait many years. The charity undertakes formal educational events to raise the standard of surgical care, as well as providing blankets and winter clothing to the Yazidi refugee camps in Duhok. The charity is also building a connection between Kurdistan doctors and the International Committee of the Red Cross in Lebanon, to transfer war-injured casualties to the committee's war-wounded trauma reconstruction centre there.

Although I have yet to visit Kurdistan, I am an enthusiastic advocate of deep and broad links with our friends in the Kurdistan region, which is inclined to friendship with us and describes us as a partner of choice. The Minister has travelled to Kurdistan in his former official capacity and on an all-party group delegation. He was prepared to put aside Foreign and Commonwealth Office briefings to meet the passionate pleas of many Members here when the Commons discussed and agreed to formally recognise the genocide by Saddam Hussein against the Kurds. I hope his wisdom will enable him to understand that the Iraqi Kurds have a special place in British hearts and do his best to help ensure their freedom, equality and justice.

2.50 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. It is also an honour to follow the hon. Member for North Tyneside

(Mary Glendon) and, in particular, my genuine hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti), who introduced this debate and knows a huge amount about the region. Without sounding too sycophantic, I could not be more pleased to have my right hon. Friend the Minister back in his rightful position as the Minister for the Middle East.

I have been privileged to join all-party group delegations to Kurdistan—I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests—five times since becoming an MP. Kurdistan has its problems, but it successfully has the essential ingredients for a flourishing society. It is an extraordinary place run by a progressive Muslim Kurdish Government dedicated to improving property rights, boosting private enterprise and encouraging inward investment. Unusually for that part of the world, the Kurdistan Government have determined that the rule of law must prevail. There are the beginnings of a vibrant civil society. I have met the trade unions several times on my visits, and I wish them well in developing sharp elbows to ensure that working people get a fair slice of the cake, although I would not recommend they follow the example of Len McCluskey and others. I have spoken to women's organisations that have put domestic violence on the agenda and helped reduce the incidence of female genital mutilation. I salute the religious pluralism, and commend Prime Minister Barzani who said:

“What differentiates [us] from most of the countries around us is religious and ethnic tolerance. Accepting and defending each other's rights strengthens the principle of humanity in this country, particularly in difficult times.”

It is astonishing to see religions from all over the region—Turkmen, Christians and others—literally fleeing to Kurdistan, because they know that it is the one place where they will receive protection.

I note that the KRG has appointed an official in charge of Jewish affairs. Jews once made up 17% of the population in Slemani before they were expelled in the bad old days, and there is a large Kurdish Jewish community in Israel. I remember driving past a Jewish area synagogue that was being preserved. Not many other nations in the middle east would preserve synagogues; they are usually knocking them down or demolishing them. I was very pleased when President Barzani told me that if Iraq recognised Israel, there would be a consulate-general in Irbil the next day. The relationship with Israel could be a major asset for both countries in future. Just imagine, Mr Davies, a progressive Muslim nation building relations with Israel, working together to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. That would set an example across the middle east.

There is one place, however, that I will never visit again: the Red House in Slemani. It was a horrific Ba'athist torture centre where thousands were murdered, tortured and raped. It is now a museum. More than anything, it shows the devastating inhumanity of Saddam's regime. I remember going into a room inside the prison that was called the “party room”. In that room, women were raped by the guards and the subsequent foetuses were thrown into furnaces, in echoes of the holocaust. I remember going into the rooms of the prison, which were bugged. That was not for the prisoners, but to bug the guards in case they were giving anything to the prisoners, which has echoes of Stalin and Nazism. When we visited the Red House the second time, I refused to go in; I just sat outside.

The visits encouraged me to lead the Kurdistan Genocide Task Force, which united the KRG in the UK with MPs, academics and legal practitioners. In 2013 it helped persuade the Commons to formally recognise the Anfal genocide. We wanted to encourage the UK Government to do the same, but as my right hon. Friend the Minister will remember very well, the Government did not agree on the grounds that the decision should be legal and not political. I suspect we will still disagree, but I ask him to rethink. I give my real thanks to him for agreeing that the British Government should formally mark Anfal Day every April. I passionately believe that given the suffering of the people of Kurdistan, it is vital that we recognise the genocide, because it was the demonisation, marginalisation and annihilation of the Kurdish people.

Some people at the time asked why we focused on the past, but the history of genocide remains relevant to the Kurdistan story. Let us remember that they lost nearly 200,000 people, most notoriously in the chemical weapons attack on Halabja in 1988. Let us also remember that Saddam bombed the area before he used chemical weapons, so that the windows of all the Kurdish people's houses were broken. That meant that when the chemical weapons were dropped, the people could not protect themselves by shutting themselves in their houses and shutting their doors and windows. More than 4,000 villages were razed to the ground. That was the beginning of forcible urbanisation, which makes it difficult nowadays to persuade people to leave the cities and make their money from agriculture. It could be a major source of income and help Kurdistan diversify away from a reliance on oil.

The past is never far from the surface. Just a few months after the Commons recognised Halabja and Anfal, the Syrian Ba'athist regime used chemical weapons in Ghouta. It is no coincidence that that was done by a Ba'athist party. In 2014, ISIL attacked Iraq and later Kurdistan. I am sure I have no need to persuade the Minister that ISIL undertook a genocide against the Yazidis and the Christians. I would welcome his update on the measures the UK is taking to help preserve evidence to mount criminal prosecutions. I remember being in Kurdistan and being warned by Kurdistan Ministers that, “In some months, we will have al-Qaeda in Mosul.” I think the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), was at that meeting. They called it al-Qaeda, not ISIL, but they said that that would happen. All the awful things they predicted would happen tragically did happen.

The genocide against the Kurds ended when they rose up against Saddam in 1991 and evicted him from most of Kurdistan under our armed protection. For that the Kurds will always thank the then British Prime Minister, John Major, and British public opinion, which was appalled at the sight of so many people dying in the freezing mountains which had, in the old Kurdish saying, been their only friends. It is a privilege to sit next to my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), who was so involved at that time.

Whenever one thinks of the Iraq war, the thing we must always thank Tony Blair for is the fact that but for the removal of Saddam Hussein, the Kurdistan nation would likely still face an existential threat. Saddam has gone. Leaders that followed may not have been like him, but their actions did much to break the hope of federalism.

[Robert Halfon]

That is why the Kurds are now seeking their sovereignty. I worry, however, that the mentality that allowed thousands of soldiers to conduct genocide is still obvious in the condescending and high-handed manner in which the Kurds are treated by Baghdad. I am also concerned about the attitude of the Shi'a militia towards the Kurds.

I have much sympathy with the Kurds' desire for independence so that they can always protect themselves. I certainly believe they have the right to exercise self-determination by holding a referendum in September. I have signed the early-day motion stating that, and would be willing to observe the referendum. I understand that the Government's position is to ask them to be proactive in seeking to facilitate the negotiations that will follow a successful referendum result, so that the Kurds and Arabs currently in Iraq can negotiate a more productive relationship. The UK must do everything possible to support this remarkable nation, which is at the vanguard of the fight against ISIS and for democracy, rule of law and a free economy in Iraq and the middle east.

3 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spennings) (Lab/Co-op): It is truly an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I declare an interest: I have travelled to the region as the guest of the Regional Government of Kurdistan. I was invited to visit as part of a cross-party group of fact-finding parliamentarians. Aware that the conflict in the region is one of the biggest issues facing our world, I was very keen to go, and having spent a number of years volunteering in London with victims of torture—some from the region—I jumped at the chance to find out more.

On arriving in Irbil, I was shocked by the progressive and sophisticated surroundings. I was expecting a war zone, but the city could be mistaken for Dubai in its high-rise ambition and elegance. Sadly, war was not very far away. Half an hour's ride out of the city, we were in a Syrian refugee camp near the border with the Kurdistan region.

Chatting to families, surrounded by playful children, I heard so many stories of pain and suffering: loved ones missing believed dead, people injured by mines, children made orphans by war. Most of those I spoke to had been there for more than three years, with no guarantee of when they would return home. They were weary and exhausted; all they wanted was to be reunited with their families and get back to their homes.

Kurdistan is host to not just refugees from Syria, but 1.5 million people displaced by war from other parts of Iraq. Although refugees have special status in international law and are cared for by the UN, internally displaced people are the responsibility of the host Government. Sadly, Baghdad seems to be doing little to help and leaves the task to Kurdistan, which is already suffering an economic tsunami, thanks to a dramatic fall in oil prices, the hostility of Baghdad, which has cut its budget since 2014, and Kurdistan's own dysfunctional economy, which needs massive reform.

As the Kurds and Iraqis move to liberate Mosul from the brutality of the self-styled Islamic State, more displaced people are heading into Kurdistan—the population has expanded by a third, which is the equivalent of the

population of Birmingham moving to Scotland. Understandably, there are electricity and water shortages, and schools and hospitals are overwhelmed.

Travelling to the frontline in Mosul to talk to peshmerga fighters and Iraqi special forces, we saw clearly the sacrifices made by those men and women. Over the border, in Mosul province, we visited the Christian village of Bartella, which had been seized by the Iraqis after a brief firefight. ISIS did not have time to destroy houses or set booby traps, but many houses were pockmarked by bullets, while some were entirely destroyed by airstrikes. Later, visiting a local hospital, we saw soldiers suffering life-changing injuries. I was humbled to witness a female peshmerga fighter passing away. We and the rest of the world owe them so much.

Another poignant visit was to a camp that is home to Yazidis, who practise a pre-Islamic and pre-Christian religion. Many have been murdered as apostates, sold into sexual slavery between one IS emir and another across Iraq or Syria, or killed because they were deemed too old to sell. Women survivors saw their men slaughtered before their eyes and their babies killed for fun. Of the 5,000 Yazidi women abducted as spoils of war, 2,000 have escaped, but they must still endure daily nightmares and flashbacks, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glendon) alluded to.

At the SEED project, which operates from a schoolhouse building, assiduous professionals were working carefully to help victims overcome such traumas. A couple of therapists had studied clinical psychology at Koya University, but that is the only such course in the whole of Kurdistan: the country is in desperate need of people who understand post-traumatic stress. It must be our priority, and the Government's, to offer that support, alongside physical reconstruction and the political reform the country so desperately needs.

Another way to heal psychological wounds can be through culture, which can be a force for rebellion and resistance, as well as for rebuilding empathy and tolerance in communities. The Kurds' love of poetry and music attest to that. The legendary Iranian-Kurdish folk singer Mazhar Khaleghi, who now runs the Kurdish Heritage Institute in Sulaymaniyah, says:

"We have lost our lands and we're probably never going to get them back. But we have to fight to save what is left of our culture. If we lose that, we have lost everything."

As 150,000 peshmerga fighters push back against IS, Khaleghi's team of a dozen ethnomusicologists, anthropologists and historians are fighting to preserve the Kurdish identity.

Kurdistan is an exceptionally beautiful country and I was privileged to meet a number of film makers and producers, who were anxious to use the beautiful location to create greater creative links with the rest of the world. I was shown around a disused cigarette factory by a local producer who had some of the finance in place to create a film studio to rival Shepperton or Pinewood. Nearby Turkey has a vibrant film industry and I am sure the same could be true of Kurdistan. It is younger film makers such as Syrian-Kurdish director Lauand Omar, making films such as "Curse Of Mesopotamia"—a low budget horror that can be screened anywhere in the world—who are leading the way.

We can help by supporting Kurdistan's ambition for inward investment, domestic production and private-sector employment within the Kurdistan region and working

with the UK film industry to secure an efficient unified film industry organisation, merging the cinema directorates within the KRG. Kurdistan has huge potential to be a film-making centre in the middle east, bringing economic, social and cultural benefits to the region and its people. I hope there are people listening to this debate who could make that happen.

To visit Iraqi-Kurdistan was an absolutely fascinating opportunity. Yes, there are grave challenges in that part of the world—but where terror has done untold damage, a rose is growing through the cracks in the cement. Beauty and creativity is growing. I think we can all agree that that is testament to the Kurdish people. Over the coming years, they will look to us for support, and sometimes guidance. I hope that, in years to come, such support will be more forthcoming from our Government.

3.7 pm

Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): It is a privilege and a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. From the outset, I declare a significant interest in the Kurdistan region in Iraq. I refer colleagues to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

As I have so often said in my parliamentary contributions since being elected for the first time in 2010, I am very proud to be the first British Member of Parliament of Kurdish descent. I therefore feel, perhaps more strongly than most, that the people of Iraqi Kurdistan have an inalienable right to self-determination, as do all peoples. That is why it is my belief that September's referendum should be welcomed by our Government, without the need for the Minister to express a desire or opinion for or against independence.

