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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 5 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

CABINET OFFICE AND THE CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER

The Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—
Public Sector Pay

1. **Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): If he will hold discussions with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on bringing forward proposals to review public sector pay. [900232]

The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Damian Green): Public sector pay policy has always been designed to strike the right balance between being fair to our public servants and fair to those who pay for them. The Government will continue to assess that balance.

Neil Gray: I thank the Minister for that answer, and I ask the House to note that my wife is a primary school teacher in Scotland. According to an academic report published this week by the UK Government, average public sector earnings have fallen in the last decade by 6%, or up to £3 per hour for some people. With that in mind, will the Minister advise us on whether he supports, and wishes this Government to follow, the lead that the Scottish Government have taken in ending the 1% cap for public sector workers? Or does he support what the former Prime Minister David Cameron said yesterday: that it is “selfish” to campaign for an end to the cap?

Damian Green: It is interesting that the hon. Gentleman brings up Scottish education, which is, as he knows, the responsibility of the Scottish Government. I point out that in England, where this Government have responsibility for education, there are 15,500 more teachers than there were in 2010. As he knows, the Government have asked independent public sector pay review bodies to recommend what should happen in their respective professions each year, and the House may be interested to know that the Government have accepted every recommendation made by a public sector pay review body since 2014.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): The Gray family have a monopoly on Question 1. Of course, we all have every sympathy with public sector pay bodies, and it is right that we listen to what they say. Nevertheless, does my right hon. Friend agree that if we are to accede to every request, we will have to pay for it by either decreasing spending or increasing taxation? Which would he prefer?

Damian Green: My hon. Friend makes a perfectly valid point. Everyone in this House wants to be fair to public sector workers, but Conservative Members also want to be fair to taxpayers. It is very important that we strike the right balance. If we do not strike that balance, we will wreck the economy, which is what would happen with the Labour party’s ridiculous uncosted policy proposals.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): While cutting the real-terms pay of nurses, the police, fire officers and others, the Prime Minister has broken her own £72,000 cap that she advocated for the salaries of political appointees. A third of all her special advisers earn more than that, and her two ill-fated chiefs of staff earned almost double that amount. How can the Minister justify pay restraint for nurses when there is no restraint in No. 10? Will he put an end to the pay cap in the public sector by changing the guidelines that the Government give to the pay review bodies? Finally, will he reject the former Prime Minister’s disgraceful slur that wanting to earn a decent income in the public sector is somehow selfish?

Damian Green: Let me answer some of the hon. Gentleman’s questions. I hope he recognises that, as I have just said, the Government have accepted every recommendation made by a public sector pay review body since 2014. Striking the right balance between being fair to public sector workers and being fair to taxpayers must be the right way forward. The suggestions that were made during the election campaign, and clearly continue to be made, by the Labour party would lead to the situation that the Greek people have had to suffer: precisely because of irresponsible commitments made by their Government, they have had to slash their public services. Public services get worse under the sort of economic policy advised by the Labour party.

Prompt Payment Code

2. **Neil Parish** (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): What progress the Government are making on the delivery of the prompt payment code. [900233]

9. **Gillian Keegan** (Chichester) (Con): What progress the Government are making on the delivery of the prompt payment code. [900240]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Cabinet Office (Caroline Nokes): Since 2015, we have worked closely with the Government’s major strategic suppliers to encourage them to sign up to the prompt payment code. I am pleased to say that all 32 strategic suppliers that we targeted in 2015 have now signed up.

Neil Parish: Will my hon. Friend explain to me exactly how we are speeding up payments to companies? Cash flow from Government contracts is so important. Also, is there a way to make sure that Government contracts are of a size such that small and medium-sized companies are more able to bid for them?

Caroline Nokes: We know how important prompt payment is to smaller businesses, and we are committed to making further improvements to payment practice. We are working to remove all barriers facing small and

medium-sized enterprises bidding for Government contracts, and we are committed to increasing spend with SMEs, both directly and through the supply chain. We have also opened the free-to-use Contracts Finder website for suppliers to advertise subcontracting opportunities.

Gillian Keegan: Cash flow is vital to small businesses in Chichester and throughout the country. What are the Government doing to ensure that they lead the way and pay their suppliers properly?

Caroline Nokes: I welcome my hon. Friend to the House. The Government are committed to paying our suppliers promptly. All public sector buyers must include a 30-day payment term in new public sector contracts, pay undisputed invoices within 30 days, and require that this payment term be passed down the supply chain. Our own payment performance is published quarterly, and the Government are doing brilliantly well in meeting our targets.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): When my party becomes the Government of this country very soon, we will declare war on late payments, requiring companies bidding for a public sector contract to pay their suppliers within 30 days, and going beyond that with heavy fines for late payers. Will the Conservatives in opposition support us in passing the necessary legislation?

Caroline Nokes: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his optimism. In fact, this Government have made sure that undisputed invoices are paid within five days in many cases, and 96% of all contracts are paid within 30 days when the invoices are not disputed.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The prompt payment code simply has not done enough to address the scourge of late payment, with £26 billion owed and an average of 72 days being taken to pay invoices across the country. May I say to the Minister that she should stop paying lip service to the problem and take the action needed for smaller businesses, which just want to be paid on time?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Gentleman is of course right to point out what a problem this is for small business in particular. However, I want to draw his attention to the Government's mystery shopper service, which has secured a positive outcome for the vast majority of companies that have brought disputed payments to our attention, and indeed to the signatories to the independent Prompt Payment Code Compliance Board, to which we would encourage all those who have not been paid on time to report such cases.

Electoral Fraud

3. **Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con):** What steps the Government are taking to tackle electoral fraud. [900234]

5. **Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con):** What steps the Government are taking to tackle electoral fraud. [900236]

13. **Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con):** What steps the Government are taking to tackle electoral fraud. [900244]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): The Government believe that electoral fraud is unacceptable on any level. We have a clear path to building a democracy that is both clear and secure, and we will work closely with key partner organisations to deliver a comprehensive programme of work for reforming our electoral system and strengthening electoral integrity.

Sir Henry Bellingham: Is the Minister aware that there is now clear evidence that many students boasted on social media of voting twice—once at university, and once by post at home? Surely this is straightforward electoral fraud.

Chris Skidmore: The offence of double voting that my hon. Friend mentions is completely unacceptable. Indeed, it is nothing less than an abuse of our democracy. I am meeting Sir John Holmes, the chair of the Electoral Commission, this afternoon, and I intend to raise this with him as a priority. Let all of us in this House be clear: this is a crime. If anyone has any evidence of people voting twice, they should report it to their local returning officer and the police, who must take this issue seriously.

Mr Wragg: Will my hon. Friend provide more information about how the introduction of individual electoral registration has assisted in preventing electoral fraud? What checks are in place to ensure that a person is eligible to vote when they register online?

Chris Skidmore: The IER digital service operated by the Cabinet Office checks the details provided by the applicant, including their national insurance number, against government data before passing on the application to the relevant local electoral administration teams.

Andrew Bridgen: It has been highlighted that all someone needs when they go to vote is a name and an address. In theory, someone could get hold of a telephone directory and vote all day in different polling stations. Does the Minister agree that it is time to use photo identification to prevent electoral fraud?

Chris Skidmore: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. People deserve to have confidence in the security of our democratic system of elections. Voter ID has been in place in Northern Ireland for decades, and the use of photographic ID was introduced in 2003 under the previous Labour Government. The Electoral Commission has consistently called for use of ID in polling stations to protect the integrity of the polls. The Government will conduct voter ID pilots in the local elections in May 2018 to enable us to learn what works best, and to ensure that we develop a system in which there is full public confidence.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Are we not supposed to have policy driven by evidence, and is it not significant that the Minister gave not one shred of evidence in his reply? Quite frankly, in every election there are one or two cases of people being convicted of fraud, out of tens of millions of voters. This is straight out of the Donald Trump disinformation playbook, because Ministers are again trying to suppress voter participation. The Minister cannot come up with any evidence—if anyone has such evidence, they should take it to the police—and he should be ashamed of himself.

Chris Skidmore: I missed the last part of that rant, but this idea has the backing of the Electoral Commission and electoral authorities, so that we can deliver a secure democracy that has the confidence of the public. The last Electoral Commission report on the subject shows that 38% of people felt that electoral fraud was an issue. Since 2010, 2,394 alleged cases of electoral fraud have been reported to the Electoral Commission.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): Electoral fraud, whenever it occurs, is a serious business. The fact that there were two successful prosecutions in 2016 shows the size of the problem. Does the Minister agree that the bigger crime is having 7 million people off the electoral register?

Chris Skidmore: When it comes to the size of the electoral register, I am sure the hon. Gentleman will share my delight that we have the largest electoral register since records began, at 46.9 million people. A record 3 million people registered to vote at this election. The Government believe in a democracy that works for everyone. Tackling electoral fraud means making sure that people are not disenfranchised by losing their vote, and protecting the most vulnerable communities, such as those in Tower Hamlets.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): But surely the time has come for automatic electoral registration. How can it possibly be fair that, according to the Office for National Statistics, in my inner-city Nottingham constituency, less than three quarters of adults are on the electoral register, but in the Minister's constituency, over 97% of adults are? Is not the real electoral fraud those policies that stand in the way of citizens exercising their democratic rights?

Chris Skidmore: The introduction of the individual electoral registration website has seen 27 million people register to vote using that system. We want to ensure that registering to vote is as easy and effective as possible, but voting and registering to vote have individual responsibility at their heart. We need to protect the integrity of the polls and, equally, all MPs have a duty to encourage registration in our constituencies.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): In Eddisbury there was clear evidence of double registrations, even within the constituency. Does the Minister agree that we should have a central system that flags up people who are double-registered, wherever they are in the country?

Chris Skidmore: The electoral register is held by 380 electoral registration officers. It is right that that remains locally accountable to communities. We do not intend to introduce any central registration system, which would cost upwards of £80 million, but we are interested in looking at this issue, which is a serious one. As I said, I am meeting the Electoral Commission and look forward to taking forward proposals in due course.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): This new ministerial team would be wrong to pander to the near-obsession of their own Back Benchers with the idea that the principal problem of our electoral system is voter fraud. In fact, the biggest thing that undermines our parliamentary democracy is that more than 14.6 million of those who were registered to vote did not do so four

weeks ago. Will the Minister make good on the promises, which I have received twice already in this Chamber, to bring forward proposals to increase democratic participation in our country?

Chris Skidmore: The hon. Gentleman mentions a 14 million figure, and we heard a 7 million figure earlier from a Labour Member. What we know from the data is that there is a specific churn of people moving properties, particularly renters and home movers. The Government want to address that to make sure that we have better data, so that we understand where people are registering and why they are registering. That is why we will bring forward a democratic engagement strategy to ensure that we have a democracy that works for everyone.

Democratic Engagement

4. **Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): What discussions the Government have had with electoral administrators on promoting democratic engagement. [900235]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): We have worked closely with electoral administrators across the country to make use of their experience and expertise when consulting on promoting democratic engagement. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to take this opportunity, on behalf of the whole House, to thank our returning officers and registration officers for their hard work in ensuring that the recent general election ran so smoothly. They are the unsung heroes of our democracy.

Maggie Throup: British citizens living abroad want to engage in our democratic process here in the UK, but currently they lose that right after 15 years. What is my hon. Friend doing to deliver on our manifesto promise to give such people votes for life?

Chris Skidmore: The Government's principle is clear: participation in our democracy is a fundamental part of being British, however far people have travelled. We are committed to scrapping the 15-year rule in time for the next scheduled general election in 2022. Although the manifesto commitment to legislate for votes for life was not in the 2017 Queen's Speech—the manifesto was a programme for the Parliament, not just for this first Session—we are determined to ensure that British voters, wherever they are, have the right to have their say.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): In terms of democratic engagement, we had unprecedented problems in Newcastle-under-Lyme during the general election with late and missing postal votes, and with people being turned away from polling stations over registration issues. I have written to the First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office about that, an investigation is under way, and I will apply for an Adjournment debate. In the meantime, will the Minister urgently remind council chief executives and returning officers of their responsibility to resource electoral services sufficiently to carry out their legal responsibilities?

Chris Skidmore: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will report that specific point on Newcastle-under-Lyme to the Electoral Commission, which will produce a review of the general election that the Government will look at

closely. The Cabinet Office has provided funding for local authorities and registration officers over a five-year period. We are looking at those claims, but he is absolutely right that our elections are a centrepiece of local democracy, and local authorities should take this seriously.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Democratic engagement must be safe. Will my hon. Friend provide more information on the work being done to support sufferers of domestic violence in registering to vote?

Chris Skidmore: Indeed. Next year will be the 100th anniversary of women getting the right to vote, and the 90th anniversary of women getting the equal right to vote, but there are still some women and groups in society who, by virtue of their circumstances, are unable to vote. Survivors of domestic violence are unable to register because they do not want to put their safety at risk. We are determined to take forward legislation to ensure that we expand the range of attestors and documentation to give those women the chance to vote in our democratic elections.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): A Lancaster University study found that 24% of people with learning disabilities had registered to vote, but that only 9% of them used their vote. The survey also found that some voters were turned away from polling stations by clerks who perceived their learning disability to be the reason why they were not allowed to vote. What are the Government doing to ensure that all voters, regardless of their disability, have their right to vote in elections?

Chris Skidmore: The hon. Lady makes a very important point. The Cabinet Office has established an “accessibility to elections” working group; its members include Mencap and the Royal National Institute of Blind People. I am concerned to ensure that in the 21st century, disability and sight loss are not barriers to voting. We will look at bringing forward proposals to ensure that we make our elections as accessible as possible.

Mr Speaker: Pithily, John Howell.

Cyber-security

6. **John Howell** (Henley) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure the cyber-security of public and private sector organisations. [900237]

10. **Victoria Prentis** (Banbury) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure the cyber-security of public and private sector organisations. [900241]

14. **Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure the cyber-security of public and private sector organisations. [900245]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Cabinet Office (Caroline Nokes): Our world-leading national cyber-security strategy, supported by £1.9 billion of transformational investment, sets out measures to defend our people, businesses and assets; deter our adversaries; and develop the skills and capabilities we need. Our experts in the National Cyber Security Centre provide advice and guidance to help both public and private sector organisations be more resilient to cyber-attacks.

John Howell: There seems to be a misleading impression that IT and cyber-security are of interest only to boys. What are the Government doing to encourage women to take part?

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Only 10% of the global cyber workforce is female. That represents a huge pool of untapped talent. As part of our ambitious plans to transform the nation’s cyber capabilities, we have launched new initiatives, such as the incredibly successful CyberFirst Girls competition to encourage young women to pursue a career in the industry—it has more than 8,000 participants. We also want business to do more to encourage women into that exciting and rewarding sector.

Victoria Prentis: What steps can we take to ensure that we train young people to tackle the cybercrimes of the future?

Caroline Nokes: I agree that it is important that our young people have the skills they will need to support the nation’s future security and economic prosperity. We are working with industry experts and organisations such as Cyber Security Challenge to reach out and inspire children, parents and teachers through a range of extracurricular activities, mixing teaching with real-world challenges and hands-on work experience.

Damien Moore: Many of my constituents are served by Southport and Formby district general hospital, which was affected by the recent cyber-attack on the NHS. What steps are the Government taking to protect our health service from such attacks happening again?

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend raises a really important issue. The impact of WannaCry was felt by the NHS as a result of a legacy of some unsupported IT systems and inconsistent software patching. NHS Digital is taking a proactive approach to ensure that security patches are applied promptly, and the National Cyber Security Centre has provided expert guidance to CareCERT and is supporting individual NHS trusts and organisations in their migration from unsupported systems.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The Cabinet Office rejected a Public Accounts Committee recommendation that it should set out a detailed plan for how the National Cyber Security Centre will enable those under attack to get help. We heard evidence from many people in large organisations who were very confused about where to go for that help. Will the Minister now reconsider the rejection of that requirement and look again?

Caroline Nokes: Our advice is very clear: we have funded a substantial national cyber-security programme, which goes alongside expertise from the National Cyber Security Centre. That is directed specifically towards improving the cyber-security of Government and the wider public sector. Our collective focus is on ensuring we have the most secure systems, and that public services and buildings are kept up to date so that our information is safe.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Cyber-security is, of course, only as strong as it is policed. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure the police have the resources to enforce cyber laws without having to sacrifice neighbourhood policing?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Gentleman will have heard my comments about the National Cyber Security Centre. It is really important that we have specialists in place to address what is a very particular and high-tech crime.

Topical Questions

T1. [900209] **Chris Davies** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Damian Green): In their 2015 manifesto, the Government committed to sign up their major suppliers to the prompt payment code. This voluntary code commits signatories to fair payment terms across all UK transactions. Prompt payment can make a real difference to small businesses, boosting their cash flow and allowing them to invest in growth. Since 2015, we have worked closely with the Government's strategic suppliers to encourage them to sign up. I am pleased to confirm that all the suppliers we targeted in 2015 have now signed up to the code.

Chris Davies: Does my right hon. Friend agree that transparency is an effective way of changing the culture around prompt payments? What are the Government doing to ensure that businesses that regularly pay their suppliers late can be identified?

Damian Green: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. We recently introduced a new statutory duty for large companies to report on a six-monthly basis on their payment performance and practices. It is important that this protects small and medium-sized enterprises. We encourage businesses to report any instances of poor payment practice in public sector contracts to our mystery shopper service.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): The House will be aware that we are currently having the first parliamentary by-election of this Session. It is happening over in the other place; it is the hereditary peers by-election, with just 31 electors. Does the Minister agree that that is a farce in a modern-day democracy?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): The Government have been clear, in the previous Parliament and in their manifesto, that reform of the House of Lords is not an immediate priority. However, a Lord Speaker's Committee in the other place is looking at the size of the House of Lords and we are determined to consider its recommendations. The situation relates to legislation passed by a previous Labour Government in 1999. We are determined to ensure, above all, that the House of Lords is an effective revising Chamber.

T5. [900213] **Luke Hall** (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): Will Ministers assure the House that all relevant Government Departments will be consulted to ensure that the domestic implications of Brexit are properly considered?

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Sir Patrick McLoughlin): The Cabinet Office plays an important role in ensuring that Government business is effectively

co-ordinated, including on important issues around Brexit. Cabinet Office Ministers are working closely with colleagues in the Department for Exiting the European Union and others across Whitehall to ensure that we get the best deal for the whole United Kingdom.

T2. [900210] **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Government's coalition of chaos extends, unfortunately, as far as cyber-security, with responsibility shared between the Cabinet Office, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the Home Office and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. Can the Minister tell me the prevalence of XP machines in the Government estate, the public sector and the private sector, and what she is doing to reduce it?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Cabinet Office (Caroline Nokes): We have made good progress on reducing dramatically the number of XP machines in the Government cyber-estate. The hon. Lady will know that the National Cyber Security Centre takes the lead on this issue and is co-ordinating work across government.

Mr Speaker: One sentence: Sir Henry Bellingham.

T7. [900215] **Sir Henry Bellingham** (North West Norfolk) (Con): Further to my earlier question about students fraudulently voting twice, may I ask whether, when my hon. Friend meets representatives of the Electoral Commission, he will ensure that the police are involved as well?

Chris Skidmore: When it comes to the issue of electoral fraud and double voting, I will ensure that we involve all our electoral partners, including the police.

T3. [900211] **Jo Stevens** (Cardiff Central) (Lab): If the Government are really committed to modernising the electoral register, will the Minister confirm that they will allow universities to block-register students during enrolment and re-registration, and ensure that schools and further education colleges give details of people who are approaching voting age to the electoral registration office?

Chris Skidmore: No. We do not agree with block registration. What the Government have done is to ensure, through the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, that universities have a duty to encourage registration. We will publish ministerial guidance on the issue in 2018.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): Now that the Local Government Finance Bill has been suspended, will the Minister tell me what additional revenue-raising powers mayors such as mine in devolved areas like Cambridgeshire will have?

Damian Green: I know my hon. Friend will welcome the fact that, through the devolution deal with Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, the Government have pledged up to £770 million of new funding to support local economic growth. I look forward to working with the excellent James Palmer, the new mayor, to support growth in Cambridgeshire.

T4. [900212] **Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): At the last general election, the Government made very little attempt to ensure that voting registration and participation took place, and large swathes of the electorate were unable to vote properly. Will the Minister outline the steps that will be taken to ensure—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Carry on.

Marsha De Cordova: Will the Minister outline the steps that will be taken to ensure that people living with visual impairments are able to vote, and that voting is fully accessible both to them and to those with learning disabilities?

Chris Skidmore: A record number of people are now on the electoral register. We have a democracy in which more people are participating than ever before. I shall be delighted to work with the hon. Lady on the question of visual impairments, which I believe is a cross-party issue, and we look forward to presenting proposals to ensure that elections are accessible to visually impaired people.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked— Engagements

Q1. [900217] **Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 5 July.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): Today marks the 69th anniversary of the NHS, and last week saw the 80th anniversary of the 999 service. I know that Members on both sides of the House will join me in paying tribute to the incredibly dedicated men and women who work tirelessly to save and improve lives day in, day out.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today. Later this week I will attend a meeting of the G20, where I will discuss the global economy, counter-terrorism and sustainable development with my fellow leaders.

Hannah Bardell: Her face smashed with an iPad, her body beaten, and forced to abort a baby girl: that is only some of the domestic abuse that my constituent Lola Ilesanmi has suffered from her estranged husband because she has refused to allow the genital mutilation of her daughter. Lola is educated, has a mortgage, and had a good job with Royal Bank of Scotland until the Home Office revoked her right to work. I have been writing to the Home Office since March, and have got nowhere. Will the Prime Minister now intervene to prevent the family from being deported, and to prevent that three-year-old girl from being subjected to genital mutilation?

The Prime Minister: The Home Secretary has obviously heard the case that the hon. Lady describes. The issue of female genital mutilation is one on which I think all of us, throughout the House, are agreed. It is an abhorrent activity; it should not be taking place. Great efforts have been made in recent years in strengthening the law on female genital mutilation, getting information out about

the issue, and trying to support people in communities where FGM is practised. The message must go out from the House today that we will not accept FGM in this country.

Q2. [900218] **James Morris** (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): In the last few days Iraqi security forces, assisted by coalition airstrikes, have made significant progress in eradicating ISIL fighters from Mosul. That is a significant step forward in the military conflict against ISIL in Iraq, but does the Prime Minister agree that the United Kingdom and the United States, in a broad international alliance, need to work with the Iraqi Government to ensure that there is reconstruction in places such as Mosul, and also to ensure that they are sufficiently strong to withstand the poisonous ideology of ISIL as we seek to defeat it?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: in order to keep the streets of Britain safe, we must continue to attack Daesh in Iraq and Syria, and the UK is playing its part as one of the 71 members of the coalition. The RAF has conducted over 1,400 strikes, and over 500 British soldiers are on the ground providing further assistance, but he makes the very important point that it is not just about the military action that takes place; it is about how we ensure there is sustainable reconstruction and rebuilding afterwards. Our troops have helped to train over 55,000 Iraqi security forces personnel, and we are providing more than £169.5 million in humanitarian aid and a further £30 million to help Iraq to stabilise these liberated areas. Together, we must also work not just in Iraq but internationally to ensure that the hateful ideology of extremism is not able to poison the minds of people.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): May I start by wishing everyone a very happy Pride month, especially those taking part in the Pride march this Saturday and similar marches around the country? We should also be aware that a survey taken by Pride in London found that half of LGBT people in London had experienced hate crime in the past 12 months.

I join the Prime Minister in wishing the NHS a very happy birthday, but I was hoping that she was going to say a bit more about NHS staff and their pay during her birthday greetings, because after a week of flip-flopping and floundering, we thought we had some clarity from Downing Street at last. On Monday, the announcement was that the public sector pay cap at 1% remains, and a rare moment of agreement between Nos. 10 and 11 was seen, but yesterday we heard news that firefighters will be offered 2% this year and 3% next year, so can the Prime Minister confirm whether the public sector pay cap will remain for all other public servants until 2020?

The Prime Minister: First, may I join the right hon. Gentleman in wishing everybody who is going to take part in Pride London on Saturday an excellent day? I am sure it will be a very good occasion, as it always has been. May I also say that I and all Members of this House value the incredibly important work done by our public sector workers, including—*[Interruption.]*—yes, including those in the national health service and others?

I understand why people feel strongly about the issue of their pay, but perhaps I can just set out—*[Interruption.]* For the information of the House, perhaps I can just set out what the current position is. Three public sector pay

review bodies reported in March—they covered doctors and dentists, NHS staff including nurses, and the armed forces—and the Government accepted the recommendations of all three. The firefighters' award is not determined by the Government—it is determined by the employers—and is not subject to a pay review body. There are outstanding pay review body reports that cover teachers, prison officers, police officers and those on senior salaries. The Government will consider those reports very carefully and respond to them, but while we do that, we will always recognise that we must ensure that we take decisions with regard to the need to live within our means. The right hon. Gentleman and I both value public sector workers and our public services; the difference is that I know we have to pay for them.

Jeremy Corbyn: The public sector pay cap causes real shortages in nursing, teaching and many other professions, as well as real hardship. I had a letter last week from a teacher called David—*[Interruption.]* It's all right: he is a teacher; he is doing a good job—all right? He says:

"I have been teaching for 10 years. I have seen my workload increase. I have seen more people leave the profession than start, and no form of pay increase in seven years. The only thing holding the education system together is the dedication to struggle on for the students and staff."

He goes on to say that that dedication is "starting to run out". I say to the Prime Minister that what we are doing through this pay cap is recklessly exploiting the good will of public servants like David. They need a pay rise.

The Prime Minister: The Leader of the Opposition refers to the number of nurses and teachers working in the public sector. Of course we now have more nurses in our hospitals than we had in 2010, and we have more teachers in our schools. But let me remind the right hon. Gentleman why it has been necessary for us to exercise restraint in public spending, including by capping public sector pay. It is because we inherited the biggest deficit in our peacetime history. We have acted—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I noticed earlier, Mr Mahmood, that you seemed to be in a very hyper condition today. I recommend that you take some sort of soothing medicament or go and lie down for a little while. You will feel better at the end of it.

The Prime Minister: We acted to bring the deficit down by a quarter and then a half, and it is now down by three quarters. At the same time, we have seen the economy grow and record levels of people in employment. Our policy on public sector pay has always recognised that we need to balance the need to be fair to public sector workers, to protect jobs in the public sector, and to be fair to those who pay for it. That is the balance that we need to strike, and we continue to assess that balance.

Jeremy Corbyn: We have had seven years of tax cuts for the richest and tax breaks for the biggest corporations. Last year, there was a net loss of 1,700 nurses and midwives to the NHS, and in the first two months of this year alone, 3,264 have left the profession altogether—not a great birthday present for the NHS, is it? Last week, the Chancellor said:

"We all value our public services and the people who provide them to us."—*[Official Report, 29 June 2017; Vol. 626, c. 797.]*

He went on to laud his own economic record by saying that we had a "fundamentally robust economy". The Prime Minister found £1 billion to keep her own job; why cannot she find the same amount of money to keep nurses and teachers in their jobs? After all, they serve all of us.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about the number of nurses. In fact, I think he was talking about the number of nurses who are registered in the United Kingdom. There are about 600,000 nurses registered in the United Kingdom; about half of them—300,000—work in the NHS in England. Contrary to what he says, we have 13,000 more nurses working in the NHS today compared with 2010. I understand that it has been hard for people who have been working hard and making sacrifices over the years as we have been dealing with Labour's mismanagement of the economy, but let me remind the right hon. Gentleman of what happens when you do not deal with the deficit. This is not a theoretical issue. Let us look at those countries that failed to deal with it. In Greece, where they have not dealt with the deficit—*[Interruption.]* What did we see with that failure to deal with the deficit? Spending on the health service cut by 36%. That does not help nurses or patients.

Jeremy Corbyn: I hope that the Prime Minister is proud of her record of controlling public sector pay to the extent that hard-working nurses have had to access food banks in order to survive, and of frozen wages for teaching assistants, paramedics and council workers. But this is not just in the public sector. Across the economy, wages are rising by 2.1% while inflation is at nearly 3%. Six million workers already earn less than the living wage. What does the Prime Minister think that that tells us about seven years of a Conservative Government and what they have done to the living standards of those people on whom we all rely to get our public services and our health services delivered to us?

The Prime Minister: I will tell the right hon. Gentleman what has happened over the past seven years. We have seen record numbers of people in employment—nearly 3 million more people in work. We have seen the introduction of the national living wage—never done by Labour, but introduced by a Conservative Government. We have seen 4 million people taken out of paying income tax altogether and a cut in income tax and a change in the personal allowance that is the equivalent of £1,000 a year to basic rate taxpayers, including nurses. That is a record of good management of the economy—you only get that with the Conservatives.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister simply does not get it. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. We have plenty of time. I am quite happy to run on for some considerable period of time. People who are making excessive noise should try to calm themselves and perhaps just give a moment's thought to whether they would like to be viewed by their constituents shrieking their heads off. It is very downmarket.

Jeremy Corbyn: There is a low-pay epidemic in this country, and it has a terrible effect on young people. Those in their 20s will earn £12,500 a year less than the

generation before. They are the first generation to be worse off than the last. They are less likely to be able to buy their own home, more likely to be saddled with debt, and more likely to be insecure, low-paid work. Except for more misery, what do the Prime Minister and her Government actually offer the young people of this country?

Hon. Members: Jobs!

The Prime Minister: To echo the words of my colleagues, we offer young people more jobs, more homes, and the opportunity to own their own home. Let me just tell the right hon. Gentleman what is not fair: it is not fair to refuse to take tough decisions and to load debts on to our children and grandchildren; it is not fair to bankrupt our economy, because that leads to people losing their jobs and their homes; and it is not fair to go out and tell people that they can have all the public spending they want without paying for it. Labour's way leads to fewer jobs, higher prices and more taxes. Labour's way means that everyone pays the price of Labour.

Jeremy Corbyn: When Tories talk of tough choices, we know who suffers: the poorest and most vulnerable in our society. Young people employed on zero-hours contracts are more likely to have worse mental and physical health. Students who have worked hard at university graduate with £57,000 of debt that will stay with them until they retire. Let me spell it out to the Prime Minister: this is the only country in which wages have not recovered since the global financial crash; more people are using food banks; 4 million children are living in poverty; there is record in-work poverty; young people see no prospect of owning their own home; and 6 million people are earning less than the living wage. The low-pay epidemic is a threat to our economic stability. Will the Prime Minister take some tough choices and instead of offering platitudes, offer some real help and real support to those in work and to young people, who deserve better and deserve to be given more optimism, rather than greater inequality?

The Prime Minister: We actually now see that the proportion of people in absolute poverty is at record lows. The right hon. Gentleman asks for help for those who are low paid, and I reiterate to him the help that we have given to people who are low paid: we introduced the mandatory national living wage—the lowest earners' fastest pay rise in 20 years; we have cut taxes for basic-rate taxpayers and taken people out of paying income tax; and we are doing what is important for this country, which is ensuring that there are jobs and an economy providing those jobs for people, because the best route out of poverty is being in work. I know that he has taken to calling himself a "Government in waiting". Well, we all know what that means: waiting to put up taxes; waiting to destroy jobs; and waiting to bankrupt our country. We will never let it happen.

Hon. Members: More, more.

Mr Speaker: Order. I understand that the House is excited about hearing the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan).

Q4. [900220] **Nicky Morgan** (Loughborough) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I know that the Prime Minister and her Ministers, and many other

Members of this House, are committed to better mental health care for everyone. I am a founder of the Loughborough Wellbeing Project, and I recently visited the CAMHS—child and adolescent mental health services—eating disorder service in Leicester. As a result of this Government's careful financial management, £1.4 billion more is going into mental health services. How can the Prime Minister ensure that that money is getting to frontline NHS services consistently?

The Prime Minister: First, let me commend my right hon. Friend on the work she has done in setting up the Loughborough Wellbeing Project, and I am happy to join her in paying tribute to the work of the eating disorders service in Leicester. As she says, it does incredibly important work, and we must do more to transform the mental health services that we provide for young people and mental health in general. That is why, as she says, we are putting more money into mental health, and our spending on mental health reached a record £11.6 billion last year. We do need to make sure that that funding gets through to frontline services. One example of that is the work we are doing to ensure that teachers and staff in schools are trained to better identify and better deal with mental health problems when they are present in children. I saw that when I visited Orchard School in Bristol last week, where excellent work is being done, really improving the quality of services for young people with mental health problems.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): As we meet here today, the funeral is taking place at St Peter's Free church in Dundee of the former leader of the Scottish National party and Member of Parliament for Dundee East from 1974 to 1987. I am sure the House would like to join me in commemorating the life and contribution to politics of the late, dearly missed friend and colleague Gordon Wilson.

The UK government have not announced any measures to address rising inflation and slowing wage growth, which the Institute for Fiscal Studies has described as "dreadful". As workers face more than a decade of lost wage growth, and endure the worst period for pay in 70 years, does the Prime Minister think she is looking out for the "just about managing"?

The Prime Minister: First, may I say to the hon. Gentleman, as I did last week, that I am sure all Members of this House will wish to offer our condolences to the friends, family and colleagues of the late Gordon Wilson, and recognise the role he played in politics in the United Kingdom, including in this House.

I say to the hon. Gentleman, as I have said to the Leader of the Opposition, that what is important is that we ensure that we have an economy that is increasing the number of jobs, because the best route out of poverty is for people to be in work. That is what we are doing. We have seen nearly 3 million more jobs being created over recent years. That is important for people. We also help people by, for example, cutting taxes—that is exactly what we have done for people who are lower paid—and introducing the national living wage. Those are measures that are giving people real help.

Ian Blackford: Of course it is the forecast of a rise in in-work poverty that should concern us, in particular the likely increase of young people in poverty over the lifetime of this Parliament. Since the 2010 general election,

the FTSE 100 has risen by 39.6%. Monetary policy, not least quantitative easing, has helped to drive up financial assets, while workers have paid the price for austerity. Workers will earn no more by 2021 than they did in 2008. Will the Prime Minister give workers a pay rise?

The Prime Minister: I would have thought that the hon. Gentleman, particularly with his background, would have recognised the role played by monetary policy, including quantitative easing, in ensuring that we have the jobs in the economy that are so important to people.

Q5. [900221] **Paul Scully** (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend tell me what steps the Government are taking to drive value for money and efficiency in the aid budget, to ensure that that taxpayers' money is used to promote global peace and security in the national interest?

The Prime Minister: I am proud that the Government are committed to honouring our international commitments on aid. That is important for this country, because that money is saving lives and building a more stable and prosperous world, and that is firmly in our UK national interest. Nevertheless, my hon. Friend is absolutely right that we need to make sure that the money we are spending is being spent properly and efficiently. I assure him that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development is driving value for money and efficiency in the aid budget, focusing on greater transparency, boosting payment by results, and driving value for money from DFID suppliers. In 2011, we set up an independent aid watchdog, together with stronger systems and controls in DFID. It is important not only that we are committed to that money, but that we make sure it is spent well.

Q3. [900219] **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): My young constituent paid a £300 house-reservation fee to Pattinson estate agents, but the agents will not refund it after their landlord client withdrew from the contract because my constituent refused to pay 12 months' rent in advance. She faces having to pay another agent non-refundable fees of £650 to secure a different property. When will the Prime Minister act to put an end to these rip-off fees and stop these agents capitalising on young people and others?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman should look at the Queen's Speech, in which we referred to what we are doing in this area. We recognise these issues—[*Interruption.*] He says "When?", but he will recognise that in this House we need to ensure that we get right any legislation that we introduce, so that it actually works. We recognise the problem and we are going to do something about it.

Q6. [900222] **Bill Wiggan** (North Herefordshire) (Con): In 2008, I tried to amend the Animal Welfare Act to extend sentences for cruelty to animals from weeks to years. Will my right hon. Friend see what can be done to ensure that people who are wilfully cruel to animals are punished far more severely?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this issue. We all share a high regard for animal welfare and it is important to have in place strict laws to ensure that we deal properly with people who are not looking after animals. Anyone who is cruel to an animal or does not provide for its welfare needs may be

banned from owning animals, given an unlimited fine or, as he says, sent to prison. My hon. Friend is right that sentencing is an issue, which is why the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs regularly holds discussions with the Ministry of Justice on sentencing policy for animal welfare offenders.

Q8. [900224] **Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): With the civil service reportedly having to explain in crayon to the Cabinet that there is no "have your cake and eat it" Brexit option, will the Prime Minister come clean and admit that she is prioritising her own absolutist red lines, not people's jobs and wages?

The Prime Minister: I am afraid the hon. Gentleman and others will have heard the answer before: we want to negotiate the best possible deal for the United Kingdom that ensures we have a comprehensive free trade agreement, that we can continue to trade with our European partners, that we have a new deep and special partnership with the European Union, and that we are growing our economy. But it is not just about our relationship with the European Union; it is about the trade deals that we will do with countries around the rest of the world and it is about ensuring sound management from a Conservative Government.

Q7. [900223] **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): Looe harbour commissioners have highlighted to me the valuable contribution that retired police sergeant—and now special constable—Russ Hall has made to maritime policing. Does my right hon. Friend believe that joined-up working with other agencies is essential and can make a positive contribution to beating crime in small harbours and helping to protect our borders?

The Prime Minister: I join my hon. Friend in recognising Special Constable Russ Hall's contribution in her constituency. She makes an important point; indeed, when I was Home Secretary I brought together various agencies—the police, the Border Force and others—to look at how we deal with protecting our borders. That joined-up working can make a real and positive contribution. As she will know, what matters is not only how we do that but ensuring that we have an impact—and crime has fallen by a third since 2010, to a record low.

Q12. [900228] **Mr Khalid Mahmood** (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for advising me about my blood pressure. When I go to the hospital to see my consultant on Monday, I am sure that he will give me the same advice. My blood pressure rises when I go into hospitals and see all those nurses who are overstretched, overworked and underpaid, and having to use food banks. The Prime Minister pays lip service to them and will not look at ending the public sector pay cap. I now make a plea to her; she should listen not to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition, but to those nurses and do something about the public pay sector cap.

The Prime Minister: I set out my position in response to an earlier question by the Leader of the Opposition. People may not realise that there is not only the overall public sector pay increase, but, for many nurses, increments or progression pay as well. A typical band 5 nurse will receive 3.8% over and above the 1%.

Q9. [900225] **Matt Warman** (Boston and Skegness) (Con): It is a strong economy that powers this Government's investment in the NHS and a strong economy that allows this Government to create 1,500 new medical school places and some new medical schools. Does the Prime Minister agree that Lincolnshire's unique rurality and sparsity makes a compelling case for a new medical school in this great county?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point, which is that we can pay for our public services only if we have that strong economy. That is absolutely the basis of it. As he said, we will train 1,500 new doctors every year to ensure that the NHS has enough doctors to continue providing that safe compassionate care that we all want to see. The Department of Health is currently looking at how to allocate these places, and will publish its consultation response shortly. It is also looking at the possibility of new and aspiring medical schools bidding for those places. I am sure that, as he has always been a champion for his constituents and his constituency, he will continue to make an excellent case for Lincolnshire.

Q14. [900230] **Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): On Saturday, the shadow Chancellor and I joined staff from Picturehouse Cinemas outside the Ritzy in Brixton who are striking because their employer refuses to pay the London living wage and has outrageously sacked their trade union representative. Will the Prime Minister join me in calling on Picturehouse Cinemas, which made a profit last year of more than £80 million, to pay its staff the London living wage and to reinstate the local reps immediately?

The Prime Minister: That is about a relationship between employers and their employees. Overall, what is of importance is that the Government are taking the right decisions to ensure that we are growing the economy and providing those jobs for people in the first place.

Q10. [900226] **Andrew Bowie** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for taking time during the general election to come up to Banchory and campaign in my constituency where we did rather well. Does she agree that it is utterly shameful that the Scottish Government have, for the second year in a row, had to go pleading to the European Commission for an extension to the farm payment deadline? Is that not proof, if further proof were needed, that the Scottish National party is failing rural Scotland?

Mr Speaker: Order. We are fascinated to hear the answer, but I should just say that, although I am very interested to hear the answer and we will, the Prime Minister is not responsible for the Scottish Government.

The Prime Minister: I welcome my hon. Friend to his place in this House. I very much enjoyed my visit to Banchory during the election campaign. What he says is absolutely right. Time and again in this Chamber, we hear the Scottish nationalists demanding more powers for Scotland, yet what do we see? We see that they are failing to deliver for the Scottish people with the powers that they already have. Yet again, Scottish schools are now outperformed in every category by schools in England, Northern Ireland, Estonia and Poland. Powers are kept in Edinburgh rather than being devolved to local people

and, as he says, yet again we see farmers waiting months for their subsidy payments. The simple fact is that the SNP's policies are not in the best interests of the people of Scotland.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I say to the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), who persists in gesticulating in an extremely eccentric manner, that he seems a little discombobulated from the world he inhabits, which is a very unhappy state of affairs that cannot long continue.

Q15. [900231] **Stephen Lloyd** (Eastbourne) (LD): The Southern rail dispute is causing real damage to the economy of Eastbourne and the south-east. My constituents have had a dreadful time, with a shocking service provided—or not provided—over the past 18 months. This simply cannot go on. Will the Prime Minister enlighten me, my constituents and the House as to why the Department for Transport and the rail operator will not meet the unions at the same time and in the same room together to negotiate a deal?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the problems that have been experienced by Southern rail passengers—the matter has been raised by a number of colleagues in the House, including my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), who raised it last week. I am very disappointed that ASLEF and the RMT have called more industrial action, which is completely unnecessary; all that it will do is cause more disruption and frustration for passengers. The recent independent Gibb report said that the main cause of widespread disruption on Southern rail has been union action, so I urge the unions to call off the strikes, work with the operator and deliver the services that passengers need.

Q11. [900227] **Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Businesses across my constituency will be cock-a-hoop to hear that their calls for better broadband are being answered by the digital infrastructure investment fund, which will unlock about £1 billion for full fibre service and help them create jobs, particularly in rural areas. Does the Prime Minister agree that that is exactly the sort of infrastructure spend we need to get our Brexit ready?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. This country is already a digital world leader, and we are committed to ensuring that we remain so. We already see 93% of the UK accessing superfast broadband, and we are on track to reach 95% by the end of the year, but we want to see more commercial investment in the gold-standard connectivity that full fibre provides, which is why we have launched the digital infrastructure investment fund. Companies across the UK, including in Brentwood and Ongar, will be able to apply for match funding for projects and see fibre delivered right to the doorstep. Yesterday we also announced 100% business rate relief for those businesses rolling out new fibre. This is important. We want to continue to be a world leader in digital, and the actions that the Government are taking will ensure that we will be.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Police officer numbers in Wales have dropped by 10% since the Prime Minister's party came to power. If policing were

devolved, as it is in Northern Ireland and Scotland, Welsh police forces would have extra funding worth £25 million at their disposal, which would more than replace those lost officers. What justification is there for refusing to devolve policing?

The Prime Minister: We have been around this discussion before. Let me address the central issue of what the hon. Lady is talking about, which is police budgets and the number of police officers. We have been protecting police budgets since 2015, as I believe is acknowledged across the House. We are also ensuring that the police have the capabilities they need to deal with new types of crime, by creating the national cybercrime unit and the National Crime Agency. Those are all important steps to ensure that the police can do their job of cutting crime, and crime is at a record low.

Q13. [900229] **Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for introducing the trade, agriculture and fisheries Brexit Bills in the Queen's Speech, which will be welcomed right across the west country. However, we are facing significant challenges with our rural post office network at the moment, with the transition from community branches to community village stores and community buildings. Some of those moves have been smooth and some have not. Will she take a look at that to see whether there is anything more the Government could do to help my constituents?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point. It is right that we recognise the role that post offices play in rural communities, and not only in places such as Camelford and St Minver in his constituency, but in the constituencies of other hon. Members. We have invested more than £2 billion in the network up to 2018. The number of post offices is actually at its most stable for decades. But he is absolutely right. I urge the Post Office to make it as easy as possible for shops that want to take over postal services to be able to do so.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Some 2,400 people have died as a result of the NHS contaminated blood scandal—more than Hillsborough and all the other disasters over the previous few decades put together. On 25 April, the former right hon. Member for Leigh presented compelling evidence to Parliament of a criminal cover-up on an industrial scale, so will the Prime Minister now do the right thing and order a public inquiry for the whole United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady raises an important issue. I know that Members' thoughts will be with all those who have been affected by this terrible tragedy of contaminated blood. Serious allegations have been made, and Ministers at the Department of Health will obviously look at information that has been brought to the House. If any hon. Member has any further information or evidence that they believe is important, it should go to Ministers so that they can properly investigate it. We are providing more compensation than any previous Government, and we committed £125 million extra funding last July for those affected by the contaminated blood tragedy. The Department of Health will look at any new evidence that is brought forward.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): Rather than celebrating the NHS, the Labour party has rather shamelessly tried to weaponise it as a mere tool for political campaigning. Will the Prime Minister assure me that decisions on services such as the 999 service will be clinical decisions, not those of politicians who are trying to weaponise our public services?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is very important that decisions relating to services provided by the NHS are taken on a clinical basis by those who understand the needs and requirements of people in different areas. That is why we set up NHS England, which has a plan for developing services in the NHS over a five-year period. It is important that politicians allow clinicians and others in the NHS to make the decisions they need to.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I know that the House will be thinking of my constituents Connie Yates, Chris Gard and Charlie at this incredibly difficult time. It is clear that if Charlie remains in the UK no further treatment is available and life support will be switched off. There are differing views about the chances of the nucleoside bypass therapy, which other children—albeit with less severe forms of Charlie's conditions—have benefited from. I understand that the chances of improvement for Charlie are low, but the doctors would be able to say within three months whether Charlie was responding and whether that change was clinically beneficial. If there is any room for discretion in the court rulings for Great Ormond Street to allow Charlie to leave and to transfer his care to doctors at Columbia University, and if he is sufficiently stable to receive treatment, would the Prime Minister do all she can to bring the appropriate people together to try to make this happen?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is right to raise the concerns of her constituents in this matter. I am sure that the thoughts of all Members of the House are with the family and Charlie at this exceptionally difficult time. It is an unimaginable position for anybody to be in, and I fully understand and appreciate that any parent in these circumstances would want to do everything possible and explore every option for their seriously ill child. I also know that no doctor ever wants to be placed in the terrible position of having to make such heartbreaking decisions. The hon. Lady referred to the fact that we have that court process. I am confident that Great Ormond Street hospital has considered, and always will consider, any offers or new information that have come forward along with the wellbeing of a desperately ill child.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): When the Prime Minister and I left our comprehensive schools to go to university, we entered a privileged elite. Will she confirm that as a result of tuition fees, introduced by Labour and improved by the coalition, more young people from working class and poor backgrounds are now going to university than ever before? Some people say that there are fewer. Are they right or are they wrong?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to join my right hon. Friend in recognising that she and I left comprehensive schools and went to universities at a time when the number of people going to university was significantly

lower than it is today. I am also grateful to her for reminding the House that, actually, it was the Labour party that said it would not introduce tuition fees and then, when it got into government, introduced tuition fees. Under the current system, we are seeing more young people than ever going to university, and crucially—to address the point she raised—disadvantaged 18-year-olds are 40% more likely to go to university now than they were in 2009.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): The Prime Minister herself commissioned Bishop James Jones to report on the experience of the Hillsborough families. Given the painful evidence before us that parts of the state still do not know how to treat bereaved families or the survivors of catastrophe, will she now give me the date when she will publish Bishop Jones's report?

The Prime Minister: I have not myself yet seen Bishop Jones's full report. I am not able to give the hon. Lady a date when I will publish it, but she raises a very important point. The reason why I asked Bishop James Jones to undertake this work was precisely because I was concerned about the way in which the bereaved families at Hillsborough had been treated over far too many years, and obviously we have seen the result of the Crown Prosecution Service decisions last week. This is why we have committed in the Queen's Speech to introducing an independent public advocate who will be able to act on behalf of bereaved families in cases of public disaster. It is important that

they are able to have that support alongside them, because too many families have to fight over many years to get justice, as we have seen in Hillsborough. I want to ensure that they have help and support in doing that.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Given the Government's record on freezing fuel duty, will the Prime Minister resist recent siren calls to raise it, because this hurts the lowest paid the most? Will she also do everything possible to make sure that when the international oil price falls, that price is properly reflected at the pumps so that we can have a Britain that works for every motorist?

The Prime Minister: May I first commend my right hon. Friend, who has been championing this issue for all the years that he has been in the House? The work that he has done as a great campaigner on this and, indeed, other issues has been recognised by the Government in changes the Government has made. As he knows, I am pleased that we have been able to do what we have done in relation to holding down fuel duty. I think he is trying to tempt me down a path which I will not go down, because, as he knows, decisions on these matters are taken at the time of fiscal events.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order.

Public Sector Pay Cap

12.48 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement outlining the Government's policies with regard to the public sector pay cap.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): We all recognise that public sector workers do a fantastic job. Over the past seven years, we have seen major improvements in our public services. Crime is down, with a greater proportion of police on the frontline. More children are achieving higher standards at school and going on to apprenticeships and university. Our NHS is looking after more people than at any time in its history.

Government pay policy is designed to be fair to public sector workers, who work so hard to deliver these strong public services, but we must also ensure that we are able to provide those public services on a sustainable basis for the future. In many services, workers have received pay additional to the 1% national increase. Teachers had an average pay rise of 3.3% in 2015-16. More than half of nurses and other NHS staff had an average increase of over 3% in 2016. Military service personnel also saw an average additional increase of 2.4%. Salaries in the public sector remain comparable to those in the private sector. In addition, many people benefit from higher pension entitlements. They also benefit from the rise in the personal allowance, worth £1,000 to a basic-rate taxpayer.

We are currently completing the pay review process for 2017-18. We have accepted the pay review body recommendations made for doctors, the NHS and the armed forces. We will be looking very carefully at the recommendations on the remainder and making determinations in the usual way. As the Chancellor said on Monday, our policy on public sector pay has always been designed to strike the right balance of being fair to our public sector workers and fair to those who pay for them. That approach has not changed, and the Government will continually assess that balance.

John McDonnell: I welcome the right hon. Lady to her post, but when we ask a question of the Chancellor, we would expect the Chancellor to respond to that question. We simply wanted clarity on whether the pay cap is still in force. That is all we asked for.

The response that we have seen today confirmed what most commentators are now saying: this is not a Government; it is a Cabinet of absolute chaos. Let me explain that the existing Government policy, as set out in the comprehensive spending review 2015, due to be ratified today in the Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) Bill, is still a 1% pay cap, and this is the diktat to which the various pay review bodies are still working. In fact, they are written to and told that their proposals have to reflect

“the Government's policy on public sector pay awards”.

Yet over the last week we have seen, to be frank, absolute confusion in government—total disarray. The question we are posing is, “Who actually speaks for the Government on this issue?” On the day of the Queen's Speech, No. 10 was briefing out the end of austerity

and the relaxing of the pay cap, only to be contradicted by an incandescent briefing from No. 11. Daily fearful of a putsch, No. 10 then backs down. For the Prime Minister it must be tough, living next to a disruptive neighbour you can't stand, you try to get rid of, and you can't get on with.

We then receive in the press the wisdom of the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), who, according to a spokesperson,

“supports the idea of public sector workers getting a better pay deal”.

This is followed by his past campaign manager turned political assassin, the new Environment Secretary, who supports the putsch against the Chancellor. Then the whole process degenerates into farce when we have David Cameron, earning £100,000 a speech, telling us that the people who want more than 1% are “selfish”. The Chancellor has called for a grown-up debate. I agree. What we have seen are Cabinet Ministers scrapping in the school playground. Cut off from the real world that most people live in, the Chancellor has no understanding of why our public sector workers are so angry. They are angry because they have had enough of seeing tax cuts to the rich and corporations while their pay is being cut.

Can the Chief Secretary to the Treasury clarify how the Government's estimates 2017-18, as per the Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) Bill on the Order Paper today, will accommodate the reported offer to the fire and rescue services, which, we are told, is subject still to Government funding? Moreover, if we are to see another Government U-turn, which in the case of public sector pay we would welcome, can the Government confirm how they will fund the £5 billion needed that they say would be saved by the 1% pay cap? Or are we being confronted with yet another uncostered commitment within weeks of a Parliament commencing? It's the magic money tree again.

The Government's own report on Monday showed how much doctors' and nurses' pay had fallen. Does the Chancellor think that is fair? Given that 20% more nurses left the nursing register than joined it this year, does the Chancellor agree with the chief executive of the Royal College of Nursing that

“For every day...the cap remains in place”
the profession is “haemorrhaging”?

Finally, given the chaos on the Government Benches over this policy, can the Chief Secretary tell us when an actual decision will be made about the future of the pay cap? Will public sector workers have to wait until the next Budget before finding out whether they will have decent pay for the next two years? Should not the Chancellor now write formally to the pay review bodies to say that they are free to do what is right by public servants and pay them a fair pay award this year?

Elizabeth Truss: I do not know whether to be disappointed or delighted that the shadow Chancellor does not want to see me at the Dispatch Box, but I am here today to answer his questions because I am responsible for this policy area, and I think that is entirely appropriate.

As has been outlined by the Prime Minister and the Chancellor already, our policy on public sector pay remains in place, because it is the responsible thing to do. It is the responsible thing to balance the importance

[Elizabeth Truss]

of recruiting and retaining high-quality people in our public services with making sure that our public finances remain sustainable so that we can continue to see the improvements in our public services that we have seen under this Government.

Some of the shadow Chancellor's comments were disingenuous. He did not reflect the fact—

Hon. Members: Withdraw!

Mr Speaker: Order. I know these matters pretty well by now. The right hon. Lady must resume her seat. I am sure that she has got a very versatile vocabulary, and she must deploy some other term. She cannot accuse a Member of being disingenuous; that is an imputation of dishonour. She has been in the House long enough to know that she should not say that. It is very simple, no debate required—a simple withdrawal. Thank you.

Elizabeth Truss: I do withdraw that, Mr Speaker, and apologise for it.

Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman was mistaken in what he said, because in 2015-16 we saw teachers get 3.3% worth of progression pay, we saw more than half of nurses and NHS workers get over 3%, and we saw military service personnel receive 2.4%. I therefore suggest that he include those facts in the figures next time he speaks. As for the fire service, he knows perfectly well that those pay policies are set independently and are covered within the local government budget.

I think it is wrong that we are hearing the Opposition talk down our public services when we are seeing huge improvements, we are seeing more people attracted into our public services, and we are seeing the best performance ever in our education system and our health system. As for uncosted commitments, the right hon. Gentleman has £60 billion worth.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the pay review process. Well, the process is very simple. We have received recommendations from pay review bodies already this year. They make decisions based on the individual circumstances within those sectors. We have followed all of their recommendations. We will look at the further recommendations we need to make decisions on, and we will look at the balance between affordability and making sure that we retain and recruit high-quality public sector workers. This is the right approach. It is not saying that we are going to open up the cheque book, bankrupt our public services and see people lose their jobs, which is exactly what has happened in countries like Greece that took that approach and took their eye off the public finances. The right hon. Gentleman needs to take a more balanced approach in the way that he looks at this issue.

Mr Speaker: During the rather fractious proceedings to date, one Member has been the embodiment of calm and serenity. That Member should be imitated by others, and will now be called to contribute—Mr Kenneth Clarke.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): Those are not adjectives that have been applied to me throughout my political career, Mr Speaker, but I am grateful to you for that credit. May I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on straightforwardly

restating the Government's sensible policy on this issue? It is necessary as part of our ensuring, in this post-Brexit world, that we keep the economy on track; that steady, sustainable growth continues; and that we steadily eliminate the problem of debt and deficit that we inherited.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that if she were to give way to this week's lobbying on the subject it would be a political disaster, because the Government would be accused of a U-turn and a surrender? It would set off a wave of pay claims across the entire public sector, which the Opposition are obviously looking forward to taking part in if they can provoke them. It might also be an economic disaster, and it would not be in the interests of the many people in the public and private sectors who are having economic difficulties in these times, and who want to look forward to a much more prosperous future as we get our economy back to health.

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. and learned Friend has a huge amount of experience in this area. He is correct to say that we need to take account of the sustainable, long-term financing of public services. We need to look at the specific issues in each sector where we need to recruit and retain staff, and we also need to look at fairness with the private sector. At the moment, public sector and private sector salaries are roughly comparable. As a country, we need to improve our productivity and our growth rate. That is the way to ensure that everybody benefits. The Government have a fantastic record when it comes to getting people into work, and unemployment is at its lowest level since 1975. We need to make sure that we continue with that.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I welcome the Chief Secretary to her place. We had all hoped that today would bring some commitment and certainty from the Government on public sector pay. Instead, our public sector workers continue to be stonewalled from the Dispatch Box, while members of the Cabinet have apparently abandoned collective responsibility to brief for an end to the cap. Perhaps that says more about those Ministers' desire to undermine the Chancellor and the Prime Minister than it does their commitment to public sector workers. According to *The Times*, the Prime Minister wanted to announce something today but could not get her Ministers to agree a line.

This week, a report by academics from University College London was published quietly by the UK Government's own Office of Manpower Economics. The report showed that average hourly public sector wages fell in real terms by 6%—or, for some, by up to £3 an hour—in the past decade. That is perhaps part of the reason why the past decade has been the worst for wage growth in 200 years, and why in-work poverty continues to rise. With that in mind, can the Chief Secretary advise our dedicated police, firefighters, nurses and others—who put their lives on the line and make great sacrifices for us—what they have to do to earn a fair pay rise, as they will do in Scotland? Or does the Chief Secretary support former Prime Minister David Cameron's comments from Seoul yesterday, when he said that it was “selfish” to campaign for an end to the pay cap?

Elizabeth Truss: As I have outlined, pay is determined by a very clear process. Independent pay review bodies make recommendations on areas such as pay for the

police and nurses. We will look very carefully at those recommendations to balance fairness for public sector workers, and recruitment and retention of the best possible people, with affordability for the public finances. That is a responsible approach to take, and it will ensure that our economy grows and unemployment continues to move in a positive direction.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Since 2010, 13,000 more nurses have been employed in the NHS. I am worried that the Labour party's unfunded proposals for public sector workers could lead to a cut in the number of nurses, given the £68 billion black hole in the financing of the party's manifesto. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that when she looks at pay for nurses, she will not only consider what is a fair level of pay, but ensure that we remain able to afford to employ more nurses in the NHS? Will she also ensure that we continue to focus on sound finances and a strong economy to pay for our public services?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right to point out that, by having this balanced policy, we have protected jobs in the public sector and we have protected important services. The Office for Budget Responsibility outlined in its report that our policy protects the jobs of 200,000 public sector workers. That is important for those people, but it is also important for our constituents who receive those public services and who are seeing improvements in our schools and hospitals, and a reduction in crime. It is important that we take that balanced approach.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Does the Chief Secretary not accept that there was a fundamental difference between the economic conditions when the 1% cap was introduced, when there was a fear of large-scale unemployment and deflation, and the economic conditions of the present day, when there are chronic labour shortages throughout the public sector and salaries have been eroded by rising inflation? Will she not lift the cap to reflect basic economic reality?

Elizabeth Truss: First of all, public sector pay is comparable with private sector pay. In addition, public sector pensions are set at a higher level, on average, than private sector pensions. The pay review bodies have a remit to look at retention and recruitment when they make their independent decisions. Of course, I will look at all their recommendations when they come out. The right hon. Gentleman has made an omission that was also made earlier; a lot of those roles have pay increments independent of the 1% cap. Teachers' pay increased by 3.3% in the last year for which we have records, so it is not right to talk solely about the 1% cap. In fact, public sector workers are rewarded in a number of different ways.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): A recent Office for National Statistics study shows that public sector productivity fell by 5.7% in the long period from 1997 to 2014. Is not the way forward better pay for smarter working? Do we not want pay awards that give something for something, so that the taxpayer wins, the service user wins and the employee wins?

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. Friend is correct to say that we want improvement in our public services. I have highlighted education, where more children are

going to good and outstanding schools; and I have highlighted our health service, which is dealing with more patients than ever before. School pay policy is set by individual academies, for example, so we are giving more freedom over pay and pay determination. It is important to look at the public finances as a whole, and to ensure that, overall, we are living within our means as a country.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): Right now, 130 workers at Annesley Department for Work and Pensions office are being told that their place of work will be closed and their jobs relocated up to an hour's drive away. Have these public sector workers not suffered enough from the seven-year pay cap? Is not the last thing that they need to be told that they need to find more money to pay for their travel to and from work?

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Lady refers to a specific issue with a jobcentre in her constituency. I am sure that the DWP is looking at how those people can be assisted, and it is certainly something that I am happy to raise with the Work and Pensions Secretary on her behalf.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): In Chelmsford, we are very proud to be home to one of the places where nurses are trained—the great Anglia Ruskin University, which I visited just last week. It is good to hear my right hon. Friend speaking about how nurses have benefited from pay progression, and also from lower taxes, through the increment.

Part of increasing the prosperity of public sector workers is the provision of an increasing number of training opportunities. There is great excitement in my constituency not only about the introduction of degree apprenticeships and being one of the first places in the country to build a new medical school, but about affordable housing and people having more money in their pockets. Can the Chief Secretary confirm that increasing prosperity is not just about pay, but about having a strong economy to deliver more houses, more training and more skilled opportunities?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right that we need to look at what is included in the wider package that people receive, whether that is support for their pension, additional flexibilities or additional elements of pay and training, because training and progression are extremely important. I remember visiting Chelmsford prison in her constituency, which was looking at training opportunities for prison officers. We are looking at that throughout the public sector, because job satisfaction derives from many things, and although pay is of course important—I would not deny that—job satisfaction is also about working conditions and about people on the frontline feeling empowered to do their jobs well and knowing that they are making a contribution. Being a public servant is incredibly important, and we need to show that we are giving people on the frontline the ability to make decisions and really improve people's lives for the better.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): As a public sector worker, how much has the right hon. Lady's own pay increased since 2010 and how much has her productivity

[John Mann]

increased since 2010? Can the country afford her pay increase, and if so, does she agree with me that Britain deserves a pay increase?

Elizabeth Truss: I would answer the hon. Gentleman by saying that my pay has gone both up and down since 2010, but my pay is set independently. The important point is that the pay of public sector workers is determined by the pay review bodies, whose recommendations I take very seriously, and that is how we should approach this issue. Rather than trying to politicise the issue and saying that we should have a blanket approach, we have set public sector pay review bodies the remit to make such decisions themselves.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): When will the Government introduce the £95,000 cap on exit payments for public sector workers? The legislation is on the statute book, but it has not been implemented. Will it be implemented soon so that we do not have any more payments such as the £390,000 paid earlier this year to the chief executive of Bournemouth Borough Council to leave?

Elizabeth Truss: I would be very happy to discuss that issue with my hon. Friend later.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The rise in inflation, the recommendations of pay review bodies and the closing of the gap between private sector and public sector pay have quite rightly focused attention on the whole issue of the current pay policy. Does the Chief Secretary agree that rhetoric about austerity and uncoded and unfinanced amendments to the Queen's Speech in this House are no substitute for looking at the tax and borrowing implications and the implications for other parts of the public sector of a review of pay policy?

Elizabeth Truss: We need to look not only at the important issue of fairness for public sector workers and the issue of recruitment and retention, but at the overall health of the British economy, so that we can make sure we carry on having low unemployment rates and growth in our economy and carry on dealing with the debt that is a result of the great depression that we suffered as a country. We need to pay down the debt and get the deficit further down so that we can continue to enjoy high-quality public services.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): As someone who has worked as a nurse during the period of the pay cap and pay freeze, may I just say that that is very difficult to do as a public sector worker? The issue is greater than just a pay rise; it is also about the pay structure. When Labour introduced the "Agenda for Change" system, it created an increment system under which people have to wait five, six or seven years to get the pay they actually deserve. The increment system is not working, and it also gives trusts the opportunity to downgrade people, with a sister in one hospital on band 7 while another somewhere else is on band 5. The pay structure is not working, and that needs to be looked at as urgently as the pay cap.

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend's great expertise as a former nurse is shown by the detailed question she has asked. We need to make sure that we reform public services and give people the opportunity to progress and be trained in the roles they fill. One of the roles of the pay review body is to look at such structures, as well as at rates of pay. During the processes they go through, those bodies certainly take evidence from frontline workers, unions and experts in the area, and I hope that they will take such issues into consideration.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Chief Secretary referred to productivity increases in the public sector. We recently saw firefighters racing into Grenfell Tower, paramedics and police racing into the Manchester Arena after the bomb, and doctors, nurses and other medical professionals working around the clock to save people's lives. What advice would she give to her hon. Friends on the Government Benches about productivity increases by those people, who have served the people of this country?

Elizabeth Truss: Those firefighters, police and others in the emergency services have done a tremendous job, and I am sure we are all extremely grateful to them for regularly putting themselves on the line of danger. The hon. Gentleman is right to point that out.

What does productivity mean? I talked earlier about empowering people on the frontline to be able to make decisions and do things more quickly. When I talk to nurses and teachers, they sometimes say that they want less bureaucracy so that they can get on with the real jobs that they have been employed to do, and that is why more police are spending more time on the frontline. Productivity means giving people more job satisfaction—spending more of their time doing the job that they have come in to public services to do—and that is why we are reforming public services and seeing improvements.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is vital that the Government should continue to balance fairness for public servants and fairness for taxpayers who pay for public services?

Elizabeth Truss: We need to ensure a continual balance in being fair to the people working in public services—giving them the training and opportunities they deserve, and paying them fairly—while at the same time making sure that they will be able to continue to work in those public services in the future. If we look at what happened in Greece when the deficit got out of control, we can see that there was a 36% reduction in spending on the health service. [Interruption.] Members on the Opposition Front Bench may groan, but they should look at the facts about what happens when unfunded spending commitments are made. Let us be clear: the Institute for Fiscal Studies has said that Labour's spending plans would lead to the highest levels of taxation we have ever seen in peacetime Britain. There are not moderate but extreme proposals that would lead to people losing their jobs.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): The Chief Secretary quite rightly outlined that there is more to the package offered to public sector workers, including pensions, but will she confirm that the average pension for a local government worker is less than £80

week? What message does it send when, on top of that, their wages are suppressed and their workloads have increased twofold? Is not the truth that this Government know the cost of everything and the value of absolutely nothing?

Elizabeth Truss: We care about how well our public services are serving the public, and we want to have highly motivated people working in our public services who feel valued and properly remunerated. That is why such decisions are made by independent bodies.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): Members on both side of the House want strong wage increases for those at the bottom end, whatever sector they are in. Will the Chief Secretary tell us what our new national living wage will do to the incomes of those at the bottom end, and will she confirm that it will give us one of the strongest minimum wages in the world?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right and I congratulate him on the role he had in that policy. We are raising wages for those on the lowest incomes and taking more people out of tax. Basic rate taxpayers have seen a £1,000 reduction in their tax bill. That is important in dealing with the cost of living and in making sure that it always pays for people to go into work.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): In a very readable book, "Austerity: The History of a Dangerous Idea", Professor Mark Blyth charts the fact that austerity always fails, either at the ballot box or with people waking up to the failing nonsense that is austerity. If the Government instead concentrated on growth, the deficit would take care of itself. Is it not time that public sector workers, who pay taxes, are given the money to spend in the economy and create that growth?

Elizabeth Truss: I understand that the hon. Gentleman's party voted to support our pay policy earlier this year.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The Institute for Fiscal Studies estimated that Labour's proposal would cost £9 billion a year, which is more than double the amount the party estimated in its manifesto. That would involve significant borrowing. Our interest bill is £50 billion a year. Does the Chief Secretary to the Treasury agree that that is £50 billion less to invest in our public services?

Elizabeth Truss: That is right. Future generations will pay for the services that we are enjoying today, and that is wrong. We need to live within our means and make sure that people are properly rewarded. We need to make sure that things are fair between the public and private sectors. That is what the Government's balanced policy is achieving.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): My union Unison represents workers across the public sector. The hard-working nurses, teaching assistants, cleaners and local government workers in my constituency of Enfield, Southgate who are not subject to increments have been asking me when they will get fair pay for the hard work they do for all of us. Does the Chief Secretary agree with me and some of her colleagues that in the light of the increases in inflation and the cost of living, the public sector pay cap must end now?

Elizabeth Truss: I have already said that our policy balances the need to make sure that people are remunerated properly—that is what the pay review bodies look at—and the need to make sure that public services are sustainable in the long term, because as well as making sure that people are paid properly and that the wider package is as good as possible, we need to make sure that those jobs are protected and secure in the long term.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Does the Chief Secretary agree that as a result of Labour's economic mismanagement in 2008 to 2009, average wages—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady's question must be heard. Everybody in this Chamber must be heard. Let us hear Rachel Maclean.

Rachel Maclean: Thank you, Mr Speaker. As a result of Labour's economic mismanagement in 2008 to 2009, average private sector pay fell significantly, while public sector pay remained stable. Does the Chief Secretary agree that it is important, when we look at the pay review bodies' recommendations, to recognise the challenges faced by small businesses when they are outpaced by public sector earnings? Given that small businesses, as employers, create the majority of the jobs in this country, will she ensure that the pay review bodies take into account the views of small business people?

Elizabeth Truss: We have got to the position where public sector pay is comparable with private sector pay, and public sector workers often have pension entitlements on top of that. It is fair to get to a position where pay is comparable, for the skills people have. That is fair for the businesses that we need to create wealth in our country, so that we can fund public services. It is fair for workers in both the private sector and the public sector. Nothing is more important than getting people into work and giving them a sense of pride and responsibility, and the ability to earn for themselves and their family that come with it. The Government should be proud of what we have achieved: the lowest level of unemployment since 1975. The idea that we should put that at risk by making our public finances unsustainable or by pricing small businesses out of the market is very dangerous.

Mr Speaker: I see that the Father of the House is leaving the Chamber, but I hope that the calm and serenity that he brought to the Chamber will linger with us for some time to come.

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): This issue is also about fairness—a word I have heard repeatedly. Liverpool clinical commissioning group paid themselves increases of between 15% and 81%, with a non-executive getting £105,000. An NHS investigation has confirmed that that is far outside the rules, yet the accountable officer and governing body have not been held to account. Does that send a message from the Government to the NHS that people can do what they want, that anarchy rules and that the pay cap will be applied selectively and is not fair?

Elizabeth Truss: It is very important that all public sector bodies stick within the rules.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my declaration of interest as a working NHS doctor. My right hon. Friend has talked rightly about the effect that increments have on progression pay, and the staff affected have received an increase in their pay. However, in the NHS half a million staff are at the top of their pay scale and have received a real-terms pay cut over the past few years. They work incredibly hard, above and beyond the call of duty. They are the people who gave up their days off to go in when the terrorist attacks happened in London and Manchester. Those people do need a pay rise. Does she recognise that many of those staff are now turning to agency work? The locum and agency bill in the NHS is £4 billion and rising. Does she recognise that part of dealing with the cost of locum and agency staff must be to increase the pay of permanent staff?

Elizabeth Truss: I completely agree with my hon. Friend that doctors and other medical staff do a vital job and have faced real challenges. We are reducing the agency spend in the NHS over time. It is important that we look overall at the affordability for the public sector. That is the remit of the independent pay review bodies. They hear evidence from the experts on the frontline and make their recommendations. We accepted the recommendation for doctors that was put to us. We accepted the recommendation for nurses and other NHS workers as well. We respect that pay review body process.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Put simply, does the Chief Secretary think it fair that the public sector workers who face a cap also face a rise of around 5% to 7% in energy prices when the chief executive of SSE this year had a 72% increase in his pay, taking it to £2.9 million?

Elizabeth Truss: The Government are taking action on energy costs. We are also making sure that public sector workers receive increments in addition to the 1% that the right hon. Gentleman mentioned. We are taking action as a Government to raise the tax threshold, so that people on the basic rate are now paying £1,000 less tax. He needs to take account of the whole package; I think that he is cherry-picking some bits.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): Is the Chief Secretary to the Treasury aware that the Scottish Government set pay for 485,000 public sector workers, which is close to 90% of all public sector workers in Scotland? Does she agree with the statement by the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport on 10 May in the Scottish Parliament, when the Scottish Government voted against a pay increase for NHS staff, that "we believe that there can continue to be value in the independent pay review process"?

Is my right hon. Friend aware of the Nuffield Trust report that highlights that the Scottish National party's deep cuts to the health budget in Scotland are seriously harming the NHS?

Elizabeth Truss: It is great to have one of my Scottish colleagues pointing out the facts about what is happening in Scotland. The Scottish National party has failed to deliver. We see worse performance in the Scottish NHS, and school standards in Scotland are falling, which is a huge shame. *[Interruption.]*

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP) *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Stephens, you are a very excitable denizen of the House. I had been intending to call you, but I think I will leave you to simmer down for a few minutes in the hope that you can recover such poise and composure as are available to you.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): The Labour Government brought in Agenda for Change for NHS staff, which finally put us—I was one of those NHS staff—on a fair rate of pay with an independent pay review body, but since 2010 the coalition Government and the Tory Government have systematically undermined Agenda for Change pay rates by capping and freezing wages. The Government are all too ready to describe NHS workers as fantastic, but giving them a fair pay award is just that—fantasy. Is it not time that the Government put their money where their mouth is?

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Lady is not acknowledging the fact that more than half of those people on Agenda for Change are receiving average incremental pay of 3.3%.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that the NHS has attracted workers from across the EU, particularly in nursing. When she looks at how we set public sector pay, will she look at international comparisons across the EU to ensure that pay is set in such a way as to continue to attract those very much needed staff to Britain? Does she have data on that that she can consider?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his question. The pay review bodies are responsible for gathering the data on how we ensure that we retain and recruit the high-quality staff that we need in our NHS. I know they have looked at that in their reports this year, as I am sure they will do in future.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): In the exceedingly fine city of Norwich, we have three NHS trusts, two local authorities and a teaching hospital—thousands of public sector workers who contribute to our economy, and who are struggling to make ends meet. Surely the Government must understand that austerity is dying on its feet. They should invest in those people. If they lift the public sector pay cap, they will invest in Norwich's local economy. It is a win-win for everyone.