There are many who say that Kurdistan could not survive as an independent state, that it is not ready for such an important vote, or that now is not the time for it. Whatever the outcome of September's vote, I believe Kurdistan can and will prosper.

Although the most recent delays to holding September's long-awaited and long-overdue referendum are understandable given the conflict in the region, I cannot help but draw attention to the deficiencies of previous Iraqi Governments in helping to facilitate the vote. In so doing, I am sympathetic to arguments that claim previous Iraqi Governments have effectively contributed to the mood for separation in Iraqi Kurdistan. The so-called Iraqi Barnett formula works in the opposite way to ours. I say that slightly in jest: since 2014, Iraqi Kurdistan has been almost totally cut off in terms of central Government funding. The region questioning its independence is shouldering a greater financial burden than other regions of the country, rather than the other way round.

In 2005 Iraq approved its new federalist constitution, with 79% in favour and 21% against. However, significant parts of the constitution are, sadly, yet to be implemented by Baghdad, denying regional Governments the autonomy for which an overwhelming majority of Iraqis had voted. Perhaps the most significant part of the constitution for Iraqi Kurdistan that is yet to be implemented is article 140. It has long been the expectation that the disputed Kurdish regions within particular governorates would be dealt with as Kirkuk was: they would have a referendum on whether they should become part of the Kurdistan Regional Government

or remain within the greater Iraq. Article 140 makes it imperative that significant and sufficient measures to reverse Saddam Hussein's Arabisation process in the disputed regions are undertaken so that the referendum is seen to be fair.

Thousands of Kurds returned following the events of 2003, and those regions are now under the control of the KRG after it claimed them from Daesh, but a formal referendum has not taken place. We now face a referendum on Iraqi Kurdistan's independence while the status of the disputed regions remains unresolved.

President Barzani has confirmed that residents of the disputed regions, which Baghdad still considers not to be part of Iraqi Kurdistan, will be allowed to partake in September's referendum. My fear, however, is that whatever the outcome of September's vote, without the prior resolution of the regions' statuses, Baghdad or Irbil will use the treatment or inclusion of those regions as a means to negate the result or make the referendum illegitimate. If it is a no to independence, Irbil may say that the result would have been different had disenfranchised Kurds been formally reunified with Iraqi Kurdistan prior to the referendum. If it is a yes, Baghdad may say that the result would have been different had the disputed regions not been included in the plebiscite as, they would argue, should have been the case all along.

I realise that I may be painting a rather bleak picture of a post-referendum Iraqi Kurdistan. Despite the concerns I have raised, I am still on balance far more optimistic than pessimistic. Although we may see a minor war of words between Irbil and Baghdad in the wake of September's result, whatever it is I think the wider and longer-term result will be greater stability in the whole region. We will almost certainly see greater devolution to the KRG as a result of the vote: either total devolution in the case of independence or more devolution in order to placate the unsuccessful side in the case of a no vote. It is this devolution, the autonomy and power to control its own economic affairs, to manage its public services and to raise its own army, that has made Iraqi Kurdistan such a powerful force for regional stability.

The peshmerga have enjoyed immense success in combating Daesh-Isil, as many of my colleagues have mentioned, and in bringing stable and lasting liberation to large parts of Iraq and the adjoining parts of Syria. They have played an instrumental role in the liberation of Sinjar, and are continuing to do so as we speak on the eastern front in the battle to liberate Mosul. The leaders of western forces, our great military leaders, are all too ready to praise the peshmerga as the most effective military operators in the region. It is precisely their status as a regional army that has led to their effectiveness. I see a clear causal link between greater devolution to Irbil and the liberation and eventual political stability of Kurdistan and the country of Iraq as a whole. For that reason, I welcome the prospect of any further devolution, whatever the degree.

I would also like to make reference to the very strong relationship that the KRG has with Turkey—another critically important power in the conflict taking place in Iraq and Syria and one on which regional stability also depends. I further welcome more devolution to Irbil in the hope of closer and more unified co-operation with Turkey in the campaign against Daesh.

[*Nadhim Zahawi*]

My overall point is that rather than seeing a fully independent or more powerful Kurdistan as indicative of an increasingly divided and chaotic Iraq, one should see it as an opportunity to bring greater stability to the region. I urge the Government, represented here so ably by the Minister, whom I thank for giving up his time, to look closely at the opportunities that an Iraqi Kurdistan with more devolved power could bring.

I know from conversations with leading politicians in the KRG, including the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister, that the Iraqi Kurds would never resort to any violence of any kind against the Iraqi Government to make their case for more control over their own affairs. The KRG, and indeed the people of Iraqi Kurdistan, see Baghdad as their closest and most important strategic ally. My message to my Government is this: let us learn the lessons from our invasion of Iraq in 2003; let us recognise that we may have won the war but we certainly did not win the peace; and let us be open-minded about the role we can now play in restoring stability to Iraq by being positive about a more autonomous Kurdistan, whatever path it chooses for itself in September.

3.16 pm

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): Thank you for the opportunity to speak, Mr Davies. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) for securing this important and timely debate, which is testament to his long-standing interest in Kurdistan.

I will be brief and restrict myself to two main points. First, Iraqi Kurdistan is and should continue to be an important strategic ally of the United Kingdom. I have had the privilege of making several visits to the Kurdistan region of Iraq—most recently in June 2014 when I visited Kirkuk, where I was very pleased to meet, among many others, members of that city's Christian community. They were extremely relieved that the peshmerga had prevented Daesh from capturing the city because, for the Christians, that would have meant certain death.

At that time, Daesh were sweeping across Iraq. The Iraqi national army had collapsed and had abandoned Mosul, leaving a great deal of equipment behind when they fled south. The Kurdish peshmerga were a bastion against Daesh and managed to contain the tide of that murderous death cult. I am glad that the British Government recognised that.

We should acknowledge that since August 2014 the UK has supported the peshmerga with significant material and other support, such as training for peshmerga fighters, counter-IED detectors, heavy machine guns, and thousands of rounds of ammunition. Most importantly, there has been the support of Typhoon and Reaper strikes and air reconnaissance. We should be very proud of that support. Does the Minister think we should build on that and support the peshmerga further?

We in the United Kingdom have helped the Kurdistan Regional Government defend not only themselves but the interests of Iraq as a whole and also our interests. Their position is now a strong one and the impending liberation of Mosul is a testament to the sacrifices that they and their allies have made. It is the current disposition in Iraq today that leads to my second point.

Jack Lopresti: I thank my hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene; I am enjoying his speech. On the military support we have given the peshmerga, some have said it has been inadequate and some have said we could do a bit more, but, importantly, there has been a shortage of body armour, helmets and respirators. Does he agree that we have a responsibility to make sure not only that they are properly equipped and armed, but that they have access to medical care and treatment as well?

Leo Docherty: I agree with my hon. Friend. The issue is not only about arming, but about protecting and providing facilities.

We are still living with the legacy of the unintended consequences of the 2003 liberation of Iraq and the end of Saddam's tyranny. One of the most important unintended consequences is the fact that Iran is strategically dominant: the presence of Iran-backed Shi'ite militias across Iraq indicates a new-found political dominance of the Shi'a crescent by Iran. When Mosul falls, an Iran-controlled land corridor will link the Islamic Republic to its ally Hezbollah on the Mediterranean. That is likely to have increasingly serious regional implications. We must plan accordingly, with our allies.

Furthermore, today the viability of the state of Iraq is called into question, as it has been on a number of occasions since 2003. I want to be clear that I hope that the state of Iraq as a federal state is indeed still viable. However, the Kurdish hold on Kirkuk, the impending referendum, which hon. Members have mentioned, and the likely antipathy, when Mosul is liberated, from among the Sunni population towards the Baghdad Government, are factors that will shape the future of Iraq and they are beyond our control.

My experience as a soldier in Iraq has taught me that British direct involvement in its politics rarely meets with success. However, we are doing what we must continue to do and what we do best: engaging in full-throttle defence diplomacy to help the Kurds to defend their interests, and ours at the same time.

3.21 pm

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) for his speech. His knowledge of and passion for the Kurdistan area came through strongly, and his work for the all-party group is impressive.

The imminent recapture of Mosul from Daesh control by Iraqi security forces is a welcome development, and it will bring multiple complex challenges. The transition from offensive combat operations to a post-conflict stabilisation phase—notably the performance of constabulary police—has not always been well handled by the Iraqi Government forces. Above all, it is critical that there should be no repeat of the stories and allegations that emerged, for example, from the recapture of Fallujah when Iraqi Government forces were accused of reprisals against suspected Daesh fighters and the civilian population alike. Of equal importance are humanitarian aid, stabilisation and the restoration of functioning state institutions. As things stand, there are 820,000 Iraqis currently displaced from Mosul and the surrounding areas since military operations to retake the city began in October 2016. Their needs must become an immediate priority.

Although it is not part of Kurdistan proper, Mosul's position within the disputed territories of northern Iraq, its multi-ethnic demography and its overall importance for the economy and governance of northern Iraq make it imperative that the authorities in Baghdad and Irbil should collaborate effectively in the aftermath of its recapture. We urge the UK and the other members of the international coalition to exert their influence to make sure that the collaboration works. I believe that yesterday the Foreign Secretary met Iraqi Foreign Minister Jaafari, and we expect to hear how that message might be communicated to him at a later time.

As many hon. Members have said, the people of Iraqi Kurdistan have the right to decide their own future, and we urge all parties to work together to ensure that Kurdish self-determination is supported. My hon. Friends and I support the right to self-determination for all, provided it is expressed through peaceful democratic processes. We welcome the fact that the Government in Irbil intend to pursue their legitimate aspirations by means of a popular vote, but we would stress the importance of dialogue with Baghdad and with all regional actors to ensure that it passes off peacefully and contributes to regional stability.

I was taken by an article by President Barzani who, writing in *The Washington Post*, made a compelling case for Kurdistan to be an independent country. He wrote:

“On Sept. 25, the people of Iraqi Kurdistan will decide in a binding referendum if they want independence or to remain part of Iraq. The vote will resolve a conflict as old as the Iraqi state itself between the aspirations of the Kurdish people and a government in Baghdad that has long treated Kurds as less than full citizens of the country.

Iraqi Kurdistan's exercise of its right to self-determination threatens no one and may make a volatile region more stable. It will not alter the borders of any neighboring state and, if done right, will make for a much stronger relationship between Iraq's Arabs and Kurds. We are determined to do everything possible to accommodate Iraqi concerns in the likely event that the vote is for independence.”

The President argues that Kurdistan's case for independence is compelling and he points out that 100 years ago, in the peace negotiations that followed world war one, the Kurds were promised their own state. Instead they were divided against their will, and their lands were carved up among Turkey, Iran, Syria and Iraq. The newly-established state of Iraq was supposed to be an equal partnership between Arabs and Kurds, but that hopeful dream gave way to a grim reality. All Iraqi Governments suppressed the Kurds, and the resulting atrocities culminated in the 1980s, when Saddam Hussein used poison gas extensively on Kurdish towns and villages, levelled more than 5,000 Kurdish villages and deported Kurds to the south, where they were murdered and buried in mass graves; 182,000 Iraqi Kurds—nearly 5% of the population—including members of the President's family, perished in that period.

The article continues:

“With the overthrow of Hussein's Baath regime, the Kurds worked hard to build a new Iraq, including drafting a constitution that guaranteed Kurdistan's autonomy and protected the rights of all Iraqis. Fourteen years later, Baghdad has failed to implement key provisions of that constitution, and we have good reason to believe that it never will. This failure of the political system is also responsible for the drastic deterioration of relations between Sunnis and Shiites that led to the rise of the Islamic State, with disastrous consequences for all Iraqis, including the Kurds.”

The President notes that the principal argument that is made for Iraqi unity is that a single Iraq is better able to protect its citizens, but that that claim is not supported by evidence and experience. When the Islamic State attacked Kurdistan in 2014, using advanced US weapons abandoned by the Iraqi army in Mosul, the Iraqi Government refused to give Kurdistan its constitutionally mandated share of the federal budget, and it certainly did not provide soldiers—known as the peshmerga, as other hon. Members have noted—with weapons. As an independent country, Kurdistan would have been able to finance and equip its own troops and to bring the fight to a much swifter conclusion.

The article states:

“The war on the Islamic State since then provides a model for how Kurds and Arabs might cooperate in the future. In the battle to drive the Islamic State from Iraq, the peshmerga and the Iraqi army have been in an alliance of equals. Each army has its own chain of command. The peshmerga's joint operations with the Iraqi military support each other in ways that never occurred in an Iraq where Baghdad sought to dominate and control Kurdistan. Regardless of the referendum, we will continue our close cooperation with Iraqi and Western forces until the final victory over the Islamic State.”

That statement tells us a lot about how Kurdistan would be a stabilising force in the region, should it be able to move to independent status and not have to rely on Baghdad for its orders.