Elizabeth Truss: I should say to my fellow Norfolk MP that we are seeing improved public services in Norfolk, both in the health service and in our local schools. That is a result of the Government reforming services and investing in them, and ensuring that people receive pay that helps to retain and recruit the best possible staff.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I understand that pay bodies are independent—it is important that they remain so—but will the Chief Secretary explain who sets the context for those pay bodies? When they undertake their reviews, will they take into account not only historical pay rises and the cost of living, but extra influences such as the influence of Brexit on our difficulty in recruiting nurses?

Elizabeth Truss: The answer is that the Government set the remit for the pay bodies last year. Those reports have all been submitted. We have responded to some of them, and we will respond to others in due course. Later this year, we will set the remit for the 2018-19 pay bodies.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): No Opposition Member is talking down our public services in the way that the Chief Secretary to the Treasury claims. We are talking up the incredible commitment of the people who work in them, despite the contempt with which her Government treat them. She talks about job satisfaction. Does she accept that what contributes to job satisfaction for nurses is having the time they need to spend with patients? When the NHS is under such strain, nurses simply do not have the time to spend with patients because there are so many staff vacancies. The NHS is in crisis. Lifting the pay cap is a crucial way of addressing it. Why will she not do it?

Elizabeth Truss: With respect, the hon. Lady talks the NHS down in her question. The fact is that the NHS is doing a tremendous job. We are reducing the bureaucracy so that nurses can spend more of their time with patients. My right hon. Friend the Health Secretary is driving an agenda of reform that is delivering better public services.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is worth remembering what would have happened had the Labour party won the first general election after the great recession: its 2010 manifesto committed to tough action on pay, including a 1% cap on public sector pay. Does my right hon. Friend think that that was because Labour does not value public sector workers, or because it understood the reality of the country's position as a result of its mismanagement of public borrowing and bank regulation?

Elizabeth Truss: There is rather an issue of false consciousness on the Opposition Front Bench.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): May I help the Chief Secretary? The pay review bodies operate within a budget that is set by the Government. It is a political decision not to accept their recommendations, which she can do something about. Before entering Parliament, I was proud to serve as an NHS manager. Managers in the NHS play a crucial role in both patient care and patient safety. Does she agree that equity of treatment on pay is crucial for senior and all levels of management in the health service, to ensure the recruitment and retention of the very best?

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Lady talks about the recommendations of the pay review bodies. We have accepted all of the recommendations that we have reported on so far this year. They are able to make the recommendations they see fit. The Government set a remit, but the bodies are independent in what they advise us, and they have to take account of areas such as retention and recruitment.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Unemployment has fallen by 63% in my constituency since 2010. I have many nurses and teachers working in my constituency, but I also have careworkers, all of whom have benefited from tax changes introduced by the Government that mean they have an extra £1,000 in their pockets and in

their take-home pay. Does the Chief Secretary agree that tax changes do not discriminate between private and public sector workers?

Elizabeth Truss: Both private and public sector workers have a vital part to play in the economy of this country. By taking people out of tax, we have reduced the tax bills of basic rate taxpayers by £1,000. The Opposition propose the highest levels of taxation in this country's peacetime history. Who would that fall on? It would fall on precisely the people whom we have been talking about in today's debate.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I mean to accommodate remaining would-be interrogators, but questions and answers from now on need to be shorter. They have been becoming ever longer as the session has proceeded.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Fifty-five per cent. of public sector workers are not covered by review bodies, including most of our civil servants and some of those on the very lowest incomes. Will the Chief Secretary give any hope that real pay rises will be considered for the 3 million public sector employees without a review body, and what will be the mechanism for doing so?

Elizabeth Truss: As with people who are under the purview of the pay review bodies, we need to ensure that we retain and recruit the best possible civil servants. At the same time, we need to ensure that that is affordable for the public purse.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): As the shadow Chancellor knows perfectly well, the former Prime Minister did not say that it was selfish for dedicated public sector workers to ask for a pay rise. He argued—I would agree—that it is selfish and immoral for politicians to offer benefits to the voters of today to be paid for by the voters of tomorrow. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, for her children and mine, it is important to balance fair treatment of the public sector with handing on a strong country not saddled by excess debt?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We need to ensure that our public finances are properly sustainable, so that we can fund those public services in future, and so that we do not burden the next generation.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Chief Secretary write to the chairs of all the pay review bodies—those serving on them are incredibly frustrated—and ask them to set out the true cost of a nurse, a teacher and a soldier, and to report back to Parliament, so we can assess the independence of their research?

Elizabeth Truss: I am sure the hon. Lady is aware that all documentation from this year's pay process will be published. She will be able to see the research the bodies have looked at and the people they have interviewed in coming to their determination. In due course, I will be writing to the pay review bodies for their remit for the following year.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Public sector workers are the guardians of our nation in terms of our security, health, education and infrastructure, so we clearly have

[Robert Halfon]

to do something, in particular for the lower paid. May I suggest to my right hon. Friend that, given revenue from corporation tax receipts increased by 21% in the past year, can we not have a special redistribution fund to use that increased revenue to at least help the lowest paid public sector workers?

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. Friend will be aware that the flexibility we give to pay review bodies is such that they can decide to give higher rises to those on the lowest incomes in the public sector. I would also point out that those on the lowest incomes have benefited most from the raising of the personal allowance. There are various ways of ensuring support for those on the lowest levels of pay.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): It will interest the House, I am sure, to know that the Scottish Government announced last week that they are lifting the pay cap. The Labour Welsh Government have the ability to do exactly the same thing, but in reality Labour in Wales is the Conservative Government's gwas bach, taking their lead from Westminster. Thirty thousand Welsh nurses are having their pay cut in real terms. I ask those on both the Government and Opposition Front Benches to explain to thousands of Welsh workers why Wales remains the poorest paid country in the United Kingdom.

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Lady will be aware that that is a devolved issue and a decision for the Welsh Government.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): I am quite close to this debate. I served Strathclyde fire and rescue service for 31 years, so I am familiar with the good work that my colleagues continue to do; and I have two daughters in nursing. One is a nursing sister, or a senior charge nurse as she is determined today, and one is an auxiliary nurse and a single parent. I do not hear from them what I am hearing from Opposition Members, who are painting a dark picture. My daughters seem to enjoy their work. They work very, very hard, and there is no doubt that my colleagues in the fire and rescue service work very hard, too. My fear, if we continue to increase wages in the public sector, is the risk of a spiral, with inflation and mortgages going up. The point is the value of the take-home pay in your pay packet and what influences the buying power of public workers' take-home pay.

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend points out the impact on the overall economy of unsustainable increases. We need to look at the overall package for public sector workers, including the reduced taxes that most public sector workers are paying and improvements in areas such as training, and we need to ensure that any pay raises are sustainable.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I am sure the Chief Secretary agrees that public services are the backbone of our country, but the average full-time public sector employee will have lost £4,073 in real terms by 2020 because of this Government's decisions. Does she think that that is fair?

Elizabeth Truss: I do not recognise that figure. I outlined the increments we have seen in areas such as teaching, nursing and the armed forces. We need to make sure we have a balance between fairness and affordability, and I outlined that earlier, too. That is what we have been doing and that is why we have been able to sustain high-quality public services at the same time as reducing the deficit and seeing the lowest unemployment for 40 years. The fact is that unsustainable increases in public spending would lead to higher taxes, higher interest rates and a much worse outcome for working people.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the fact we are spending more on debt interest than on our schools perfectly encapsulates the reason why we need to be fair across the generations when it comes to setting public sector pay? Does she agree that there is nothing right or moral in making cheap promises based on money we do not have?

Elizabeth Truss: The Labour Government left us with a huge deficit and a huge debt, which we have had to deal with over the last Parliament. It continues to hang over us, which is why the only path is the sustainable path of making sure we grow our economy, so we can enjoy even better public services and see people's pay rise across the board.

Mr Speaker: Now that the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) has been sitting in a state of almost Buddha-like repose for some minutes, I think it is safe for the Chamber to hear from him.

Chris Stephens: Mr Speaker, as a passionate trade unionist for 20 years sometimes my emotions get the better of me.

Will the Chief Secretary confirm that pay is so low in some Government Departments that 40% of employees in those Departments are in receipt of tax credits? Will she publish, for each UK Government Department, how many employees are in receipt of tax credits?

Elizabeth Truss: We have good rates of pay across the civil service. We need to make sure that that is sustainable, so we can carry on making sure that we have good services in both the civil service and the wider public sector.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): The public are rightly fed up with politicians playing politics with the NHS, so let us listen to what the NHS pay review body has evidenced and said. Is my right hon. Friend aware that the NHS pay review body stated:

"We do not see significant short-term nationwide recruitment and retention issues that are linked to pay?"

Elizabeth Truss: That is exactly why we have independent pay review bodies: they give us impartial advice and make recommendations. We accepted in full the recommendation of that body.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): NHS consultants in my constituency tell me that morale in the NHS is at an all-time low and that this is leading to real problems for recruitment and retention. Having voted against doing so only last week, I understand that certain members of the Cabinet are now in favour of

ending the public sector pay cap. Will the Government now heed their calls and give public sector workers the pay rise they deserve?

Elizabeth Truss: I am not sure the hon. Lady has heard the last hour of our discussion. We need to maintain sustainable public finances at the same time as being fair to workers in the public sector.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): In my constituency, the local NHS trust has been crippled by Labour's disastrous PFI deal, a £350 million building project that has now cost £2 billion in interest payments that could have otherwise been used for pay rises. Does the Chief Secretary agree that this proves absolutely that sound economic planning in the health service is the best way to provide fair pay in the future?

Elizabeth Truss: PFI is yet another example of how the Labour party spent money it did not have and left future public service organisations, schools and hospitals with debts that they are now having to deal with. That is why we should not heed its irresponsible calls.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Chief Secretary earlier tried to draw a distinction between taxpayers and public servants. Public servants are taxpayers, so she cannot continue to draw that unfair distinction. I would like to introduce an element of maths. Will she acknowledge that when RPI is running at 3.2% and CPI is running at 2.8% but pay is capped at 1%, that is a real-terms squeeze on disposable incomes, which is hitting the living standards of public sector workers? In the general election, when the Prime Minister was challenged on why nurses were having to use food banks she replied by saying it was a complex issue. How much does the Chief Secretary attribute the pay cap to that "complex issue"?

Elizabeth Truss: As I have said before, there is the 1%, but there is also incremental pay in many public service professions. There is the 2.4% for the armed forces, and there is the 3.3% that was received by teachers in 2015-16. Labour Members should tell people about the whole picture, rather than cherry-picking specific numbers.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am sure the Chief Secretary agrees with me—and with the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell)—that public sector workers are taxpayers. When it comes to public sector pay, we should indeed look at the whole picture, including the major tax cuts that have been made since 2010 for those on the lowest wages.

Elizabeth Truss: Absolutely. It seems to me that Labour Members want to count some things in their sums but not others, and that they are picking numbers rather than looking at the big picture.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Will the Chief Secretary confirm that new Government 10-year gilts are paid at 1%, and will she confirm that if the markets lose confidence in our deficit reduction plan the interest rate is likely to rise, as is the cost to the country, which will mean less money for our public services?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the macroeconomic picture, and to point out that if we do not have a confident deficit reduction plan such as the one that the Government have pursued for the last seven years, the financial markets will lose confidence, and the effect on working people will be a rise in interest rates, a rise in housing costs, and problems for the Government in respect of our borrowing.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I declare an interest: my wife is a primary school teacher who is currently working as a teaching assistant.

Will the Chief Secretary ensure that both the rising cost of living and recommendations of the independent pay review bodies are properly taken into consideration in the setting of public pay policy for next year's settlements?

Elizabeth Truss: That is one of the factors that the pay review bodies consider, along with issues such as recruitment and retention and ensuring that the pay settlement is affordable. They have the responsibility of speaking to people like my hon. Friend's wife who work in the public services, hearing what they have to say, and making a determination. There are different issues in different public services, and I think it wrong to suggest that there is a "one size fits all" solution.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): The shadow Chancellor mentioned inequality. In fact, income inequality has fallen since 2010, and now the top 1% will pay 27% of all income tax, a higher proportion than was ever paid under Labour. Does that not show that the Labour party tries to talk tough when it comes to inequality, but it is left to the Conservatives to deliver?

Elizabeth Truss: The shadow Chancellor does not like facts to get in the way of his rants.

Neil Gray: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. At the start of these proceedings I failed to declare the fact that my wife is a primary school teacher, which I did when I asked a similar question during Cabinet Office questions. I apologise, and I thank you for allowing me to correct the record now.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman—as will be the House—for putting that on the record.

Grenfell Rehousing

1.53 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government (Alok Sharma): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will update the House on the ongoing work that is being done to rehouse the victims of the tragedy at Grenfell Tower.

Three weeks have now passed since the fire. As we all know, it soon became clear that the delivery of the initial response on the ground was simply not good enough. Since then, much has been done to support victims, to see that justice is done, and to ensure that other buildings around the country are safe. Throughout that process, however, our first priority has been helping victims who have suffered such an unspeakable trauma. We have been working hard to ensure that they have all the support that they need, securing emergency accommodation and making financial and emotional support available as quickly as possible.

The response efforts have been co-ordinated by the Grenfell response team, led by John Barradell. He is being supported by colleagues drawn from London councils, the wider local government sector, the voluntary sector, and police, health and fire services, as well as central Government. I want to express my heartfelt thanks to them all for their immense efforts over the last few weeks. The new leader of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, Elizabeth Campbell, has given a fulsome apology for the inadequate initial response. She has also asked for help from central Government to put things right. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government has said in a written ministerial statement today, we will be establishing an independent taskforce to help the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea to build its capability so that it can deal with the longer term challenge of recovery.

The Prime Minister promised that we would offer temporary housing to all those who have lost their homes as a result of the fire, within three weeks. These are good-quality, fully furnished homes. Families will be able to move on from emergency accommodation and live, rent-free, in proper homes while permanent accommodation, on equal terms, is found; 158 families from Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk have been identified as being in need of such housing.

I can confirm that every family that is ready to talk to the housing team has been offered a temporary home, and that 139 families have received offers of accommodation. However, 19 families have not yet been ready to engage in the process, and we need to respect that. Some are still in hospital as a result of their injuries. In some cases, the people on the ground offering those families support have made clear that it would be inappropriate at this time to ask them to make a decision about where they will live. They have been through unimaginable trauma, and we need to go at the pace at which they want to go. What matters above all else is what the families individually want.

The Grenfell response team have been working with the 139 families currently engaged with the process to match them with appropriate temporary accommodation, and to start to talk to them about their long-term needs. The housing team have identified and secured more than 200 good-quality properties so that residents can

have a choice of where to live. I know that some have raised concerns about the quality of the accommodation offered. All the properties have been inspected by the housing team to ensure that they are in good condition. My right hon. Friend the Communities Secretary has personally seen an example of the kind of property that is on offer, and representatives of local residents groups have also seen and been assured of the quality. If the shadow Minister would find it helpful, I would be happy to visit some of the properties with him so that he can assure himself of their quality.

All the properties are local, and are either in Kensington and Chelsea or in a neighbouring borough. That will mean that families can continue to be near their friends and relatives, go to the same GP, and send their children to the same school. Fourteen offers of temporary accommodation have been accepted, and three families have already moved in. I expect the number to increase, but we must respect the pace at which the families want to move. I have personally met more than 30 of the families who have been directly affected, and from talking to them, I understand that there are many reasons why they are reluctant to take up these offers. Some may choose to remain in hotels until they have an offer of a permanent tenancy.

We also understand that one of the big issues holding people back is the lack of trust. Some families were told that they were moving into Grenfell Tower on a temporary basis, and then, years later, they were still there. Their concerns are entirely understandable, and this is a trust that we need to work hard to earn. We must also respect their decision if they do not wish to move out of temporary accommodation before permanent housing is available. We will continue to make offers to families of local homes that we think would be suitable for them, but no one will be forced into a home to which they do not want to move.

I want to respond directly to a number of reports that have been made, claiming that people are being told to move far from London, or that they may be deemed homeless if they do not accept an offer. I want to be absolutely clear to the House: if that is ever suggested to a victim, it is completely unacceptable. I have already stated that if anyone is aware of an individual family that is not receiving the offer we have promised, please tell me, and we will fix this. I repeat that call to the House now.

Let me set out again what the Government have committed to do. Every household that is ready to talk has been offered temporary accommodation. The housing team will continue to work with families to ensure that their individual needs are met. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said, everyone whose home was destroyed by the fire will be guaranteed a new home on the same terms as the one they lost. That means paying the same rent, with the same level of security, and in the same area.

When it comes to permanent housing, we have already announced a new block of social housing that will provide 68 new homes in Kensington Row. We are urgently working with a number of developers to secure similar properties, either in Kensington and Chelsea or very close to North Kensington, so that families can stay in the same area. These negotiations have not yet concluded, and we need to work closely with the residents to make sure that the sort of properties we are able to make available will match what they want.

There are also 17 leaseholders who lost their homes, and we are working with them to make sure that they do not lose out financially because of the fire. I met a group of leaseholders recently, and we are working with them individually to find the right solution for them.

My visits to the Westway, hearing the harrowing accounts of survivors, have been the most humbling and moving experience of my life. The families I have met have been through unimaginable pain. This is a tragedy that should never have happened, and we are determined to do all that we can to make sure something like this never happens again.

2.1 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I welcome the Minister to the Dispatch Box for his first oral statement in this job and thank him for making a copy of his statement available. May I also add the thanks of Labour Members to John Barradell and the emergency response team, as well as to the community organisations that are still supporting the survivors?

The Minister has had a testing first few weeks. I hope he knows now that, whatever he says, it is the Government's actions that count in getting Grenfell Tower residents the help and new housing they need, and in giving them and the wider local community in North Kensington the confidence that what is promised will be done. I have to say to him that the Government have been slow to act. They have been off the pace at each stage following this terrible tragedy, and it is clear from this statement that in some ways they still are.

After the fire, the Prime Minister said:

"I have fixed a deadline of three weeks for everybody affected to be found a home nearby."

The three weeks are up, yet whole families, who have lost everything, are still in hotels and hostels. We have learned today that three—just three—of the 158 families from Grenfell Tower have moved into a fresh home, and these are only temporary, which was not what the Prime Minister first said. Plus, only 11 others have so far been found somewhere they feel they can say yes to.

Why have so few families been successfully matched with fresh accommodation? Is it the case, as I have been told, that some have been offered accommodation with too few bedrooms, or in another tower block, or indeed with bizarre conditions attached, including "no overnight stay" for family or friends? A hotel room is no home, and temporary housing is no place to rebuild shattered lives. When will all those now homeless from the fire be offered a new permanent home?

The Minister mentioned the 68 homes in the Kensington Row development. They were already allocated for social housing. How many extra social homes have the Government or the council made available in the borough? Will the Government guarantee that the number of new social homes planned before the fire will be increased by at least the number needed now as a result of the fire? What assessment have the Government made, with the Mayor of London and the other London boroughs, of the knock-on consequences for temporary accommodation, social housing and council waiting lists across the city?

The Minister mentioned the recovery taskforce for Kensington and Chelsea. This is the taskforce that has now been sent in to take over from the taskforce sent in three weeks ago. Kensington and Chelsea is a failing

council—it has even failed to admit that it is failing. The fundamental concern about this council is not just its capability, but the total lack of trust that residents or anyone else have in it. The Government concede that by sending in the taskforce, yet they leave the council in charge. Labour Members want the taskforce to work, but we doubt that it will. It can advise but it cannot act. It lacks the powers of decision or action that commissioners would bring. Public confidence in the council will not be restored by replacing one set of leaders with politicians from the same ruling group. What will be the tests for this taskforce, and what will be the tests of further council failings, before Ministers take the fuller intervention steps needed, as they have in other areas?

The fears following the fire go well beyond Grenfell Tower, as do the consequences. Hundreds of thousands of people who live in high-rise blocks around the country want to know that their homes are safe. That means that the full building has been tested for fire safety, not just one component of the cladding on the outside; that all replacement cladding and fire prevention works necessary to guarantee safety are done; and that no remedial action is delayed or not done because the council or housing association has not got the funding.

How much funding have the Government set aside for these costs? Has the Treasury agreed access to the Contingencies Fund? Will the Minister reassure tower block residents today by making a clear commitment to full up-front funding for whatever work is needed to make these high-rise homes safe? When Ministers have rightly said, "You can't put a price on people's lives," that is what it means.

Alok Sharma: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. I will take each of his points in turn.

In terms of actions, we have made it very clear that the initial response was not good enough—the Prime Minister has said that at the Dispatch Box. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, ministerial colleagues and I have been engaged in meetings with the community, both on an individual basis and as part of community meetings, and that work will continue.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to the three-week offer. The purpose of that was to make sure that we offered temporary accommodation to the people who wanted it.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about the numbers. As I have said, we are working with all the families involved. I expect that number to rise, but I know that he and all in the House will acknowledge that it is not up to Government, or indeed any Member of this House, to determine the pace at which families should move—that has to be up to them. We have to treat them with sensitivity and that is what we are doing.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about whether people are being housed in tower blocks. That is not the case. I know there was initially some reporting about tower blocks, but I believe that was in relation to emergency accommodation in hotels that are tower blocks, and we responded to that.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about affordable housing. I can confirm that Kensington Row was originally designated as affordable housing, not social housing, so this represents a net increase. We are looking to provide a net increase in the number of homes in the social sector.

[Alok Sharma]

The right hon. Gentleman referred to the independent recovery taskforce that has now been appointed. It will report directly to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. Its members, including the chair, are being identified, and we should be in a position to announce further details over the coming weeks. I want to be clear that the special focus of the recovery taskforce will be on housing, regeneration and community engagement.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about high-rise blocks, and I do understand that those living in similar blocks across the country will have concerns. That was why we acted immediately and made sure that we informed local authorities and housing associations of the checks that they needed to do. We put in place a regime for them to send us the cladding materials on any building that they felt was suspect, and that testing has been going on at a pace. We have been very clear that local authorities and housing associations should do whatever is necessary to keep people safe, and that if there are issues to do with funding, we will work with the individual local authorities and housing associations. It is vital that we ensure that everyone who lives in such a block is kept safe.

The right hon. Gentleman also talked about wider tests. When we wrote to local authorities and housing associations on 22 June, we also asked them to look at issues related to insulation and to make checks. On 27 June, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State appointed an expert panel to advise on these matters. It met on Thursday 29 June and agreed a range of matters that it will look at. In particular, it agreed to consider whether any immediate additional action should be taken to ensure the safety of existing high-rise buildings.

I know that this is a subject that we wish we did not have to debate, but I have found, through the discussions that I have had with colleagues on both sides of the House, that this is a time for us to work together. There is a public inquiry, and a criminal investigation is under way. They will apportion blame, leaving no stone unturned, but this is the time for us to work together. I say again to colleagues, including the right hon. Gentleman, that if they feel that any individuals are not getting the right level of support, please come to me. I stand ready to help.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): It is clear that the Minister fully understands the great challenges that the residents face. Anyone who has had dealings with their local authority housing department will recognise the difficulties of finding accommodation quickly, particularly in an area of high housing demand such as North Kensington, and will understand that a long-term solution will take time. Can the Minister provide reassurances to residents that their needs will be paramount and that they will be given a choice of housing that is suitable for their needs?

Alok Sharma: I can absolutely confirm that to my hon. Friend. As I have said, it does not matter what any of us in the House thinks about the accommodation that is on offer. What matters is what the individual families think, and we are going to keep working with them to ensure that they get the right accommodation in the right area to meet their needs.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I thank the Minister for giving us advance notice of his statement. Members appreciate the fact that Ministers have come to the House to make statements so regularly.

There have been reports of some families not having security and certainty about their emergency accommodation, and not knowing where they will be sleeping tonight or tomorrow night. I would appreciate it if the Minister could update us on that situation, particularly with regard to those who are still in emergency accommodation. I also want to ask what support the families are being given when they move into temporary accommodation to ensure that they are able to buy the things that make a home a home, not just a shell, such as toys for their children and perhaps ornaments. I appreciate that the properties are fully furnished, but that does not provide everything that a family needs.

I hope that we will continue to receive updates. I understand that the public inquiry will look into the circumstances surrounding what happened and what led up to it. We have asked for that inquiry to be as wide as possible, with the residents' views taken into account at all times.

Will the Minister also commit to looking into the response to the events, and to carrying out an inquiry or some other kind of assessment into that, so that we can ensure that we across the nations of the UK can learn from what has happened and, should a disaster like this happen again—we hope it will not—make the best possible response?

Alok Sharma: I thank the hon. Lady for her acknowledgement that Ministers have been updating the House regularly. That is exactly what we should be doing, particularly at this time. She asked about hotel rooms. I appreciate that in the initial stages there were concerns that some people were being asked to move at very short notice. I believe that that has been rectified, and that people will be given much more notice. We will try to keep people in the hotels that they have become familiar with, so long as they are happy to be there. I have had individual conversations relating to hotel accommodation with some of the families, and I think that we have managed to fix this.

The hon. Lady asked about money. When people have lost absolutely everything, we need to ensure that funds are readily available so that they can replace things. We have the discretionary fund: 249 payments of £500 have been made so far to those in Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk, and 112 grants of £5,000 have been made to households. Another 840 discretionary payments have been made to others in the wider area who have been affected. The total spend from the discretionary fund is £2.5 million, but we will ensure that funding is made available where it is required.

The hon. Lady also asked about the public inquiry. Sir Martin Moore-Bick has been appointed, and he has already met victims, survivors and members of the local community. Although the House already knows this, I want to make it clear again that legal support for victims will be provided so that they can play a full part in the inquiry. Clearly it is up to the judge to determine the scope of the inquiry, but I am sure that he will have heard that people want as full an inquiry as possible.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am keen to accommodate the level of interest in this extremely serious matter, about which there will, I suspect, be many statements in the weeks to come, but I must advise the House that both subsequent debates are well subscribed, especially the debate on Israel and Palestine, which is very heavily subscribed. I must leave time for that, so what is now required in each case is a short, preferably single-sentence question.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): My hon. Friend mentioned the fact that a number of families had not yet engaged with regard to rehousing. The community in Latimer Road and the Westway have been marvellous in putting their arms round those families, but can he confirm that, even if there is a delay before those families engage, they will still be given the same priority and rights to rehousing that he has mentioned?

Alok Sharma: Yes, I can absolutely confirm that. I should also like to pay tribute to the local communities and volunteers who have worked so hard to support these families.

Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): Is the Minister aware that, despite the press narrative of survivors refusing £1 million luxury flats, some are being offered totally unsuitable accommodation? One man in particular, whom I think the Minister has met, runs his own business and cares for his elderly disabled mother. He was offered a home in a poorly maintained, rat-infested estate that is about to be demolished. What kind of peace and stability could that traumatised family, who escaped with their lives while rescuing their neighbours, possibly find in that frankly shameful offer? I would really like to know who considered that kind of accommodation to be suitable.

Alok Sharma: We do not want any family to be placed in accommodation that is unsuitable. I invite the hon. Lady to join me and the shadow Minister—let us go and visit some of these properties and make sure that she is happy with the quality of what is on offer.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): In his statement, the Minister suggested that some of those who lived in Grenfell Tower had been there for five years, despite having been assured that it was temporary accommodation. Can he assure us that those now being placed in temporary accommodation will not subsequently have it described as permanent?

Alok Sharma: I can absolutely offer that assurance.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Does the Minister agree that the uptake of temporary accommodation by only 14 families is disappointing? If he thinks that this is to do to with a lack of trust rather than the quality of the housing, will he tell us what is being done to build that trust?

Alok Sharma: I want to return to the point that the pace at which things happen has to be determined by the families, but I accept that lack of trust is an issue. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has written letters directly to the affected families, setting out clearly what we are offering, but we must continue to build that trust.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): In addition to ensuring discretionary funds, what discussions have Ministers had with the Association of British Insurers to ensure that life policies and household policies, where they were affordable and were in place, are paid as quickly as possible?

Alok Sharma: I can confirm that the Treasury is looking at all the insurance matters, and the Chancellor recently met the insurance industry.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Does the Minister know how many of the households from Grenfell have previously been homeless and have experience of the homelessness system? Those who have will know that it is hell. They were living in insecure, bad-quality accommodation and were subjected to frequent moves. In some cases, they have stayed in temporary accommodation for up to a decade. Does the Minister understand that that is the context that feeds the residents' catastrophic mistrust? He needs to deal with those factors as well as the immediate rehousing.

Alok Sharma: I have already acknowledged that there has been a lack of trust, and Ministers must ensure that we work to restore that trust.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement. He referred to several leaseholders in the flats, so will he outline what steps he is taking to ensure the security of those leases?

Alok Sharma: I am happy to do that. I met a number of the leaseholders yesterday, and we have asked them to provide us with further information on their leases. We expect to start having individual discussions from next week.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): There have been two fires in my constituency and one in a neighbouring constituency since the Grenfell Tower fire, and they were not in high-rises. People are very concerned, so will the Minister explain what systematic action is being taken to prevent other fires? What will he do to ensure that we strengthen the regulators' powers to address residents' concerns when they raise the alarm?

Alok Sharma: I talked about the expert advisory panel, which will consider many such matters. As the Prime Minister said at last week's PMQs, we need to look "much more widely" at what has happened "under different Governments and under different councils".—[*Official Report*, 28 June 2017; Vol. 626, c. 587.]

We will ensure that we get to the bottom of that. It is vital that people feel safe, and that is what we are going to ensure.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement and for assuring the survivors that they will be supported at the pace they want. There have been disputed reports in the media about the number of missing residents, and the situation has been complicated by sub-letting. What efforts have been made to help to identify missing residents?

Alok Sharma: We want to build as full a list as possible of the people who were in the building at that tragic time. As my hon. Friend will know, the Director of Public Prosecutions has said that if people were

[Alok Sharma]

sub-letting illegally, they will be exempt from prosecution. If some of them are aware of people who were in the building that we do not know about, I hope that they will come forward.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I want to share the words of my constituent, Jess. She says:

“I am a firefighter and went into Grenfell Tower, rescuing an unconscious girl from the 12th floor. Myself and my fellow firefighters will never forget the horrors of that night and the fact we couldn’t rescue everyone. But we are not to blame for these deaths, the shocking and tragic fire in Grenfell Tower was avoidable. I have never seen a building go up in flames so quickly, it took minutes for the fire to hop from floor to floor. This tragedy has shown that the laws on fire safety in buildings aren’t fit for purpose.”

What would the Minister say to my constituent, and what support has been put in place for workers like her?

Alok Sharma: I pay tribute to the firefighters, not only for the incredible work they did that night but for the work they do every day of year. As for support, it is vital that we ensure that trauma counselling is made available, including to firefighters. The public inquiry is there to get to the bottom of what took place, and we will ensure that that happens. Ultimately, we can never have something like this kind of tragedy happen again in our country.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): The Minister spoke about the importance of building trust among the community. Does he agree that it is important not to inadvertently diminish trust in the judge in the inquiry—Judge Moore-Bick—without good cause? Of course we would all like to see the judiciary in this country more accurately represent the population, but we must not cast aspersions on their impartiality before they have even begun the inquiry.

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I said, Sir Martin Moore-Bick has already met some of the victims and survivors, and we need to allow him to set out the full scope of his inquiry.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): As cladding is being removed from high-rise blocks around the country, those blocks are losing the insulation protection that it offers. If that cladding has not been replaced by the time winter comes, it may be a struggle to keep those homes warm and dry. What assessment are Ministers making now of the need to have those buildings properly insulated by the winter, so that people are warm, dry and safe?

Alok Sharma: As the hon. Lady will know, where the cladding is coming down, new, non-combustible cladding is planned to go up.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I commend the Minister for his calm and dignified approach today following a dreadful disaster.

I and all of us in Northern Ireland have been terribly affected and deeply moved by what happened in the tower block, and it concerns me that the survivors now face an indeterminate time in different accommodation. It would help matters enormously if the Government committed to help with rents if they are higher than

what residents were used to in Grenfell Tower. The Government have a moral obligation to give that assurance to the survivors.

Alok Sharma: I am sorry if I did not explain myself correctly; the temporary and emergency accommodation is rent-free.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The financial provisions for local authorities that are trying to sort out problems around the country seem very ad hoc. Would it not be much better to set up a specific fund that local authorities could draw down from, thus making a proportionate amount available for local authorities in Wales?

Alok Sharma: It is important to respond to the needs of individual councils and local authorities, and that is precisely what we will do in conversations with them.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I say gently to the Minister that the fudge at local level about who is control of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea will not work. The local community does not want the usual suspects in charge of the council. Will he say today that there will be no loss of social or affordable housing and that every single unit will be replaced? It is wrong that people on waiting lists are paying the price and will suffer as a consequence of Grenfell.

Alok Sharma: As the hon. Gentleman knows, there has been a change of leadership at the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced the independent taskforce. As for the housing that people will be put in permanently, it absolutely has to be of very good quality, and that is what we are going to ensure.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): We all know who the villains of the piece are, but it is right that we mention the heroes. I thank the Minister for his warm words today and his gratitude to councils, such as that of the London Borough of Ealing, that have committed resources and staff to help, but some of the most active groups within the area are the local faith communities—St Francis of Assisi, the Holland Park synagogue, the local mosque, the community church. What plans does the Minister have to meet that group which collectively has done so much for so many people with so few resources?

Alok Sharma: Ministers have committed to meet community groups, and some meetings have already happened. My right hon. Friend Secretary of State has also met some of these groups, and Home Office Ministers are also looking at the situation. I understand that it is vital to engage with community and faith groups to ensure that they also provide their input.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister showed real humility in his statement—humility not shown by his Secretary of State at the Local Government Association conference, where he sought to attack local government for the failings of an individual council. If he will not stick up for local government, I will: Kensington and Chelsea does not represent local government as a whole.

It will take time to work through the regulations and to find better regulations for building control, but properties are being built today with Government money through the housing investment funds that are devolved to Greater Manchester, Birmingham, East Anglia and so on, and we could be insisting that sprinklers are installed today.

Alok Sharma: First, I am sorry to have to say this to the hon. Gentleman, but my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has been working incredibly hard on this issue from day one with me. This is a time for us to work together and to come together, particularly on this issue. *[Interruption.]* On building regulations and related issues, we have an expert panel and we understand we are going to have to look at all of this in the round.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): If the Government want a little advice from a mere observer of this towering inferno, I can tell them that I think it is time we had an end to Government Members and their supporters howling with derision at the very mention of health and safety and having resolutions to get rid of red tape and regulation. The truth is that had there been more red tape and regulation in those blocks, we would not be talking about this today.

Alok Sharma: I respectfully point out to the hon. Gentleman that the regulations were set out in 2006, when of course there was a Labour Government. The reality is that we have to learn the lessons from this, and of course where people have lessons to offer, we will listen.

Points of Order

2.31 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On Monday evening, the Secretary of State for Health published a written ministerial statement suggesting that local authority access to the £2 billion funding for social care announced in the spring Budget will now be dependent on performance against targets for delayed transfer of care, meaning that some councils could lose funding which they have already planned to spend this year. Today, the Local Government Association has announced it has been left with

“no choice but to withdraw”

its support for the guidance on better care funding. Social care is already in crisis and this can only make things worse, so have you had any indication from the Health Secretary as to whether he intends to come to the House to make a statement on where this leaves funding for social care and to give hon. Members the chance to ask questions on this matter?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order, to which the short answer is that I have received no indication of any intention by a Minister to come to the House to make a statement on that matter. I am very conscious of the importance that the hon. Lady and probably others attach to it, and of the evident urgency that she attaches to the subject. She is an experienced Member of the House, and as we approach the summer recess, I rather imagine that she will diligently keep an eye on the subject. If she is dissatisfied with what is said, or with the absence of anything being said, she knows that there are options available to her to secure the attention of and a comment by the relevant Minister.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You will be aware that in this new Parliament and the previous one my colleagues and I had, it seems, a partly successful campaign to save Glasgow’s jobcentres from closure. More than an hour ago, I learned in the press about the Department’s plans. Thirty-five minutes ago, the Department’s plans were laid in the House through a written ministerial statement—and that is despite our request for this to be an oral statement so that we could have a full and proper discussion of these matters. Mr Speaker, can you advise me and my colleagues as to how we can get a Minister to that Dispatch Box to ask why there has been no published equality impact assessment and why the consultation responses still have not been published six months later, and so that we can hold the Government to account on the fact that they still want to close seven of our city’s jobcentres?

Mr Speaker: The short answer is that I am, fortunately, in a position to advise the hon. Gentleman, whom I thank for his point of order. The essence of my advice is to impress upon him the importance of repetition. He has raised the issue now and his representations will have been heard on the Treasury Bench. He is a seasoned habitué of the Chamber and he will know that tomorrow we have business questions. I firmly expect him to be in his place and to be bobbing up and down with great intensity to catch my eye, in order to question the

[Mr Speaker]

Leader of the House on whether and, if so, when there will be an oral statement on this matter. I look forward to seeing the hon. Gentleman bright eyed and bushy tailed in his seat in the Chamber tomorrow morning.