The President argues that an independent Kurdistan could have a much stronger relationship with Baghdad and would be a great neighbour, co-operating against terrorism and sharing resources, including water, petroleum and many kinds of infrastructure, in ways that would benefit both countries:

“Without the sanctions that Iraq has applied to our imports and exports, we could jointly develop our human and natural resources in a common market to the benefit of both Kurdistan and Iraq.

While the results of the referendum will bind future Kurdistan governments, the timing and modalities of our independence will be subject to negotiation with Baghdad and consultation with our neighbors and the wider international community.”

That is not the view of an aggressive state trying to have things all its own way. There is room for negotiation, and I am sure that the way the President has phrased his article means that his approach would be very peaceful and reasonable.

The article goes on to say:

“In our negotiations with Baghdad, we will be practical. The issue of what territory joins Kurdistan will be the most contentious issue in the separation. Despite a Dec. 31, 2007, deadline, the Iraqi government refused to implement a key constitutional provision...that would have the people of the disputed areas decide their future democratically. Nearly ten years later, we propose to give them that opportunity.”

That is a fantastic step in the right direction.

“We wish to incorporate into Kurdistan only those territories where the people overwhelmingly want to be part of Kurdistan as expressed in a free vote. The last thing we want is a long-lasting territorial dispute with Iraq that could poison our future relations.”

The hon. Member for Batley and Spennings (Tracy Brabin) talked about Kurdistan's culture and diversity, which it values. It is home to Christians, Yazidis, Turks, Shabaks and Arabs, all of whose separate identities are recognised by its laws. Since 2003, many Iraqi Christians have moved to Kurdistan to escape the violence and persecution elsewhere in Iraq. Since Islamic State seized part of Iraq in 2014, Kurdistan has also provided

[Douglas Chapman]

support for more than 1.5 million Iraqi refugees, with only minimal help from Baghdad and the international community.

I appreciate the input from the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), who talked about having a vibrant civil society within a progressive Muslim nation. He referred to the disgraceful Red House—I was not aware of it, and I think most Members would look on it with disgust.

The hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) talked about having respect for the peshmerga, which has support in the north-east. The hon. Member for Batley and Spen talked about the people of Birmingham all moving to Scotland—I am not sure that is a very good idea at the moment, although they would be very welcome—which indicates the scale of what has happened in that country.

Finally, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi) said that the people of Kurdistan have the inalienable right to decide their own future. I hope that the Minister will confirm the Government's position, and that they will reconsider their attitude to Kurdistan and the referendum that is about to take place.

3.32 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti), the chair of the all-party group on the Kurdistan region in Iraq, on securing the debate. He has taken over a very important position in a group that has had a profound effect on this Parliament over the 10 years of its existence. I was involved in the group in its early days, and I was privileged to travel under its auspices to Irbil on two separate occasions. It helped to inform me and ensured that Labour Members—many of my colleagues also visited—are well informed about Kurdistan and what it has to offer the world.

Like many right hon. and hon. Members, I have many Kurdish constituents—now naturalised British citizens—who bring with them the history of their nation and region. They are mostly from Iraqi Kurdistan, but some are from Syria, Turkey and, of course, Iran. In his opening remarks, the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke said that Kurdistan cannot be subjugated, and he talked of a resetting of relationships with Baghdad—not through a universal declaration of independence, like former Rhodesia, but through the referendum that will take place on 25 September. He urged the United Kingdom to send official observers to the region for the referendum.

The hon. Gentleman and others also alluded to the bravery of the peshmerga. When we see their operations, the work they have been doing, their fighting and the bravery they have exhibited, we cannot but admire them. He also mentioned the issue of the unfair assessment of visas for Kurdish people—especially those injured in war—who hope to come to the United Kingdom. I hope the Minister will address that issue in his winding-up speech. The hon. Gentleman also said that the United Kingdom and the Kurdistan Regional Government have a lot in common. That is something that struck me when I was there on my two visits.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) said she was delighted by the liberation of Mosul, and appealed to the Government to provide clinical psychologists and psychiatrists to help with the trauma of Daesh's rape victims in the city. I hope the Minister will tell us a little more about that.

The right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon)—I hope he does not mind my addressing him as my right hon. Friend—with whom I visited the region in 2011, I think it was, talked about the thriving civil society, the religious pluralism, the tolerance and the defence of each other's rights, which he, I and many other Members found on our visits to Kurdistan. He said something that I was not aware of: Jews once made up 17% of the city of Sulaymaniyah. It would be nice to see Jewish people returning to that city and other parts of Kurdistan. Like the hon. Gentleman, I remember being told that if Iraq recognised the state of Israel today, tomorrow we would have a consulate in Irbil—such is the Kurdish people's admiration for the Jewish people.

We were told at the time that the Anfal brought the Kurdish people closer to the suffering that the Jewish people underwent during the second world war with the holocaust. They understood what that meant, because they had suffered a genocide themselves. My right hon. Friend ably led the Kurdistan genocide taskforce in 2013, which resulted in the United Kingdom Parliament's recognition of the Anfal genocide. I recall speaking at that conference myself. We heard from a young man—he is still a young man—who as a child witnessed the genocide in Halabja. He was there hiding in a basement, watching his family, friends and neighbours dying from the poison gas attack. It is one of the most moving things I have ever heard since my election to this House 20 years ago. It was absolutely extraordinary—I hope we never have to hear such testimony again. That is another reason why the people of Kurdistan deserve and need our support.

My dear hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), who has done so much good work since her election to this House in the by-election nearly a year ago, talked about the 1.5 million people internally displaced by war in Kurdistan, and said that the Kurdistan Regional Government receive very little help from the Government of Iraq. The fall in oil prices has affected the Kurdish economy, as many hon. Members said. She said that we must try to offer post-traumatic stress counselling to those who have been affected.

My hon. Friend also made an important point about something that those of us who have been to the region also noticed very strongly, especially in comparison with other countries in the same region: the Kurdish people's very strong culture. I remember visiting a school in Sulaymaniyah and watching young people dancing the most joyous dance to the most extraordinary music in the most wonderful costumes—something that would not go amiss in one of the films she mentioned. Why not? Kurdistan bills Sulaymaniyah and its other cities as a hub for film-making in the region. Turkey has a vibrant film industry, as she rightly pointed out, so why not Kurdistan too? It would be lovely to see that. It is a most extraordinary culture.

The hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), who, as he pointed out, is the first British MP of Kurdish descent, talked about the referendum. He said that since 2014 Kurdistan has been almost completely

cut off from central Government funding in Iraq. He rightly mentioned the problems relating to holding the referendum, but he was optimistic that there will be greater stability in the region, not the reverse. I certainly agree.

The hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), who is welcome in this debate—I welcome him to the House—is a former director of the Conservative Middle East Council, and therefore has considerable knowledge of the region. He was also an Army officer and fought in Iraq. He brought his wisdom and experience to us. He said, very importantly, that the viability of the state of Iraq has already been called into question. He mentioned the political significance of Iran's Shi'a dominance in the region, against which Kurdistan is a bulwark. He also said—I definitely agree with him, having voted against the invasion of Iraq in 2003—that UK interference in Iraq has not been entirely successful.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): The hon. Gentleman talks about the United Kingdom's role in Iraq and interference. Does he agree with me about what happened post-2006? The Government of Mr Maliki came in with the backing of the Shi'a blocking vote and conducted the persecution in Anbar province. The United Kingdom Government should have disassociated themselves much earlier from support of the Maliki Government, rather than doing so many years later. That persecution of the Sunnis led to the havoc we see in Iraq now.

Fabian Hamilton: That is entirely why I voted against this country's participation in the invasion of Iraq. Yes, it resulted in the deposing of the dictator Saddam Hussein, but it also resulted in some of the appalling things to which the hon. Gentleman alluded.

As we have heard, the Kurdish minority in Iraq numbers more than 6 million, which is about 20% of the population of Iraq. Mutual suspicion and acrimony between Baghdad and the Kurdish autonomous Government have led to the Kurdish Regional Government's announcing the independence referendum that is to take place on 25 September. No outside Governments are in favour of the referendum, which it is widely believed will create more instability in the region. I beg to differ.

The UK Government assist the Government of Iraqi Kurdistan in fighting ISIS and helping with refugees, for which we are all profoundly grateful. Iraqi Kurdistan and its army, the peshmerga, have been very beneficial and helpful, and extremely brave in fighting ISIS in Iraq over the past three years. A January 2015 report of the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee—the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon was a member of the Committee at the time—stated:

“It is for the Iraqi people to decide their future, but it appears to us that a looser federal model, permitting greater self-governance by its diverse mosaic of communities, offers best hope for Iraq remaining united and sovereign. Highly centralised rule under a ‘strongman’ in Baghdad will never work.”

I certainly agree.

Iraq's neighbours—Turkey, Iran and Syria—all oppose secession, fearing that separatism will spread to their own ethnic Kurdish populations. We can understand that, but none the less should all believe in the right of peoples to self-determination. European Union Foreign Ministers have acknowledged the right to nationalist

aspirations for Iraqi Kurdistan, but cautioned against “unilateral steps” that threaten the unified state of Iraq. The United Nations will not involve itself in debates concerning independence, and the only country that seems to be warming to the idea of independence is the state of Israel.

Human Rights Watch estimates that between 50,000 and 100,000 people were killed or disappeared during Saddam Hussein's Anfal campaigns between 1987 and 1989, with 2,000 villages destroyed by Saddam's regime by 1993. So, finally, I want to state the Labour party's position on the referendum. We believe, as I am sure all in the House do, in the right of self-determination for peoples living under oppression. The Kurdistan Regional Government, it could be argued, are not a group of people living under oppression, but they are in an invidious and difficult position and have been for many years, especially in the light of that history.

The Labour party will recognise the result of the referendum if we are convinced that it is conducted openly and honestly, and freely and fairly—that, of course, will require international observers—and if the borders of Kurdistan are agreed and recognised internationally. Perhaps the Minister will comment on whether the United Kingdom Government, of whom he is a well-respected Minister, would consider doing the same in such circumstances.

3.44 pm

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): In common with everyone else, it is a great pleasure for me to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and I thank you for relaxing the jacket rule, which is welcome and much appreciated by a number of us.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) on securing the debate and on his recent election as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the Kurdistan region in Iraq. I will return to some of his remarks, but he set his case out ably and firmly, as I had had no doubt that he would, and I listened extremely carefully.

A number of colleagues have made some kind remarks about my return to this ministerial role, which are genuinely appreciated. Although I needed no reminder, having this as a first debate has reminded me of the pain and complexities of a region that I have come to know well, because I have many friends there. The debate illustrates how the politics of the region are rarely simple and how a Government have to tread with great care, because all words have consequences. Appropriately, our Government will treat the situation with extreme care, for we recognise—as the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) set out—that what any particular region may do in the middle east has ramifications, and Kurdistan is no exception.

I, too, must make a declaration of interest. As has been referred to, not only did I visit Irbil and the Kurdish region as a Minister, but I visited it as a member of the all-party group. I enjoyed and appreciated both visits very much indeed. I thank my courteous hosts, who told me a great deal about the region. The respect that I have for the civilian Government and for what they were achieving in Irbil, as well as my respect for the extraordinary performance of the peshmerga and all those who have defended our freedoms through their actions, have left a deep impression. Those who

[Alistair Burt]

are responsible for the Kurdish region know that those are my feelings strongly. It was also nice to be reminded of John Major and his work. He is well thought of for his work to protect people in the region at a crucial time.

I am grateful for the contributions of hon. Members and will do my best to respond to a number of the points made, although I am mindful of how difficult that is in a short time. I could spend five minutes on each and every point made by colleagues during the course of their remarks, but I cannot do so. There will be other opportunities, however—again, only so much can be said in public and on the record, and many things can be discussed in different forums. I tried to do that when I was in this role previously, and I certainly intend to do so again, because colleagues' interest in the area is profound. Accordingly, appreciation of as many of the complexities that the United Kingdom Government have to deal with as possible is of benefit to Parliament as a whole: Parliament speaks with great wisdom and knowledge on such matters.

The debate has come at an historic moment for Iraq and its people, with the battle to liberate Mosul approaching its conclusion. Iraq's security forces have shown immense courage, suffered significant losses and demonstrated strong capability in a long and complex operation against a ruthless enemy with no regard for human life. The contribution of Kurdish forces to that process has been remarkable. Even though the fighting is not yet over, Iraq is entering another even more critical phase.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I am grateful to the Minister for paying tribute to the Kurdish forces in their fight against Daesh. Does he share my concern about some of the actions of the Turkish air force, which has targeted Kurdish forces in north Iraq and Syria? What more can the British Government do to bring influence to bear on Turkey, which after all is a NATO ally?

Alistair Burt: It is indeed. The hon. Gentleman's remarks again require the House to be aware of the complexities of the region, the different forces operating there, the reactions of different states in the area to such forces and whether everyone is working to the same agenda. I cannot comment specifically on the matter he raises, but I am well aware of the difficulties and of some actions of forces that may be interpreted in more than one manner. However, I take his point.

Once the liberation of Mosul is complete and the fighting is over, the peace must be won. Military success has to be consolidated through building a more stable, inclusive and prosperous country. The hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) reminded us that the consequences of recapturing a city or an area can be harsh, and the world will be watching to ensure that that is not the case in Mosul. Some of the reprisals visited upon people in the past only laid the foundations of more anger and conflict, but I am sure that the forces in Mosul who are responsible to the coalition understand that well.

Enabling and encouraging Iraq to achieve the goal of a more stable, inclusive and prosperous country is one of this Government's fundamental objectives. It is certainly

true, as several colleagues mentioned, that the failure to include the Sunni community in the future of Iraq was fundamental to the emergence of what became Daesh and the concerns that have been raised since; it is absolutely vital to ensure that it is included in the future. Supporting a more stable, inclusive and prosperous country includes supporting a strong and successful Kurdistan region within a unified Iraq.

The Kurdish people, the Kurdistan Regional Government and their security forces have been pivotal to the military campaign to defeat Daesh. They have been generous providers of humanitarian support, and they will be instrumental to the effort to secure peace. They are a critical partner of the UK and the global coalition, but also a close friend and key ally of the UK.

As part of the global coalition against Daesh, the United Kingdom Government are providing practical support to the Republic of Iraq and its Kurdistan region in their shared fight against Daesh. Alongside the training we provide to the Iraqi security forces, around 150 UK military personnel are based in the Kurdish region to provide the peshmerga with military training, which the Foreign Secretary has seen at close quarters, as is well known. We have trained nearly 8,500 Kurdish peshmerga in light infantry skills, counter-improvised explosive device techniques and military medicine. We have supplied military equipment, including heavy machine guns and ammunition, and delivered military equipment on behalf of our coalition partners. We also give strategic advice to the Kurdistan Regional Government's Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs.

I echo the welcome that has already been given to my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty). Many Government colleagues have benefited greatly from his expertise in this area and his selfless generosity in sharing it. That it is now available to the House as a whole is a good thing for us all, and I welcome that. He mentioned further equipping the peshmerga. I remind the House that, as he knows, all UK military assistance is direct and provided through Centcom, the central command of the military coalition, which assesses the needs of the peshmerga, but colleagues have in the past returned from the area and provided advice about what might be necessary on the ground at a particular time, and that has been taken through by the British Government. I assure him that he will always be listened to with great care.

Rehman Chishti: I pay tribute to the brilliant work that the Minister did before at the Foreign Office, and I am sure that he will do so again. I have huge admiration for what the peshmerga do, but one of my constituents went to the Kurdistan region of his own free will to fight with the peshmerga against Daesh. Does the Minister agree that that kind of action is completely unacceptable, as is that of those individuals who fight with Daesh? There should be stringent measures for people who want to offer their assistance; they should do so through appropriate channels rather than by taking actions of their own will.

Alistair Burt: My hon. Friend makes his point well. The United Kingdom provides support to those who are imperilled by Daesh and those who fight it through legitimate means. The British military is involved in a coalition—that job is being done. Much though people

may feel inspired to go out to the region, the United Kingdom Government does not support that, as we are engaged in other ways.

Jack Lopresti: Will the Minister give way?

Alistair Burt: Briefly. I am keen to make progress to get on to my hon. Friend's questions.

Jack Lopresti: Although I recognise, accept and agree with the Minister's position on British nationals going to fight for the peshmerga, does he agree that there is no moral equivalent between people who go to fight with Daesh and people who volunteer to serve with the peshmerga?

Alistair Burt: Absolutely. There is no moral equivalent whatever, and I was not making that point; I was merely making the point that the United Kingdom Government are supporting those who are countering the most evil force, and that is the right way to do it. We counsel caution to those who wish to do it any other way.

In addition to the military support that I mentioned, the UK Government have provided £169.5 million in life-saving humanitarian aid to Iraq since June 2014, which has helped to support internally displaced people across Iraq, including those hosted in the Kurdistan region.

The hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glendon) mentioned the women who have been captured and used by Daesh forces. I absolutely take her point about support from clinical psychologists; I will make inquiries about that. Yet another previous role of mine was Minister for mental health, so I am aware of the importance of that work and I will look to see what may be available. I am the United Kingdom's commissioner for the International Commission on Missing Persons, and at a recent meeting in Stockholm I met a Yazidi woman who had escaped but whose mother and sister were still being held captive. As was mentioned, providing evidence for what may well turn out to be war crimes is of significant importance. Gathering evidence and, in time, using that evidence is as important as ensuring that those who are lost are recovered and missing no longer.

Let me turn to the specific questions that my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke asked. I will look at the specific item that he mentioned about medical assistance. Such assistance is not disaggregated, so I will look at what specifically goes to the Kurdish

region. I take his point about visas, which are a constant issue in the middle east. I will discuss that with the Home Office, which is responsible for visas. We will welcome Kurdish officials meeting the Prime Minister in due course. The Prime Minister has not yet met Prime Minister Abadi, which should come first, but I take my hon. Friend's point carefully.

I must mention the referendum before I give my hon. Friend the chance to wrap up. We understand the aspirations of the Kurdish people and will continue to support them politically, culturally and economically within Iraq, but we also believe that a referendum on independence risks detracting from the more urgent priorities of defeating Daesh, stabilising liberated areas and addressing the long-term political, social and economic issues that led to Daesh's rise. That is why we maintain that any referendum or political process towards independence must be agreed with the Government of Iraq in Baghdad and that unilateral moves towards independence would not be in the interests of the Kurdistan region, Iraq or wider regional stability. Our position is shared by many of our key allies. My sense is that those responsible in the Kurdish region understand that well, and we expect this matter to proceed with due care, recognising the sensitivities of disputed areas as well as other parts of Iraq.

3.58 pm

Jack Lopresti: Thank you for your chairmanship of this debate, Mr Davies. I am hugely grateful to every colleague who came along to support it; there have been some very good interventions and great speeches.

The debate has, to a large degree, demonstrated and reinforced the British Parliament's support, affection and understanding of the Iraqi Kurdish people. I want again to put my thanks and appreciation on the record with respect to the peshmerga. The Minister referred to this, but I remind him that although training, equipment and war-fighting capabilities are important, those things have a cost and we must be mindful of the medical care and support that some of the peshmerga are not getting. Whatever the Kurdish people decide in the referendum in September, the British Government need to get fully behind them and continue to develop our relationships on security, trade, business and democracy.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Kurdistan region in Iraq.

Renewable Energy Generation: Island Communities

[SIR DAVID AMESS *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered support for renewable energy generation in island communities.

I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David, and I am pleased to welcome the Minister to his new role. He is one in a fairly long line of Energy Ministers during my tenure in the House—I am not entirely sure how many I have seen—but he brings with him a reputation for being a diligent and effective Minister, and I wish him well in his time in the Department. It is the convention on these occasions to say how pleased we are to have secured the debate. Although I will keep my tie on, I will break with convention by saying that I am not particularly pleased; I have been around this course for the past 15 years and I am immensely frustrated that debates of this sort are still necessary.

I think it will be helpful for those who might be watching our proceedings from elsewhere to be quite clear not only what the debate is about but what it is not about. It is not about individual projects that may be under consideration; there are a number in my constituency, including in Orkney and with Viking Energy in Shetland. To say that we need a strategy to unlock the potential of renewable energy generation is not to say that any individual project in itself is right or should go ahead, nor is it to be confused with the consultation currently being undertaken by Ofgem on replacing Shetland's power station with a 278 km, 600 MW high-voltage direct current cable. That is exciting some comment at the moment, but it is a proposal of which I remain to be convinced; having been around this course for many years, I do not regard it as quite so difficult or challenging for that particular project to get a cable on the seabed.

The debate is about how Government and the forces of government can unlock the potential for renewable energy generation that we all know is there within our island communities. A study commissioned jointly by the then Department for Energy and Climate Change and the Scottish Government in 2013—the “Scottish Islands Renewable Project”—estimated that the Western Isles, Orkney and Shetland could between them supply up to 5% of Britain's total electricity demand by 2030. That is a quite significant prize and it is within our grasp. However, it is something that we already know will only happen if we can get everybody working together.

In that connection, I welcome the intervention this morning from Councillor Donald Crichton, chair of the Sustainable Development Committee in the Western Isles Council, calling for cross-party consensus building on this. As he said, the Conservative party's manifesto commitment at last month's general election to “support the development of wind projects in the remote islands of Scotland, where they will directly benefit local communities” is an important and welcome step. Similarly, I also place on the record my appreciation of the efforts of Lord Dunlop of Helensburgh, who, in his time as a junior Minister in the Scotland Office and before, did a lot to push this particular issue.

That manifesto commitment was welcome, and I am pleased that it has survived the cull of so many other commitments from that unfortunate document. However, we are looking to the Minister for some outline of what the commitment will actually mean in practical terms. If you will forgive me, Sir David, there is quite a history here, and it is important that we remind ourselves of some of it. A lot of the issues that underpin this history come from the fact that Ofgem—for reasons that are understandable in relation to non-renewable technologies—has for some time adhered to a system of locational charging. For renewable projects, far from the centres of populations and the ultimate points of consumption, that does not necessarily make the same sense, so we have looked for different ways around that over the years.

Back in the days of the late Malcolm Wicks, we tried the idea of a cap on transmission charges. That was brought in by him and the then Labour Government, and was then extended by Chris Huhne when he was Secretary of State for Energy, but that in itself did not provide the solution we had hoped for. We then moved on to the new contracts for difference regime, and within that it was suggested that we could have a dedicated islands strike price. Unfortunately, at the point that that was being submitted to the European Commission for state aid approval, it was felt that it could be delayed by the islands element, so it was removed for later submission. It was resubmitted at a later stage and went through the pre-approval application process, which concluded some time around the end of 2015.

In the meantime, we had a general election, and the Conservative Government that came in in 2015 had a manifesto commitment to have a moratorium on onshore wind developments. The point at which the Government decided to go ahead with the CfD auction round that we are currently part of, without any provision for the islands, sticks in my memory for two reasons. First, it was the morning after the American people had elected President Trump, and secondly, I remember very clearly taking the call from the Secretary of State on my mobile phone while I was going through Edinburgh airport. However, a consultation period followed, which should have ended in the early part of this year and to which we I think we still await the Government's formal response.

I remind the House of that history at this point because it is germane to the debate. Although the commitment in the Conservative party's manifesto from last month is new, the issue is not—it has been within the machinery of government for some considerable time. Although we hope that that commitment will be given the green light, it is far from the case that the work needs to start from scratch. What is now needed is the degree of political commitment to implement the commitment and to tell us exactly what it means, because time is not in plentiful supply.

If provision for the islands of Scotland is to be included in the next round of CfD auctions, we are looking at something that has to go through the machinery of government and possibly even the state aid consent procedures in order to be in place by the end of next year, so there is a need for some degree of urgency in the approach to this. When the industry hears from the Minister later, it will be looking for a degree of clarity. We are not looking for the blueprint on everything that

is meant by the manifesto commitment, but we want to hear some sort of outline or framework through which this can be turned into a reality.

What are we looking at here? Are we revisiting the idea of an islands strike price, or are we looking at something that might, somehow or another, find a mechanism for including onshore island generation with offshore wind? I do not know just how doable that would be, or how workable it would be from the point of view of the industry, but those are some of the ideas that have been floated. Alternatively, does the Department have some new mechanism that is going to be brought forward?

In any event, when in all those processes will the work start in order to obtain state aid approvals? I understand that the Government will proceed on the basis that, regardless of what happens with Brexit, state aid regulation compliance remains a feature of our regulatory landscape for the foreseeable future. Is it the Government's aspiration that any projects that would be brought forward under this new scheme would be eligible for the next round of CfD auctions? If that is the case, will the Minister at this stage consult within Government to get a commitment that the next auction round will not go ahead unless and until this scheme is in place and island-based projects are able to compete?

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene in the limited time he has. Will he explain to the House whether there is any other route to market for island wind if there is no access to the next round of CfD funding?

Mr Carmichael: The answer to that depends on what we mean by "route to market". There are other ways in which the energy generated can be used, and a lot of innovative work is being done in relation to non-distributing technologies such as the use of hydrogen, but for all intents and purposes, for the projects being considered at the moment across the country, there really is not. Those in the industry will have a view on that, and if they bring forward something we are not currently considering, I think we will all be in the market for hearing it.