SUPPLY AND APPROPRIATION (MAIN ESTIMATES) BILL

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 56), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Question put forthwith, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Criminal Law (Northern Ireland)

2.35 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chloe Smith): I beg to move,

That the draft Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 (Extension of duration of non-jury trial provisions) Order 2017, which was laid before this House on 22 June, be approved.

Under this order, trials without a jury can take place in Northern Ireland for a further two years from 1 August 2017; the current provisions expire on 31 July. Although this is the fifth such extension of these provisions, I hope to leave Members in no doubt as to the continued necessity for the provisions for a further two years.

May I take this opportunity to welcome Madam Deputy Speaker—Dame Rosie Winterton—to her place? This is the first time I have had the chance to do so from this Dispatch Box. I am sure we will all enjoy serving under her chairmanship this afternoon.

Hon. Members will be aware of the lethal threat posed by terrorists in Northern Ireland. Dissident republican terrorist groups continue to plan and mount attacks, with the principal aim of killing or maiming those who serve the public in all communities so bravely. Police officers, prison officers and members of the armed forces are the main focus of these attacks, but the terrorists' continued use of explosive devices and other weaponry continues to cause death and injury. Individuals linked to paramilitary organisations also continue to undermine peace and the rule of law in Northern Ireland through the use of violence and intimidation, in both republican and loyalist communities. I want to assure hon. Members that the Government wish to end the exceptional system of non-jury trials as soon as it is no longer necessary. But that should happen only when the circumstances allow, otherwise we risk allowing violence and intimidation to undermine the criminal justice process in Northern Ireland.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I am delighted to see you in the Chair for the first time, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to welcome the new Minister to the Dispatch Box to debate this important legislation. It would be helpful to the House if she were to indicate the types of trials that have involved the individuals who have gone through this non-jury procedure in the recent past. Have they involved loyalist paramilitaries, republican paramilitaries or predominantly one or the other? It would be helpful if she told us that.

Chloe Smith: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. Initially, I want to set out the conditions under which such a trial can be granted, as that will begin to help to answer her question. I shall also come on to discuss the numbers of such trials. As she will appreciate, I will not be able to comment on any live cases or give her every single detail she asks for, but I will endeavour to give the House a strong sense of what these trials are used for.

Lady Hermon: Obviously, I am not asking the Minister to comment on ongoing cases, but this procedure of non-jury trials has been exceptional to Northern Ireland. I fully understand and support them in the context of continued paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland.

However, what she needs to explain to the community and to the House is that this is not a one-sided process and that those who have been through it, whether convicted or acquitted, come from both loyalist and republican paramilitary groups. It would be helpful if she would do that.

Chloe Smith: The simplest short answer is yes, it is absolutely the case that the provisions we are discussing have and will apply across communities. There is no doubt about that.

If the House will allow me to continue with my opening remarks, I will try to answer everything else during the course of the debate. The Government wish to end the non-jury trial system because it is exceptional, and we wish to do so as soon as the circumstances allow. Although many attempts to visit violence and intimidation and undermine the criminal justice process have been disrupted, the security situation today remains much the same as it was in 2015, when the House last considered these measures. The threat from terrorism in Northern Ireland is assessed as severe. This year alone, there have been four national security attacks in Northern Ireland, including the wounding of a police officer who was serving the community. It would be remiss of the Government to dispose of the provisions now, given that threat and its potential impact on the delivery of criminal justice for all communities in Northern Ireland. It would be a weak argument to suggest that we should move on from the provisions because we have had them for a long time.

In the past two years, attacks by dissident republicans and loyalist paramilitaries have put countless innocent lives in danger. Members may be aware of the incident on the Crumlin Road in Belfast in January, when two police officers who were serving their community came under attack from dissident republicans, leaving one officer badly injured. The forecourt of a busy filling station was sprayed with automatic gunfire, demonstrating the utter disregard these groups show for human life and the harm that they pose to ordinary members of the public. Sadly, this despicable attack was not an isolated incident: there were four confirmed national security attacks in 2016 and there have been four so far this year. That underlines the persistence of the threat that we face.

The presence of dissident republicans and paramilitaries in Northern Ireland means that violence and intimidation remain concerns for the wider community. Figures released by the Police Service of Northern Ireland show an increased number of security-related deaths over the past three years, as well as an increasing trend in the number of paramilitary-style assaults since 2012-13. Threats towards the police and public bodies also demonstrate the continued attempts at the intimidation of individuals and communities in Northern Ireland. In 2016-17, there were 137 arrests and 19 charges related to terrorism. I pay tribute to the work of the PSNI and its partners, because it is having an impact on the threat, but the security situation remains serious.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): May I speak from personal experience? In some court cases there is huge intimidation of witnesses from the public gallery, which it is very difficult to control. I have to say, I was frightened.

Chloe Smith: I welcome my hon. and gallant Friend's experience being brought to bear on this debate. He is right. I was just about to talk about the circumstances in which non-jury trials are appropriate, and will come on to that very point about the intimidation of those involved in the justice process. He will also be aware of some other jury reforms that have been implemented administratively; I hope to see them succeed.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): With the information she has outlined, the Minister is making the case for the system's renewal very well. Does she agree that it is essential for all sections of the community in Northern Ireland to support the security forces and the work that they do?

Chloe Smith: Yes, I do. We are talking about a threat that goes across all communities and the wider public, and I hope I have begun to make that clear.

I shall explain the precise ways in which justice is threatened and what the measures before us are for. Non-jury trial provisions are available in exceptional circumstances in Northern Ireland, when a risk to the administration of justice is suspected—for example, jury tampering, whereby intimidation, violence or the threat of violence against members of a jury could result in a perverse conviction or acquittal.

The Director of Public Prosecutions for Northern Ireland may issue a certificate that allows a non-jury trial to be held in relation to any trial on indictment of a defendant, and anyone tried with that defendant, if it meets a defined test that falls within one of four conditions: first, if the defendant is, or is an associate of, a member of a proscribed organisation whose activities are connected with the affairs of Northern Ireland, or has at any time been a member of an organisation when it was a proscribed organisation; secondly, if the offence was committed on behalf of a proscribed organisation, or a proscribed organisation was involved with or assisted in the carrying out of the offence; thirdly, if an attempt was made to prejudice the investigation or prosecution, by or on behalf of a proscribed organisation, or a proscribed organisation was otherwise involved with or assisted in that attempt; or, fourthly, if the offence was committed to any extent, directly or indirectly, as a result of, in connection with or in response to, religious or political hostility.

A case that falls within one of the four conditions will not automatically be tried without a jury, because the DPP must also be satisfied that there is a risk that the administration of justice might be impaired were a jury trial to be held. For those with a historical view, I should be clear that this is not a Diplock system—this is not the system that pertained before 2007. There is a clear distinction between the current system and the pre-2007 Diplock court arrangements, under which there was a presumption that all scheduled offences were tried by a judge alone. In Northern Ireland today, there is a clear presumption that a jury trial will take place in all cases.

In line with the commitments made in Parliament in 2015—before the July 2017 expiry date that necessitates our being here today—the Secretary of State held a full public consultation on whether non-jury trial provisions should be extended. The consultation concluded in

[Chloe Smith]

February this year. It received a total of 10 responses from a range of interested individuals and groups in Northern Ireland.

Lady Hermon: I am extremely grateful for the Minister's generosity in taking interventions. It would be helpful if, before she sets out the consultation's conclusions and draws her remarks to a close, she could indicate how often the DPP has issued these certificates—he has not been at all hesitant in doing so. It would also be helpful if she could tell us about when he has refused to issue certificates, which is in the minority of cases. That sort of information would be helpful to everyone.

Chloe Smith: I am happy to do that, so I shall pause my speech and provide exactly those figures. In the 2017 calendar year, which is obviously still running, four certificates have been issued so far, and 19 were issued in the 2016 calendar year. In 2016, one request to issue a certificate was refused. I shall give the proportion as well, because it is illustrative for the House: in 2017, just 0.5% of Crown court cases have been dealt with by means of a non-jury trial under the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007—that is a percentage of all disposals. That makes it clear to the House how infrequently the provisions are used. The figure for refusals gives a sense of how carefully the DPP makes the decisions: it is not about rushed decision making; due care and attention are applied.

Before that intervention, Madam Deputy Speaker, I was speaking about the responses to the consultation; I hope you do not mind my taking the time to put this on record for those who have an interest. The Secretary of State has received relevant briefing from security officials so that he can understand the underlying threat picture. In the light of all the evidence and views before him, the Secretary of State has decided to renew non-jury trial provisions for a further two years and to keep them under regular independent review—those are the proposals I have brought before the House. As an extra and new measure of assurance, the independent reviewer of the 2007 Act will review the non-jury trial system as part of his annual review cycle, the results of which will be made available to the public in his published report. We hope that that gives some extra reassurance to those interested in these issues.

We must recognise that Northern Ireland is in a unique situation and that the non-jury trial provisions in the 2007 Act continue to be an important factor in supporting the effective delivery of the criminal justice process in a very small number of criminal cases. Certain jury trials in Northern Ireland would not be safe from disruption by those involved in paramilitary activity, many of whom make their presence known in Northern Ireland's close-knit communities or indeed in the public galleries of the courtrooms.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Given that some paramilitary organisations are also involved in organised crime, is the Minister confident that jurors in other trials are not being intimidated by those organisations?

Chloe Smith: That reminds us of the importance of the four conditions that apply here. If there were some link with those four conditions, any trial may be considered under these processes. The DPP must be satisfied that one of the four conditions is met, and that justice may

be put at risk by the holding of a jury trial. My hon. Friend can rest assured that the provisions are available for all types of criminal cases as long as they meet the conditions.

In 2016 and 2017, a very small number of certificates were issued. I would just like to add that the DPP acts with a great measure of independence. His role is to exercise his discretion in deciding whether to issue a certificate. I note that the current DPP is due to retire this year, and he will have exercised these duties and many others in great service to this country over the years.

As I have said, the numbers of certificates are very small compared with the total burden of Crown court cases. I hope that hon. Members are reassured by the fact that the Secretary of State has not taken lightly this decision to seek to renew the non-jury trial system. We strongly believe, however, that the system is, on balance, proportionate and necessary in light of the unique risks facing the criminal justice process in Northern Ireland.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Just before the Minister concludes, can she tell us whether, in the very small number of cases that have gone before the non-jury courts, there is any evidence of appeals being put forward and indeed being successful in part as a result of the way in which they were tried in the first place?

Chloe Smith: There are indeed ways to challenge these certificates; legal challenges have been made. I will not go into them in great detail here because they are on record and available for Members to look at. However, I will draw out one interesting point from one of the pieces of case law: it is noted that not to have a jury trial is not the same as not to have fair trial. That is a crucial piece of reassurance for Members here today who may be thinking deeply about the measure for which I am asking their support.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Will the Minister comment on the concern of the Bar of Northern Ireland that the criteria under which a challenge can be brought under section 7 of the 2007 Act is really very narrow and confined to exceptional circumstances? That concern comes out clearly in the consultation and is expected to be addressed in some way.

Chloe Smith: I am grateful to my hon. and gallant Friend for his contribution. He speaks with great experience, as he has spoken on these issues from this very Dispatch Box. He is right that the consultation responses, while being broadly in favour of continuing the system—indeed many of them noted that they had faith in the Secretary of State's decision—contained some points of detail that could be considered in the future. However, I must point out that the provisions expire this month. I am asking the House to extend them now for immediate purposes, which is somewhat separate to the broader question of reform that we might look at in due course. I have mentioned an independent review, which will be a very good opportunity to draw out all these issues. I will also take the opportunity to put it on the record that the very complexity of these issues reminds us why we want to see an Executive in place in Northern Ireland—so that a Ministry of Justice there can properly play its part in these issues as well.

In conclusion, we would love to be able to do away with these measures as early as we possibly can, but that can only ever be done when circumstances allow. We want a system that remains fair, effective, necessary, appropriate and proportionate. We look forward to discussing it further under the annual independent review, but, for now, I commend this order to the House.

2.55 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I am sure that I join the whole House, Madam Deputy Speaker, in welcoming you to your seat. I learned, when I was a very junior Whip under your leadership, that your eye misses nothing. I am quite sure that that will be our experience here. I would also say that, during my time in the Whips Office, one of my opposite numbers was the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), whom I welcome to her position. I also welcome the hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris), who brings a great deal of knowledge and the affection of the House to this particular brief.

May I say at the outset that we do not intend to oppose this order for reasons that will be self-evident? I also think that the involvement of David Seymour, as the independent reviewer, is a very powerful step forward. There have been some issues in the past about the transparency of the process. I understand that Barra McGrory is leaving this year, and I certainly endorse the kind comments that were made by the Minister. The fact that there has been one judicial review of his decisions says a great deal about his skill and impartiality. I appreciate that there have been some Members who have felt a certain absence of confidence, but his service has proved that he is more than capable of being completely objective. We all remember Sir Alasdair Fraser, who held the post for more than 20 years. We welcomed Barra McGrory and certainly look forward to the new appointment.

The points that the Minister made about the current situation need to be considered very sombrely and soberly. It is just over a year ago that Adrian Ismay was killed on his way to work at HMP Hydebank. Obviously, we remember the death of David Black a bit earlier. Clearly, the situation is dangerous. She also mentioned explosive finds. One sad statistic is that, between August 2015 and July 2016, there were 246 incidents of explosive ordnance disposal activity in support of the police, including 35 improvised explosive devices. The situation is serious, and it demands a serious response. The two proposals that the Minister has made today—the renewal of the order and the involvement of the independent reviewer—go a long way forward.

Lady Hermon: I am very grateful to the shadow spokesperson for Northern Ireland for responding to this debate and for assuring the House that he supports the renewal of this measure. I would be very comforted to know that his party leader supports the need for non-jury trials in Northern Ireland. For as long as such trials are needed in Northern Ireland, I would like to know that his party leader supports them.

Stephen Pound: That is a little bit above my pay grade. I shall certainly speak to my party leader and make sure that he sends a note to the hon. Lady, of whom he is very fond.

This is my third trot around the paddock with this subject. In June 2013, when the right hon. and gallant Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mike Penning) was the Minister, we managed to deal with it in seven minutes. In July 2015, when the right hon. Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace) was Minister, sadly it took us 22 minutes. I am in no way implying that we are on a particular scale, but I think that it is important, in view of some of the new evidence we are discussing today, that we take a little time to consider the matter.

The role of the independent reviewer of the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 is crucial. I wish to recommend David Seymour's report to the House and express my gratitude to the Northern Ireland Office for making it available, and indeed for all the work it has done. The report is salutary. It actually states why the situation in Northern Ireland is so serious. I must say that I now know more about stop and search on the causeway coast and in the glens than I ever really wanted to.

David Simpson: I am glad that the Opposition support these measures. The hon. Gentleman will know that my constituency, which he has visited a number of times, has the highest level of dissident republican threat, and of course it was in my constituency that Mr Black was murdered, so he will know how necessary these measures are.

Stephen Pound: Absolutely. One of the things that strikes many of us when we visit Northern Ireland, apart from the staggering beauty of that part of the world, is the persistence of fear. I salute all public servants, elected and non-elected, who hold the line in Northern Ireland in the most horrendous circumstances. I pay tribute not only to the hon. Gentleman, but to Prison Officer Black, Adrian Ismay and so many others who have suffered.

The independent reviewer's report, which is a solid body of work, should be studied. I am extremely glad that in future it will contain some oversight of the process. With regard to the only challenge to the DPP's decision that has gone to judicial review and not been upheld, some people still feel that it is a closed process. When the PSNI goes to the DPP and applies for a certificate to be issued, the DPP quite rightly runs the template of the four tests over the application and makes a decision, but it does depend, to a certain degree, on the individual characteristics, intelligence and knowledge of the DPP. I think that DPP Barra McGrory has proven time and again that he is more than capable of that, but some people have suggested that there should still be some element of external examination and oversight.

I think that the Minister, in a very fine piece of parliamentary footwork and legislative improvement, has answered those objections. I have no way of knowing whether I will be at this Dispatch Box in two years' time—if I am, it will probably be because I have not been promoted; if I am not, it will almost certainly be because I have been demoted—but if I am, I look forward to reading this. Indeed, even if I am not at the Dispatch Box, I will certainly read it anyway, just to see where we are with the situation.

I thoroughly endorse the Minister's earlier points about the desire to see Northern Ireland's devolved institutions up and running again. We know that the people of Northern Ireland deserve better than an

[Stephen Pound]

impasse or a vacuum. We know that the quality of the elected representatives in Northern Ireland is such that they are more than capable of reaching such an agreement, and I look forward to them doing so very soon.

I reiterate the point made at the beginning about this being a reluctant piece of legislation. When we considered this in June 2013, the Minister at the time said on the record that the Government wished to see a return to full jury trials as soon as possible. That goes for all of us. We do not want to see criminal non-jury trials. They do not exist anywhere else in the United Kingdom—there may have been an increase in civil non-jury trials, but criminal non-jury trials do not exist anywhere else. They exist in Northern Ireland because of the difficult and exceptional circumstances there.

Lady Hermon: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Pound: I will always give way to a former professor of law at Queen's University.

Lady Hermon: The hon. Gentleman has inadvertently promoted me; it is awfully flattering and very kind of him, but I was never a professor of law at Queen's University. The point I wish to draw to his attention—this is why I was so disconcerted, displeased and angry with his response to my earlier intervention about the attitude of his party's leader towards non-jury trials in Northern Ireland—is that the Criminal Justice Act 2003 provides for non-jury trials throughout the whole United Kingdom, so they are available in England and Wales.

Stephen Pound: I apologise to the hon. Lady for elevating her—I am sure that it would only have been a matter of time before she had been made a full professor of law. I am one of the very few Members of Parliament who have not been a lawyer, my previous occupations having been those of sailor and bus driver. However, I was under the impression that we did not have non-jury criminal trials in Great Britain, although we do have non-jury civil trials, for example in fraud cases. But I am more than happy to be corrected on that.

I would like to hear from the Minister what the actual mechanics of the process will be with the independent reviewer's reporting. Will it be an annual report, a biannual report or a sixth-monthly report? Will it be laid in the Library or will there be a statement to the House? Bearing in mind that we are entering some pretty choppy waters in Northern Ireland, will she consider a wider involvement by the shadow Secretary of State, because we on the Opposition side are proud of the bipartisan approach that we continue to take in relation to Northern Ireland matters? There are very few points that divide us on this, because we all want the same thing in Northern Ireland: peace, decency, honesty, economic success and the rule of law. We on the Opposition Benches pledge ourselves to working in a bipartisan way. I would therefore like to see wider involvement with the shadow Secretary of State, because over the next few months there will inevitably be—I hesitate to use the term "direct rule"—direct involvement from London.

We are approaching 12 July, which is a tricky time in the Northern Irish year. I think that what we are doing here today will show confidence on both sides of the

House in the rule of law in Northern Ireland. It will show that people have not taken their eye off the ball and that the Minister's move to include David Seymour in the process is a positive one. The Opposition therefore endorse and support the extension of the non-jury trial legislation for a further two years.

3.6 pm

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I, too, welcome you to the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, and very much look forward to working with you in the House. I also welcome the Minister to her new post and wish her well in the role.

It is a little unfortunate that this is the second time this week that we have had to discuss Northern Ireland matters in this respect, because of course on Monday we had a statement from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to update us on where the discussions are with regard to bringing the parties in Northern Ireland together to restore the Assembly and the Executive, and unfortunately it was not good news. We wish him well in those negotiations, because, as has been said already today, decisions that affect Northern Ireland should be taken in Northern Ireland by local politicians elected by the people. We hope that progress will be made. I was a shadow Northern Ireland Office Minister for a number of years, and we dealt with many important issues upstairs in Committee, perhaps with as few as 18 MPs, only a fraction of whom were from Northern Ireland. That was no way to run the Province, so I really do hope that those negotiations and discussions can move forward.

It is also unfortunate that we have to renew this legislation. When I was a shadow Minister, we held these discussions and found it necessary to extend the period of time in which we could have non-jury trials. None of us wants that to be the case. One of the central tenets of United Kingdom law is that we are tried by our peers—those we work with and live alongside—in a jury. That is the way it should be, so it is unfortunate that we have to extend this facility today. However, as I understand it, and as the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) has mentioned, section 44 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003, which allows non-jury trials to take place, applies across Great Britain. I have not looked at it in great detail, so I am not sure how that provision differs from the measures we have in place in Northern Ireland. I am not sure whether there is any opportunity to roll the two into one provision at some future point, because even though we have special circumstances in Northern Ireland, obviously we seem to have them in Great Britain as well, as the existence of the 2003 provision shows. It is always regrettable when we get to that point.

Where is the specific threat perceived to be coming from? The Minister has quite rightly said that a very small fraction of cases are tried in this way, but it would be interesting to know what kinds of offences they were. If she does not have that information available immediately, perhaps she could write to hon. Members who are interested. What sort of cases are tried in this way? Are there any particular offences? Is there a pattern? This point was raised also by the hon. Member for North Down. It is important to try to identify where the problem is.

It is not all bad news in Northern Ireland. I have touched on two pieces of bad news but the Secretary of

State also mentioned on Monday that he is reviewing political donations, which he wants to be more transparent. When I chaired the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs in the last Parliament, we looked at that matter and urged a move in that direction, because we want to make Northern Ireland politics more normal. That was some good news. Today's news—that we have to extend this measure—is not good news, but I have no hesitation in supporting the Government.

When we looked at this issue previously, we asked whether a single judge sits on the non-jury trials or whether there are any occasions when more than one judge sits. I seem to remember being told that one judge usually sat on such cases because of the limited number of judges available. But given that the Minister suggested that only a small number of cases are tried in this way, is it not possible for more than one judge to preside over such cases?

It is with a heavy heart that we have to extend this legislation, but I support the Government in doing so for the reasons that have been given. I hope that we can continue to move forward to the point at which it is not necessary to make this the norm and where we do not need this kind of legislation on the statute book because Northern Ireland will have moved to where we want it to be. It is sadly not there yet for the reasons that the Minister set out, but I wish her well in that respect.

3.12 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): May I say what a delight it is to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker? I and other SNP Members look forward very much to working with you in the future.

I will be brief, and let me be clear at the outset that the SNP will not oppose this extension. That does not, however, mean that we offer unconditional support to the principle, despite the extra and welcome safeguard of which the Minister has spoken. In fact, I have concerns about the principle when it comes to the human rights implications of a trial being seen to be fair. I make it clear that the prosecutors and judiciary involved are impartial—I have no concerns about their probity—but justice needs an impartial face to show the world, as well as an impartial body corporate. The authorities in Northern Ireland will have to strike a balance between the efficient running of the justice system, with fair and sustainable verdicts, and the need to respect the basic human right to a fair trial.

When we are talking about serious crimes, we need serious scrutiny of the operation of the courts. There is a great deal to be said, as other hon. Members have mentioned, for the principle of being judged by a jury of our peers. There is also a great deal to be said for protecting justice from perverse decisions that are made as a result of intimidation. While we are debating the order today, let us give some thanks and praise to the prosecutors, judges and defence agents who deliver justice in Northern Ireland.

The most important point of all, which was also made by other Members—I was delighted to hear the Minister and shadow Minister agree about this—is that decisions such as the one we are making today would more properly be taken at Stormont. Admittedly, that is a little difficult at the moment, but individuals elected by the people of Northern Ireland should be taking

decisions about policing and the delivery of justice. Those decisions should be devolved to Stormont. In spite of these reservations, the SNP will not oppose the order.

3.14 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): What a delight it is to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. I also congratulate the Minister; it is good to see her in the Chamber.

I was very interested in the comments of the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock). We clearly need to be concerned about whether this arrangement risks verdicts being less safe than would be the case under the system that we enjoy throughout the rest of the United Kingdom. The hon. Lady has presumably seen table 5 in the consultation response. That interesting table shows quite clearly that the chances of acquittal are higher under a non-jury system. What I am slightly worried about, and this touches on the remarks made by my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson), the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee—

Mr Robertson: Ex-Chair.

Dr Murrison: Well, let us say Chair of the Select Committee for the time being.

I am slightly worried about these informatics and what the numbers actually represent. Who were the people given over to a non-jury trial, and who were those tried by jury? It is difficult to make head or tail of the figures without that granularity. But, taken at face value, the process looks safe. Indeed, several consultees suggested that that is the case, so we should derive some comfort from that.

I support the proposition outlined by the Minister. It is important to understand that this is part of a process; it is not Diplock courts. When the original legislation was passed in 2007, it was felt that things were sufficiently normal in Northern Ireland to move to this next level. The question will be when the situation is sufficiently normal in Northern Ireland to enable us to default to the position under the Criminal Justice Act 2003, which, under very exceptional circumstances and using a very high hurdle indeed, allows for non-jury trials. It is pretty clear that we are not there yet.

The hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), who speaks from the Opposition Front Bench, said that the independent reviewer appears to be content with the current situation and believes that the situation has not changed sufficiently for us to fail to pass this extension of two years at this point. It is a credit to the system that we keep it under such regular review and that we are extremely cautious about the difference in Northern Ireland compared with the rest of the United Kingdom that sets to one side our precious jury system, which is so fundamental to the way in which criminal justice runs in the United Kingdom.

David Seymour is absolutely right. Not enough has changed for us to consider not putting in place the extension at this point. We have heard about the five deaths last year, the 29 bombings and the 61 shootings. Most of us who live in the rest of the United Kingdom find that extraordinary. It is remarkable that all that is carried out in Northern Ireland, which is a small part of the country, and it clearly suggests that the situation in

[Dr Murrison]

Northern Ireland is not yet sufficiently normal for us to consider setting aside the provisions of section 7 of the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 and relying instead on the 2003 Act.

One or two respondents to the consultation asked a number of questions, one of which I touched on in my intervention. On the assumption that we will default to the 2003 Act as opposed to section 7 of the 2007 Act at some point in the future—sooner rather than later, I hope—one respondent asks what we need to put in place. In other words, what do we need to do to prepare for that point and protect those who are engaged, one way or another, in the justice system, so that people are not intimidated?

The PSNI has made it clear, as we might expect, that it sees real problems in putting alternatives in place—that is, protecting people in the community from the sort of intimidation that the 2007 Act is meant to militate against. Having been a Minister in the Department, I can fully understand why the PSNI might shrink from the proposition that it could be an alternative to the provisions of the 2007 Act, as it would find that extremely onerous. However, we need to start thinking about how to put in place measures that will come into force after we decide that we no longer need section 7 of the 2007 Act, as most of us hope that that will be sooner rather than later. That may well mean some sort of protection for those involved in the system.

The only other issue is the granularity I would rather like to see in table 5 so that we can know exactly—this touches on one or two comments that have been made this afternoon—who these people are who are being tried by this alternative means, because it is only with that information that we can really make sense of informatics such as that table.

As I said in my intervention on the Minister, the grounds for a legal challenge under section 7 of the 2007 Act are really quite stringent, and it has been pointed out by the chief executive of the Bar of Northern Ireland that we might like to review that. I very much welcome the review that the Minister spoke about, and I hope very much that this issue will be included in it. In our enthusiasm to ensure that we are as normal in Northern Ireland as in the rest of the United Kingdom, and that we do as little as is necessary to except Northern Ireland from the normal criminal justice system we have in this country, we do need to look at detail such as this to ensure that, when we can improve matters in the way the Bar in Northern Ireland appears to suggest, we do that, if at all possible. However, with that in mind, I certainly support the order.

3.21 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I welcome the announcement that the Minister has made today. It is important we have every opportunity in Northern Ireland to address issues in whatever way we can, and one of the things in our armoury is non-jury trials.

Right hon., hon., and hon. and gallant Members have referred to some of the activities in Northern Ireland over the last period. The rise in paramilitary and criminal activity in my constituency has caused me great concern as its Member of Parliament. I have had meetings with the PSNI, and I intend to have another

meeting just next week with local councillors to address the issue. That paramilitary and criminal activity includes making drugs available to all levels of society almost with impunity, which scares and worries me, and we need to address that issue. We also have paramilitary activity in relation to protection rackets, trafficking and prostitution. These people have their fingers in every pie they can, and they do everything they can to be involved in money creation. We have to address those issues, and we have to deal with the godfathers—those who are behind these things, pulling the strings. We therefore need this legislation, which enables us, in cases where it is appropriate, to take on those people and to put them in prison, which is where they should be.

We are looking forward to the holiday break and to our tremendous and glorious 12 July celebration, when everything good culturally and historically will be on show. I invite all right hon. and hon. Members to come to Northern Ireland to experience some of those wonderful things. I know that the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), has had the opportunity to come over many times to see them at first hand. He has also been along to some of the association dinners we have had, and those have been good occasions.

Bob Stewart: He would have been, wouldn't he?

Jim Shannon: If there is a free dinner, there is an occasion to be there—[*Interruption.*] Well, it was a non-alcoholic event, but there you are. It is always good to have the interest of Members of the House. The fact that Members are participating in the debate, or that they are just in the Chamber, indicates that there is a real interest in Northern Ireland, and we appreciate that.

We have to take on and respond effectively to paramilitary activity and the clear dissident activities—the bomb attacks and the murder attempts—there have been in the Province. It is worth reminding ourselves of some of the statistics and of how they compare with the situation in 2015. We have had five security-related deaths—two more than in 2015. We have had 29 bombings, as other hon. Members have mentioned. We have had 61 shooting incidents—25 more than in 2015. We have had 66 paramilitary assaults—14 more than in 2015. There is clearly a need to address the rising tide in paramilitary activity through this legislation.

As the Minister said, the rate of non-jury trial usage in Northern Ireland is only 2%. However, it is critical that we have non-jury trials in our armoury and the ability to use them when necessary to catch those involved in criminal activity and put them in jail, which is where they belong.

It is therefore welcome that the Minister and our Government, led by the Prime Minister and her Cabinet—let us be quite clear about this—support this legislation, and that they are fully committed to ensuring that criminal activities across Northern Ireland are severely dealt with. If non-jury trials are a method of achieving that, let us use them, irrespective of what the issue may be. We can all then ensure that criminal activities across the whole of Northern Ireland decrease and that we have normality—we all look towards normality.

We live in a different Northern Ireland today than we did many years ago, but there are still some steps to take. Along with the Minister, the shadow Minister and other Members who have spoken, my colleagues and I

are particularly interested to see the Northern Ireland Assembly back on the road again and democracy in place. However, with great respect, that can happen only if other parties accept the reality of the situation and enter into talks that can deliver the long-term visionary peace that we all want—a peace that is acceptable to the Unionist population, which we clearly support.

3.26 pm

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): May I join colleagues across the House in congratulating you on your election, Madam Deputy Speaker? I also welcome the Minister to her place.

I rise to speak briefly in support of the extension of the non-jury trial provisions in the 2007 Act for a further two years. As the Minister indicated from the Dispatch Box, this is a pragmatic and practical response to the unique circumstances that we continue to experience in Northern Ireland.

This would be the fifth extension of the provisions since they were first introduced in 2007 by the then Labour Government. However, the temporary nature of the provisions indicates that the Government acknowledge that this is a unique and exceptional situation—a situation that should be reviewed regularly. As my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) indicated, it is a credit to the House that we make parliamentary time available to review it regularly.

As the Minister rightly said, this situation should be ended as soon as it is no longer needed and when the security situation in Northern Ireland improves and is much more stable. However, as the whole House will know, the security situation unfortunately remains volatile and, in some cases, of serious concern. In the last year alone, there have been five security-related deaths, more than 60 shooting incidents and almost 30 bombing incidents recorded by the PSNI. Some 137 people were arrested under section 41 of the Terrorism Act 2000 last year, of whom 19 were charged with an offence.

Members on both sides of the House will know that the security situation in Northern Ireland remains severe—that is its official classification—and it continues to pose some risk to the criminal justice system and the fair and proper administration of justice. Therefore, the extension of this order is a pragmatic and necessary step to protect the administration of justice in Northern Ireland. As other hon. Members have indicated, the order contains some safeguards that make it a practical and appropriate response. Fewer than 2% of all Crown court cases are tried under these provisions. The Director of Public Prosecutions for Northern Ireland has to meet a statutory test before he can issue his certificate, the judge in the trial must give reasons for his decisions, and people convicted under the provisions are still entitled to right of appeal. In short, this is a fair and proportionate measure designed to target a very small number of exceptional cases, reflecting the unique security situation in Northern Ireland.

Other hon. and gallant Friends have referred to the Government's public consultation, which I have also read. I want to draw the House's attention to a few points, and hope that they can be given weight when Members decide whether to support this order extension. First, it is important to note that a majority of respondents to the consultation supported the extension of the order. The Chief Commissioner of the Northern Ireland

Human Rights Commission acknowledged the ongoing security implications and suggested that the order should be extended. The DPP for Northern Ireland confirmed that the conditions remain appropriate. The PSNI itself has argued that there are a limited number of cases where continuing risks to the administration of justice justify the extension of this order. Other supporters include the independent reviewer of the 2007 Act, who says that

“nothing has happened or changed in the last two years...to justify bringing these arrangements to an end”.

Those are very authoritative and weighty contributions to the public consultation, and I hope that Members across the House will pay heed to them as we decide whether to support the extension of this system.

I am also heartened by the fact that in their response to the consultation, the Government reiterated their commitment to ending these arrangements as soon as the security situation stabilises, recognised the temporary nature of the 2007 provisions, and committed to keep the operation of the provisions under review by the independent reviewer of the 2007 Act, who, as other hon. Members have said, is doing a very good job. I welcome all these commitments, which clearly demonstrate the Government's intention to make sure that this order is a proportionate response that mitigates some of the ongoing risks to the security situation in Northern Ireland.

I welcome the Secretary of State's efforts, and those of all the parties in Northern Ireland, including those represented here, to restoring the devolved Administration at Stormont as soon as possible, allowing the people of Northern Ireland ultimately to have jurisdiction over all sorts of matters that affect them, from public services to the economy, security and the administration of justice. That is the long-term solution, and it is something that we all want to see. A restored Northern Ireland Executive and devolved Government is the long-term way to address all these very important issues. While all across this House work towards the normalisation of politics and the security situation in Northern Ireland, we must also continue to recognise the unique security situation that pertains in Northern Ireland. I will therefore support the extension of the order today and encourage other Members to do so as well.

3.31 pm

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): Everybody across this House, and from all parties, can acknowledge the very significant progress that there has been in Northern Ireland over the course of the past 30 years, and that has been incredibly welcome. However, my hon. Friends and I—and, I am sure, others who have gone to Northern Ireland and seen the situation—believe that for too many communities that progress has not been sufficient. There is still a way to go towards full transformation and full peace. That was recognised in the Northern Ireland Executive's good relations strategy “Together: Building a United Community”, which recognised how far we have come but also that much more needs to be done to ensure that those in many communities can be brought fully to the table of transformation and peace.

Northern Ireland has so much to give, but for much too long that potential has been stifled by the scourge of terrorism. What is required in this situation is unreserved condemnation of terrorism but working with these

[*Emma Little Pengelly*]

communities to try to ensure that the transformation is fully complete. To that end, I echo the words of so many in this House and say that the best way to do that is by having a strong and stable Government in Northern Ireland delivering for people and ensuring that the journey can be completed. Although this is not a devolved matter, such stable government would certainly help to secure the peace moving forward. The Democratic Unionist party has always been of the view that there was no need to bring down the institutions in Northern Ireland, and at this stage we see no barrier to getting those institutions re-established. Our challenge to all the parties in Northern Ireland is to drop all and any red lines that they have and get back into government, delivering for people on health and education. That is the best way to build a stable future for everybody in Northern Ireland.

Turning to the particular subject of this debate, it is with some sorrow that I stand here to welcome the fact that this extension will remain in place, subject to the vote of this House, for a further two years. I do think it is necessary, because unfortunately, in too many places, there are ongoing issues of intimidation and threats. We have heard some of the statistics and figures here today. For some people, hearing the scale of that ongoing activity over the past couple of years may well come as a bit of a shock. For the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland, their day-to-day experience of living there has changed dramatically, and that is welcome, but there is still the ongoing threat of dissident republicans, and threats across both communities.

As a former barrister, and as the new spokesperson on justice for the Democratic Unionist party, I want to pay tribute to our justice system in Northern Ireland. For many decades, through the darkest days of the troubles, not only the judiciary but barristers and solicitors had to put up with many threats and a lot of intimidation; it was not just jury members who faced intimidation. The courts in the Diplock system served Northern Ireland well during that period.

The integrity of the justice system must continue to be protected, although this protection is—and this is welcome—used to a much lesser extent. Justice must be served, because it is the absolute centre of our democracy in Northern Ireland. It is therefore with sorrow that I welcome the proposals, and I give my commitment to do all I can in the next few years to try to remove the necessity for such measures.

3.35 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome you to the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker.

As someone who trained in criminal law and has always held our great traditions—of which trial by jury is one—in high regard, it is with regret that I come to the House and consider situations in which we cannot sensibly offer people that right. It is only right that the House should approve this order. It was interesting to hear the Minister outlining it and explaining some of the reasons for it, and it was interesting to hear the comments that the hon. Member for Belfast South (*Emma Little Pengelly*) has just made.