Finally and most obviously, we will want to hear in fairly early course exactly what is meant by the expression "community benefit", which has been around the renewables debate for as long as I can remember and has meant different things to different people in different places at different times. If it is to form part of policy, a clearer definition will be necessary.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I appreciate the opportunity to intervene. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that a significant motivating factor for accelerating the development of renewable technology has to be reducing household energy bills as part of the community benefit? Those bills are often higher in island communities such as the Isles of Scilly in my constituency, owing to the inaccessibility.

Sir David Amess (in the Chair): We are fresh from an election, and there are lots of new Members here. The usual procedure in a short half-hour debate is that there should be prior discussions with the person whose

debate it is as to whether they are prepared to take interventions. Of course, there is nothing to stop any Member intervening on the Minister's speech.

Mr Carmichael: I am grateful for that timely reminder, Sir David—although it has driven from my mind the question that the hon. Gentleman asked. Perhaps I could write to him about it in the fullness of time. It was about driving down price, which is one of the important opportunities of a more diverse and flexible market structure than the one we have. The issues faced by my constituents are not dissimilar to those facing the hon. Gentleman's constituents in the Isles of Scilly.

We want to hear a bit from the Minister today about something beyond the situation regarding wind generation. We would like to see a willingness from the Minister, his Department and the Government to engage with the renewables industry beyond the onshore, or even offshore, wind sector. The United Kingdom already has a pipeline of wave and tidal stream projects that could be some of the most significant and forward-leaning projects to be found anywhere in the world. The estimates we have seen are in the region of £76 billion-worth of development by 2050. It is a significant global market for which we are doing the initial heavy lifting at this point. I have seen in my constituency, and especially in Orkney over the years, how the industry has pulled itself up inch by inch, but in recent years it has been pushed backwards by a lack of dedicated support for wave and tidal projects. I hope that the Minister, in his time in the Department, will have some proper regard for that.

We need a proper ring-fenced pot for wave and tidal power. A pot of that sort could be transformative. It would not need to be particularly significant in size, but for it to be guaranteed would make a massive difference to those involved in the development of these technologies and would give a very positive signal to those who are looking at bringing their projects to this country to develop them and to put devices in the water at places such as the European Marine Energy Centre in Stromness. I know the Minister has not yet visited that centre, but I strongly encourage him to do so in the earliest possible course, because there he would see for himself the potential that is being thwarted by the inclusion of wave and tidal projects within the pot for emerging or less established technologies, where they are competing with offshore wind.

To give an illustration of what is involved here, the offshore wind sector currently has 5,100 MW of installed capacity, with a further 4,500 MW under construction. The marine renewables industry, by comparison, has 10 MW of installed capacity. In that context, it is pretty straightforward and easy to see which is the genuinely less established technology that requires the support found in the title of the pot.

To bring down the costs is not rocket science. We have been here before and seen it with other low-carbon industries. We have to get the devices into the water. We see what happens to them there, learn the lessons, innovate, improve and repeat. That work is still being done by those who demonstrate a commitment to marine renewables.

We have a burgeoning supply chain. We have investment from local councils in Orkney, which I would be happy to show the Minister. As I indicated to him this morning, we have a sector that is desperate to re-engage with him

[Mr Carmichael]

and his Department. I hope that in the time he has in this position—which I hope is both long and productive—he will engage with the sector, because the opportunities that it brings to the future development and the industrial strategy to which the Government still lay claim are significant indeed.

4.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): Sir David, it is as ever a great pleasure to serve under your constituency—under your chairmanship; I am sure your constituents feel the same about your activities on constituency days. In my first Westminster Hall debate, you were a mere Mr Amess. I am delighted you are here.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael)—I remember when he was my right hon. Friend—is a gentleman in the true sense. The way he has conducted the debate, on a subject in which he has a lot of interest and expertise, and the way he speaks up for renewable energy generation in island communities, is truly commendable. As he is fully aware, he has me at a little disadvantage, as I have been in the job for precisely three weeks. I am not yet the expert he is, but I would like to make it clear to him and other Members that I have listened carefully to every word and intend to set out the Government's position in what I hope he will accept is the right way at this stage.

We know that the islands have long been a hotbed for innovations in renewable energy generation. The Burgar Hill wind turbine site in Orkney, for example, hosted some of the most innovative experimental turbines in the '80s and early '90s. As has been said, the European Marine Energy Centre, which is also located on Orkney in the right hon. Gentleman's constituency, has since its creation more than 10 years ago maintained its position as the world's leading wave and tidal stream testing facility. The fact that it has hosted the prototypes for almost all the world's leading devices, including the Atlantis turbines deployed in the Pentland Firth last summer, is a testament to its premier global status.

I also understand that the grid infrastructure necessary to support the proposed wind farms on the remote islands of Scotland could, if built, act as a springboard for further development of our wave and tidal sector and give this emerging industry a further boost towards commercialisation, helping to maintain the UK's leading position in these technologies. The challenge for the wave and tidal sector will be to innovate and to reduce its costs sufficiently that it can compete with other renewable technologies. Those costs have fallen significantly during the past few years, and we fully expect that downward trajectory to continue. This is now a very competitive market, and developers will need to respond to that challenge; the sector can no longer take high subsidies for granted.

As the right hon. Gentleman is aware, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy visited the Western Isles this year to learn about this issue at first hand. The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) kindly hosted the Secretary of State's visit, and I shall take this opportunity to thank him again for what my

right hon. Friend described as a productive and informative trip. I know that it will not help or please the right hon. Gentleman unless some action is taken, as he has pointed out to me.

The issues are clear, and we know what the gains are. I shall go through the issues in no particular order. The first is ensuring healthy competition to support the best projects and get the best value for the consumer, while recognising that it may take a certain volume of projects to justify building the all-important new island-to-mainland links. I am aware that those are a vital piece of the overall picture, with their own timeframes and set of complex decisions, so there are really two areas of decision.

The second issue, as the Secretary of State made clear, is ensuring that local communities, which have been enthusiastic about this industry, receive appropriate benefits for hosting these projects.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): Excuse me, Sir David, if I do not quite get some of the etiquette right.

I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for what he has said about the importance of the popularity of tidal and other energy-efficient projects. It is right to say that islanders can play an important role, but does he agree that energy policies should take into account other policies such as regard for the landscape? Wind turbines were very unpopular with many of my constituents, because of the damage that they did to the landscape in areas of outstanding natural beauty, but solar panels are more popular. Should wave and tidal power take off, there would be, again, an aesthetic element as well. It is wonderful to have these things, but that should not be at the expense of a tourism economy in a place such as the Isle of Wight.

Richard Harrington: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. Time does not permit me to answer in full, but I would be happy to meet and discuss this subject with him on behalf of his constituents.

Thirdly, we have to define what is meant by "island wind projects" in a legal context, and that is being done; we are working through the issues. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland is very aware of that matter.

Last but not least, we need to give clarity to the developers of island projects while being fair to developers of other projects elsewhere and to consumers across the UK.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): This issue is also very dear to my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), who has been unavoidably delayed while travelling here today. He is very concerned, as I am. Given the promises made in the Tory manifesto and by Tory candidates at the general election, when will the Government act to introduce an island CfD? The lack of a CfD and the locational pricing model are severely hampering the industry on the islands, and this is a vital sector that we need to survive.

Richard Harrington: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we are aware of that issue and we are fully on it. I am happy to meet him if he would like to discuss it

separately, but I have only five minutes left now and I do not want to break into the time for the key points that I need to raise.

There is a range of options for overcoming the issues that I have outlined, and I hope that by taking a pragmatic approach we can do so quickly. We need to understand the costs of the projects and the impacts on consumers' bills. My officials have begun the process of updating the evidence base to set an appropriate strike price—the maximum that these projects could get paid for each unit of electricity that they produce. We must not forget that any additional costs that arise as a result of awarding support contracts are ultimately paid by households and businesses in their electricity bills.

Our approach to supporting new renewables, of competitive auctions with limits on the maximum price that we will allow, ensures that we support only the more cost-effective projects. That approach is not new but has been applied very successfully to other technologies, such as offshore wind. The industry is confident that the renewables support auction currently under way, whose outcome is expected in the coming months, should lead to a significant further drop in price. Whatever approach we take will need to work in this context of quite rapid price changes, and we want to see the outcome of our current auction before making decisions regarding the remote Scottish islands.

We have been through very clearly the importance of local support. Not everyone in the islands will support the development of the wind farms, but I am told that the majority of residents do. I understand that a poll of 1,000 Isle of Lewis adults commissioned by Lewis Wind Power found that seven in 10 supported having wind farms on their island. That is encouraging, but such support should not be taken for granted. It needs to be rewarded in the way that has been discussed—through community benefit funds and other systems. The Scottish Government have informed my officials that all the developers on the islands have committed to pay at least £5,000 per megawatt of capacity per year into such funds for the lifetime of a wind farm. That means that the Viking wind farm on Shetland, for example, could provide up to £1.85 million every year to the community. That money could be used for all sorts of projects: schools, local support groups, scout groups—the list is endless. Developers are also offering communities the opportunity to own a stake in projects, which is something that the UK and Scottish Governments are keen to see more of. Beyond direct income, we should also acknowledge the other benefits that these projects could bring. For example, jobs will be created not just during construction but throughout the lifetime of the projects.

Wind energy can play an important role for the country as a whole in producing the electricity we all need to support the running of our economy and our daily lives and in helping to reduce the harmful emissions associated with our energy systems. We all appreciate the commitment that island communities will have to make to ensure that we have access to long-term clean power. That is why it is absolutely right that they should benefit from hosting the projects.

We recognise that there are different ways of delivering the benefits, but of course it is important that any commitments that developers make are real and go beyond warm words. The Scottish Government are considering this issue closely, and I very much welcome that work. I look forward to meeting the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland and a group of developers, which we discussed outside the Chamber. That is a very good idea, which I am keen to progress as soon as possible.

I hope that my response today, in the short time that I have had, provides some reassurance to Members, as well as to the constituents we all represent, that the Government will support the development of onshore wind projects in the remote islands of Scotland, where they will directly benefit local communities.

Another very good point made by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland is that we are not starting from scratch. We know that, and I do not mean just the manifesto commitment, but everything that went before.

Mr Carmichael: I understood the Minister to say earlier that the Government would not come forward with firm proposals until after the conclusion of the current round of contract for difference auctions. Is that indeed the case? May I ask him to take that away and consider whether it is really necessary? At the very least, given the pressures of time on us here, we should have everything ready to go once we reach that point.

Richard Harrington: I am very prepared to consider that point as the right hon. Gentleman has asked me to do. I hope that hon. Members will bear with us as I and my officials tackle the issues that I have outlined. I hope to come back very shortly with a decision. I say “very shortly” because I want that on the record and because of the respect in which I hold the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland. In the meantime, I will shortly be meeting the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar to discuss these issues further, and I would be happy to meet any other Members of this House.

Question put and agreed to.

Safety of Riders and Horses on Rural Roads

4.30 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the safety of riders and horses on rural roads.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David, and to open this important debate; a number of colleagues have been very active on this issue and would also like to have secured it. I will welcome interventions and speeches later. I congratulate the new Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), on his appointment and welcome him to his first Westminster Hall debate. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) on his role. Welcome.

First, I have two confessions to make. I am not a horse rider; I have been on a horse twice in my life. The second occasion was because my wife is a horse rider: when we were courting, I was not really getting the opportunity to spend as much time with her as I intended, so I went horse riding with her. There was only the one attempt, and I eventually won the argument and we married. The earlier occasion was when I was younger, and I cannot really recall that experience.

My second confession is perhaps more serious. I am one of the Members in this place who has had to take a speed awareness course—I was caught speeding in Bristol some years ago. During that course, I was made aware of what damage a moving vehicle can do to vulnerable road users: children, motorcyclists, cyclists, and horses and riders. I welcomed that opportunity and wake-up call about why it is so important to keep to the speeds that are set out for us. So when a constituent, Debbie Smith—she is here this afternoon; welcome, Debbie—came to me wanting to raise the issue of the safety of horses and riders in west Cornwall, I had an open door and was ready to listen and do everything I could to support her campaign and the campaign of many of her friends who ride horses.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Does he agree that one of the problems is that most drivers are unaware that they should not pass horses any faster than 15 miles per hour? They are often just guided by the speed limit, thinking that it is okay. Would he commend the work of the British Horse Society, which has advocated raising greater awareness of the speed at which one should pass a horse?

Derek Thomas: I thank my right hon. Friend for her intervention; she is absolutely right, and I was pleased to meet the BHS today to discuss its concerns. A lot of the work, including this debate, that we have been doing over the past couple of years with Debbie Smith, the British Horse Society and many others is about raising awareness of how we should use our roads and consider others' safety, and pressing on the Government that we believe that there is more they can do to take part in this cause.

For many years, Debbie Smith has been working with others to campaign on behalf of horse riders for safer rural roads. Her most recent petition about passing

wide and slow, calling for stronger legal protections for riders on our roads, has reached almost 110,000—maybe now it is 110,000—signatures on the change.org site. I first met Debbie in November 2015 and required little persuasion to join her cause to make our roads safer for horses and their riders. Our initial encounter led to a meeting in February 2016 with the former roads Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), and civil servants from the Department for Transport. We discussed the need for a concerted effort by the Department to make our roads safer. Since then there has been a horse-riding awareness day—earlier this year, in which 15 different locations in the UK took part—and 110,000 signatures on the petition, as I said.

Horse riders make up a significant group of vulnerable road users, but despite there being 2.7 million across the UK, they often find themselves as the forgotten demographic—an afterthought in the minds of drivers and unacceptably low down many politicians' priority lists. It is for this reason that the British Horse Society launched the horse accidents website in November 2010. Since that launch, 2,510 reports of road incidents involving horses, including near misses and collisions, have been logged by the BHS. That is but the tip of the iceberg. Most significantly, since the launch 222 horses and 38 riders have been killed. This problem is not in decline. In the past year there has been a 29% increase in the number of road incidents involving a horse reported to the British Horse Society.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very sound case. In fact, it is shocking. I am very nervous of horses, so I go incredibly slowly whenever I am near them because I am afraid of the damage that they might do to me, but does he agree that on the whole many people who drive cars just think of a horse as a horse and forget that they are individuals and that one has to be even more careful if it is a young and nervous horse? The 15 mph and distance from the horse are crucial.

Derek Thomas: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I live in west Cornwall, where most of the roads are very narrow and horses and riders enjoy their valuable and important pursuit. It is absolutely right that we raise awareness and help drivers to understand that horses are living beings—they have brains. Something that they see, but we in the car behind perhaps cannot, may well cause them to get spooked. We need to make drivers aware of the risk not only to the horse and the rider, but to them and their vehicle. That might gain their attention. Statistics such as those should cause alarm.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Derek Thomas: Certainly, although I would like to make some progress this afternoon.

Chris Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this important topic forward for debate today. As somebody who has ridden all my life, I understand the problems out there with road safety and horses. My wife—just like his wife and the Minister's wife—rides, so this is a very important matter. My hon. Friend mentioned the British Horse Society, so will he join me in congratulating

it on the “Dead? Or Dead Slow?” campaign? It won the Driver Education Campaign of the Year, awarded by the Driving Instructors Association, in 2016.

Derek Thomas: Certainly. I am glad to do that and work with whoever across this House and the various organisations to raise awareness about the dangers on our roads. My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I thank him very much.

Yesterday, this debate was subject to a House of Commons digital debate: the first of this Parliament—and, I am told, without question the busiest of this Parliament, although there has been only one. The debate reached a total of 119,288 Facebook accounts, with almost 1,500 contributors. Obviously, I did not respond to every single one. Among the many excellent suggestions and sincere concerns expressed, the contributors articulated a strong belief among the horse riding and horse driving community that their safety has become a low priority.

The sentiment that all too often tragedy is not followed by justice is underpinned by high profile cases such as that of Mark Evans and his horse Wil. Mr Evans was a funeral director who also ran a horse-drawn carriage service. Years spent building up his business were undone in 2016 when a car ploughed into a funeral procession, leaving one horse dead and the family of the deceased devastated. The incident has left Mr Evans physically and mentally unable to work and in a position where he may have to give up his home due to loss of income. That is just one example of how lives are affected and why this debate is so important.

Cases such as these, repeated up and down the country, are far from inevitable. In fact, 80% of recorded incidents were caused by vehicles passing too close or too fast for a horse. We are debating an issue that is eminently preventable.

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for allowing an intervention. Has he made any assessment of the type of accidents that occur—between those that may be a result of ignorance or neglect and those that are a result of people who, for some reason, take leave of their senses when in the vicinity of horses and become almost temporary class warriors, getting annoyed and driving up close to horses? Is there any assessment or statistic that he can bring to our attention?

Derek Thomas: I will not cite any statistics, but in the debate yesterday many people raised that very point. There is a perception that people on horses are not necessarily welcome on the road. We need to understand and address that. My personal belief is that nearly everyone is a taxpayer, so we all contribute in some way to the maintenance of our roads; everybody has a right to outdoor activity, however they choose to do it. It is important that we break down any attitude or prejudice, because it is the safety of lives—whether of horses, riders or drivers—that should be of paramount importance. I thank my hon. Friend for a good intervention.

Several factors contribute to the situation. The first is the attitude and behaviour of drivers. Drivers often have good intentions when passing horses, but may be unaware of what speed or at what distance they should pass the horse; of how quickly a horse can move; of the fact that a horse is a flight animal; of how

it may react to a moving vehicle; or of how much damage it can do to a vehicle, notwithstanding the injuries it may receive.

The second factor, which my wife regularly raises with me, is the relative powerlessness experienced by riders on rural roads. The Highway Code stresses the importance of riders taking basic precautions to ensure that they take into their own hands as much responsibility for their own safety as possible. Campaigns such as “Pass Wide and Slow” do an excellent job of encouraging riders to wear high-vis jackets, avoid riding in poor visibility and use technologies such as hat cameras. The British Horse Society has a riding and road safety qualification to enable riders to upskill and better navigate today’s roads.

Despite such campaigns, riders are often at the mercy of the poor judgment of other road users. Hand gestures to drivers, save those made in moments of intense frustration, are rarely understood and seldom acknowledged. CCTV from hat cameras is not routinely followed up by police, which makes it difficult for riders to hold other road users to account. Increased usage of electric cars poses a new threat to riders that must now be considered; silent vehicles have already been the cause of several near misses.

Finally, the speed limit on many rural roads is too high. Many of the country lanes in my constituency are little more than adopted unmarked tracks, but they retain a speed limit of 60 mph—just 10 mph less than a motorway. The vulnerability of riders and the increase in road incidents involving horses on rural single-lane carriageways are symptomatic of a wider problem.

The Department for Transport has stated that around two thirds of UK road deaths take place on country roads. It issued guidance in 2013 that stated that local authorities should take the presence of vulnerable road users—including people walking, cycling or riding horses—fully into account, along with the concerns of local residents, when setting local speed limits. Despite this, inadequate consideration is being given to using the lower limit on high-risk rural roads. In effect, this has created legal havens for reckless driving. One participant in the digital debate yesterday told me how a driver rounded a bend at 45 mph on a very narrow road, striking and killing her horse, but police were unwilling to prosecute because the speed limit was 60 mph.

Campaigners have repeatedly stressed their sense of frustration that drivers who fail to exercise due care when encountering riders on the road, and in some cases exhibit a total disregard for the safety of both horse and rider, are rarely reprimanded by the police. I recently spoke to a solicitor who specialises in seeking compensation for clients injured in accidents that involve horses. She expressed surprise that many of the cases that she undertakes in civil court are not pursued as criminal cases, despite the submission of strong evidence—including headcam footage—of possible criminal behaviour. We need to consider how we can help police to make use of existing powers to pursue drivers who do not act with due care and attention when in the vicinity of riders.

I shall draw to a close with three recommendations for the Minister. I propose that we continue the discussions we had a year ago with the then roads Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough, to develop a national “THINK! horse” campaign. Although

[Derek Thomas]

many of the incidents that I have talked about today were not malicious, that does not make their consequences any less devastating. Some 80% of these accidents are avoidable because drivers are travelling too fast or too close to horses. I ask the Department for Transport to think carefully about expanding its existing work and running a sustained marketing campaign to promote safety measures for riders and horses on rural roads. It could borrow from the successful model employed by the “THINK! bike” campaign.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a really passionate and constructive speech and is reaching his peroration. Does he agree that this issue does not affect exclusively rural roads? Constituents of mine in semi-rural parts of Cheltenham such as Charlton Kings have written to me; they are equally affected and should not be forgotten either.

Derek Thomas: I thank my hon. Friend for that good intervention. I am sure he will have the opportunity to raise the matter with the Department. My concern particularly relates to rural roads, because narrow unmarked roads present a particular hazard to horse riders, but I take his point; I hope the Minister has heard it and will respond.

I ask the Department for Transport to borrow from the successful model employed by the “THINK! bike” campaign and focus on inspiring empathy between road users, as well as raising awareness of steps that both parties can take to avoid collisions. A greater emphasis on good driving practice around horses might be considered for driving lessons and tests. The Government might also think about possible measures to strengthen the rights of riders to control their immediate environment through the use of hand signals.

My second recommendation is that we empower the police to ensure that they can make use of their powers to pursue drivers who do not act with due care and attention in the vicinity of riders. We must establish common national police practice for recording and dealing with road incidents that involve horses. We should also increase the use of section 59 of the Police Reform Act 2002 to act as a viable deterrent.

Although some incidents may not meet the threshold for prosecution, that does not mean that there are not serious concerns about the standard of driving that is often shown in headcam CCTV footage. Officers should automatically consider the use of section 59, which enables them to warn a motorist that any repetition of similar driving within 12 months may result in the seizure of their vehicle and in recovery charges. The Government might also consider encouraging a standard online system to enable incidents and video recordings to be submitted for retention, action and feedback. Some police forces, including Greater Manchester and North Yorkshire, have already implemented such systems; I know that they are willing to share good practice with other forces.

Finally, we need to reduce speed limits. The Government must consider what action is needed to reduce the speed on rural single-lane carriageways. Guidance is issued by the Department for Transport but is under-utilised by local authorities; rural roads are consequently exploited as rat runs. Will the Government consider whether a

40 mph speed limit is more suitable for high-risk rural roads, particularly those that are unmarked? I urge the Minister to consider stronger measures to protect our most vulnerable road users, not least those in the riding community.

Sir David Amess (in the Chair): Wind-ups will start at 5.15 pm. There will be no contribution from the Scottish National party group on this occasion, so it will be for the Government and the Opposition to split the time between them. Mr Speaker has said firmly that interventions and speeches can be made only by Members who have been present from the start of the debate.

4.49 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak on this matter. I congratulate the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on setting the scene so well for us. I regularly deal with this issue in my constituency, where a lot of people are interested in horses. There is nothing like the grace and poise of a horse, and many people in my constituency enjoy riding. To be truthful, I am not someone who knows much about horses, but I do have a particular interest in horse-and-carriage and driving competitions. I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this issue forward.

I hail from a constituency that is a combination of rural and urban areas, which is why I often boast—quite rightly so, if I may say so myself—about having it all in Strangford. The constituency is not just beautiful; it has all these other things as well. Just a few miles from my home is the picturesque village of Carrowdore, in which it is not uncommon to see horses and traps and carriages trotting down the main street. We see them all the time. People who live in the area know to slow down, as the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) said, and go at a certain speed. They learn to live with all those on the road. The horses are used to having cars in front or behind and have learned to take their time. More importantly, cars stay back and drive slowly by, giving them a wide berth, so there is a way when people have an understanding of the area they live in.

I want to turn to why this issue is compounded in my area. On occasion, I have had the opportunity of judging the concours d’élégance class—picking a horse and carriage that I like; one that is pleasing to the eye—at the game fair and other events in Ballynahinch, Carrowdore and elsewhere. I believe those events add character to a village and give so much enjoyment to so many people. However, all it takes is one uninformed or inconsiderate person to turn what is a delightful sight into a horror scene, and unfortunately that is the reason for this debate, as the hon. Member for St Ives has outlined.

Those who hail from the countryside know how to drive around horses. They know to take their time, they know to drop their speed to 15 mph and they know to drive very slowly. However, we are increasingly seeing new build houses, bringing what are affectionately known as “blow-ins” into the area. For those who do not know what a blow-in is, it is someone who does not have a third-generation grandparent buried in the local cemetery. I am 58 and I am looked upon as a blow-in in my constituency, which might give hon. Members a perspective on blow-ins.

It is good to see more people moving into the area—let us be honest—and breathing life into the local economy, filling the schools and enjoying the peace of living in the

countryside, but this is about knowing how to live effectively alongside horses, or horses and carriages, on the road. With that influx has come people who perhaps do not fully appreciate how easy it is to upset the delicate balance of an area. That is in no way to be interpreted as placing blame on city folk. That is not what this is about—I am lucky that I am a country boy; I have lived in the country all my life, so this comes to me first hand. I am only highlighting the fact that everyone needs to be aware of the dangers of passing horses and riders.