When I visited Northern Ireland last year, it was clear that things have changed. Things have moved on a lot since the peace process and the agreements that were

reached in the late '90s, but there is still an undercurrent that makes provisions such as this absolutely necessary. One only has to walk through the Falls Road area and see the signs on which PSNI has been expanded to “People Should Not Inform” to see that there are still those who would subvert the criminal justice system and make jury trials impossible if they felt it was in their interests to do so. Therefore, we must protect the justice system by making available a slightly different provision to deal with cases in which intimidation or threats might lead to an unfair trial or a perverse outcome.

When I trained to be a lawyer, the Diplock court system was still in existence and was regularly cited in England as an example of a scenario in which there was no trial by jury. As the hon. Member for North Down (*Lady Hermon*) has pointed out, UK law provides for extreme circumstances in which people seek to avoid justice by intimidating juries. It is not possible to have a democracy without the rule of law, and people need to know that they cannot use violence to avoid facing justice.

I welcome the fact that the numbers are falling, and the figures given by the Minister give me comfort that the provision is used only when absolutely necessary. It is right to say this is not a return to the Diplock court system by the back door. When the justice system is under attack, however, it must be able to respond so as to maintain fairness and ensure that an individual can still get a trial—an opportunity to put their case, with all the burden of evidence still on the prosecution—without a jury of 12 people who could be intimidated in an attempt to deliver a result other than the one that justice demands.

It is with regret that I support this measure, but I think that it is absolutely proportionate and that the justice system in Northern Ireland cannot do without it at the moment. We all hope that it will not need to be renewed again, but we must be practical rather than simply philosophical. A defendant will still have all the protections of a criminal trial. The only difference will be the absence, in exceptional circumstances, of a jury who could be intimidated, or who might feel unable to give a fair verdict because of implicit intimidation.

It is worth paying tribute to those who continue to administer law, order and justice in the most difficult and challenging circumstances, in which people seek to intimidate others to avoid being held responsible for the crimes they have committed. This is a proportionate measure that is, sadly, necessary, and it has my full support.

3.39 pm

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I want to make a few points, although the Minister was very kind in allowing me to intervene on her so I have already been able to mention some of the issues that I wanted to raise. When I intervened on her about types of trial and the defendants involved in non-jury trials, I expected her to have the full information at hand. The hon. Members for Tewkesbury (*Mr Robertson*) and for South West Wiltshire (*Dr Murrison*) said it would be helpful to have an indication about the nature of the defendants, whether or not acquitted, who have gone through the process.

By happy coincidence, before I came into the Chamber I had a look at a research paper. I stand to be corrected by the Minister when she winds up if I have inadvertently

mentioned these individuals, but I do not think that will be the case. Let me give the House some examples. There was Michael Stone, a very infamous murderer—not famous, but infamous for the Milltown murders—and a loyalist paramilitary. There was a gentleman called Chris Ward, who was apparently involved in the Northern Bank robbery, which was a huge bank robbery. I would not like to say where the money went, but I think a lot of us suspect that it went to the IRA. There was the murder of Robert McCartney, which was a ghastly, horrible murder. I know that these are past cases, but I am simply giving examples of cases in which there were non-jury trials, and they were all very serious cases indeed.

It is wholly appropriate to remind the House that this is an exceptional procedure: non-jury trials under the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 are very exceptional. I also remind the House that this is written into the 2007 legislation:

“No inference may be drawn by the court from the fact that the certificate has been issued in relation to the trial.”

That is really important because, as was mentioned by the hon. Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly)—I welcome her to the House—our judiciary in Northern Ireland, and indeed the legal profession in Northern Ireland, has had to endure a sustained terrorist threat over many long years. The judiciary in Northern Ireland is rigorously impartial and independent. The fact that the statistics show acquittals in non-jury trials to be very much in line with those in jury trials indicates that this is a very fair process. Even if it is a non-jury trial, such a trial is a fair process. We have remarkable judges who show impeccable judgment and impartiality.

May I add a comment in fairness to the outgoing or retiring Director of Public Prosecutions for Northern Ireland, Barra McGrory? I know there has been criticism of him, including by me, in relation to the fact that he had been involved—in his past life, but in his professional capacity—in advising IRA members who received comfort letters from both Labour and Conservative Governments. However, as the hon. Member for Tewkesbury will confirm, his evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee as the DPP made it quite clear that no one who received a comfort letter could rest easy in their bed while he was the Director of Public Prosecutions. I think he has been totally impartial in carrying out his functions as the DPP. It is a very difficult job in Northern Ireland, and the non-jury trial system in Northern Ireland is a challenge for everyone.

As the Minister knows—other Members have given the statistics—the continued loyalist and republican paramilitary activity is a serious concern, and it should be, because the threat level in Northern Ireland is severe. However, there is one point that I would like the Minister to address. Part 7 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003 made provision for non-jury trials where there is a real and present danger of jury tampering, and section 44 applies equally to Northern Ireland as to Great Britain. Will the Minister say whether there have been any applications by the prosecution under section 44 of the 2003 Act because they feared that there was a real and present danger of jury tampering, and whether those have been dismissed, or whether the only non-jury system that has been in operation is that under the 2007 legislation that we are renewing this afternoon? We need clarity on whether both systems are running in parallel or one has been less used than the other. That would be helpful to the House.

Without hesitation, I give my support to the renewal of the order this afternoon. I am content that the non-jury system in Northern Ireland under the 2007 Act is impartial. Everyone should have confidence in it, given the statistics, and I am happy to see it renewed for another two years.

3.45 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): May I just say, Madam Deputy Speaker, how that Chair becomes you? I welcome you to it and I welcome the Minister to her new position. I hope that will get me called more often.

I was the Army incident commander at Ballykelly when, as many people know, the Ballykelly bomb was detonated just after 11 pm on 6 December 1982. The bomb was placed by the Irish National Liberation Army and took the lives of 17 young people, including several girls—four, I think—and 11 soldiers, six of them from my company. One of them was Lance Corporal Clinton Collins, who I had just finished playing squash with two hours before. He had been promoted to lance corporal that day.

Four years later, I was the lead Army witness in the trial of, I think, five bombers at Belfast Crown court. There was no jury, but if there had been they would have been grossly intimidated by what happened in that court. Throughout the evidence I gave, I was barracked from the public gallery with words like, “You’re a dead man,” and, “You’ve had it.” Of course, it was incredibly unsettling and the court procedures did not seem able to do much about it. After my evidence—not because of it, I am sure—the accused changed their plea from not guilty to guilty. They went down for what was meant to be life, but which turned out to be only a few years.

For my part, I was placed on a published terrorist death list. Indeed, a few years later, a terrorist team came to my house in Brussels, where I was serving as a lieutenant colonel in NATO, got out of their car and spoke to my 13-year-old son, who was playing in the front garden. They intended to kill me. They asked my son whether his daddy was home. His daddy was home but my son, perhaps alerted by the appearance and possibly the accents of the three men, said, “No, my daddy’s not home. My daddy works three miles away in NATO headquarters and he’s not here.” The men got back into their car and left. They killed two other servicemen on the German border later.

Those men were trying to take vengeance on me for giving evidence in a court. I dread to think how much intimidation there would have been for people on a jury in that case. I dread to think how much intimidation would continue to this day in trials such as that one and others we have heard about in the Chamber this afternoon.

Let me be absolutely clear. None of us—no one in this place—wants to have trials without a jury, but right now, Northern Ireland requires non-jury trials, and every single Member of the House should back that.

3.51 pm

Chloe Smith: I begin my brief closing remarks by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) for that moving, sombre and timely illustration of exactly the issues we are dealing with today. On behalf of the whole House, I thank him for sharing that piece of his family’s unfortunate experience.

Dr Julian Lewis: This is an appropriate point, is it not, to show our appreciation for the work of our armed forces, without whose courage we would never have had a political settlement, and to express our concern that former service personnel still face the possibility of trial for matters arising out of the troubles when terrorist murderers are able to walk free?

Chloe Smith: My right hon. Friend will be well aware that, at this point, I am not able to deal fully with the issues he raises, except to say in brief that we would all wish to have a way of dealing with legacy issues in Northern Ireland that is fair, balanced and proportionate. We will have to return to those more fully at a later time.

I will do my best to work my way swiftly through the requests that have been made of me this afternoon. I thank the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), for his support for the measures, and for the additional reasons he gave for the argument that many of us share. He asked how the review mechanism will work. I confirm that it is for David Seymour to decide on the exact mechanisms of the independent review. We can all have confidence that his previous work has been very thorough, and that he will bring to the subject the oversight and transparency that we would wish for. In some ways, that answers other points that have been made—there are bigger issues than are in the order.

The independent review report will be laid before both Houses.

Stephen Pound: Will the Minister tell the House whether that will be on an annual, biannual or six-monthly basis?

Chloe Smith: It will be part of David Seymour's annual review cycle. I think I said that in my earlier remarks, but I am happy to make it clear for the record.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson), the erstwhile Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee—

Stephen Pound: He still is.

Chloe Smith: Indeed. No doubt we will see my right hon. Friend serve as the Chairman again. He and a number of hon. Members asked about the mechanisms of the Criminal Justice Act 2003. I can confirm to the House that that Act remains in force. The threshold is different for these provisions—the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) made those very same points. Obviously, the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 came after the 2003 Act. Today's provisions were designed to complement the 2003 Act—the provisions that were already in force in the UK. They are specific to Northern Ireland and were designed to be a way to address its legacy of paramilitary activity and the risks to the population at large that stem from that.

Lady Hermon: Will the Minister give way?

Chloe Smith: I am afraid I must press on, as I have only few minutes left in which to answer points raised by quite a few Members.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury asked how many judges sat on the trials. I can confirm that in a non-jury trial there is a single judge. He and others asked about the trend for the types of trials that use the

provisions. As I confirmed earlier to the House, trials have come from both republican and loyalist sides of the community, but, as we have seen in this debate, they are for criminal trials of all types. As long as the request falls under one of the four conditions, and the DPP is satisfied on the fifth, a certificate may be issued. I note that others, including the hon. Member for North Down, have gone further into what type of defendant has been tried under the provisions. I will not comment on individual cases in the Chamber, but I will confirm that they are designed to be used across communities and to protect the general public from the scourge of intimidation.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) asked about human rights implications. I am glad to have the opportunity to say a little more on that. In the explanatory memorandum, the Secretary of State is clear that in his view the provisions do not infringe on equality and human rights measures. That is the simple part. The more complex part is that one reason why we feel the provisions are necessary is because they protect the human rights of jurors. As my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham made absolutely clear, jurors have a right to enjoy a family life and a right to privacy. When we talk about the potential intimidation of juries, we must remember how those rights apply. It is also possible to argue that if a person does not receive an unbiased jury trial, their rights as a defendant have been compromised. I raise these points in brief just to say to the hon. Lady and others that these are complex issues, but we feel confident that the 2007 Act does not compromise human rights and indeed that it upholds, to the extent possible in the circumstances, the right to a fair trial.

My hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) wanted granularity in the list of where the measures have been used. As I said, I will not comment on individual cases but I am happy to write to him, and to other hon. Members who raised this point, with a little more detail to further illustrate the kind of trials to which they may apply. He highlighted the comments by the Bar. I reiterate that we all want to look towards a world where these provisions are not necessary. We have an opportunity to do that with the forthcoming independent review.

I welcome the comments made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). He emphasised the range of paramilitary criminality we face and I am grateful to him for placing it on the record. I am equally grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Alan Mak) and the hon. Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) for illustrating further the reasons we should all be able to support the measures. I particularly welcome the hon. Lady to her role not only in the House generally, but as the justice spokesperson for her party.

Let me now deal with the remaining points made by the hon. Member for North Down, and dwell a little further on issues relating to the Criminal Justice Act 2003. The relevant provisions have been used in England in two cases, one in 2004 and one that is before Leeds Crown Court this year. It has not yet been used in Northern Ireland, but, as I have said, the two systems are designed to be complementary.

The measures in the 2003 Act do not address one very important issue, namely the potential for bias in juries. We have discussed the potential perversion of a justice system. There has not been time for us to go into this type of provision in too much detail, but it involves

the important concept of wishing to avoid trials that could be undermined by biased juries, a problem that could arise in the context of the presence of paramilitaries in close communities. I am confident that the hon. Lady and some of her near neighbours are familiar with such issues, and—like, I think, all Members who are here today—want to see an end to paramilitarism, and an end to a world in which these unfortunate measures are necessary. I think we have all agreed that we want to see a move to renew and refresh the Executive in Northern Ireland, so that they too can play a part in ensuring that a robust criminal justice system serves all the communities in Northern Ireland.

I commend the order to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 (Extension of duration of non-jury trial provisions) Order 2017, which was laid before this House on 22 June, be approved.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In the last half hour, the Department for Work and Pensions has made available a written statement outlining the closure of jobcentres across the country, which will lead to the loss of 750 jobs, including jobs at Newton-le-Willows jobcentre in my constituency. The story was briefed to the media earlier today, but no Minister has come to the House to be scrutinised or asked questions about this catastrophic decision, which will lead to the loss of so many jobs. I think that that shows contempt for the House, for scrutiny, and, most important, for the people who are losing their jobs. Can you advise me, Madam Deputy Speaker, on how we can ensure that when Ministers make and announce decisions such as this, they do it properly, in the House?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): This matter was raised earlier by another Member. I am sure that Ministers will be aware that it has been raised a second time, and is therefore a cause of some concern to Members. The Speaker advised earlier that Members might consider raising it at business questions tomorrow, so I think I will leave it at that.

Israel and Palestinian Talks

4.3 pm

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Israel and Palestinian talks.

Looking around the Chamber, I am conscious that, first, a great many colleagues want to speak in the debate, and, secondly, there is a great deal of knowledge about this subject in the House. Accordingly, I do not intend to speak for long at this stage, on the basis that that will give me more time at the end of the debate in which to respond to some of the questions that are bound to be asked.

Having knocked around this issue for about 30 years—as some other Members in the Chamber have done—I know that many aspects of it are well known to us, and that restating them would probably be less effective than dealing with questions and looking at current issues, which is what I intend to do. I hope that the House will forgive me if I do not cover everything in my opening speech. No offence is intended, but I shall have a little more time to deal with the major questions when I respond to the debate.

I am very pleased to have the opportunity to discuss this important issue. A just and lasting settlement between Israelis and Palestinians that resolves the elements of conflict between them and delivers peace for all their peoples is long overdue and desired by friends of both all over the world. A lasting peace between the Israelis and Palestinians will only come about through a two-state solution negotiated between the parties, and that is the United Kingdom's position.

Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to his rightful place on the Front Bench. Does he agree that one of the tragedies of this conflict is that for many years both sides have seemed to know what a deal looks like but, sadly, have never got there? One of the views in the middle east region is that that is in part because Hamas can never agree with Abu Mazen. Indeed, some will say that Hamas does not want a peace deal because it does not suit their interests.

Alistair Burt: There are many blockages on the way to peace, and a number of them will come up during the course of this debate. Hamas's inability to accept the existence of the state of Israel is plainly one of them, and there are plenty more. As my hon. Friend said, it is a long-standing tragedy that the broad outlines of what many of us consider to be a deal are available and known, but the steps needed to convert that into action have not yet been taken.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What discussions have the Government had with the Israeli Government about the extension of the settlements in Jerusalem? More importantly, what discussions have our Government had about sanctions?

Alistair Burt: If I am able to pursue my original course of action of putting a few things on record and then dealing with subsequent questions, settlements will inevitably come up. I would like to deal with that issue then.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Alistair Burt: I will take two more interventions for now.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his elevation to the Front Bench once again. What is his view of some of the peace builders, in particular the ecumenical visitors who accompany various groups between both parties and attempt to build bridges?

Alistair Burt: Again, I will come on to issues such as two-track possibilities. Many people have a contribution to make. One of the agonies of the situation is that so many people urge good will and want a resolution, yet there are blockages that prevent that from happening. However, everyone with good intent is welcome into the process.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I also welcome my right hon. Friend back—again, again—to the Front Bench. It is good to see him back at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, too.

This debate too often becomes polarised, so may we from the outset establish that in all things this debate should be reasonable? Will my right hon. Friend therefore condemn the recent march in London under the banner of Hezbollah flags and also some of the pillorying of those of us who consider ourselves to be supporters of the state of Israel, as critical friends? During the general election campaign, a supporter of the Leader of the Opposition screamed the name of the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) in my face, and then proceeding to describe me as “Israeli scum” and “Zionist scum” because of the simple fact that I list myself as a friend of Israel—I would say that I am also a friend of the Palestinian people. That sort of behaviour is completely unacceptable.

Alistair Burt: I thank my hon. Friend for his remarks. Sadly, as Members on both sides of the House have pointed out, extremism of language and a deliberate design to hurt or belittle those of different views has become part of our modern political life and discourse. That sort of language has absolutely no place on an issue such as this, which is extremely sensitive and well-balanced, and on which there are strong views on both sides and deeply ingrained worries and insecurities about taking steps forward. That language will never have any place in this House, as we know, but it does not help the arguments of anyone outside, and nor does it help any of us to reach out to our friends to try and find the solution we are looking for.

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con) *rose*—

Alistair Burt: I will take one more intervention, but then I would like to make some progress.

Oliver Dowden: I, too, welcome my right hon. Friend to his place.

Further to the interventions of my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy), many of my constituents were deeply upset and offended to see the flag of Hezbollah flying on the streets of London at the recent al-Quds rally. What can the Government do to stop this representation of a Jew-hating terrorist organisation? Can anything be done to ban that hateful organisation in this country altogether?

Alistair Burt: For the avoidance of doubt, and to assist colleagues speaking later, I am very pleased to be back at the Dispatch Box. I appreciate and am very grateful for so many kind comments. It is debates such as this that remind me exactly what I have got myself back into.

The military arm of Hezbollah is proscribed in the United Kingdom and we have no contact with its political wing. I saw the pictures of flags belonging to Hezbollah that portrayed arms and had a little sticker that was designed to deflect legal action. I am not acting as a lawyer here, and I do not know whether carrying those flags with that sticker is against the law—that is a matter for the courts. In the circumstances, however, I cannot see that they add anything to the debate or enable the people of the United Kingdom to take a full part in the reasoned and difficult discussions that we need to have on this issue, no matter how strongly people feel about it. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that point.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab) *rose*—

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con) *rose*—

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab) *rose*—

Alistair Burt: I will not give way now.

John Spellar *rose*—

Alistair Burt: No. The right hon. Gentleman is a great friend and colleague who knows a lot about this subject, and I hope he will get a chance to speak later.

I share the frustration of us all—in the House and beyond—at the lack of progress on a peace settlement. The present tragic situation on the ground demonstrates the urgent need to progress towards peace. We need to see revived efforts from the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli Government, and we urge both sides to work together to meet their obligations under the Oslo accords. Israel and the Palestinian Authority should do all they can to reverse the negative trends identified in the report released by the middle east Quartet on 1 July 2016.

I want to look into some of the blockages and to give a balanced response to them. First, in relation to the Palestinian Authority, I continue to welcome President Abbas's commitment to a two-state solution. It is important that the Palestinian leadership should engage with determination and create the conditions for success. Having known him for many years, I am sure that he is aware of the importance of the opportunity provided by President Trump's recent engagement with the issue. It is critical, however, that the Palestinian leadership implements the recommendations of the Quartet report and continues its efforts to tackle terror and incitement, to strengthen its institutions and to develop a sustainable economy.

We in this House must also recognise the damage that the division between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority does to the Palestinian body politic. Ultimately, it is the innocent people of Gaza who have suffered from a decade of Hamas administration. Hamas faces a fundamental decision about whether it is prepared to accept the Quartet principles and join efforts for peace, or if it will continue to use terror and anti-Semitic incitement, leading to terrible consequences for the

people of Gaza and Israel, including the failure to close the Palestinian fissure and therefore to make progress. Gaza must remain a constituent part of a future Palestinian state with the west bank, and with East Jerusalem as the state's capital.

A further barrier to peace with which it is sometimes difficult for the Palestinian Authority to deal is the attitude taken towards terrorists and their portrayal as martyrs. Although the track records of President Abbas and the Palestinian Authority have shown their genuine commitment to non-violence and a negotiated two-state solution, this remains an area of great difficulty.

On the Israeli side, it is important that the Government of Israel reaffirm their commitment to a two-state solution. Every Israeli Prime Minister since Ehud Barak in the 1990s has advocated a two-state solution as the only way to permanently end the Arab-Israeli conflict and to preserve Israel's Jewish and democratic identity. However, there are now differences of opinion within Israeli society, which has changed a great deal over 30 years. There are concerns about security risks from other areas. Polls of Israeli public opinion show that although everyone wants peace, seeking a solution to the problems between Israel and the Palestinians is not always the first item on the political agenda. There is a real deficit of trust on both sides, and we encourage all parties to work together to find a lasting solution.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Alistair Burt: I give way to the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms).

Stephen Timms: I also welcome the right hon. Gentleman's reappointment. I agree that we need Israeli support for the two-state solution, but does he agree that continued settlement building risks making two states unviable?

Alistair Burt: I am not sure whether the right hon. Gentleman wrote my speech or had early sight of it, but perhaps I could turn to the next paragraph before giving way to my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris).

Vital to getting an environment that is conducive to fresh negotiations is avoiding actions that undermine the viability of lasting peace. One such action is building settlements. The United Kingdom's view is clear and unchanged: settlement building seriously undermines the prospects of two states for two peoples. I am extremely concerned by reports this week of plans to construct more than 1,800 new housing units in East Jerusalem. In the UK's view, all settlements are illegal under international law. If confirmed, the plans would be the latest example of an accelerating policy of illegal settlement expansion. That would take us further away from a two-state solution and raises serious questions about the Israeli Government's commitment to achieving the shared vision of Israel living side by side with a viable, independent and contiguous Palestinian state. We have always been clear—I certainly have—that settlements are far from the only problem in this conflict, and we have to be careful not to be sidetracked by one side or the other. It is not about one thing or the other. That is the problem: there are so many different things.

The people of Israel deserve to live free from the threat of terrorism and anti-Semitic incitement, but it has long been our position that settlement activity is

illegal and that it undermines the viability of two states for two peoples. We are gravely concerned that an increase in the pace of settlement construction in East Jerusalem and the west bank presents a strategic threat to a peaceful resolution of this conflict. As a strong friend of Israel, we urge the Israeli Government to show restraint on the construction of settlements, and to avoid steps that reduce the prospects for peace and security in the region and make it harder to achieve a different relationship between Israel and the Arab world.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): It is worth noting that recent polling shows that a clear majority of both Israelis and Palestinians want peace, with a clear majority in favour of a two-state solution. However, it is hard to see that happening when Hamas remains committed to the destruction of Israel. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Hamas routinely and completely lets down Palestinian people in their quest for peace?

Alistair Burt: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. I mentioned that earlier. Peace is very much the desire of the peoples in the areas concerned, but the awkwardness is how to get there. I have said before from the Dispatch Box that there are always 100 reasons to say no, but we have to find the reasons why people should say yes.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab) *rose*—

Alistair Burt: I can think of no one better to do so than the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn).

Hilary Benn: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way; like everyone else, I am pleased to see him back in his rightful place. We have just been debating Northern Ireland, the history of which has taught us that courageous political leadership and a willingness to compromise are absolutely essential to progress. Does he share my view that the absence of such courageous political leadership on all sides in the current Israel-Palestine conflict is the biggest obstacle to bringing about the peace that we all wish to see?

Alistair Burt: I think that the right hon. Gentleman suggests that there is a gap into which courageous leadership should come. It is certainly true that for every courageous step taken, there are issues that pull people back, which may demonstrate that a courageous position might not be well enough rewarded. Leaving Gaza, for example, has not brought the swap of land for peace that the Israeli Government intended when they left. Courageous acts sometimes do not occur because they may make the situation worse. The outside world needs to assist in the building of trust, so that those courageous acts can be taken. There are examples from both sides of where leaders have been prepared to take courageous acts, and that is what the situation calls for.

James Morris: Will the Minister give way?

Alistair Burt: If I may, I will make a little more progress and then look to finish, otherwise I will not be able to fulfil my commitment.

Having looked at the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli Government, a third element is the United States. If there is one area of the world in which the recently elected President of the United States is engaged, it is clearly the middle east and Israel. We welcome his

[*Alistair Burt*]

strong leadership on the issue of middle east peace, as underlined by his visit to the region. It is incumbent on all parties to seize whatever new opportunity there may be to move forward for peace, so we look forward to working with President Trump and his advisers for a peace deal that meets the requirement of both parties, reflects our long-standing support for a two-state solution and takes the chance being offered by his election to move forward.

James Morris: Historically, when a two-state solution has almost been reached, it has been on the basis of negotiations where there were no preconditions between either side. That has to be a fundamental principle. The Minister says he has been looking at this issue for 30 years. Having no preconditions leads to a potential two-state solution.

Alistair Burt: I agree with my hon. Friend on that. It is not for those of us from outside to suggest or dictate terms, but it is clear that if movement is to be made in a situation where everyone is so very familiar with it, there should be as few constraints as possible. Having an absence of any condition before people talk is probably one of those things that we all know happens behind the scenes, and it is important that that is recognised.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I visited the region almost two years ago, when one of the many things that struck me was the detention of child prisoners in Palestine who are taken through the military court system. Many allegations of abuse have been made. I know that the Minister is a very decent man and I hope he will look at this issue in his role.

Alistair Burt: I thank the hon. Lady. Yes, this is an issue on which I have been long engaged, and discussions are going on with the Israeli authorities about the holding of children in military detention. The UK has already expressed its concern about that, and the hon. Lady can be assured that I will do so again.

I wish to finish by discussing two more things. First, I wish to recognise that this is the centenary of the Balfour declaration. This is a part of our history that divides opinion in this country and in the region, and we will treat it sensitively. I do not think it is incompatible to be proud of the UK's role in the creation of the state of Israel and yet to feel sadness that the long-standing issues between the relative communities created by it have not yet been resolved. It was a historic statement and the UK is proud of its role in the creation of Israel, but it is unfinished business and, accordingly, in this centenary year we are especially focused on encouraging the Israelis and the Palestinians to take steps that will bring them closer to peace.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Does the Minister agree that any recognition of a Palestinian state before direct peace talks between the two states, Israel and Palestine, would not only be counterproductive but would damage a long-term two-state solution?

Alistair Burt: It is not the UK Government's intention to recognise a Palestinian state; we believe it should come in due course, at the conclusion of the talks to settle the issue, and I do not believe that position is going to change.

I wish to conclude, as the House has been very patient. We will continue to work through multilateral institutions, including the United Nations and the European Union, to support resolutions and policies that encourage both sides to take steps that rebuild trust, while recognising that it will eventually only be for the two sides themselves to bring about success.

John Spellar: I thank the Lazarus of the Government Front Bench for giving way. Before he concludes, I hope he will mention and deal with the extremely unhelpful role of Iran in the affairs of Israel and of the wider middle east, not least in this context of Iran's strong support for Hezbollah and Hamas. Apropos of that, should we not now call time on this charade of distinguishing between the military and the political wing of Hezbollah?

Alistair Burt: If the right hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I will perhaps deal with that issue in my concluding remarks; otherwise, I will have been unfair to people by going on for too long.

The United Kingdom is also strongly supportive of a regional approach to peace. The relationship of Arab states with Israel over a variety of matters means that there has never been a better time to try to make sure that they are playing an active part, both in helping to resolve Palestinian issues and in understanding that their recognition of Israel and the plugging in of Israel to the economy of the middle east would have a profound impact throughout the middle east, where there is a demographic bulge and where many jobs are going to need to be created. There are so many good reasons for the situation to be resolved, and that is one of them. Arab states have a particular role to play.

In conclusion, we remain committed to encouraging both the Israelis and the Palestinians to revitalise the peace process. International action has an important role to play, but, ultimately, an agreement can be achieved only by direct negotiation between the parties. Only the Israelis and the Palestinians can bring about the lasting peace that their people seek and that is long overdue. I am absolutely certain that every single one of us in this House would want to wish them well in that and encourage such efforts.

4.25 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I begin, as so many Members have, by welcoming the new Minister for the Middle East to his role. He fulfilled a similar but more junior role with great distinction for several years, and I am sure he will do so again. I am also sure that he will continue to bring the same passion for the cause of finding peace between Israel and Palestine that he always has brought to the issue, and that he always brings to issues in the House.

My pleasure at welcoming the Minister to his new role is tempered by the fact that I truly believe that if the Government call a debate on such a serious foreign policy issue as the future of talks between Israel and Palestine—this is the first time a Government have done so for 10 years, I believe—and that debate is held in Government time, it would not be unreasonable to expect the Foreign Secretary himself to make the effort to lead the discussion. I do not mean to undermine how much I welcome the Minister and what he has said but,

although some Members might disagree, when 100 years ago Britain's then Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour, decided that the British Government should publicly declare their support for the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people, he wrote the letter in his own name. He did not delegate the task to his junior Ministers, because he realised that not only do words matter but that who says them matters very much.

I regret that the Foreign Secretary has chosen not to speak today, but I am afraid it is all part of a pattern. Since the Yom Kippur war in 1973, we have fought 12 elections in this country and the Conservative party has published 12 manifestos. During that whole period, the most recent election is only the second time the Tory party has failed to mention the middle east even once in its whole manifesto. Even the 2005 manifesto—a document so parochial, insular and isolationist that it did not even mention Russia or the United States—said that a Conservative Government would

“work to achieve peace in the Middle East based on the principle of Israel secure within its borders and a viable Palestinian state.”

Ten years later, in its 2015 manifesto, the Conservative party said it would

“support a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, robustly defending the right of Israel to protect its security, while continuing to condemn illegal settlement building, which undermines the prospects for peace”.

So, we have to ask ourselves what has changed. We have to ask why the Conservative party has been prepared to spell out its middle east policy in 1987, 1992, 1997, 2001, 2005 and 2010, and just two years ago in 2015, but its latest manifesto says absolutely nothing—or as some might say klum, or as others might say, la shay. I do not know what the Foreign Secretary's explanation is, and we are not going to find out today. He might blame Nick Timothy, or his good friend Sir Lynton Crosby, but I must say that I drafted my section of Labour's manifesto; why did the Foreign Secretary trust someone else to do his?

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): It may be that the Conservatives did not cover this issue in our manifesto, but at least we did not elect a leader who views Hamas and Hezbollah as his friends.

Emily Thornberry: When debating this issue, it is important to do so seriously and to raise serious matters. I am surprised at the tone that the right hon. Lady adopts. If she wants to continue to use the Lynton Crosby style of politics in this place, I have to tell her that it is discredited, outdated and does not work. Surely it is better to engage on the substance of the debate. The point that I am making today is that at the last general election, the Conservative party did not mention the middle east and it did not mention Palestine and Israel. I am coming on in my speech to wonder why that is and to put forward a few explanations.

Oliver Dowden: The shadow Foreign Secretary is very dismissive of her leader's description of Hamas and Hezbollah as friends. I have to say to her that a great many of my constituents, many of whom are Jewish, are deeply worried and troubled by the prospect of someone who aspires to be the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom describing those two Jew-hating terrorist organisations as his friends. I would welcome it if the shadow Foreign Secretary were to take the opportunity

to withdraw, on behalf of the Labour party, those comments that have caused so much upset and offence in the community.

Emily Thornberry: One way we can approach this is by looking at the truth of the situation, which is that, in order to engage people in peace, the leader of my party wishes to bring them together to encourage them to discuss matters. It is only through discussion and agreement that we can make progress.

Dr Offord *rose*—

Emily Thornberry: Before the hon. Gentleman jumps up and down, let me just finish my point. [*Interruption.*] Please, I urge Members to calm down a little. I am sure that if the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden) has some good ideas about what a future peace process between Israel and Palestine might look like, he may get a letter from the Leader of the Opposition, asking him up to the second floor of Norman Shaw South to discuss it with him—he is quite happy to discuss peace and people's ideas. However, if Government Members continue to use one of the main guns of the Lynton Crosby campaign, which is discredited and has not worked, I will not take any further interventions from them.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend has rightly talked about the seriousness of the issue. Our focus must urgently be on those who are living in Israel and Palestine and those who are suffering tremendously. It is important to acknowledge the worsening of the humanitarian situation. Two million people are trapped in the Gaza strip, half of them children. In 2012, the UN said that Gaza would be unliveable by 2020. Many experts say that 2020 is already here. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is important that we focus on those real issues and that we move the debate forward in a productive way today?

Emily Thornberry: My hon. Friend is quite right: when 80% of people who live in Gaza are dependent on aid to survive, it is a very important issue. My hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), who will be summing up the debate at the end of the day, will be dealing particularly with humanitarian issues.

I shall make a little more progress on the point I was making, while messages are perhaps sent to Lynton Crosby for a different script. I drafted my section of the Labour manifesto, so why did the Foreign Secretary trust someone else to draft his? The reason, I suggest, is this: if we have always known in this country, ever since the Balfour declaration 100 years ago, that when statesmen and stateswomen in this country are prepared to set down in black and white their policies on the middle east, those words have an impact. When they are set out by the most senior figures as official Government policy, they matter even more. I know that the Minister has said some very important things today, but the point is that if they are not put in the manifesto or not said by the Secretary of State, they do not have the same impact. That is important.

When the Conservative party fails to set out its policies in respect of the middle east in its official manifesto, people on all sides of the debate, particularly those in Palestine and Israel, are left to interpret silence in the way they wish. Many of them, sadly, will come to

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the conclusion that I did, which is that the Government could not repeat their 2015 language supporting a two-state solution and condemning illegal settlement building because, on both those points, they do not as yet know where Donald Trump stands. Until they do, they want nothing written in black and white, because, one day, it might put them at odds with the American President. That simply is not good enough. We cannot overturn decades of established British foreign policy, upheld by successive Governments from both parties, just because this pathetic Government are happy to play patsy to Donald Trump.

Dr Offord: I am grateful to the shadow Foreign Secretary for finally giving way. I can assure her that if her right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition has anything to say about Israel or Hamas, he can say it tomorrow when he visits my constituency, which has the second largest Jewish community in the country, and I am sure that they will have plenty of questions to ask him. What I want to know from the shadow Foreign Secretary—this has been made very clear today—is whether her party, in accordance with its manifesto, which she wrote, will immediately recognise the state of Palestine: yes or no?

Emily Thornberry: If the hon. Gentleman will take his seat, relax and listen to the rest of my speech, I will get to that at a later stage.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Only about two or three years ago, when we had the coalition Government—this might explain the reason why it was not in the Conservative party's manifesto—the then Foreign Secretary said that the window of opportunity for a settlement was slowly vanishing. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this possibly is the reason why the Government party has possibly never really given up? When I asked the Minister concerned about discussions with the Israeli Government, sanctions and settlements, he responded in a way that did not completely answer the question. More importantly, as my right hon. Friend has said, 2 million people are suffering in Palestine, so what are the Government going to do to alleviate the suffering resulting from sanctions?

Emily Thornberry: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I see that the Minister is making a note of it, so hopefully he will deal with it at the end of the debate, because these questions are important.

We seek some clarity from the Minister today on where the Government stand and what they will do to promote peace in any of the specific areas that the Opposition set out in our manifesto. First, on the issue of security, it states:

“There can be no military solution to this conflict and all sides must avoid taking action that would make peace harder to achieve.”

That was what we wrote in May, and surely no party in this House would disagree. We all know that there can be no progress towards peace between Israel and Palestine unless both sides are sure of their security. Sadly, at present the opposite is true. Peace and security are becoming ever harder to achieve because of the climate of increasing aggression and extremism, which the Minister referred to.

Whether it is the horrific phenomenon of Palestinians randomly attacking Israeli civilians and security staff with knives, or ramming them with vehicles, leaving dozens dead or injured, and creating a dread that we in this country well understand, particularly after the attack on London Bridge; or whether it is the acts of indiscriminate terror, or the record number of Palestinians who last year, without process or explanation, were forcibly evicted from their homes in the occupied territories, in many cases to make way for new and illegal Israeli settlements—whatever the actions taken, no matter which is objectively worse, no matter who started it and no matter what ludicrous justifications anyone can offer—the truth is that all these actions are simply contributing to and worsening the same vicious cycle of violence and extremism, a vicious cycle that can never lead us towards peace.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Does the right hon. Lady agree that one thing that can unite us across party in this House, in addition to our opposition to terrorism, which we must always condemn, is that we must be united in our opposition to flagrant breaches of international law and flagrant human rights abuses in the occupied Palestinian territories?

Emily Thornberry: The hon. and learned Lady is of course quite right.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): It is of course right that we condemn settlements, but if international law is powerless to impose any form of sanction, are we not simply cementing the status quo, which has not delivered peace over many decades?

Emily Thornberry: I believe that all of us have been saying for some time that we know what a peace settlement ought to look like and what elements need to be stopped. We know that we have to stop the downward spiral of illegality, violence and blame, and that the further down we go, the more difficult it is to climb out again. That is why what I want to do in my speech is to address what the British can do.

As a friend of Israel and of Palestine, I am appalled at the cycle of violence that has become so familiar that it is no longer covered by our country's news broadcasts, let alone in some parties' manifestos. I am equally appalled when the reaction of some, on both sides of the debate, is not to prioritise stopping the cycle of violence, but to believe that we somehow have to pick a side to support, denying the reality that in a terrible conflict such as this, no side can win, and both sides can certainly continue to lose.