The British Horse Society has found that in the last five years, since the launch of its horse accidents website, about 2,000 road incidents involving horses have been reported to the charity. I presume that they were all reported to the police as well—if they were not, they should have been. Of those incidents, 36 caused rider deaths and 181 resulted in a horse dying from their injuries or being put to sleep—the hon. Gentleman referred to that at the beginning of his contribution. Some 75% of accidents happened because a vehicle passed a horse without allowing enough space. It is just about understanding life in the countryside and how to pass safely; it does not take a great capacity to do so. More than a quarter of respondents said that they had also had to deal with driver road rage during the incident, which further compounds the issue and adds to the frustration of the horse owner and those of us who perhaps have a better understanding of the countryside and how overtaking should be done.

The majority of these incidents happened on a minor road, in a rural area. The incidents that I am aware of happened in the countryside: nearly half the horses involved—

Sir David Amess (in the Chair): Order. I was rather hoping that hon. Members would be generous to each other and take about five minutes each, in order to get everyone in.

Jim Shannon: I will be very mindful of that. I am sorry, Sir David. I should have realised that.

It should be noted that only 10 such accidents were reported in Northern Ireland, but anyone who has loved a horse will know that that is 10 too many. I believe that more information must be available UK-wide to help to prevent such accidents.

To conclude, we need signage on the road that adequately describes what should happen. There is undoubtedly room for all on rural roads—indeed, there is a need for all—but we must share the roads, and be wise and sensible in our approach. This information needs to get through to those who perhaps do not understand it yet. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

4.55 pm

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I would like to put on the record my thanks to the good people of South East Cornwall, who have ensured that I could do that and speak here today.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing this debate. I am grateful for the opportunity to make a brief contribution. I want to thank my constituent Audrey Cole, a retired police

officer and a highly experienced equestrian who was sadly injured while riding last week, although not in a road traffic accident collision.

Horses and their riders are an integral part of rural life. I spend many days going round my constituency, hearing the familiar sound of the clip-clop, clip-clop of horses' hooves on the roads and seeing riders on the byways of the countryside in my constituency. We are all aware that our roads are increasingly busy and congested, and rural areas are no different. In addition, constituencies such as mine have problems that can be exacerbated by the otherwise very welcome influx of holidaymakers. Some of them are inexperienced in rural road conditions, and that inexperience, when combined with local agricultural traffic and the fact that not all local people drive in a responsible way, can present real challenges to horses and their riders.

More awareness and education are definitely needed, as other Members have said, and perhaps the driving test should be refined to ensure greater emphasis on rural road conditions and on horse rider and driver activity. Also, I understand from the British Horse Society that there is currently no safety requirement for any equestrian-related road accident to be recorded unless there is human injury that requires hospital treatment directly from the scene of the accident. I would be grateful if the Minister could consider these issues when he responds to the debate.

However, improving the safety of rural roads is not just about improving driving and encouraging responsible behaviour by those on four wheels, two wheels or two legs. Many responsible horse owners do the sensible thing of providing early road training for their horses at home before ever venturing out with them on to public roads, learning to pass a stationary vehicle, bicycle or dog walker. Another great help for any horse doing road hacking is to go out for the first few times in the company of a more experienced animal that is used to the sights and sounds of public roads. For many riders, this is a matter of good common sense and good practice.

I know that every rider is encouraged through their respective sporting organisation to respect an unwritten code of conduct as far as courtesy to other road users is concerned. Sadly, it has been reported to me that the actions of a small minority of riders do not reflect those good standards of behaviour. I understand that there is a rider road safety test that the Pony Club and other riding clubs have offered in the past, but it is not compulsory. Perhaps we could consider introducing suitable incentives to encourage people to take up such courses. For example, horse insurers could be encouraged to offer a discounted rate to those who hold such a safety certificate.

Finally, I encourage the Minister to work closely with all stakeholders, including road user groups and the British Horse Society, to enhance safety for riders, horses, drivers and pedestrians. There is much good practice that can be built on, to improve driver awareness and education, and to ensure more efficient road preparation training for horses, including greater use of common sense and courtesy by people in the first instance.

4.59 pm

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Sir David, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

[*Mr Laurence Robertson*]

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) and thank him for securing and introducing this very important debate. Horses are very important to me: horses brought my wife and me together, many years ago, and I have ridden many, many times. I therefore know that horses, as well as being very big and powerful, are very nervous and volatile, and consequently very unpredictable. That is a big part of this debate.

I also have an interest in the debate as I used to be the chairman of the all-party group for the horse and currently serve as the joint chairman of the all-party racing and bloodstock industries group, and I draw the House's attention to my entry in that respect in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. It is very important that we understand that there are very many horses in this country.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) that this is not just a rural issue. There are many horses in London, for example, as well as in Cheltenham. I am very fortunate that the Cheltenham racecourse falls within my constituency, not his—nevertheless, he is very supportive indeed. My point is that there are very many horses around our towns and cities and, in particular, around our country roads.

I want to pick up on one point made by my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives: speed on rural roads. I myself have been involved in a car accident because someone was driving down a narrow country lane so fast they could not stop—I had stopped and they ran into me. If it had been a horse in that position, there could have been a serious accident. Only some four weeks ago, during the general election campaign, I was called away from campaigning to another similar accident down a very narrow lane, where someone was again going so fast they could not stop. I do not know whether the car they hit was a write-off, but it certainly looked that way. I do not know what the speed limit for that country lane technically was, but, as has been suggested, surely the important thing is that people drive according to the road conditions rather than any arbitrary speed limit. I urge the Minister to consider that serious issue and to review the situation.

Rebecca Pow: I know we are tight for time, but my hon. Friend has really sparked my attention. I, too, suffered an accident, in a rural lane in Taunton Deane. The driver had just passed his test and was going at at least 65 miles an hour. I had stopped, because I had seen the lights, and he crashed into me. I could have died; a horse would have had no chance. I wonder what my hon. Friend thinks about the earlier suggestion of a 40-mph speed limit for some of these rural roads, not just because of the horses but for the safety of other drivers.

Mr Robertson: I am grateful for that intervention. Even 40 miles an hour on the wrong kind of road could be too quick. This goes back to what my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) said about education being very important, in connection with horses but also with driving safely according to the road conditions. It is often not possible to go faster than 10 or 15 miles an hour on a very narrow country lane to remain safe, so education is crucial.

My final point is that in order perhaps to take horses off roads that might be dangerous we could do with reviewing the rules on bridleways. It might be that many existing footpaths could be made dual use, and function as bridleways as well. That would help to ease the problem.

Dame Caroline Spelman: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, as I know time is tight. Precisely on bridleways, close to urban settings there is a terrible dearth of them and they do not connect up. I think it is the fact that they are seen as multi-purpose—for pedestrians, cyclists and even motorised transport as well as horses—that leads to great reluctance on the part of landowners to extend any sort of bridlepath network. Might we appeal to the Minister to consider a new designation for off-road safe riding for equestrians?

Mr Robertson: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend's remarks. I will not take up any more of the House's time except to stress that horses are part of our countryside and our country. We only have to look at the startling statistics that have been cited to realise that we really must do something about the issue.

5.4 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing this brilliant debate on what is an important issue for rural areas and also, now, for towns.

One reason why I wanted to speak in the debate was to have the opportunity to thank my constituent Christine Brindle, who invited me to her stables in Hadleigh in July 2016 to meet her and her fellow campaigners. She is part of the "Pass Wide and Slow" campaign group. I was brought up in London but moved to South Suffolk in 2011 and am a keen cyclist. What I have observed is that the key word is simply "respect". Someone living in the countryside comes to respect equestrian road users and know that they should slow down and pass wide and slow. The question is: what happens when someone—either from the communities or from outside—does not show that respect and drives aggressively or carelessly? What measures can we take to make a difference?

Several measures have been suggested, including with regard to speeding. A particular concern is about anticipation, because my constituency, like many others, has bendy rural roads, and drivers have to anticipate more what is ahead of them. If they come sharply round a bend and there is someone there with a horse, they have to react far more quickly. This is about sensible driving, but speeding is also an issue. I would be interested to hear from the Minister whether there are any ways in which we can affect the law. I know this is not optimal timing for changes to legislation, but it would be good to know if we could make any changes, which I think would have support, to enforce the idea that drivers should be considerate in the presence of vulnerable users, including horses. However, I think this is a public messaging issue in particular. We all know about the very good "THINK! bike" campaign, which has promoted the idea of taking motorcyclists into account and checking for them in our side mirror; we should have a similar campaign—it has been referred to as "THINK! horse"—for equestrian road users.

I want also to mention driverless vehicles. We have had driverless horses for many centuries, but driverless cars will bring their own issues. Members might be aware that Volvo has an issue with kangaroos. The company has recently reported that its driverless cars, initially tested to detect and avoid moose in Sweden, have struggled with marsupials. I am no expert, but I think it is because they bounce rather than approach steadily. This is a serious point, because we want to lead the world in the industrial field of driverless automotive: I hope that in developing large-animal detection systems in driverless cars companies will be cognisant of all road users.

My final point is that this is a predominantly rural issue. I have a predominantly rural constituency. We live in an age when people in the countryside sometimes feel ignored, and on this issue we could show that we have a transport policy for the whole country that takes into account and is fair to all users, in particular those on horseback and those riding with horses.

5.7 pm

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I very much thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) for securing the debate and look forward to working with him on many issues that affect his islands and the Isle of Wight. I was fascinated to hear my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartledge) talking about kangaroos. I think it will be some time yet before we start riding them but that will be an issue when we come to it.

On the Isle of Wight, we have the highest percentage of horses per acre in Britain and our riding stables are an important part of island life and of our economy. I share the concerns about the dangers of riders and cars colliding on busy roads. On the Isle of Wight, we have been fortunate enough to have a new contract to resurface all our roads so we will soon have some of the best roads in England, if not Europe. However, riders have expressed concerns that the new road surfaces will, at least for the first few months, be slippery and not all horses can have studs fitted, so I look forward to talking to Island Roads about what more we can do. Although I am generally impressed by the consideration that islanders in my part of the world have for riders when they pass them, there are complaints from a small minority of drivers that horses should not be on busy roads. However, riders clearly do not want to share roads; they do so only when there is no other choice.

So what do we do? In my part of the world I will raise with our council the issue of what can be done to improve the conditions of some bridleways, to encourage their use by not only riders but cyclists, who are also vulnerable users. I think there could be a role for the ferries in reminding people coming to the island that we have a lot of very small lanes, like west Cornwall, and to remind people of distances and to be considerate of more vulnerable road users.

More generally, I wonder whether more could be done to encourage minimum distances. We have heard about the excellent campaign from the British Horse Society and others, but can minimum distances be stipulated, apart from in emergencies? Can they be in the driving test? Can it be brought home to people in towns and villages that there needs to be a minimum

distance between cars and horses, cars and cyclists and cars and motorbikes? I say that partly out of self-interest: while a car is very dangerous to a horse, a horse is reasonably dangerous to a car if it kicks or spooks. Thoughtfulness and consideration should be our bywords.

I share the concerns about single-lane roads. I live one and a half miles down a single-track lane. On my patch, someone going round a corner at more than 15 mph will have a problem if something is coming at more than 20 mph from the other direction. I share that lane with lots of horses, because it is a popular route for them and lots of other lovely members of the animal kingdom. I wonder whether the answer is to have what have become known as quiet roads, where drivers do not have priority, but pedestrians and cyclists and riders do. We have one or two quiet roads on the island. There is a cost to them, but they could be in part an answer to national speed limits, which make driving very fast on single-track roads legal, but extremely foolish.

To sum up, my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives mentioned his national campaign ideas, with which I fully agree, but I stress that more might be done with the driving test to reinforce minimum safe distances.

5.12 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to make my first contribution as a shadow Transport Minister under your chairmanship, Sir David. I thank the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) for securing this debate today, which has focused on the significant issue of safety for vulnerable road users, whether they have two legs or four legs, or are on a bicycle or perhaps even a unicycle. It is important that all road users feel safe and are not put at undue risk.

The subject of today's debate is horses and their riders, and it is vital that that matter receive attention in this place, because there have been more than 2,500 incidents involving horses over the past seven years, of which 222 resulted in the death of the horse and 38 resulted in the death of the rider. In the past year alone, almost 40% of riders were subject to road rage or abuse, with 81% of incidents occurring because the driver did not allow enough room between their vehicle and the horse. One out of every five such incidents resulted in the vehicle colliding with the horse. Clearly the Government need to address that pressing issue.

The British Horse Society reports that since its "Dead? Or Dead Slow?" campaign launched in 2016, reports of road incidents have creased by 29%. That proves that safety campaigns on their own are not enough. The Government must do more to protect riders and their horses. In a Westminster Hall debate in the last Parliament on road traffic accident prevention, the Minister at the time, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), stated that he did "recognise the problem" for horse riders, yet no concrete policy has materialised. While I do not doubt the Government's sincerity on road safety, their record has been a disappointment in recent years. They failed on their 2015 manifesto commitment to reduce casualties year on year, and their manifesto in the recent general election only mentioned road safety in passing.