What are the Government doing to bring the cycle of violence to an end? What steps is the Minister taking with Palestinian leaders with regard to: ending and condemning all the acts of terrorist violence against Israel, whether using knives, vehicles or rockets; ending and condemning all incitement to violence, including their own; and, at long last, recognising the state of Israel's right to exist? What pressure is he also putting on the Israeli Government to end the forced displacement of Palestinians from their homes, to end the building of new settlements and to commit to the dismantling of existing ones? Ultimately, what are they doing to end the blockade of the occupied territories and allow the Palestinian people to find permanent homes and proper jobs?

While we are discussing the issue of security, it would be remiss of me not to ask the Minister when we can expect the publication of the report into the foreign funding of extremist groups in the UK. We all know that this is a central issue when it comes to Israel and Palestine. The funding network is vital for Hamas and other extremist groups. We need to look into the issue and understand it. Yet, when the Foreign Secretary was asked about the report on 6 June, he said that he would “dig it out and have a look at it if that’s what you would like me to do”.

Well, we do not want him to “dig it out”. It should never have been buried in the first place. We want the Government to publish it and act on it. We want to know—indeed, we have a right to know—how their policy towards Qatar, Saudi Arabia and other countries that may be funding extremism is being informed by that report. We want to know and we can see no reason why we should not be told. Will the Minister start by telling us today which countries the report implicates? Are sovereign Governments to blame, or simply wealthy private financiers? What are the Government’s ties with those Governments and individuals? Ultimately, why has that report not been published?

Let me turn to the importance of clarity and consistency, among other things, in relation to the middle east. In Labour’s manifesto, we once more called for a two-state solution, an end to illegal settlements and a return to meaningful negotiations to achieve a diplomatic resolution. None of those things should be difficult or controversial. Indeed, they have been staples of UK Government policy and successive party manifestos on both sides going back to the aftermath of the second world war. But, as I have already said, we are now at a crossroads. The Government do not know whether Britain’s long-standing policies on the middle east are still consistent with our equally strong desire to work closely with the United States to try to co-ordinate policy, because we do not know what the policy of the United States is. The Minister welcomed President Trump’s engagement on the issue, but I note that he did not give us any indication of what Donald Trump’s policy on the middle east is, and that confusion is not restricted to Britain.

Two weeks ago, the Israeli Defence Minister said that there is an agreed level of new settlement construction that the Trump Administration have said they will support. He said that

“they respect our approach and our vision regarding...settlements”, but last week the Israeli Education Minister said the opposite, suggesting that Trump’s approach to settlement building was a disappointment and that “he’s...going down the same unsuccessful path that his predecessors did”.

So what is the truth? The Israelis do not know. The Palestinians do not know. And I bet a fair amount that, although the Minister of State welcomes the engagement, he really does not know what Donald Trump’s policy is. Depressingly, I am pretty sure that Donald Trump does not have the foggiest idea either.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I was on a cross-party delegation to the Holy Land in January. Does my right hon. Friend share the concern of some of the Palestinians we saw—Christians as well as Muslims—at the involvement and financial interests of some of Donald Trump’s acolytes in settlement

construction? In the popular imagination, settlements are maybe just a few shacks on a hill, but Ma’ale Adumim, which we saw, has 37,500 people in it—it looks like a pleasant American commuter town, with five swimming pools and all sorts of other things—and that makes the geographically viable Palestinian state that might one day come even more difficult.

Emily Thornberry: The difficulty is that, certainly during the campaign, and in the early days of his—I think the word is—Administration, the statements Donald Trump has made in relation to Israel have been very alarming for those who support a two-state solution.

The point I am trying to make is that Britain has always wanted to be able to co-ordinate its foreign policy with the Americans, and this Government are so weak and wobbly that they feel they have to be in lockstep with Donald Trump. That is where we have the difficulty in relation to middle east policy, and that may be one of the reasons why the Foreign Secretary will not come to the Dispatch Box and why Israel and Palestine were not mentioned in the Tory manifesto.

Let me develop my argument further. One thing we know for sure is that waiting for Donald Trump to make up his mind is no way for the British Government to decide their foreign policy. So let me ask the Minister of State today not just to do what every Foreign Minister has done for the last seven decades and to make it clear that we want to see a peaceful process of negotiation towards a two-state solution, including an end to all acts of terrorism towards Israel and an end to all illegal settlements, but to make it clear that that will be our position regardless of what America finally decides is its policy stance. If Donald Trump departs from those long-standing policies, will the British Government condemn him? That is what they should be prepared to do.

If the Minister of State will not say those things today, we can only come to two equally unpalatable and pitiful conclusions: either the Government have abdicated Britain’s leadership role and are simply waiting to take their cues from Trump Tower, or they see no point in putting pressure on the Trump Administration, because they know they will simply be ignored—just like they were over climate change.

Let me turn to the final point on this issue. The Labour manifesto said simply and clearly:

“A Labour government will immediately recognise the state of Palestine.”

Six years ago, the then Foreign Secretary said:

“We reserve the right to recognise a Palestinian state...at a moment of our choosing and when it can best help bring about peace.”—[*Official Report*, 9 November 2011; Vol. 535, c. 290.]

Let me, then, urge the Minister and the Government to seize the moment we are now offered by the Balfour centenary to throw our support behind Palestinian statehood, just as we threw our support 100 years ago behind Israeli statehood.

If the question is whether this is the moment when recognising statehood will help bring about peace, I would simply ask, in Primo Levi’s words, “If not now, when?” When violence and extremism are rising on all sides, when hard-liners are assuming increasing control, when the humanitarian crisis is getting even worse, and when all eyes are on an American President whose grand plan for peace exists only in his mind, we need the

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British Government, more than ever, to show some leadership and to show the way towards peace—and recognition of Palestinian statehood would be one significant step in that direction. So will the Minister of State tell the House whether such a move is under consideration? If it is not, what will it take for the Government to act? The right hon. Gentleman will recall that in 2014, MPs on both sides of the House voted in favour of recognition of Palestine by a majority of 262.

I have mentioned the 100th anniversary of the Balfour declaration.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I am interested in and listening with great care to what the right hon. Lady is saying about recognition of Palestine, and particularly about what the Government's position was some years ago. Does she share my concern that, given the Minister's comments today, it seems that that position has moved and that recognition is being ruled out until the end of talks on a peace process rather than being something that the Government would be able to do at any time?

Emily Thornberry: I would be grateful if the Minister could clarify the position today, and that is why I am asking these questions. If Britain were to recognise the Palestinian state, it would be an opportunity for us to play honest broker and to challenge the Palestinians to ensure that their leaders behave in a statespersonlike way, as their people need them to behave if they are to be a state and in order to look to the future. If we were to recognise that, we could make a positive contribution.

I mentioned the 100th anniversary of the Balfour declaration, but this is also the year when we mark the 50th anniversaries of two equally significant moments in middle east history: the six-day war, and the Israeli occupation of Gaza and the west bank. Just as the consequences of Balfour's letter are still with us 100 years on, the consequences of events in 1967 are equally alive today. They are alive in the justifiable fears that every Israeli citizen shares whenever they hear denials of Israel's right to exist, whenever they hear air-raid sirens warning of rocket attacks, and whenever they hear the latest reports of cowardly terror attacks on ordinary Israeli citizens. The consequences are also with us in the anger and unfairness that has been felt by many Palestinian people since 1967, with their children growing up in poverty and deprivation, their homes bulldozed to make way for ever more illegal settlements, and their futures offering just more of the same. It is a vicious cycle of fear and despair—as I said earlier, a downward spiral from which it becomes ever harder to climb back.

But it does not have to be this way. We will hear in today's debate—indeed, we have all heard in our discussions with Israelis and Palestinians in recent years—that there are on all sides people of good will with moderate views, mutual understanding, and shared hope for progress, who can together take us down the long and difficult but necessary path towards brokering a lasting peace. I hope that this debate will set the right tone in that regard, and that it will be constructive and forward-looking. Most of all, as I said at the outset, I hope that we all remember that our words on this issue are listened

to—they matter and they make a difference—and that neither silence nor choosing sides is acceptable if what we ultimately want is peace.

In that spirit, I ask the Minister to address all the questions I have raised, but, most importantly, to tell us very simply what the Government will actively be doing, on their own terms, in the coming months to make their contribution towards that peace.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. It will be obvious to the House that a great many colleagues wish to speak in this debate. The opening speeches have been very long. I appreciate that that is because the opening speakers have taken a great many interventions. I trust that people who have intervened on the opening speeches will remain here and take part in the rest of the debate, because otherwise it is not fair on those who are waiting to speak and will have only a very short time to do so at the end. There will have to be a time limit, after the SNP spokesman, of six minutes initially, but I am afraid that that will come down to a smaller amount later because of the number of people who wish to participate in this very important debate.

4.53 pm

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): 2017 is a year of many historic anniversaries for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, so I welcome this chance for Members across the House to reflect on Britain's past, present, and future role in the conflict. The events we mark are not relics of the past holding kernels of wisdom for the astute historian; they have directly structured the ongoing daily reality for the lives of millions of people.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the six-day war and the Israeli occupation of the west bank that continues to this day. The occupation, and the settler movement that formed under its shadow, has created an unsustainable status quo that poses a fundamental threat to our shared ideals of a democratic and secure Israel alongside a viable and sovereign Palestinian state.

I remember taking part in a cricket tour of Israel five years ago, as part of the Lords and Commons cricket team, with my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris). One of the highlights was him hitting a ball into the middle of the Olympic stadium stand, in a piece of cricket playing that was otherwise largely unsuccessful on our part. On that tour, we witnessed some really interesting attempts to build peace from the bottom up. Under the auspices of the Peres Centre for Peace, we saw children from the occupied territories playing cricket together with Israeli Jewish children and Israeli Arab children. That was one of myriad projects designed to try to do something, in different walks of life, to bring peace.

Two other things really struck me on that tour. The first was that an Israeli general election campaign was in progress, and the conflict was barely an issue among the Israeli parties. It was simply behind the wire or the wall, both politically and in reality. The other was a comment made by the chair of the Israel Cricket Association, a South African Zionist who had been there since 1947, who said that 1967 was the time when Israel began to lose its moral authority.

There is something special about the Israeli story. Like many in my generation, I grew up learning about the horror of the holocaust and the building of a brave democratic state in Israel, which was assailed on all sides by its Arab neighbours. There was a sense of moral authority about the setting up of this state, following the appalling events in Jewish history in Europe over the previous 1,000 years or so. I hope that out of the talks that need to happen now, we can find a way to restore the specialness of the Israeli story and the moral purpose of the state of Israel. I think we all have expectations of the state of Israel—that she will aspire to the highest possible standards—but the way in which the conflict and policy have developed makes it very difficult for her to achieve them. I will return to that point.

Particularly significant for us this year is the 100th anniversary of the Balfour declaration on 2 November. I hope that this debate will not preclude further parliamentary consideration of that anniversary at the time. This is a touchstone issue for millions of Arabs and Muslims, and I do not think I am exaggerating when I say that their eyes will be on us. The centenary must be handled with the utmost care and consideration. In the conversations that I had with almost all Arab ambassadors in my former capacity as Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, it was clear that uncertainty and anxiety surround the centenary.

Last November, the then Minister for the Middle East assured the House that the British Government would neither celebrate nor apologise for the Balfour declaration. I welcomed that position for its acknowledgement that although for many the declaration was the beginning of their deliverance from centuries of persecution, for others its unfulfilled passages were the root of their communal loss. In such a context, celebration or apology betrays the legitimate historical sensitivities of either party, when we should be focused on how to move the issue forward to the benefit of both parties.

I would welcome from the new Minister—the most admirable piece of recycling that it has been my pleasure to see; in his position as a Privy Counsellor and a Minister of State he has the authority of all the experience he gained when he previously held the role, for which he was widely held in high regard—a clarification of the Government's position on the centenary and an assurance that Ministers will endeavour to ensure that their messages are properly synchronised, and that they open a particular dialogue with the Arab embassies and states about the Government's position on the anniversary.

Talking of anniversaries, I am in my 21st year as a Member of the House; that is an anniversary that we share, Madam Deputy Speaker. It has been an honour to sit on these Benches, but it has been profoundly sad to witness these recurring debates on a frozen conflict, the position of which has got worse over the last 20 years. Amid the minefield of competing claims, we get bogged down in an epistemological challenge about how we balance so many unbalanced forces, how we treat fairly so many conflicting injustices and how we stand up to the wrongs of one without establishing the equivalence with those of the other, all supposedly in pursuit of effecting meaningful change to bring about a resolution and to put an end to the conflict.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I very much welcome the hon. Gentleman's tone. I am a supporter of the state of Israel, and I am also desperate

for some real progress to be made towards a Palestinian state and towards showing dignity and respect for the Palestinian people. I agree with earlier comments that debates such as this can get quite polarised and binary in the House of Commons. I believe we all wish to see progress, and we should look to the tone adopted by the hon. Gentleman.

Crispin Blunt: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I am trying to make precisely the point that we all too often indulge in reinforcing our own respective positions.

No single problem is causing the stalemate, and there is therefore no single solution. Neither party holds a monopoly of power to make peace, and all sides have the capability to spoil it. Palestinians have been betrayed by years of factionalised leaderships that have failed to meet their people's needs—from the basic governance necessary to live in dignity to the realisation of their legitimate political ambitions for self-determination. Now, possibly more than at any time in their history, the Palestinian people are trapped deep within a structural crisis of leadership, with almost all levels of democratic activity and elections suspended. This augurs badly for any efforts to address issues such as the incitement or commission of violence, and it denies Palestinians the opportunity to present their cause with the legal and moral authority that it deserves.

On the other hand, the continuation of the settlement programme, in contravention of international law—I welcome the Minister's restatement of the British position—undermines the prospects for a viable Palestinian state in the future. Settlements are the physical embodiment of conflict between competing narratives of nationalism, in the context of a historic tragedy that has pitted entire peoples against each other in their respective searches for nationhood. Across the canvas of a biblical landscape, settlements paint a picture of a zero-sum paradigm from which no party has found the political will to escape. Aside from the practical impact that settlements have on the viability of a future Palestinian state, settlements and the multifaceted injustices that they represent are salt in the open wound of their collective dispossession.

Both sides complain that they lack partners for peace on the opposite side of the negotiating table. However, they all too often fail to think about what they themselves could do to nurture such partners. Any colleagues who have been able to spend time engaging with broader Israeli and Palestinian society will know that there are such partners, and they share many of the frustrations at their mutual predicament. These people need to be empowered to win their respective arguments in their societies. The Minister will recall that we both met Gideon Sa'ar during the election campaign. He took time out from frontline Israeli politics—he is a potential successor to Benjamin Netanyahu as the leader of Likud—to go to Northern Ireland with an organisation called Forward Thinking to see the peace and the resolution that we have made, and are trying to make, to the conflict there. He was prepared to learn lessons, and it is a sign of hope when Israeli leaders are taking time out to go and see routes to conflict resolution. We need to be able to do that with political leaders on both sides.

Dr Huq: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Crispin Blunt: If the hon. Lady will forgive me, I will not give way because I am concluding and I know that other Members wish to speak.

It was with some disappointment that the general election broke off the Foreign Affairs Committee's inquiry into Britain's role in the middle east peace process, after we had received 70 submissions totalling over 400 pages of evidence. I hope to be able to carry on this work if I am re-elected as Chair of the Committee, because there is a clear need for scrutiny and debate on all the policy questions raised by this tragically frozen conflict. If we do not get to grips with this conflict, it will continue to get worse and more desperate. Britain, with its historical legacy, has a very particular role to play, which is why we cannot escape our involvement in this tragedy, but it will require our full attention if we are to get the Israeli-Palestinian conflict back on a path to peace.

5.3 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I welcome you back to your role, Mr Deputy Speaker, and both your deputies to theirs. I also welcome the Minister to the Front Bench. I note that he is a joint Minister of the Department for International Development and of the Foreign Office. It will be interesting to see how such an innovation pans out, but I hope it enhances rather than diminishes the role of DFID within the Government.

The last time I spoke in such a debate in the Chamber before the general election was during the Backbench Business Committee debate on the question of illegal settlements in the occupied territories on 9 February. It was an historic debate, after which the House resolved, without a Division, to recognise that the settlements are "contrary to international law" and to call on the Government of Israel "immediately to halt" the planning and construction of such settlements.

This is a welcome, if somewhat unexpected, opportunity to revisit in Government time the wider question of the peace process and relations between Israel and Palestine. The Government are to be congratulated on making this time available. I hope they will listen carefully to the points being made by Members across the House and, in particular, consider how they can best support multilateral efforts to bring about a lasting settlement.

As others have noted, 2017 marks a number of important anniversaries and milestones in the region. We should use that opportunity to comprehensively review efforts for peace in the region and ensure that the appropriate diplomatic channels and support are in place.

Dr Offord: Would the hon. Gentleman like to take this opportunity to inform the House what the SNP's policy is? Would it like to recognise the state of Palestine before direct peace talks?

Patrick Grady: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will be pleased to hear that the SNP manifesto committed us to continuing

"to work with international partners to progress a lasting peace settlement in the Middle East, pursuing a two state solution for Israel and Palestine."

When the vote was taken some years ago on recognising the state of Palestine, SNP Members voted in favour of that resolution of the House.

It is the long-standing position of most international actors, starting with the United Nations and including the SNP in our manifesto, that a two-state solution with secure, stable and prosperous states of Israel and Palestine living side by side should be the basis of a just and sustainable peace in the region. That position was reaffirmed in December last year by the Security Council in resolution 2334, which stresses the need for respect of the 1967 borders and calls on both sides to refrain from activities that prevent progress towards peace.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Patrick Grady: No. The resolution calls for "immediate steps to prevent all acts of violence against civilians, including acts of terror, as well as all acts of provocation and destruction".

That clearly applies to indiscriminate rocket attacks against targets in Israel. However, the resolution also makes clear the responsibility of Israel, as the occupying power, to respect international law and the protection of civilians, and it condemns

"the construction and expansion of settlements, transfer of Israeli settlers, confiscation of land, demolition of homes and displacement of Palestinian civilians".

There is a responsibility on UN members, particularly UN Security Council members, to take the calls for action in the resolution seriously and redouble efforts to make progress.

We have heard in this debate that far from reducing settlement construction, the scale of building by the Government of Israel has increased. They have attempted to justify that with new legislation in the Knesset. The popularity and legitimacy of that has been questioned within Israel itself. We have heard in speeches and interventions about the worsening humanitarian situation in the Palestinian territories and the need for a response to that.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman makes a fine point in respect of human rights abuses, but one thing that has not been spoken about today as much as it should be is the infringement of the human rights of children through the use of military courts. Will he join me in saying that their use is not only inhumane but unlawful?

Patrick Grady: All the conventions on human rights, particularly the convention on the rights of the child, should be respected in this situation and in situations around the world. Children should not be used as pawns in a conflict.

Historically, the United States and its Presidents have played a key role in the negotiations. I remember studying the Oslo accords at school. In the summer of 2000, I was in America while the last Camp David summit took place. Watching that unfold brought home to me both how close and how far away peace and a genuine negotiated settlement can be at the same time. One could almost say that it is like two sides of a wall, although it is very difficult to build bridges when there is a wall in the way.

It was heartening that one of the last acts of the Obama Administration was not to stand in the way of the resolution at the Security Council. As we have heard, the new Administration have been less than

consistent on that point. At times, they have even appeared to question the consensus around a two-state solution. The first question to the UK Government, therefore, has to be how they are making the most of their special relationship with the US Administration. What steps are they taking to support a two-state solution and to encourage the US President and his team in that direction?

I want to ask the Minister more generally about the UK's exercise of its soft power and diplomacy. A specific case has been brought to my attention by an academic at the University of Glasgow in my constituency. The Home Office recently denied a UK entry visa to Dr Nazmi al-Masri, the vice-president for external relations at the Islamic University of Gaza. I understand that Dr al-Masri has a 30-year history of entering and returning from the United Kingdom, and that he was due to travel to support research at the University of Glasgow as a co-investigator on Research Councils UK-funded grants in a £2 million project on translating cultures, other projects on global mental health and the Erasmus programme. His collaborator at Glasgow University has told me that his visa refusal seriously curtails the ability of the programme and the institution to fulfil the aims of projects that have already been funded by the UK Government's research councils. How can that kind of Home Office intransigence possibly help to promote good will and understanding? Where is the UK's soft power and diplomatic influence if it will not allow academics in good standing entry into the UK to promote the peaceful study of understanding between cultures and global mental health? I hope the Minister raises that with his colleagues.

That raises further questions about the UK Government's efforts, particularly in the light of Brexit and the UK's changing role on the world stage. Are Ministers satisfied that the discussions our Prime Minister has had with Prime Minister Netanyahu are sufficient, or is there a need to go further? What steps are the Government taking to ensure that this country will adhere to the UN Security Council's demand that, in international relations, states make a distinction between Israel and the occupied territories? Will the Minister guarantee that, as the UK leaves the EU, it will continue to make that kind of diplomatic differentiation? Does he agree that the UK should not be trading with illegal settlements? Those are important questions, especially if the UK Government continue to interpret their so-called special relationship with the United States as essentially agreeing to whatever the incumbent US Administration asks of them.

As has been repeatedly said, a peaceful solution must be based on mutual respect and recognition on both sides. That applies not only to the people of the states of Israel and Palestine, but to their supporters and allies in the international community. Under no circumstances are attacks on or abuse of the Jewish people, or any kind of manifestation of anti-Semitism, acceptable. Anti-Semitism should be named as such and condemned. That applies to violence and extremism in any form, whether directed at Palestinian, Israeli, Jewish or Muslim communities.

In February, I finished my speech by quoting the Catholic translation of psalm 122:

"For the peace of Jerusalem pray: Peace be to your homes!"

Other translations put it slightly differently. The King James version is:

"Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee."

Other translations have a similar emphasis: a personal and collective injunction that we will all individually and collectively prosper if peace is achieved. Peace in Jerusalem and the Holy Land will benefit not just those who live there, but all of us around the world. That is the challenge and the opportunity to which we must rise, and to which I am sure the House will return on many future occasions.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I should just mention that speeches will be limited to five minutes.

5.12 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests regarding a fascinating visit to Israel and the west bank that I had the privilege of making in February.

We should acknowledge that despite the existential threats that Israel has so often faced, it is a liberal, pluralist democracy committed to working for a peaceful settlement with its neighbours. It is also a multi-ethnic, multi-faith democracy. Unlike many other countries in the middle east, Israel fully protects the rights of women, and the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, which we should celebrate. Trade between our two countries is at a record high, and I urge the Government to oppose the campaign for boycotts and divestment, which too often is used try to delegitimise the state of Israel.

In recent months, people in this city and this country have tragically suffered directly at the hands of terrorists. Sadly, in the past few years, there have been many similar attacks in Israel. Palestinian terrorists have deployed techniques used in recent atrocities here and in other European countries. Since September 2015, there have been more than 389 stabbings, shootings and car ramming incidents against Israeli citizens. The North London Friends of Israel, which has members in my Chipping Barnet constituency, has expressed its serious concern to me that the UK media tend to report attacks in Israel in a completely different way from how they cover similar attacks in the UK. The group points out that the word "terrorism" is sometimes completely absent and that reports can even lead with the killing of the terrorist, not the attack itself.

More importantly, the prospects for a peace settlement are harmed by those who persist in praising terrorists. The UK ambassador to the United Nations recently stated that at the "root" of recent violence

"lies a seemingly unending cycle of poisonous rhetoric and incitement", including the use of

"racist, anti-Semitic and hateful language".

It is shocking that as many as 25 Palestinian schools are named after terrorists. An estimated £84 million is paid annually to convicted terrorists, with higher salaries given to those who have killed more people. One can only imagine the hurt and outcry that would occur if that happened in relation to someone responsible for a terrorist attack in the UK. It emerged yesterday that President Abbas has vowed never to stop these hateful payments, which is something that I strongly condemn. I hope that other Members on both sides of the House will condemn that, too.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making some incredibly powerful points. Does she agree that there will be no peace deal while children are being indoctrinated to “hate the Jews” and the destruction of the state of Israel is encouraged? She rightly points out that schools—and sports competitions—have been named after terrorists, which is completely wrong.

Theresa Villiers: My hon. Friend makes an entirely valid point. In June 2016, a 13-year-old Israeli, Hallel Yaffa Ariel, was murdered as she slept. The 17-year-old terrorist who killed her was subsequently praised on Fatah’s official Facebook page. In a TV interview in September 2015, President Abbas declared:

“We welcome every drop of blood spilled in Jerusalem”.

His Fatah party have praised Dalal Mughrabi as a “bride of Palestine”. She was responsible for killing 37 Israelis, including 12 children, in one of the most despicable attacks in Israel’s history. It is also very worrying, as Members have pointed out, that the recent al-Quds day march in London saw Hezbollah flags flown in full view of the police. One of my constituents described it as “grotesque and unacceptable” that a pro-terrorist demonstration went ahead in London just a short time after we had suffered at the hands of terrorists. Like others, I urge the Government to do away with the artificial distinction between the political and paramilitary parts of Hezbollah and proscribe the whole organisation. The flags carried at the march might have had a small disclaimer on them, but I gather that many included large pictures of Kalashnikovs.

A Palestinian state cannot be achieved through unilateral measures, only through face-to-face negotiations. I therefore welcome the Government’s refusal to sign the one-sided communique in Paris in February. Every Government in Israel’s history have expressed a wish to live in peace with their neighbours. Successive Israeli Governments have declared their support for establishing a Palestinian state through direct negotiations and agreement on mutual recognition, borders and security. Israel’s Prime Minister has repeatedly offered to restart negotiations.

There have been no official peace talks since 2014, but I believe there are grounds for hope. Israel’s relationship with a number of other countries has improved somewhat in the face of shared concern over matters such as the rise of Daesh and the hegemonic ambitions of Iran, which is now involved so heavily in many conflicts in the middle east. That shared concern appears to have opened up new channels of communication and co-operation, and led to a concerted regional push to revive the peace process. This issue divides the House, but I hope we can all agree on the importance of bringing the two sides together so that they can restart negotiations and work together to secure a brighter, better future for both Israelis and Palestinians.

5.18 pm

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I add my welcome to the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) on his return to the Front Bench. He has previously served with distinction as a middle east Minister, and he speaks on this issue with great authority. He definitely has a passion for peace, and I commend him for it.

When I saw the title that the Government had chosen for today’s debate, I was put in mind of something the former Palestinian ambassador to the UK, Afif Safieh, once said. He said that when he heard Governments—our own or others in the international community—talking about the middle east process, he felt the objective was a never-ending peace process rather than an enduring peace. Everyone recognises that peace will come only when Israelis and Palestinians are committed to, and deliver, agreements that they can both sign up to. What Ambassador Safieh was getting at, however, was that when the call for talks becomes a substitute for either facing up to the reality on the ground or for using what leverage we have to change the reality, the danger is that we end up colluding with the status quo, and the status quo in that part of the world is very clear indeed.

The website of the United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs summarises life in the west bank thus:

“Palestinians in the West Bank are subject to a complex system of control, including physical (the Barrier, checkpoints, roadblocks) and bureaucratic barriers (permits, closure of areas) which restrict their right to freedom of movement. The expansion of Settlements, restrictions on access to land and natural resources and ongoing displacement due to demolitions in particular, are ongoing. Israeli policies curtail the ability of Palestinians in Area C and East Jerusalem to plan their communities and build homes and infrastructure. The result is further fragmentation of the West Bank. Ongoing violent incidents throughout the West Bank pose risks to life, liberty and security, and—security considerations notwithstanding—concerns exist over reports of excessive use of force by Israeli forces.”

Those are not my words, but those of the United Nations.

As for Gaza, it is something else again. Ten years of blockade by Israel has left Gaza without a functioning economy. At 43%, its unemployment rate is among the highest in the world. Some 95% of its water is not safe to drink, and food insecurity affects 72% of households. Gaza is a tiny strip of land whose population will have grown to 2.1 million by 2020, and the United Nations estimates that by about the same time it will be uninhabitable for human beings.

In the face of all that, the key issue is not whether we are doing all that we can to encourage talks, but what we are doing to help to achieve change in practice. A joint statement issued on 12 May by the UN’s humanitarian agencies operating in the west bank and Gaza was clear on that point, saying:

“Ending the occupation is the single most important priority to enable Palestinians to advance development goals, reduce humanitarian needs and ensure respect for Human Rights.”

We need to think about where we have leverage to enable us to do that, and one of the areas in which we have leverage is the issue of settlements. Of course we all disapprove of settlements—no announcement of a new settlement goes by without an expression of disapproval from our Government, and I welcome that—but is it not time that we started using the leverage that we have and that we use in other parts of the world? Settlements are illegal. When Crimea was annexed by Russia, we applied a series of disincentives to companies that colluded with that illegality. Why is it so difficult for us to do the same in relation to settlements in the occupied territories?

In respect of Gaza, let me ask the Minister this. Does he believe that Israel is fulfilling its responsibilities as an occupying power? If it is not fulfilling those

responsibilities, what actions can we take, as a high contracting party to the fourth Geneva convention, to ensure that it does so?

Finally, let me say something about the recognition of Palestine. We have never said—no one has ever said—that recognition of Israel should be a matter of negotiation. Israel is recognised as a matter of right, and quite rightly so, but if we believe in even-handedness between Israel and Palestinians, that same right must apply to Palestinians. It is time, on the 100th anniversary of the Balfour declaration, to fulfil what the House voted for on 13 October 2014 and recognise the state of Palestine.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order.

5.24 pm

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden).

As has been mentioned, the centenary of the Balfour declaration falls this November, marking 100 years since the British Government confirmed the UK's support for the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people. In making that commitment, we recognised that the UK not only has an interest in Israel as a nation, ally, regional partner and friend, but specifically laid out the need to protect the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, thus creating the foundation on which the state of Israel was built. The British Government have since committed to a long-standing position of supporting a two-state solution.

The centenary of the Balfour declaration presents a unique opportunity to revive the middle east peace process, and it is important that we play our part in this. As we re-evaluate the role that the UK can play in brokering peace, I am pleased that the Gracious Speech includes the commitment to find sustainable political solutions to conflicts across the middle east.

As this year also marks the anniversary of the 1967 war, we reflect that the halfway point since Balfour was marked by six days of regional conflict that pitted Israel against its neighbours, one against the other, leaving a legacy of distrust, violence and resentment against ensuing settlements. And yet today, Jordan and Israel are beacons of much-needed stability in a region still riven by war, conflict and the mass displacement of populations.

I have visited both countries and seen not only the huge challenges that they face, but their inspiring work and determination to succeed. I refer Members to my entries in the register of interests regarding my visits to Jordan and Israel. In Jordan, I saw the wonderful work being undertaken by UNICEF in the Za'atari camp and in the host communities, educating thousands of refugee children and helping to support many of the hundreds of thousands of Syrian people who have been given refuge by the Jordanian Government. The Jordanian commitment to stability in the region makes the country potentially a strong partner in the push for peace.

In Israel, I visited Rawabi, the first Palestinian planned city, which is expected to provide homes for over 35,000 Palestinians, and is aiming to create more than 50,000 jobs, focusing on the high-tech, healthcare and the renewable energy sectors. It was awe-inspiring to see a city built from scratch.

We should not underestimate the prospect that a desire for economic progress could also fuel a drive for peace. With sectors such as technology booming in Israel, with 300,000 high-tech workers being employed, a solution with two states at peace offers a future of prosperity for both.

Over recent months, we have seen terrorism and violent attacks in Israel and the west bank, as well as closer to home in the UK. It is always the innocent who suffer. However, whenever terrorism, terrorist extremism and intolerance take place, that must never be allowed to deter us from a desire for peace and democracy. To achieve the goal of a peaceful, stable region, we must support authorities on both sides to come to the table without prescriptive preconditions and in a spirit of understanding.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case for peace in the middle east. In the light of Indian Prime Minister Modi's visit to Israel and the fact that India has suffered terrorism as well, does she agree that those two great countries can come together and form an excellent security relationship?

Mary Robinson: I agree. It is interesting that we are looking to see which other countries can help, even though we acknowledge that peace itself will come only from the two sides involved.

Regional players and previously hostile states are moving closer towards accepting an ideal of peace, and I note that at the Security Council briefing on the peace process last month, the Arab League Secretary-General reaffirmed a commitment to the 2002 Arab peace initiative. Perhaps this provides an opportunity for constructive dialogue.

For our part, as the dust settles from the general election and we rightly focus on what our future relationship with Europe looks like, we must continue to act in the best interests of peace across the world. We should not lose sight of the historical bond between the UK and the region, and with our strong historical trade ties, and in this special year, the UK has the opportunity to reaffirm and actively pursue peace through our long-standing positions supporting a safe and secure Israel living alongside a viable and sovereign Palestinian state based on 1967 borders, with agreed land swaps, agreement on the status of Jerusalem for both states, and the resettlement of refugees. This has been the UK's commitment to the peace process, based on a two-state solution. As we commemorate 100 years since the Balfour declaration and our support for the region, we should revive the effort for peace through meaningful talks and truly make 2017 the anniversary of the Balfour declaration and an anniversary for peace.

5.30 pm

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): It is with both a humble heart and abiding pride that I stand to make my first speech in the House of Commons. As is customary, I would like to pay tribute to my predecessor. There is nothing that highlights a person's character more than when they are faced with adversity, and I will never forget the grace, kindness and authentic good wishes that Mr Jackson expressed to me on the night of the election. I hope that his life beyond Parliament is as fulfilling as he intends.

[Fiona Onasanya]

Also, I would like to speak briefly about my home constituency of Peterborough. It is rich in history. Its cathedral is a true gem: it was a temporary resting place for Mary Queen of Scots, and it is also where Catherine of Aragon, Henry VIII's first wife, is buried. One could say that Peterborough attracts its share of powerful women!

But when I look at Peterborough, my home, I see so much more than the legacies and treasures of its past; I see a city that cherishes its diversity. People have come to Peterborough from every corner of the globe, and many nations are represented. My presence here may be a symbol of this increasing diversity: I am the first black female MP ever elected by my constituency. In Peterborough, I see a place that has much to be proud of. Our major employers, like Perkins Engines and Peter Brotherhood, are world class. We also have entrepreneurs that are cutting edge, and our local newspaper, the *Peterborough Telegraph*, is dynamic and well read. Peterborough is also notable for its beauty, and there are rural parts of the constituency that serve as our own Gardens of Eden.

Peterborough has a bright future and so much going for it, but my constituency and our country also have their share of challenges, which I intend to address as a Member of Parliament. When I began my campaign, one of the very first issues I said I wanted to tackle was housing. We all need a decent place to live. Never in my darkest nightmares did I expect to see this proposition so starkly illustrated as it was by the Grenfell Tower fire. It still seems incredible that such a disaster could happen in one of the richest parts of one of the richest cities in one of the richest countries in the world. It is incumbent upon the Government and Members of this House to do their utmost to ensure that such a tragedy can never happen again. With this in mind, the Government must ensure that adequate funding is provided to those councils that require it. Fine words and opaque promises of support are insufficient.

We must also help those who do not have a home. According to Shelter, in December 2016 some 600 people in Peterborough were without a place to live. Homelessness is an increasing problem for the country as a whole. Shelter estimates that 150 British families become homeless every day. Far from any stereotype, these are often people who work or are willing to work. Some are veterans who have served our country with distinction. Some have physical and mental health problems. All deserve decent treatment.

I am also very concerned about education. Peterborough had amongst the lowest SATs results in the country. Our schools are trying very hard to make do with ever-shrinking resources that have been tied up in experiments such as free schools. Beyond improvements in primary and secondary education, Peterborough needs a university. So many bright and talented young people in my city feel they have to leave home to achieve their dreams, which is why I am pleased to note that some progress has been made in that area.

The NHS is also one of my key concerns. Cuts to the health service have left my constituents facing long waiting times for appointments. The healthcare "reforms" as implemented by this Government led to the fiasco of the UnitingCare Partnership, which collapsed in 2015 after only eight months. Attempts to marry up public service

and private profit have tended to favour the latter over the former, which leads me to a final observation: we need balance in our policies, placing people at the centre. We need to acknowledge that there is a role for Government and regulation, as the markets we create are not necessarily compassionate, understanding or even humane.

We need not only to hear but to listen to the voices of those we were elected to serve and we need to look around us. Those at the top continue to get wealthier, while those at the bottom are seeing their living standards eroded. Contrary to what some may think, austerity is expensive. Cutting budgets does not always save money, let alone lives. We cannot make a rich country out of one that makes the majority of its people poorer.

I am motivated in all that I do by my abiding faith in God. As we look at the issues facing Palestine and Israel, there is the temptation to see religion as something that divides rather than unites people, but I believe that it is mankind's frailties that cause conflict and strife, not one's faith. I sincerely hope for a future in which the peoples of the middle east live in the harmony that God intends for them.

It is on this note of faith that I would like to conclude my speech. Hon. Members who have encountered my acronyms will know that I refer to myself as MP FI because I endeavour to "Make People Feel Inspired" and my acronym for faith is "For All In This House". As stated on the floor in Central Lobby:

"Except the Lord build the House, they labour in vain that build it".