Alex Chalk: Does the hon. Lady share my disappointment that more Opposition Members have not come here to take an interest in this important issue?

Cat Smith: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I have a keen interest in this issue as an Opposition Member who has a constituency that includes a lot of rural areas. Indeed, my constituent Susan Armitage has raised the issue with me on a great number of occasions. It obviously affects the whole country, although the demographics of constituencies represented by Opposition Members might be considered to be more urban than rural.

By contrast with the Government's manifesto, ours stated very clearly:

"Labour will reset the UK's road safety vision and ambitiously strive for a transport network with zero deaths, reintroducing road-safety targets".

We implore the Minister to follow our lead and reintroduce the targets that were brought in under the last Labour Government. I have no doubt that those targets successfully reduced the number of those killed or seriously injured by about a third. During a Westminster Hall debate on road traffic law enforcement in the previous Parliament, the Minister at the time, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough, stated that while other countries might wish to have road safety targets, his belief was that we did not need them. However, road safety targets focus minds and attention, and the Opposition simply do not see the reason or logic behind the Government's persistent refusal to bring them back. When we support international targets at the United Nations and European level, why do we still reject them for our own country?

The Government have also overlooked the significance of road safety figures with their failure to release the 2016 national road safety statistics on time. The release has been pushed back to the end of September this year. As a consequence of the delay, casualty figures for the first quarter of 2017, previously scheduled for release in August 2017, will now not be published. The next quarterly update is expected in October, covering the period from January to June 2017.

If the Minister is determined to disregard road safety targets and figures, perhaps he can provide us with some assurances that the Government are progressing with other policy ideas. He may be aware of the petition mentioned earlier that has gathered more than 100,000 signatures on Change.org. It calls for a law to be introduced that would require road users to pass a horse with at least two metres' distance and to slow to a maximum speed of 15 mph, as well as ensuring that all road users abide by horse riders' hand signals. Have the Government considered any of those proposals? If not, what other policies can the Minister lay out today to safeguard riders and horses on rural roads?

We must see some action from the Government on rider and horse safety and the safety of road users in general. Opposition Members are determined to keep pressure on the Government until we see a return to the progress made under the last Labour Administration. It must be stressed again: inaction risks lives. The Labour party wants to reduce risk on our transport network to zero. The Government should be prepared to show the same ambition and act accordingly.

Sir David Amess (in the Chair): Before the Minister responds, I want to ask that a little bit of time be left at the end for Mr Thomas to wind up the debate.

5.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): Thank you, Sir David. It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship. If I may, I will start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing this very important debate on the safety of riders and horses on rural roads, a debate that has been dignified by some terrific contributions, albeit generally from one side of the House.

It is an honour to respond in my first Westminster Hall debate as the Minister with responsibility for roads and road safety. I do so as a rural MP who is extremely familiar with the issues from first-hand and constituency experience. I would also like to congratulate my hon. Friend on the e-debate, or online debate, that he has so successfully promoted. It has obviously proved to be an interesting and useful way to develop ideas, to share understanding and to promote awareness of these issues. I could not end the opening section of my remarks without congratulating the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) on taking her position on the Opposition Front Bench. It is testimony to her colleagues' belief in her skills and abilities that none of them has seen fit or found it necessary to attend the debate themselves.

As my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives said, this is a very important issue, but that is not merely because horses and equestrianism have an important role in local communities across the whole of the United Kingdom; nor is it because of the huge benefits of health and leisure and the sheer joy that come from riding. If I may, I will quote a somewhat unusual source in this area, Ronald Reagan, who once said that no problem does not look better from the saddle of a horse. I think that many people in the Chamber would share that view.

This debate is important because of the impact of accidents and fatalities in horse-related incidents on human lives. We need all road users to feel, and to be, safe on our roads. This country has a very strong safety record overall on roads—indeed, our roads are among the safest in the world—but we must not and will not be complacent in any sense.

It is important to flag up that there were 1,730 reported road deaths in 2015, which is the most recent year for which data are available. While this represents a 45% reduction compared with a decade ago, it still represents many wasted lives and shattered families.

A question has been raised by implication in this debate about numbers and statistics. I want to put that front and centre of the discussion, before I go on to talk about some of the ways in which we are trying to improve the situation. According to police statistics, there were no recorded incidents of horse rider fatalities during 2015. There were, however, 17 serious casualties and 77 slight casualties. Those numbers had fallen by something like a third over the previous 15 years. I recognise that these numbers do not by any means tally with the numbers reported to the British Horse Society or, indeed, the numbers quoted by colleagues here today. I start by saying that I absolutely welcome the potential for co-operation between the BHS and our own statisticians in the Department for Transport. I offer them for the purposes of establishing a set of accepted, worthwhile statistics from which we can all calibrate and understand the problem.

However one thinks of the number, it represents only a fraction of total casualties on our roads, but each one of those is enormously distressing to those involved. The Government remain very keen to support the safety and wellbeing on our roads of riders and horses alike.

I am aware that my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives, in his indefatigable way, had a meeting in February 2016 with my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), to discuss these issues. Following that, the Department, through the “THINK! road safety” campaign, worked directly with the British Horse Society to support its own “Dead Slow” campaign, to encourage car drivers to pass horses safely. The Department was able to reinforce the BHS campaign by developing a short film that is being promoted as a public information film on UK TV stations. I have encouraged the society to tweet that tomorrow, and I would encourage all Members to re-tweet that, as I will, as a small demonstration of the importance of these issues and the personal care and attention that we feel for them.

The Department has also invested in promoting the film on YouTube and other social media, such as Twitter and Facebook. Leaflets and posters to support the campaign further reminded motorists of the need to be patient when they encounter horses on the road and supplemented the advice already given in the Highway Code.

The leaflets and posters are available free of charge from the THINK! online shop and are often used by riding groups to support local campaigns. Road safety officers around the country have also been encouraged to feature the campaign locally. To some extent, therefore, there is already a national campaign, in embryo at least, but I have no doubt more can be done. Officials in my Department have worked with the BHS on its “Ride Safe” book, which is endorsed with the THINK! logo. There is a great deal of co-operation already.

I am aware of requests, and we have discussed them today, that the Government prescribe speed limits and minimum distances when drivers are passing horses. There are different concerns here. One is that it would be difficult to enforce and impractical in some circumstances, where roads are very narrow. Road speed limits are in many cases local matters and are locally configured. Judging from Herefordshire, frankly, there is a serious issue, which is the extraordinary slowness with which local authorities bring in changes to speed limits. That is something that my Department can properly look at, but it is important to be aware that even bringing in speed limits—the same is true for national speed limits—may not necessarily be safe in all circumstances. We do not want to make our roads less safe by producing a one-size-fits-all solution, but we do need to improve local take-up and local impact.

It is important to note that where people are reckless around horses, there are already laws in place that make them liable for prosecution. The offences include driving dangerously, driving without due care and attention, and driving without reasonable consideration for other road users, as set out in rule 144 of The Highway Code. However, I recognise that there may be other steps that we can take. One that has just been suggested is the idea that we can supplement The Highway Code with further material such as images of horses to promote a greater understanding of their presence on the road.

The Department’s focus has been to raise awareness of the issues and to provide advice to all road users. Last autumn we ran a “Country Roads” campaign, which encouraged drivers to anticipate the hazards—anticipation has been raised by colleagues across the House today—and reduce their speed into bends. Some 59% of all road fatalities occur on country roads, and the number of people killed on country roads is nearly 10 times higher than on motorways. We have already heard about sharp bends, hidden dips, blind summits and concealed entrances—all of which can conceal potential hazards, leaving drivers little time to react if they are driving too quickly.

As well as targeted campaigns, the Department also endeavours to protect vulnerable road users through other channels. The driving theory test contains questions about how drivers should interact with vulnerable road users, including horse riders. The hazard perception test uses on-road video clips shown from a driver’s perspective. Learner drivers are required to successfully identify developing hazards. The current test includes a number of clips where horse riders are the hazard to be identified, either directly or indirectly. The clips are refreshed and updated periodically, and the move to computer-generated imagery may mean that we are able to incorporate situations that would otherwise be too difficult to film.

In relation to the driving test, the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency has recently concluded a two-year trial, which aims to make the practical driving test much more reflective of a real-life driving journey, and a revised test will be in place from December. Changes include increasing the duration of the independent driving section from 10 to 20 minutes, and following directions from a satnav instead of an examiner. One of the aims of the changes, which I am sure colleagues will welcome, is to open up test routes and make sure that candidates can be assessed effectively in more natural or higher-risk situations, including driving on national speed limit roads.

Rules for all road users are set out in The Highway Code. As well as advice specific to horse riders, there are rules and advice for other road users when passing horse riders and horse-drawn vehicles.

Wider efforts are also in place to improve road safety. Many things combine to create safe and responsible roads users. As has been noted, young and novice drivers are at the highest risk of being involved in a road collision. That is why the Department has recently invested £2 million in the design phase of a research programme to identify the best technological and behavioural interventions for learner and novice drivers, and has awarded funding via the Innovation Challenge Fund to develop new hazard perception training.

I could dwell on changes that have been made to increase penalties for mobile phone use and many other initiatives, but let me just say in closing that I think the debate has been dignified by a large number of important and interesting changes. One I would like to touch on is the importance of effective policing. This can be done at several levels, and I would encourage all colleagues to raise the issue with their police and crime commissioners locally. I am delighted that the national roads lead for policing is Anthony Bangham, chief constable of West Mercia, my own police authority, and also a very near neighbour of mine in Herefordshire. I assure the House that I will be raising the issues personally with him.

[*Jesse Norman*]

I close by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives on securing this debate and by reassuring him of the Department's commitment to improving road safety for all users, including our most vulnerable.

5.28 pm

Derek Thomas: I thank the Minister for his response. We know our communities are working together. That includes groups such as the Pass Wide and Slow campaign and the British Horse Society, but also cycling and motorcycling groups. They are bring forward sensible recommendations and ideas, and I look forward to seeing how the Government can increase their participation and do the right thing for vulnerable road users, including horses and their riders.

I note that the shadow Minister attempted to make this a party political issue. Having spoken to the Minister, I know that he wants to work with everyone who cares about the issue to do the right thing for rural roads. I thank all Members who have participated and contributed, because together we can bring about a safer environment for all who use our rural roads.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the safety of riders and horses on rural roads.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statement

Tuesday 4 July 2017

WORK AND PENSIONS

Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council: 15 June 2017

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): The Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council met on 15th June 2017 in Luxembourg. I represented the UK.

The Council concluded the annual European semester process; Ministers approved the Council recommendation on the National Reform programmes, endorsed the Country specific recommendations and endorsed the Employment Committee opinion on the labour market integration of refugees. In the table round, in line with all Ministers, the UK welcomed the continuous improvements in the semester process.

The Council received a progress report on revisions to the posting of workers directive. The common theme in interventions was the need for European unity and to build citizens' confidence in the EU. However, member states expressed different views for achieving that, reflecting a broader debate on the balance between the social dimension of the EU and the single market.

Ministers discussed the European Pillar of social rights over lunch. The presidency provided an oral report to Council afterwards, citing agreement that there should be flexibility about the process for the proposed joint proclamation on the Pillar.

The Council took note of a progress report on the revision of EU Social Security Co-ordination Regulation 883. The presidency outlined how close they thought the Council was to agreement. The European Commission reiterated that this whole file should be concluded in this European Parliament. Supported by Germany, the UK stressed the importance of full codification of case law and of striking a balance on applicable legislation.

Progress reports on the anti-discrimination directive, women on boards and the European Accessibility Act were noted without comment from delegations. The Council also adopted Council conclusions on making work pay and the European Court of Auditors' report on the youth guarantee and youth employment initiative.

The Council agreed a general approach on the carcinogens and mutagens directive (second batch of substances). Alongside other member states, the UK emphasised the importance of protecting workers and that the revision should therefore be based on scientific and social partner advice. On polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, the presidency's text strayed from that advice, such that the UK abstained.

Under any other business, Sweden raised pharmaceuticals and the environment. The Commission stated it will publish policy options on these in early 2018, including a new Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR) Action Plan. The UK spoke on the importance of action on AMR in different sectors and following up on progress made through other global fora. The UK also welcomed work through the G7 and G20 particularly with regard to research into new antibiotics, vaccines and diagnostics. Estonia outlined the priorities for its upcoming presidency, to include tackling harmful use of alcohol; opportunities through digital innovation in health; and tackling AMR.

[HCWS25]

ORAL ANSWERS

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WRITTEN STATEMENT

Tuesday 4 July 2017

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WORK AND PENSIONS	31WS
Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council: 15 June 2017	31WS

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