With His help, Mr Deputy Speaker, I intend to do right.

5.36 pm

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Peterborough (Fiona Onasanya) on an excellent maiden speech. It is always a pleasure to follow a maiden speech and the hon. Lady delivered hers particularly well. I did not agree with every point in it, but it was delivered well and I have no doubt that the hon. Lady will join that distinguished group of Peterborough's alpha women.

Hon. and right hon. Members have drawn attention to the key obstacles to peace and to the final status issues for the negotiations between Israel and Palestine. The starting point of all negotiations must surely be to determine who will be at the negotiating table itself. On the Israeli side, there is a turbulent but moveable coalition, which is typical of Israel's lively democracy. On the Palestinian side, again, there are a number of parties, but they are deeply divided both geographically and ideologically. Let us not forget that the Gaza strip has been controlled for over a decade by the Hamas terror group, which is committed to the destruction of Israel.

Will Quince: Does my hon. Friend agree that Hamas cannot be a partner to the peace process unless it changes its ideology, renounces violence and accepts the state of Israel?

Chris Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and agree with every point he made. I am sure we will hear more from the Minister on that in his summing up.

Israel has released Palestinian prisoners who are guilty of committing deadly terror attacks as part of the Palestinian demands for the resumption of peace talks,

but I join Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and the international community in calling for a return to negotiations without preconditions. It is difficult to see who will be sitting around the negotiating table when the leadership of Gaza and the west bank is so bitterly divided. Geographical separation is something for the negotiating table. Indeed, it is almost a decade since a former Israeli Prime Minister proposed a peace offer involving a route of safe passage between the west bank and Gaza. Palestinian President Abbas only recently admitted that he turned down the 2008 offer, which would have provided for an independent Palestinian state containing all of the Gaza strip and 94% of the west bank, with the final 6% provided through the long-agreed principle of land swaps.

However, the ideological division between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority concerns me more than the issue of land. Any peace agreement at this time would only be formed between Israel and the Palestinian Authority in the west bank, leaving Gaza isolated from a Palestinian state. Yet Israel stands in the middle of the two parties, in more ways than one. Recently, the Palestinian Authority announced that it would no longer pay the full electricity bill for Gaza, where electricity is provided by Israel. The reasoning behind the decision is widely seen as a means of exerting pressure on Hamas to relinquish its hold on Gaza. Accordingly, Israel has begun reducing electricity and is now vilified by the international community—this is illustrative of the entire Gaza crisis.

I strongly believe it is in the interests of all parties involved that international actions prioritise the union of a moderate Palestinian leadership that seeks peace in order to solve the conflict and bring much needed relief to the people of Gaza, as well as, of course, to Israel and the west bank. We must make it absolutely clear to the Palestinians that, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) stated, naming schools and squares after terrorists does not show that they are committed to peace.

I hope that hon. and right hon. Members who choose to dwell on different obstacles to the peace process make it clear that although Israel is able to defend itself, we must not underestimate the impact of the divided Palestinian leadership and the repeated mantra that Israel is a temporary entity. I wish the Minister a great deal of much needed luck in his efforts to encourage Israeli and Palestinian negotiators to finally sit down together and make the difficult compromises needed to come to this lasting agreement.

5.41 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I want to focus my comments today on Gaza, which is the world's largest open-air prison. Of the 2 million people crammed into the 139 square miles of Gaza, more than a third are under 15 and almost half are under 25. In their short lives, they have seen a lot—a child born 10 years ago in Gaza has already lived through three wars, in which one in five of those who died were children—and their future looks bleak. According to the UN, we are seeing a process of “de-development” in Gaza, so that by 2020 the strip may well be technically uninhabitable. Some 96% of groundwater in Gaza is unfit for human consumption and the sea is polluted with sewage. Power shortages mean that were it not for the increasingly

hard-to-obtain fuel that runs emergency generators, hospitals would go dark. That would mean up to 40 surgical operation theatres, 11 obstetric theatres, five haemodialysis centres and hospital emergency rooms serving almost 4,000 patients a day being forced to halt critical services. As always, it is the children who are hit hardest. In April, a five-year-old girl with cerebral palsy died while waiting for a permit to travel to a hospital in East Jerusalem—she had already been waiting for two months. It seems that the bureaucracy of the blockade held out for longer than that little girl's health could.

Meanwhile, in Israel we see a Prime Minister who is driven not by concern for his nation, but by concern for the retention of his office. As yesterday's approval of more than 1,000 illegal settlement units in East Jerusalem shows, we see an Israeli Government who are undermining the integrity of a future Palestinian state and, in doing so, are undermining themselves and their own security.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend draws out clearly the human tragedy of what is happening today in Gaza, but is he concerned that Hamas has recently rebuilt 15 of its terrorist tunnels, which are being prepared for Hamas to launch attacks on the civilians of Israel?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I accept that there is an unacceptable cycle of violence, and clearly all parties in this conflict need to find a solution, but I also feel that in the current circumstances Israel holds the whip hand and it is up to Israel to make that first move.

The fact is that there can be no security without peace and no peace without security. A two-state solution is essential to peace. I do not make that point from a partisan perspective; rather, I echo the sentiments of the former head of Mossad, Mr Tamir Pardo. Just two months ago, lamenting Netanyahu's apparent rejection of a two-state solution, he said:

“Israel faces one existential threat”,

and it is not external—Iran or Hezbollah—but “internal”, the result of a divisiveness in Israel resulting from a Government who have

“decided to bury our heads deep in the sand, to preoccupy ourselves with alternative facts and flee from reality”.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that Israel's founding principles—namely democracy, respect for the rule of law, and social justice—which have made it in many respects a great country over the past 50 years, are being eroded by the Israeli Government when they seek to silence legitimate human rights organisations, whether that be B'Tselem or Breaking the Silence, in their own country? That strikes at the heart of Israel's fundamental and very welcome democratic character.

Stephen Kinnock *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Just to help everybody, because I am concerned: if Members are going to intervene, they have to keep it very short. I am going to have to cut the time limit, and the people who are intervening are going to suffer from these interventions. I want to try to give everybody an equal chance. This is a very important debate, and I want to make sure it is fair and open.

Stephen Kinnock: I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and absolutely agree with the sentiments he expresses. There are particular concerns about the entry Bill, which would potentially prevent Members of this House who have expressed concerns about trade with illegal settlements from entering Israel. This is undermining Israel's national interest.

Mr Pardo is right: the blockade and effective occupation of Gaza, and the illegal settlements, imperil not only the children of Palestine, subjecting them to a form of collective punishment for acts that they played no part in committing, but the future of Israel itself. They create a deep divide in Israeli society that Pardo sees as potentially the beginning of a path to civil war.

This year, 2017, marks the 50-year anniversary of the occupation. We must ask ourselves what a further 50 years of the politics of oppression, aggression and division will mean. Those policies have polluted the Israeli body politic, just as they have the Palestinian. In 2012, the Israeli Interior Minister Eli Yishai called for Gaza to be sent

“back to the middle ages”—

well, he is just two hours of electricity a day short of achieving that objective. If the middle ages is what we want, it may well be what we get: a life that is nasty, brutish and short.

Currently, we see an Israel in clinical denial, sipping cappuccino on the lip of the volcano, and a Palestine in clinical despair, with an acute sense that politics is incapable of delivering a solution. As the former Mossad chief has made clear, the root cause of both is the blockade and the occupation. I hope that today the House will speak with one voice, for the sake of both the Palestinian and Israeli people, in calling for an end to the blockade, for immediate humanitarian assistance in Gaza, and for an end to the illegal settlements.

5.48 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Yesterday, there was a debate on the middle east in the other place. My noble Friend Lord Polak made a typically interesting contribution. He pointed out that in 1948 there were 726,000 Palestinians refugees, and 856,000 Jewish refugees living in Arab lands, yet since then the UN's focus has been solely on the Palestinians. He pointed to the more than 170 resolutions, the 13 UN agencies created or mandated to look after the Palestinian issue and the billions of dollars that have been provided to the Palestinians. Nevertheless, he still hoped that the UK would do all it could to bring Israelis and Palestinians around the table to hammer out a solution. I agree with him.

Israel remains committed to an independent Palestinian state through, among other things, direct negotiation to end the conflict. Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has repeatedly underlined his commitment to restarting peace negotiations without pre-conditions. Israel has accepted the principle of a future Palestinian state based along 1967 lines and for land swaps to take place.

Polling in 2016 has shown that there is still an appetite for a two-state solution among both Palestinians and Israelis. The figures were almost 60% for Israelis and just over 50% for Palestinians. The biggest obstacle to peace involved the infighting between Hamas and Fatah,

the Palestinian approach unilaterally to wanting statehood, and the rearmament in Gaza by Hamas. Personally, I would add to that the seemingly blinkered approach of the Palestine Liberation Organisation. When I was last in Ramallah, I visited the PLO and had talks with its members. I found that there was little basis on which to have those talks. There was an attempt to blame us for all the ills of the region and a dislike for the involvement of anything that smacked of the private sector. I also wish to stress the levels of co-operation that already exist between the Israelis and the Palestinians and to point to one organisation in particular, Save a Child's Heart, which I have visited on a number of occasions and does fantastic work.

I would be the first to admit that settlement expansion is counterproductive, and I have made that point to the Israeli Government, but the settlement issue is not a permanent obstacle to peace, and it is one of the five final status issues. It is not the reason for the continuation of the conflict, as violence predates the settlements, and the majority of settlers live within established settlement blocks along the green line, which are widely anticipated to become part of Israel in the peace settlement.

The past two years have shown a rising level of terror and Palestinian incitement in Israel. Since 2015 alone, there have been around 180 stabbings, 150 shootings, 58 car ramming attacks and one bus bombing. The result has been more than 389 terror attacks and over 759 injuries and some 50 Israeli or foreign deaths. The violence escalated to the point that, in October 2015, an Israeli mother and father were gunned down in front of their four young children. The sort of attitude that we have seen from President Abbas is not very helpful. He vowed to Palestinians that he would not stop prisoner salaries even if he had to resign, despite telling the US that he would do so.

Bob Blackman *rose*—

John Howell: I will not give way, as I am fairly close to the end.

No peace agreement will be able to guarantee peace in the medium to long term if a generation of Palestinians are growing up indoctrinated to hate Israel and the Jews. The Palestinian Authority's failure to deliver on its commitment to end incitement and hate education explicitly undermines the principles and conditions on which the peace process is built. Although I welcome France's recent efforts to promote peace, I do not think that the best way to make progress is to hold an international conference without the attendance of the two main parties. We must get the two main parties around the table at the same time.

5.53 pm

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): New American leadership in the region is important, but pursuing the “ultimate deal” is about much more than carving up some troublesome real estate. The culture, history, hopes and fears of both Israelis and Palestinians must be respected, cherished and, where necessary, assuaged. It is also crucial that any US initiative supports the valuable work that Israel, Egypt and Jordan have undertaken over the past year to explore a renewed Arab peace initiative. With its close ties to both Israel and many Arab states, Britain is uniquely positioned to play a positive role in fostering an environment conducive to those efforts.

We have heard much today about the obstacle to peace presented by settlement building. I agree that it is wrong for Israel, the Palestinians and the prospects of peace, but, as the former US Secretary of State, John Kerry, suggested last December, the settlements are not “the whole or even the primary cause of this conflict.”

As the Clinton parameters and the Geneva initiative have demonstrated, with compensating land swaps, the problem of settlements is not an insurmountable barrier to a two-state solution.

John Spellar: Although settlements may not be an obstacle, they are certainly a problem, especially at a time, as my right hon. Friend mentioned, when Israel’s relations with the surrounding Arab states are at a better pitch than many of us can ever remember. Is it not, therefore, regrettable that the Netanyahu Government are proceeding with settlements when this could be a unique opportunity?

Joan Ryan: I never made any secret of my opposition to settlement building. It is regrettable. A better move towards peace would be if Mr Netanyahu did what I suggested when I stood on a platform with him, and he froze all settlement building.

In the event of an agreement, settlements will, of course, be the cause of anger and conflict in Israel, as they were in 1981 and 2005—so, understandably, will be the release of terrorist prisoners and resolving the status of Jerusalem, especially when some deny the Jewish people’s historic connections to that holy city. Some will say that the price is too high. However, I believe that the Israeli people will pay that price if it offers the genuine prospect of a lasting peace. But will they be convinced that the prospect of peace is genuine when Hezbollah and Hamas, backed up by Iran, stand on the border and threaten to wipe Israel from the map? Will they be convinced that the prospect of peace is genuine when the Palestinian Authority incentivises terrorism by paying salaries to those convicted of heinous crimes and, as we have heard, names schools, sports tournaments and town squares after so-called martyrs? President Abbas claimed, barely a month ago:

“we are raising our youth, our children, our grandchildren on a culture of peace”.

Some in the international community, such as Denmark and Norway, are showing the willingness to hold him to his words.

I support Department for International Development aid for health and education projects in Palestine, and the crucial investment being made to help to train the PA’s security forces, but it is now high time for Britain to do likewise. Perhaps DFID could begin by finding out whether any of the several thousand teachers and other essential education public servants whose salaries it helps to pay actually work in the two dozen or so schools named after terrorists. I sought that assurance unsuccessfully from Ministers in March.

I again ask Ministers to establish an independent inquiry into how our aid money can best support a two-state solution. There are a great many Palestinians and Israelis who genuinely wish to foster a culture of peace. I have met many of them, especially in the inspiring co-existence projects such as Middle East Entrepreneurs of Tomorrow, OneVoice and the Parents Circle Families Forum. Those organisations bring together Israelis and Palestinians in a spirit of peace and

reconciliation. That is why I urge the Government to reverse their elimination of UK support for co-existence projects and back the establishment of an international fund for Israeli-Palestinian peace to give this vital work the investment it needs today.

In only the past couple of days, the co-existence fund has received the support of the Board of Deputies and the Jewish Leadership Council. It would be a very positive move. By supporting civil society projects that establish strong constituencies for peace in Israel and Palestine, we have a chance to help to build the foundations of trust, co-operation and co-existence on which any lasting settlement must be constructed.

I welcome the Minister back to the Front Bench. I have confidence that he can help to guide his Government to find a better way forward for our position on this matter.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. On account of the level of interest, I am afraid that the time limit on Back-Bench speeches has to be reduced to four minutes for each speech with immediate effect.

5.59 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan).

On the centenary of the Balfour declaration—the work, of course, of a Scottish Conservative—we must recognise not only the past, of the founding of the state of Israel, but the present and the hope of the future. Israel has been a success story, and it is a beacon of hope in an often troubled middle east. As the region’s only functioning democracy, it shares many of our values.

Sadly, for all Israel’s successes, peace has eluded the region. As it stands, Israel does not live in peace and security; there is the threat of rockets from Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon, endangering 70% of the Israeli population, and a spate of deadly car-ramming, stabbing and shooting attacks in Israel and the west bank have killed more than 50 people since October 2015.

This terror is of real concern to many of my constituents. As I mentioned in my maiden speech on Monday evening, East Renfrewshire has the highest Jewish population in Scotland. Over 50% of the Scottish Jewish community choose to make it their home, and many will have relatives serving in the Israel defence forces. Some have, sadly, even been touched by the barbarity of terrorism. Yoni Jesner, a young man about to undertake a medical degree, who studied at Belmont House School in Newton Mearns, had his life taken from him in a Tel Aviv bus bombing—he was 19. We remember him and pay tribute to his mother, Marsha Gladstone, and others who are carrying on his memory with the Yoni Jesner Foundation.

These crimes, of course, are committed not only against Israelis. The Palestinians have still not achieved a sovereign state, and Hamas continues to betray ordinary Palestinians and to condemn them to endless rounds of suffering and exploitation. The ongoing Hamas-Fatah feud recently led to the deaths of three children, for whom hospital care was not expedited in Israel.

Despite this violence, it is vital that the UK continues to take an active role in encouraging both sides to come together for direct talks to achieve the peace we all want to see, but this must be done in an even-handed way.

[Paul Masterton]

What we need are politicians who are committed, yes, to the creation of a viable and sovereign Palestinian state, but who are equally clear that this must be achieved alongside a safe and secure Israel.

As other Members have mentioned, the appetite for peace and the two-state solution is still alive among the majority of Israelis and Palestinians. Despite terror attacks, incitement and widespread disillusion, there remains significant support for the two-state solution among both populations, and that should strengthen our resolve and fill us with hope. The Government must take the opportunity not only to solidify but to build on that support, by providing further funding to peaceful co-existence projects in Israel and the west bank which do such important work in supporting peace and bringing communities together. That work lays the ground for the day after a peace deal is reached.

The two-state solution is the only path to a prosperous Israel within a peaceful middle east, safeguarding the Jewish, democratic nature of Israel, while securing a lasting peace with the Palestinians. Indeed, talk of the possibility of a one-state solution serves only to embolden hard-liners on both sides of the conflict.

Peace will also not be achieved by international support for boycotts and counterproductive unilateral measures against Israel. In fact, every such measure pushes peace further away, often undermining and prohibiting participation in vital cross-community initiatives, particularly cultural ones, which do so much to promote and foster understanding and cohesion.

Ultimately, it is, of course, down to the two parties to agree a way forward, but we should do all in our power to encourage both sides to resume this process and finally bring about an end to the conflict.

6.2 pm

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): The Israeli-Palestinian dispute is an ongoing tragedy. The Jewish and Palestinian people are entitled to self-determination. Zionism is the movement for Jewish self-determination in the state of Israel, and it derives from a centuries-old Jewish attachment to, and living in, the middle east, in what is now the state of Israel. I abhor the use in certain quarters of the term “Zionism” as a term of abuse; that must be stopped, and it must be stopped wherever it comes from.

The only way this tragic situation can be resolved is through direct negotiations between the two parties to form two states—Israel and Palestinian—that are mutually recognised, with major international economic support for the new Palestinian state. Issues such as permanent borders, security, refugees and the status of Jerusalem can be resolved only as part of an end-of-conflict deal reached through that direct negotiation. A stable agreement would be much more likely if it was part of the renewed Arab peace initiative. There has been a great deal of movement and change recently across the middle east, and the renewed Arab peace initiative is extremely important and must be taken up.

The barriers to securing that peace between Israelis and Palestinians are significant on both sides. They include the question of settlements; I agree that settlements are a barrier, but they are not the only barrier, and they are barrier that can be resolved. It must be remembered

that Israel withdrew from its settlements in Sinai in 1978 as part of the peace agreement that exists to this day, and it withdrew from its 21 settlements in Gaza in 2005, when the settlers were forced to withdraw. It was anticipated at that stage that that would be followed by peace in Gaza and peaceful relations with Israel. Instead, the terrorist organisation Hamas overthrew the Palestinian Authority and has since been running Gaza, much to the detriment of its people.

The Palestinian refusal to accept Israel’s legitimacy as a majority Jewish state, firmly part of the middle east, is also a barrier to peace, and it is high time that the Palestinians changed that position.

Incitement and terrorism are also barriers. Since 2015, as hon. Members have already mentioned, Palestinian terrorism has resulted in 180 stabbings, 150 shootings, and 58 ramming attacks with vehicles, causing 50 civilian deaths and the wounding of more than 759 Israelis. That is not the way to secure peace, and this incitement must stop. Naming Palestinian Authority schools after terrorists also undermines Israeli confidence.

I must also refer to Iran’s activities in the region, particularly in supporting Hezbollah, urging and encouraging it to set up new bases in Lebanon ready to attack Israel. Again, I deplore the humanitarian situation in Gaza, but Hamas’s rebuilding of 15 terrorist tunnels to launch an attack on Israel does not bode well for peace.

However, these barriers to peace can be overcome. There is a vision to be had—the vision put forward by the late President of Israel, Shimon Peres, who spoke about the future of the middle east, with two nations, Israel and Palestine, working together as part of a new middle east. Let us hope that this debate contributes to securing that end.

6.6 pm

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): I draw Members’ attention to my entry in the register regarding a trip to Israel and the west bank last year.

The Balfour declaration of 1917 is one of the most significant and important letters in history. When incorporated into the Mandate of Palestine in 1922, the historical connection between the Jewish people and Palestine was recognised, and it has demonstrated the UK’s crucial and integral role in creating a homeland for the Jewish people. The UK has held an unwavering commitment to a two-state solution, and as we proudly mark the centenary year of the Balfour declaration, we are presented with a unique opportunity to renew the middle east peace process. We know that the way to achieve a genuine peace is for the two sides in this conflict to sit down together in direct peace talks and work towards a resolution and a lasting peace.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is complex, and there is only so much you can learn from textbooks and the media. Visiting the region last year and being able to speak to people on the ground, on both sides of the conflict, provided me with the greatest insight possible into the issues. Israel is an open and liberally democratic country that values freedom of speech, allowing people from all backgrounds and beliefs to express themselves. It is a country that celebrates diversity. Churches, mosques and synagogues stand almost side by side, and Jews, Muslims and Christians alongside each other in peaceful coexistence. Surrounding Israel, the rest of the region

includes dictatorship and the oppression of women and minorities, and in some failed states we have all too regularly seen images of young gay people being thrown off the top of buildings and women stoned on the streets. This stands in stark contrast to Israel's diversity and freedom. It truly is a beacon of democracy and hope in a troubled region.

I further discovered that there are tremendous synergies between my own area, Aberdeen, and Tel Aviv. Tel Aviv has a buzzing entrepreneurial culture, and its creative energy and early-age innovation are simply unparalleled. Similarly, in Aberdeen we have a strong entrepreneurial spirit, and there is huge potential for greater partnership working between these two cities.

I am deeply concerned by Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions protests in my constituency. The group has been actively trying to drive an Israeli cosmetics counter out of business, holding it unfairly accountable for Government policy by assuming that the Israeli Government represent the views of every Israeli citizen. In Aberdeen, poisonous and divisive banners stating, "Anti-Semitism is a crime, Anti-Zionism is a duty", have been displayed while handing out unfounded propaganda. This is wholly unacceptable, and it serves to polarise the debate, undermine community relations, undermine peace efforts and increase tensions.

Today, I join colleagues who have called for the Home Secretary to consider urgently a full ban on Hezbollah, an organisation that believes not in peace, but only in the extermination of Israel. We need to look at the actions of Hezbollah, and the Government should judge it on those actions. Hezbollah cannot be forgiven for its criminal, terrorist, or militant pursuits simply because it engages in political or humanitarian ones. I urge the Government to join our closest allies in the US, Canada and the Netherlands in proscribing Hezbollah.

The biggest obstacles to the advancement of peace include Hamas's rearmament drive in Gaza and internal fighting between Hamas and Fatah, as well as growing support for a one-state solution in Palestine that could effectively remove the existence of Israel. Neither is the advancement of peace supported by the Palestinian Authority's unilateral actions to try to gain statehood recognition at the UN before any peace process has been agreed.

With all the instability across the region and the continuing distrust between the two sides, a two-state solution still seems too far off. However, in this centenary year, let us seize the opportunity to bring about a lasting peace for both sides.

6.10 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, which relates to my visit to the west bank last October on a cross-party parliamentary delegation sponsored by the Council for Arab-British Understanding and the Muslim charity Human Appeal.

As a lawyer, I wish to address the Israeli Government's flouting of international law and their failure to observe the rule of law in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Many constituents write to me and come to speak to me about these issues. Israel is in breach of international law in both the fact and the manner of its continued occupation of the west bank. Two parallel systems of

law operate in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, depending on whether someone is an Israeli or a Palestinian, and that is not right. These issues must be addressed if any talks are to be meaningful.

Others have spoken eloquently about settlements, and it is clear that they contravene the fourth Geneva convention. But I want to speak about military courts, which I observed in operation last year. One law covers Israeli civilians who have been transplanted into the occupied territories, but Palestinians are subject to military law. Israel is the only country in the world that automatically prosecutes children in military courts.

Many lawyers more distinguished than myself have expressed concern about the way in which these courts conduct their operations, and I saw with my own eyes the basis for those concerns when I visited with Military Court Watch and saw that there was scant regard for justice or the rule of law in those courtrooms. Many Palestinians see a lawyer very shortly before their first appearance in what can only be described as a farcical process. We saw one young Palestinian man on trial for allegedly throwing stones at a settler car. It was said by his interrogator that he had been interrogated in Arabic, but that the audio recording had been lost. The young man was insistent that he had been interrogated in Hebrew, a language that he did not understand. In any court I have ever been in, if there had been such a dispute and the audio recording had been lost, the trial would not have proceeded, but in this case it did.

I also want to say something about the son of friends of my constituent Carol Morton, who is the director of development at Palcrafts and Hadeel Palestinian fair trade shop in Edinburgh, a Church of Scotland-run organisation that supports Palestinian fair trade. This young man was lifted several months ago for allegedly throwing two stones. He has been in custody since then, and his parents have got visits only as a result of Red Cross intervention. His name is Wadea Badawi, and his parents are Lousi and Mohammed. On one occasion when they visited him, his legs were tied, his head was shaved and he had been beaten. This young man has not been found guilty of anything, and that is how he is being treated. Even if his case comes to a resolution at its much-delayed next trial date on 16 July, he will not be released until the autumn.

Does the Minister really believe that an Israeli military court that behaves in such a fashion, and that has a conviction rate of just short of 100%, is one that can command the confidence of the international community? I do not, and I think it is important that Members from all parties speak out against Israel's violation of international law and of the rule of law. There should be no pussyfooting around these issues. Just as we must condemn terrorism, we must condemn so-called democratic states that violate international law and do not observe the principles of the rule of law.

6.14 pm

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): The urgency with which this Parliament must help with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was shown by the five debates held and 19 written statements made during the last Parliament. It is becoming increasingly apparent to me that there is no longer any real urgency being shown by either side of the debate about progressing towards a two-state solution. While the Israelis have become used to a status quo that delivers security for them, Palestinians have become

[Ms Nusrat Ghani]

ever more divided, as Hamas continues to clash with more moderate Palestinian factions. Alongside the ever present and ever increasing issue of illegal settlements, a two-state solution is therefore sliding further out of view.

The current governing coalition in Israel is the most right-wing in the country's history. Since the start of the year, the Israeli Government, emboldened by the new Trump Administration, have announced the creation of more than 6,000 new buildings in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and have attempted to legitimise them through the Land Regularisation Bill. The UN middle east envoy, Nickolay Mladenov, has condemned the Land Regularisation Bill, fearing that it may

“greatly diminish the prospects for Arab-Israeli peace”.

The retroactive legalisation of 55 settlements and roughly 4,000 housing units is a significant step away from a peaceful solution.

Let us take the case of Bethlehem, which has a population of 220,000. Surrounding the town are 100,000 illegal Israeli settlers, complete with vast security zones to protect them. These security zones have cut off Bethlehem from its historical connection with its twin city, Jerusalem. While these settlements are in place, it is impossible to imagine a situation in which a peaceful solution between Palestine and Israel can be found.

Many within the Israeli community used to argue that settlements provided an extra level of security for the Israeli state. Ami Ayalon, a former director of Shin Bet, the Israel Security Agency, has called this into question. The volatility and mistrust created by illegal settlement activity is increasingly putting Israeli people and soldiers at risk. Furthermore, even the former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak has emphasised that, in continuing with this policy, Israel is creating an apartheid reality.

Crispin Blunt: On the gap between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, does my hon. Friend share my concern about the reality of the communities simply not meeting because of how the checkpoints are run? The opportunities for Israelis and Palestinians to get to know and understand each other have been continually reduced by the way in which the situation has to be policed.

Ms Ghani: I agree with my hon. Friend that it just creates further friction when people do not know each other and fear each other.

While the US Administration under Obama abstained on UN resolution 2334, the newly elected Trump Administration risk creating a vacuum on the world stage. President Trump's threat to move the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem has further fuelled fears that his Administration will not push for a two-state solution. I am pleased that the United Kingdom voted for resolution 2334 and condemned the passage of the Land Regularisation Bill, but the Government must now step forward and fill that vacuum.

There are three areas in which the Government can exert pressure. First, the Israeli blockade of the Gaza strip is neither productive nor appropriate, and the Minister must call for its further relaxation. Relaxing the blockade would weaken Hamas's hand in the region, and allow for further reconciliation with the Palestinian Authority. Secondly, to that end, we must encourage

Israel to allow more reconstruction aid to enter Gaza. Tension in the Gulf states has meant that Qatari attempts to get aid in have proved fruitless, and Israel is well positioned to help to rebuild a war-torn society. Thirdly, the draconian restrictions in place on Palestinians wanting to move across the west bank continue to stoke further tensions, and by easing some of this control Israel could firmly send a message that it wants a peaceful solution and is willing to work towards it.

Although we are right to support Israel both locally and internationally in relation to the very difficult security situation in the middle east, it is precisely because we are its friends that it is our duty to stand up on the international stage and make it clear that we fully support a two-state solution and will not advocate or endorse any Israeli action that makes such a prospect less likely.

6.19 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the excellent speech of the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani), which I am sure was heard by the Minister. We are all happy to see the Minister back, although I agree with the shadow Foreign Secretary that it is a shame the Foreign Secretary could not turn up to a debate in Government time on this important issue. However, we are all very grateful to have listened to the Minister's views on this subject, rather than the Foreign Secretary's, as I suspect the Minister is rather better informed.

This is a year of anniversaries, as we have heard from many hon. Members. It is 10 years since the beginning of the blockade of Gaza, 100 years since the Balfour declaration and 50 years since the occupation. One anniversary would be significant; I hope that three are concentrating our minds. The key is occupation. If we truly want to fulfil the unfulfilled part of Balfour,

“that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine”—and those rights certainly have been prejudiced in the west bank and Gaza over the past 50 years—we need to end the occupation.

We have heard the humanitarian situation in Gaza described graphically. As was said, there have been three attacks by the IDF, one of the most powerful armies in the world, on the civilian population of Gaza, with thousands of people killed. I condemn all atrocities on either side—deaths and injuries on either side are appalling—but I wish we could have some recognition from the Members who have spoken in graphic terms about individual acts of terrorism of the thousands of people who have been killed in Gaza over the past 10 years, many of them children.

In discussing the need to end the occupation, let me contrast two things. The first is the abject failure of talks over the past 25 years since Oslo. It is not a coincidence that the talks have failed in that way. Many realistic proposals were made by Rabin before his unfortunate murder. The Arab peace initiative, which has been mentioned, is 15 years old and presents an easy and straightforward blueprint for peace: recognition by the states of the Arab League of Israel on pre-1967 borders and east Jerusalem as the capital of a Palestinian state. That is a real basis for peace that the Israelis have never been able to approach thus far, or have never been persuaded by the international community to approach.

On the other hand, there is the remorseless growth of settlements. In the last year or so, we have seen a change in the type and intensity of settlement growth. The 1,800 units in east Jerusalem, including around Sheikh Jarrah in the heart of east Jerusalem, that have been announced in the last couple of days are a fundamental game-changer, as are E1 and the new settlements between Bethlehem and east Jerusalem. All of those will make a viable Palestinian state impossible. There has been a 70% increase in settlement building on the west bank in the last year. These are continuing breaches of international humanitarian law and the fourth Geneva convention.

John Kerry has said that

“the status quo is leading towards one state and perpetual occupation”.

Just last week, the Secretary-General of the UN, António Guterres, said that

“the only way to achieve the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people”

is by ending the occupation. That is the issue at the heart of this and unless it is addressed, we will get nowhere. That is what I look to the Minister to address in his concluding comments.

6.23 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests as an officer of the Conservative Friends of Israel.

I welcome the debate because the issue of Israel and Palestinian talks is very important. Israel supports the establishment of a Palestinian state through the process of direct peace talks without preconditions. We can see that through the withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 and the release of 104 Palestinian terrorists in 2013. At the same time, all I see from the Palestinian Authority is its continued counterproductive unilateral steps to gain recognition of statehood at the United Nations. What it could not achieve through war, terrorism and violence, it seeks to achieve through international opinion.

As has been mentioned, the House debated this matter on 13 October 2014. I recall the words of the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas), who was on the Opposition Front Bench:

“That is why—the hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) should heed this—since 2011, when the Leader of the Opposition made Labour policy clear, Labour has supported Palestinian”

statehood

“at the United Nations.”—[*Official Report*, 13 October 2014; Vol. 586, c. 96.]

That is pretty clear.

During the general election, the Labour candidate in Hendon, who was a member of the Jewish Labour movement, said it was inevitable that Palestinian recognition would occur. As I said to him in many hustings and online, no it is not. I say it again to Labour Front Benchers: no it is not. I had hoped earlier today to receive a confirmation from the shadow Foreign Secretary, but no answer came from her about the Opposition’s position. I asked her a yes or no question; she failed to answer. Unilateral actions to recognise the state of Palestine before an agreement has been reached in direct talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority directly harm the peace process and the possibility of a lasting two-state solution.

Emily Thornberry: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr Offord: I will extend the same courtesy to the right hon. Lady that she gave to me and say no, thank you.

Unilateralism is a rejection of the peace process, not a means to revive it. I am therefore grateful that the Minister has made very clear today the commitment from the Government and the Conservative party—our actions speak louder than words—to reject Palestinian recognition before the peace talks. We have confirmed that we will continue to support the Oslo agreement; any other action would reject it. The Government and the Conservative party will continue our endeavours to assist in the creation of a two-state solution so that both countries—Palestine and Israel—can live in peace side by side.

Emily Thornberry: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I made Labour’s position perfectly clear—it is in the manifesto. We think that the state of Palestine should be recognised. I answered that in my speech. I do not understand the hon. Gentleman’s problem, and it is such a shame he did not take my intervention.

Mr Speaker: Yes, well I think that might be called a point of frustration, or alternatively a point of explanation, but I am afraid that we will have to leave it there. No further chuntering from a sedentary position from either side of the Chamber is required, or indeed beneficial.

6.27 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Minister back to his place. I wish him the best happiness in his new position for the years ahead.

As a well-known friend of Israel, and as someone who is passionate about freedom and democracy, it is a pleasure to speak in the debate. In the centenary year of the Balfour declaration, it is timely that we discuss the resumption of peace talks. It is also important that we remember the support that Britain gave for a Jewish democratic state, and the incredible achievement that the state of Israel has been. My belief in the rightness of that state and the support that we should have for our allies remains strong.

Israel celebrates democracy, has a liberal and open society, and protects the rights of all its minorities. It is a goal of mine to see other countries throughout the world reach the level of protection afforded to all who live in Israel. It is telling that up to 200,000 Arabs who did not flee during the war of independence in 1948 were absorbed into Israeli society as equal citizens. Their descendants make up Israel’s 1.7 million-strong Arab minority today. Israel is the only country in the region with an increasing Christian population. It stands as an oasis of religious freedom in the middle east.

In the west bank, 15% of the population were Christian in 1950. Christians make up only 2% of the population today. Under Hamas in Gaza, Christians face hostile treatment and the population is in steady decline. I do not wish to vilify Palestine—that is not my role or desire—but wrong has been done by many individuals of many creeds and races. It is unfair to attribute one act to a nation or people, but at this stage I should point to the words of our ambassador to the UN, who earlier this year said that

[Jim Shannon]

“as long as terrorists are treated as martyrs, peace will be distant. The scourge of anti-Semitic, racist and hateful language must be excised from the region.”

I agree with that wholeheartedly.

The Oslo accords legally bind Israel and Palestine to abstain from incitement and hostile propaganda. It is clear to me that the Palestinian leadership has not taken all the appropriate steps that are needed to deliver on that commitment, which has definitely played a role in the latest wave of violence by youths, who have killed 50 Israelis and foreign nationals in stabbings, shootings and car rammings.

The Minister will know that UK taxpayers' aid has freed up funds for the Palestinian Authority to reward terrorists with a monthly salary. Some £254 million has been used for that practice, which is 7% of the authority's budget and 20% of its foreign aid receipts.

I ask the Minister, in his dual role at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development, to ensure greater scrutiny of the Palestinian Authority's budget. Simply stating that our aid does not go to terrorists is not enough. Our constituents do not want their hard-earned money to benefit those who promote terrorism.

On the northern border, Israel continues to face the threat of Hezbollah. The terror group has amassed some 150,000 Iranian-supplied rockets capable of striking all of Israel. We must stand with Israel against those who seek to destroy its, and our, way of life.

I ask the Minister urgently to consider calls for the immediate proscription of Hezbollah in its entirety—its political and militant sides. We need to hold Iran accountable for its actions. The country provides weapons, training and funding to both terror groups, and it remains the world's leading sponsor of terrorism.

While both sides must come together to restart negotiations, we must make it clear that the onus is on the Palestinians to demonstrate their commitment to peace. Let us grasp the opportunity that the centenary of the Balfour declaration brings and make it clear to the Palestinians that they must truly renounce violence and finally recognise Israel as a Jewish state, the only state of the Jewish people, for it is only when both sides respect each other's right to self-determination alongside one another that a lasting peace will finally prevail.

Ms Ghani: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Forgive me, but due to the time restraint, I forgot in my rush to mention my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I visited the Knesset, at the invitation of the Speaker of the Knesset, to give evidence on anti-Semitism and Islamophobia.

Mr Speaker: I am most grateful to the hon. Lady for declaring that via the mechanism of a point of order. It will have been noted and appreciated, I am sure, by the House.

6.31 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): This is the first speech I have made in a debate since the general election, so I would like to place on record my heartfelt thanks to my constituents for giving me the opportunity, and

their trust, to serve the people of Ilford North for a second time. I should also thank the Prime Minister for her contribution to my election.

I rise this afternoon in exasperation. Despite having been a Member for only two years, I have, for all of the excellent speeches, a sense of *déjà vu* and repetition. Goodness knows what it is like for those who have been listening to and taking part in these debates for the last 50 years.

I first visited Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories 10 years ago with the Union of Jewish Students on a Young Political Leaders trip. Most recently, I visited with Medical Aid for Palestinians and the Council for the Advancement of Arab-British Understanding. I spoke to a wide range of people on both sides of the conflict—political leaders, civil society and trade union leaders, and people who have lost family to this bloody conflict—who have been affected in different ways. At every point, I try to put myself in the shoes of the people affected. The exasperation arises because the road map should be clear: a two-state solution based on 1967 borders with mutually agreed land swaps and a shared capital in Jerusalem. All these things are the only viable solution for the long-term security and interests of both Israelis and Palestinians.

The obstacles are also well known. They include but are not limited to poor political leadership and missed opportunities; a cycle of violence claiming the lives of innocent Palestinians and Israelis; the ongoing military occupation of the west bank; the blockage of Gaza by Israel and Egypt; and the refusal of people in the region to accept Israel's right to exist and the right of Palestinians to a state of their own. So much of this has been obvious for so long, yet the prospect of a two-state solution looks worryingly distant.

Let us put ourselves in the shoes of the Israelis. This country knows what it is like to experience the threat of terrorism and political violence. Israel has a right to defend itself and its citizens, whether from rocket attacks, incitement to deadly violence and suicide bombings against Israelis, or from those who would gladly see the world's only Jewish state wiped from the map. I have never supported those who wish to delegitimise the state of Israel. I have always believed that peace will ultimately come about through face-to-face negotiations facilitated by honest brokers, including this country. It will be made possible, ultimately, by instilling a culture of trust and a desire for peaceful co-existence on the part of both Israelis and Palestinians.

Israelis and Palestinians have something in common: terrible political leadership. That brings me to the policies of this particular Israeli Government. I have seen at first hand the impact of Israeli Government policy towards Palestinians living in the west bank. The ongoing expansion of illegal Israeli settlements cannot be justified, nor can the demolition of Palestinian homes, nor can the use of byzantine laws to seize land from its rightful owners, nor can the military court system, which violates the very principles of natural justice, and nor can the regular intimidation of Palestinian civilians and international aid workers, who too often are victims of settler violence. As many Members have said, the humanitarian crisis in Gaza is simply intolerable and more must be done to bring an end to that terrible travesty.

This, however, is the question that I ask in response to comments that have been made today. If I were a young Palestinian growing up on the west bank or in Gaza, what hope would I have? Where would I look to, with any sense of optimism that one day I could live freely in a state of my own, able to exercise democratic rights or travel the world as any young person in this country could?

This is the greatest tragedy of all. As I said earlier, Israel has a proud history as a democratic state, but the policies of its Government are the greatest weapon—the greatest tool—that its opponents could have, striking as they do at the heart of Israel's proud tradition as an independent democratic state.

6.35 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for inviting me to speak in this important debate.

Since the Trump Administration came to power, on the surface they have projected an image of trying to bring Israel and Palestine back into talks. However, the language of Trump has been meek, especially in condemnation of settlement building. Emboldened, the Knesset has reacted by passing more extreme legislation, and only last month ground was broken with a new “legal” settlement in the west bank, for the first time in a quarter of a century.

The truth is that we now feel, in many ways, further from peace than ever: further than ever from a lasting and sustainable peace that would allow Israel to exist in safety and security, bring prosperity, security and self-determination, and give life to the people of Palestine—a fair and peaceful settlement.

Only days ago, I met leading expert Professor Paul Rogers, of the world-renowned peace studies department at Bradford university. We discussed this issue, and what stood out was that although, in the current context, some would argue that the conflict between Israel and Palestine is small by comparison with that in, say, Syria, in reality it is massive in terms of its symbolism and the way it is used. It has a significant impact on how terrorism operates in the region and beyond. It is used to recruit and encourage extremists across the world. We must understand that peace would be more than a stabilising factor within the region; it would go beyond that. In the battle against vicious ideologies like that of Daesh, we cannot and must not underestimate the importance of the Israel-Palestine debate in the wider context of its influence on terror. There are groups that seek to exploit it for their own gain, and not for the prosperity of the people who are trapped in never-ending conflict.

In 2010, three years after the start of the blockade in Gaza, David Cameron said:

“Gaza cannot and must not be allowed to remain a prison camp.”

However, nearly a decade since the start of that blockade, the situation is deteriorating rather than improving. It is certainly nowhere near the vision of our Government in 2010. The infrastructure has been decimated. Bombardment and power shortages are having devastating consequences in hospitals, and a particularly devastating effect on water treatment. It has been estimated that there are more than 51,000 displaced people in Gaza. We must

recognise the conditions of life there: they are not conditions that anyone should live in, let alone have enforced upon them.

Internationally, there should be no perpetual state of war and no perpetual state of occupation. This is occupied territory, and the occupying force has a duty to protect these people. Three generations of Palestinians will have grown up knowing nothing but occupation and fear.

We have been debating the two-state solution and the political parameters of this situation for decades, in the Chamber and elsewhere, with no peace or negotiations in sight. We have to find a way to move through this moment into something better. No doubt there are moderates on both sides, but concessions are almost impossible. Israel is impregnable in its insecurities, and that does not bring long-term security. I call on the Government to tell us not what they think but what they intend to do. How are we going to move this process forward? As I said the last time I spoke, it is time to move beyond condemnation to accountability.

The fact remains that we have seen 50 years of occupation and 10 years of blockade, and engagement in every peace process that has taken place since 1967 is not unilateral. What has the Oslo agreement brought Palestinians? There has been a 600% increase in the number of illegal settlements. It is time to move beyond condemnation.

6.39 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I too refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Since time is so short, I will concentrate on an aspect that I do not think has been properly discussed this afternoon: what is happening to democratic debate and expression inside the state of Israel. There are developments there that gravely concern me and should concern the rest of the House.

There has been broad consensus in this Chamber when we have discussed this issue today and on other occasions: most people would favour a two-state solution—two democratic secular states, each reflecting the different traditions of that region, but each living in peace and harmony with one another—and in order to get that, a phased end to the occupation, peace talks and so forth. That was a mainstream—although perhaps not a majority—political position inside the state of Israel until quite recently, and it is probably the majority position of the Jewish diaspora throughout the world. Yet today inside Israel it is seen as an extremist position, and people who advocate it are denigrated and denounced for doing so.

Hagai El-Ad is the director of an organisation called B'Tselem, an Israeli human rights organisation based in Jerusalem. Earlier this year he addressed the United Nations in terms not dissimilar to many who have contributed today. The response of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was personally to launch a Facebook tirade against him and to threaten to change the law to prevent people doing national service from working for that organisation. As a consequence, others joined in and that organisation and its officials received thousands of threats, including death threats. That is what they got for daring to criticise the Israeli Government. It would be a little like the Prime Minister of this country doing

[Tommy Sheppard]

the same thing against the director of Liberty for publishing a report criticising British Government policy in, say, Northern Ireland.

Breaking the Silence is an organisation that is composed of veterans of the Israeli army; only those who have served in the IDF can be members of Breaking the Silence. It is fair to say that it does not take a mainstream position; it is critical of the occupation. It is led by a formidable man called Yehuda Shaul who told me to my face that he was a proud Zionist but his main concern is that Israel's biggest threat was the occupation of Palestine itself, and that is why he wanted it to end.

That organisation has campaigned long and hard within Israel to try to put an alternative point of view. What is the response of Israeli politicians? Some in the Knesset have tabled motions calling for the organisation to be outlawed as a terrorist organisation. That did not get very far, but a law has been passed in the Knesset to make it illegal for Breaking the Silence to go into schools and colleges and speak to young people about the choices facing them. That is hardly a liberal position.

There are many other similar examples, including the no contact policy of Mr Netanyahu. He has said that any international Government or organisation that makes contact with organisations that are critical of the Israeli Government will not speak to the Israeli Government. He said that to the German Foreign Minister earlier this year; the German Foreign Minister had the decency to say that the German Government will not be told by anyone who they will and will not speak to, and he went ahead and met Breaking the Silence and B'Tselem. The response of Mr Netanyahu was to cancel his meeting with the German Foreign Minister—the Foreign Minister of one of Israel's biggest supporters in the international community. That is the degree of illiberalism and intolerance, and I seek an assurance from the Minister that this Government will not bend in their dedication to consult other opinions within Israel because of threats by the Israeli Government and will not be cowed into refusing to recognise the plurality of discussion that is needed.

6.43 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and of the Minister, who said at the beginning of the debate that this House has knocked around these issues for over 30 years. Today's debate is welcome but, sadly, feels slightly like the film "Groundhog Day". We debate and discuss, emotions and injustices are raised, we demand peace for the region, yet nothing changes and we do it all again six months later: a carousel of misery, false hope and inaction.

Israeli people continue to live in fear of violence, bombs fall on Gaza—as they did again this week—Palestinians are still living in fear of their homes and communities being occupied with no notice, and thousands of Palestinians are still being held in Israeli prisons, many without charge. We can only thank those people on the ground working day and night to maintain peace that we are not in the middle of a similar increase in violence to that we witnessed in recent years. But it is not all negative. There have been numerous times when it feels as though progress has been made. As my right

hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) said, in October 2014 this House voted by 274 votes to 12 in favour of a motion to recognise Palestine as a state alongside Israel. That was a brave and welcome decision. As the right hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan) said at the time:

"Recognition of statehood is not a reward for anything; it is a right."—[*Official Report*, 13 October 2014; Vol. 586, c. 72.]

Recognising Palestine as a state gives moral and political support to moderate Palestinian voices pushing back against violent extremists, and I would encourage the House to decide on a timeframe for that to happen.

Only last year, the United Nations passed a resolution condemning the occupations. Settlements are illegal under international law. They breach the fourth Geneva convention, which prohibits the transfer of the occupier's

"own civilian population into the territory it occupies".

But the UN resolution was passed only because of President Obama's support, and now, with a new and very different President in place, we need clarification on what conversations the Government have had with him. Will they clarify whether he is of the same opinion as the rest of the international community?

Generations on both sides simply cannot continue to be brought up witnessing the brutality of war, fearing for their lives, and stressed and anxious about the future. The middle east and the entire international community need peace. More than anything, children should have the right to a childhood, to be a child, to play, to learn and to be happy. I would like to draw the House's attention to the serious and ongoing situation of Palestinian child detainees. At the moment, 182 children are being held in Israeli military detention, most on stone-throwing charges, and 46% of them are being held in violation of the fourth Geneva convention and the Rome statute. The inquiry of 2012 chaired by the former Attorney General, Baroness Scotland, stated:

"Military law and public administration should deal with Palestinian children on an equal footing with Israeli children."

That is clearly not happening.

It is now 50 years since the occupations began, and that is 50 years too long. Today, just about every respectable non-governmental organisation, Government and international community member stands against the occupations. How much longer can this go on? Let us ask ourselves whether we are doing all we can to bring peace to this volatile but beautiful and potentially prosperous region. We need vision, courage and leadership. Will this Government pledge to take up the baton and change the narrative by pushing even harder for peace?

6.47 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It has been a pleasure to be here for this excellent debate, and to welcome the Minister for the Middle East to his position. This is also a significant debate for me personally, because when I came here as a newly elected MP, my very first vote in the House was to recognise the state of Palestine. As the shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) said earlier, the vote was won by a

majority of 262. I thank all those speakers on both sides of the House who have made such passionate and erudite contributions throughout the course of this debate. I particularly want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Fiona Onasanya), who made her maiden speech today. She set a shining example as one of Peterborough's powerful women, and I look forward to her future contributions in the House.

One common thread has run through all the speeches today: the urgent need for peace. We are now 100 years on from the Balfour declaration, and we cannot tolerate a situation in which yet another generation of Israeli and Palestinian children grow up understanding violence, division and extremism as part of their normal lives. We owe it to all those children to see this conflict from their perspective and to resolve to end it on their behalf, whether they are young Israeli children living in fear of the air raid sirens in Tel Aviv or young Palestinian children living in grinding poverty in refugee camps behind the Israeli blockade. Will the Minister tell us what specific steps the Government are taking to secure humanitarian relief and a long-term improvement in conditions for all those young Palestinian children condemned to a life of poverty and violence simply as a result of where they were born?

On the issue of humanitarian relief, let me ask the Minister another question. The Foreign Office stated in December last year, after the Brexit outcome was known, that the UK's financial aid to the Palestinian Authority was best channelled directly through EU funding programmes. The Foreign Office said that the mechanism "offers the best value for money and the most effective way of directly providing support."

Do the Government intend to continue their participation in that funding programme even after Brexit? If not, what alternatives are they putting in place to ensure that they achieve the same value for money and the same effectiveness of outcomes?

In conclusion, we have made it clear today that an end to conflict between Israel and Palestine can be achieved only when all sides stop taking actions that perpetuate the conflict and start taking actions that will nurture peace. That means not only a total end to attacks on the Israeli people and state and a clear recognition of Israel's right to exist, but stepping up efforts to tackle the grinding poverty, the lack of opportunities and the cycle of violence in which so many Palestinian children are trapped. It means having an honest conversation with our Israeli friends about the actions they can take to ease the humanitarian crisis, particularly through the lifting of the blockade. Since 1917, Britain has stood by the two key elements of the Balfour declaration: working to establish and protect the national homeland of Israel while ensuring that nothing is done to prejudice the rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine. Those remain the key tenets of Labour's policy on the middle east, and they are the key tests that we will apply when judging the policy statements of this Government. With that in mind, I look forward to the Minister's response.

6.51 pm

Alistair Burt: I thank the Opposition Front-Bench team for both their contributions, in particular the short and thoughtful summing up from the hon. Member

for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes). I echo her remark that this has been an excellent debate: more than 20 colleagues speaking with great force in a short period of time about things that they know a lot about.

Like the hon. Lady, I will start by referring to the new hon. Member for Peterborough (Fiona Onasanya). She says that she is a symbol of diversity in her city. That is true, but she is also a symbol of strength, dignity and clarity, and she has a passion for the important causes she mentioned. I know that we will hear more of her. I particularly liked her concerns about the mental health of army veterans. She will find out that looking after mental health was another of the jobs I used to have. She also spoke about achieving her dreams, and I am quite sure that in doing so she is helping other girls in her city to do exactly the same. Her forthright defence of faith, saying that it is mankind's frailties, not God's love, that causes the problem, was heard and welcomed by many of us.

There was a range of other speeches. My hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) made a thoughtful contribution, as befits the most recent Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) spoke with extensive experience in this area. The hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) drew her speech to a thoughtful conclusion with a remark from Shimon Peres. My hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) both made thoughtful speeches. We heard optimistic speeches from my hon. Friends the Members for Cheadle (Mary Robinson), for Henley (John Howell), for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) and for Moray (Douglas Ross), picking out a bit of the relationship with Israel which makes a difference and suggests that there is a future, and referring to neighbours such as Jordan that have made a contribution to peace in the area.

There were tough words for the state of Israel from the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani), and the hon. Members for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), for Bradford West (Naz Shah), for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard). All of them referred to difficult things for the state of Israel to deal with. I say to the hon. Member for Edinburgh East that I have walked the streets with B'Tselem and Peace Now and value the contribution that they have made. I certainly will not be told to whom I should speak when it comes to those who represent valued, trusted and moderate opinion in other states. There were harsh words for the Palestinian side from my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) and my hon. Friends the Members for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies) and for Hendon (Dr Offord). My hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire made remarks about Hamas in Gaza, about which I will say a little more, but we need to be clear about what is happening in Gaza under the rule of Hamas. We continue to have concerns about the abuses of human rights and Hamas de facto authorities in Gaza; 17 death sentences were issued and three were carried out without the ratification of the Palestinian President. We continue to have concerns about restrictions on freedom of expression and of

[Alistair Burt]

assembly, and on respect for LGBT rights. We remain deeply concerned that Hamas and other militants are rearming, rebuilding tunnels and holding military training camps.

Overall, although the sympathies of colleagues for one side or another were occasionally clear, it was rare that those sympathies were not expressed without a recognition that there were issues on both sides. Although we have spoken about this a great deal, the recognition that the pain is serious and that we want to do something about it was clear for all. I am sorry not to have time to deal with all the questions raised, but I just want to pick out a little about the DFID side of this and the support being offered to the Palestinian people, who are under pressure.

In relation to the Occupied Palestinian Territories, the UK has provided £349 million of support for Palestinian development from 2011 to 2015, and a further £72 million in 2015-16. I do not see any suggestion that that is going to change or falter. The UK pledged £20 million extra for reconstruction and development in Gaza following the Gaza reconstruction conference in 2014. We are one of the largest donors to UNRWA—the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East—providing basic services to approximately 5 million Palestinians, including 70% of the population of Gaza.

Those of us who have visited Gaza know how miserable it is. If there is one place that we could say stands for the very reason this conflict must come to an end, it would be Gaza. The hon. Member for Ilford North asked what a young Palestinian thinks about their future, but what does the young Israeli soldier think when they are standing on the border of Lebanon and being involved in the west bank? What do they think of their chances of ensuring that their children no longer have to defend the state of Israel in the way they feel committed to do. That is the measure of the task.

If Members want a clear commitment from my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and myself, they can

have it. We do not know exactly where the United States is on this issue, but we do know there is a real interest there and a determination to go to see people and talk to them. The deal is not a simple one, as we all know, but it is not often that an American President takes an interest at the start of a first term, and this provides another opportunity. Most of us in this House have seen those opportunities come and go over the years, so this is a chance now that we should all take. We have all seen enough of this.

To answer the question asked by the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), there is no change in our policy. The United Kingdom's long-standing position on the map is clear: we support a negotiated settlement leading to a safe and secure Israel living alongside a viable and sovereign Palestinian state, based on 1967 borders, with agreed land swaps, with Jerusalem as the shared capital of both states, and with a just, fair, agreed and realistic settlement for refugees. I do not think any other state is going to tell me that that is not going to be our continuing policy; I assure her of that.

What are we going to do? We are going to redouble our efforts. We have to work with international partners and will continue to engage with those in Israel who are seeking such a solution. We recognise the concerns of those in Israel who fear for their security, and they are right to do so, as we have heard. We know well about the random attacks and the fears that have affected the people of Israel. Equally, there will be no ultimate lasting peace unless the hand is reached out and this time grasped by those on the other side, both in Gaza and on the west bank, to make something of this. The United Kingdom will be determined to do everything it can, and those of us who have a second chance at something that means a lot will have a really good go at this. I do not promise an answer, but I do promise an effort.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Israel and Palestinian talks.

Perth's Cultural Contribution to the UK

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

7 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I am grateful for this opportunity to debate the cultural contribution of the city of Perth to the United Kingdom's national life. As we await with bated breath the shortlist for the 2021 UK city of culture, our cultural contribution to this nation is vast, overwhelming and ever evolving. Nevertheless, we are not a city that rests on its laurels. We are a city that is rich in heritage and culture, oozing confidence and simply dripping with ambition. With our dramatic riverside setting in the heart of Scotland, where highland meets lowland, in the middle of a hybrid cultural melting pot, we are by far the most beautiful and attractive of all the city of culture candidates.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that support for the city of Perth goes beyond his party and his country? There are Government Members, whom he would no doubt refer to as Sassenachs, who think that Perth is a great city.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend—I call him that because, as I think you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, he is my colleague in the rock band MP4—for that contribution. I do, of course, recognise the fact that Perth's bid is supported in constituencies throughout the United Kingdom.

Our plan is to make Perth one of Europe's great small cities and, in achieving that, give confidence to the other small cities and large towns throughout the United Kingdom. Let me tell you a little about the city of Perth, Mr Deputy Speaker, because our story is utterly unique and like no other, and I know that you are a student of the civic attributes of so many of the communities represented in this House.

Perth is the ancient capital of Scotland. In the 9th century, Kenneth MacAlpin forged the Kingdom of Alba from the Picts and the Scots and was crowned Scotland's first King at Scone. From then on, every King of Scotland was crowned on the stone of destiny in Scone, which is now part of the Perth city region. I shall say more on that artefact later.

Perth became a royal burgh in 1210, and by the early 14th century it was the most fortified settlement in the whole of Scotland. In the 16th century, the Scottish reformation was sparked in Perth, when John Knox preached in the wonderful surrounds of St John's kirk in the heart of the city. Our place in Scotland's pre-industrial history was secured and cemented with a pre-eminent place in the Jacobite struggles and the idea and creation of the modern nation of Scotland.

With industrialisation, Perth's contribution was matched only by our contribution to the concurrent Scottish enlightenment. Our whisky, dyeing and linen, and our industry powered by the mills along the River Tay, were matched by the cultural contributions from John Duncan Fergusson and Patrick Geddes.

In the 20th century, the city of Perth became the administrative centre for much of the Scottish whisky industry and for Scottish agriculture. It offered fantastic financial services, particularly insurance, which is still a

feature of the city today. From the 1940s, hydro-electric dams shaped communities and landscapes right across highland Perthshire, signalling the coming of the renewable energy revolution.

To bring things right up to date, five years ago we were awarded full city status by Her Majesty the Queen during her diamond jubilee celebrations, in recognition of Perth's contribution to the civic, cultural and national life of not just Scotland but the whole United Kingdom.

We simply overflow with cultural activities. We have four nationally recognised arts organisations: Horsecross Arts, Culture Perth and Kinross, Pitlochry Festival theatre and the Perth festival of the arts. We have 20 dedicated cultural venues, including the wonderful Perth concert hall, which is celebrating its 12th year this year and is the largest concert-hall venue outside the Scottish central belt and, in my view, the finest concert hall in Scotland.

We are in the process of renovating our existing cultural estate with the creation of a new cultural quarter in the Mill Street area of the city and the multi-million pound redevelopment of the wonderful Perth theatre, which is one of the oldest and best-established theatres in not just Scotland but the whole United Kingdom.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making excellent points about why Perth should be the city of culture. Does he agree that Perth is the ideal location, not least because some of the areas nearby, such as North East Fife, would benefit hugely from Perth's city of culture statue?

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is a son of Perth and knows the city particularly well. We are of course partners in the Tay cities deal, and I am pretty certain that the energy and activity sparked by Perth being the city of culture will be reflected in his constituency, too.

We are the only one of the bidding cities that has a premier league football team that is still competing in European competition, though that might be short-lived as the mighty St Johnstone take to the fields of Lithuania tomorrow night to try to get a goal back.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing tonight's Adjournment debate. He will be aware of how fond I am of Perth, particularly of the mighty St Johnstone—good luck to them tomorrow night in Lithuania. What does it say about the cultural impact of Perth when the title of tonight's debate is Perth's cultural contribution to the UK? The debate I held on Paisley's merits was about Paisley's cultural contribution to the world, so there is a serious lack of ambition from Perth. Seriously, I wish Perth all the very best. Here is to a Scottish winner of the competition.

Pete Wishart: I think I am grateful for that contribution. It was a cunning plan to get the city and culture into the one title, which we have just about achieved. I say to my hon. Friend that I know that we are rivals in trying to be shortlisted for this competition, but the city of Perth will fall right behind the large town of Paisley if it is shortlisted. I am pretty certain that the large town of Paisley will fall behind the city of Perth if it is us who

[*Pete Wishart*]

are successful in this bid. With all our particular cultural attributes, we are more than able and willing to carry with distinction the badge of UK city of culture.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this matter tonight. Obviously, I look forward to working with him to help to secure the city of culture bid for Perth. Hopefully, he will agree that it is not just Perth that will benefit directly, but wider Perthshire—the 12 towns and the more than 100 settlements that feed in and further enrich Perth and that are enriched by Perth. We should also look back at Perthshire's cultural contribution to the UK, which started not in the middle ages, but goes right back to Roman settlements. There were Roman roads and trading with the Roman Empire. A contribution was made by taking artefacts from Scotland and throughout the rest of the UK to the wider Roman Empire. In Perthshire, we have Innerpefferay Library, which was established in 1680 and was the first lending library in Scotland. I hope that he will consider the wider Perthshire area and its benefits in his proposal for the city of culture bid.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Can I just say that Members should make interventions, not speeches? I am sure that the hon. Gentleman wants to save that speech for another occasion.

Pete Wishart: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that contribution. I was coming on to mention the big hinterland issues that support this particular bid. May I also congratulate him on what he said? I thought that I was doing well going as far back as Kenneth MacAlpin, but he has managed to beat me by going back to Roman settlement times. I thank him for that and look forward to working with a fellow Perthshire MP to ensure that this bid will be progressed.

This bid is truly inspired, innovative and creative. It fully captures the spirit and the idea of the UK city of culture. At the heart of our bid is a determination to tackle the quiet crisis faced by cities such as Perth and the 30 million people in the UK who live outside our big cities. It is a bid that speaks for the small cities and large towns where so many of our fellow citizens live; that recognises our particular issues, challenges and agendas; and that looks beyond the veneer of scale and rurality—where rural beauty can sometimes mask rural poverty and social isolation. I am talking about small cities where the lack of high-value jobs drives talent elsewhere, particularly among our young people. It is in this setting where culture could make a real difference in connecting people and places. In reply to the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham), we believe that an outstanding city of culture is as meaningful for the people living in its hinterland as it is for those living in the city itself. We want Perth to lead the way in defining these issues and that agenda.

The quiet crisis that I mentioned is characterised in Perthshire by three big challenges, which is our dependency on tourism, hospitality and agriculture where wages are 9% below the Scottish average.

Perth is often seen as a prosperous city. I concede that it is, but sometimes the veneer of prosperity masks real defining issues such as a low-wage and low-skill economy,

which is depressingly still a feature of so much of Perth's community. Some 38% of neighbourhoods are classed as financially stretched, one in five children live in poverty and cultural participation among the 20% most deprived communities is limited in its opportunity. It is the quiet crisis of 150,000 people living across a massive 5,000 square miles with the associated social isolation and low cultural participation levels. These challenges are no less urgent and real than those faced by the big cities, but they are less recognised. We hope to change that in the course of the bid.

Our bid will focus on the contribution of small cities and large towns to the UK economy, alongside the large-scale cultural regeneration programmes that are a transforming feature of our big cities. Different approaches are needed for different types of cities to unlock the potential of places such as Perth and tackle the quiet crisis that they face.

We will use UK city of culture to make real step changes, using culture as a transformative tool and raising the bar for great small cities with imagination, joy, wonder, emotion and surprise. Since Sir Walter Scott's time, Perth has been known as the fair city. It is a name with which we are very familiar and one that has become intimately associated with the city of Perth, but we want to move beyond the fair city. We will celebrate Perth's beauty and place at the heart of Scotland's story, but we will do so by jump-starting our future. We will honour Perth's heart and our extraordinary history, including a mass celebration of our bid for the stone of destiny to be rightly returned to Perthshire. We will have that tick-box attraction that will drive new generations of tourists to our wonderful city.

We want it to be wild, taking outstanding creative work into the extraordinary landscape surrounding Perth—our wild places, hillsides, lochs and rivers—and giving a voice to the new tribes of the 21st century. We want it to be beyond, starting in our medieval city vennels, the ancient but clogged arteries that criss-cross Perth, flowing through the rivers connecting the city to its hinterland. And it will be connected, both physically and digitally. We are looking to democratise access to culture in a world where people can create and access it across many different and varied platforms. As the infrastructure to deliver this improves and becomes more accessible, we want to ensure that visitor experiences are improved and enhanced. Technology can enable togetherness. We will use it as such.

All this will be created with the participation of the 150,000 citizens living in the Perth city region. We expect more than 740,000 people to take part in person during 2021, and around 650,000 via our ambitious digital platform projects. We can deliver this. Our plans are fully costed and our bid is built on solid roots of delivery, bringing public services and communities together to plan and deliver these priorities across our city region.

We are looking for a solid legacy. By 2022, Perth can be the place that has led the way for other small cities and large towns by reconnecting with its huge hinterland through culture. We hope to create 1,500 jobs in the creative industries by 2021 and an extra 60 additional creative industry start-ups by 2025, to grow our creative sector by 25% to £58 million gross value added by 2021 and to £72 million by 2025, to increase our annual tourism visitors to 2.6 million in 2021, to recruit

2,500 volunteers for Perth 2021 and have 40,000 people volunteering annually by 2025. We hope to increase cultural participation in our most deprived communities by 16% by 2025. We will use the city of culture title to leave a profound legacy and kick-start our future beyond the fair city.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): All these targets are undoubtedly achievable not just by the city that wins the title, but by all the bidding cities. If they want an example of that, they have to look no further than Glasgow, whose cultural renaissance began with its award of European city of culture in 1990. I wish all the cities competing for the title the best of luck.

Pete Wishart: I do, too. I actually performed on the evening when Glasgow was granted its European city of culture status. It was in Glasgow Square, on the eve of 1989 to 1990. I am pretty sure my hon. Friend was not there, but he is absolutely right: even just the process of bidding is transformative for these large towns and cities. I have a particular vested interest in the city of Perth, and I hope we are successful, but I do wish all the other cities well.

I believe in this bid. The time is right for the voice of the small cities to be heard; for us to be held in the same regard as the big cities of the United Kingdom and to have our agendas addressed; for new cultural regeneration models to emerge in small cities, alongside what works in the large cities; and for us to speak for the 30 million people who live in communities such as Perth.

We are a unique and beautiful small city, and our cultural and heritage assets reflect Perth as the place where ancient Scotland was forged and modern Scotland was shaped. In Perth we have the capacity, the potential, the passion, the imagination and the means to do this. Perth is simply the place.

7.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (John Glen): I congratulate the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) on securing this debate about the city of Perth's cultural contribution to the UK—and, indeed, the world. Once again, he has demonstrated that he is a passionate advocate for the city and its ambition to become the 2021 UK city of culture. Of course, as many in the House know, his cultural credentials are exemplary. He was a member of the bands Big Country and Runrig, and is the only MP ever to have appeared on "Top of the Pops". He has been a passionate advocate for culture in this House.

While listening to the hon. Gentleman's speech, I was very aware of the qualities of the bid. These are undoubtedly exciting times for Perth, the fair city, as indeed they are for the other 10 areas bidding for this prestigious title. I know that the shortlist announcement is eagerly awaited, and the independent advisory panel for the competition met recently to assess the bids. I will be carefully considering its recommendations before deciding the shortlist, and we expect to be able to let people know the outcome around the middle of this month.

I want to say a few words about the city of culture before I address the hon. Gentleman's excellent remarks about Perth. The UK city of culture programme enables

places in the UK—they do not actually have to be a city—to compete every four years to hold the title. UK city of culture status helps a place to use culture and creativity to regenerate and transform, attracting visitors, bringing communities together, promoting new partnerships and raising the profile of its culture. Competing places are expected to build a high-quality arts and cultural programme that reaches a wide variety of audiences and leads to lasting social and economic regeneration. Derry-Londonderry was the first UK city of culture in 2013, and Hull is the incumbent.

I have been very impressed by the wide range of places that have thrown their hat into the ring for 2021. We have the smallest cities from England and Wales, in Wells, and in St Davids and the Hundred of Dewisland. There are also larger cities such as Sunderland, Coventry and Stoke-on-Trent. As we have heard, we have an old town, in Paisley, and a new one, in Warrington. There is another rural bid from Hereford and a south-coast entrant, in Portsmouth.

Perth itself has ambitions to be a different type of city of culture from what we have seen so far, and that has been eloquently set out by the hon. Gentleman this evening. Smaller entrants may see the competition in a different way—as a means to support and strengthen communities, rather than to promote physical and economic regeneration.

I am very clear that the economic and social importance of culture to places is now widely acknowledged and uncontested. That was underlined in our culture White Paper, which was published last year by my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), and it is equally recognised, I hope, in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Taking part in the arts improves self-esteem, confidence and health, and brings people together. It makes people feel good about themselves and the environment around them. Culture has played a big part in redeveloping and energising Liverpool and Hull. Their national and international profiles have soared as European capital of culture and UK city of culture respectively.

I want to spend a few moments assessing the effects of Hull 2017. Hull has seen a number of key benefits, and its UK city of culture year has also identified many opportunities for the future. I was fortunate enough to be able to see and hear about them first hand when I visited the city in my first week as Minister a couple of weeks ago. In 2013, when Hull was bidding for the title, little more than a third of residents participated in the arts. Now, nine out of 10 residents have attended or experienced a cultural event or activity as part of Hull 2017.

The first three-month season saw about 1.4 million visits to more than 450 events and activities. There were half a million visits to Hull's museums and galleries in the first four months of the year, and visits to Ferens Art Gallery and Hull Maritime Museum are up by more than 500%. Moreover, 70% of residents say that Hull being the UK city of culture is positively affecting their lives. Almost everyone who has attended an event has enjoyed it. I am also delighted that there have been more than 100,000 hours of volunteering so far. All volunteers have my deep appreciation and thanks.

The economic boost is substantial, too, amounting to £60 million in 2017 alone. Hotel occupancy is up by 14% and train journeys are up by 17%. Almost 90 new

[*John Glen*]

businesses and 550 new jobs have been created since 2013, and more than half of city centre businesses reported benefits in the first three months of this year.

I really enjoyed seeing some of the fabulous Hull 2017 projects. A particular highlight for me was Ferens Art Gallery. Some £1.5 million of Government investment has supported the refurbishment of this world-class gallery, which shows some of the finest local and national art. We will continue to showcase the power of culture to transform communities through initiatives like UK city of culture and the great exhibition of the north, which will take place next year in Newcastle-Gateshead, which I also visited a couple of weeks ago.

Let me turn, very happily, to Perth's bid for UK city of culture 2021. All the 2021 entrants have looked at Hull and seen the opportunities it would bring. We have heard today, very eloquently, about Perth's ambitions. We have heard how the area faces a "quiet crisis" whereby many people in the region feel alienated. There is enormous beauty, but there are also pockets of poverty and social isolation. The city wants to better connect people in the rural areas, as my new hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham), from the south of the county, has explained. We want the city of culture programme to help to tackle social isolation, to overcome the public transport barriers that put people off visiting city centre venues, and to help to develop a night-time economy. The city wants to shine a light on its present and future, as well as its glorious heritage. It wants to be seen as one of Europe's great small cities. Perth's creative industry sector currently has the capacity to expand, it would be fair to say, so it wants to attract new talent and encourage existing talent to remain.

Perth has already shown with the Ryder cup that it can welcome huge numbers of international visitors, and it wants to sustain that level of tourism. It possesses an enviable collection of cultural and heritage assets. St Ninian's cathedral, a category A-listed building, has received more than £150,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund for restoration works. The HLF has also recently provided funding for repairs to St Stephen's Roman Catholic church, the Perth and Kinross Heritage Trust, and the Croft Woodlands Project.

Perth concert hall is currently hosting the Southern Fried festival of American roots music, and it will be one of the venues for the 2021 Royal National Mòd, if the bid is successful. The Black Watch Museum hosted the ceramic poppy sculpture "Weeping Window" last year as part of the 14-18 NOW first world war centenary arts programme. There are plans to transform Perth's city hall and ambitions for it to house the stone of destiny.

Luke Graham: It is great to hear my hon. Friend listing Perth's many virtues. Since a Scottish city is yet to be awarded UK city of culture status, does he agree that it is time for the award to come to Scotland—and what better city than Scotland's newest city in Perth?

John Glen: My hon. Friend makes a passionate case. As I said earlier, we do not have much longer to wait.

Perth theatre and St Paul's church are also being refurbished. I also want to highlight the UK cultural contribution of Perth Museum and Art Gallery. It has hosted the joint Tate and National Galleries of Scotland project "Artist Rooms". The recent £10 million investment in the gallery offers an exciting opportunity to partner with Tate Britain, focusing on the gallery's outstanding collection of paintings by John Duncan Fergusson.

I cannot emphasise enough that whoever is the ultimate winner, Perth, like all the bidders, will benefit from having entered the competition. Dundee's bid for city of culture 2017, although it was ultimately unsuccessful, brought incredible benefits to the area. Dundee has gone ahead with the V&A Dundee Museum of Design and plans to bid to become European capital of culture in 2023. I am very clear that preparing a bid generates new ideas, creates new partnerships and energises the cultural sectors. A candidate city can have a higher profile both at home and abroad, which may bring new investment and opportunities to attract many more visitors. Remember, Hull was successful only the second time around. The area learned so much from its first attempt, and it used that learning when making its successful bid for 2017.

I commend Perth for its ambition in seeking to become UK city of culture 2021 and the enthusiasm that it has shown throughout the bidding process. The prize of UK city of culture status is huge, and I am delighted to see so many—and such diverse—areas seeking the rewards that placing culture at the heart of their offering can bring. The UK has unmatched cultural assets. The UK city of culture competition unleashes the power of culture to transform places' futures through ambitious, inspiring and groundbreaking projects.

I pay tribute once again to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire and colleagues on both sides of the House, and to Perth and Kinross Council, for all their determined support for Perth's bid. There is now only a short wait until the House, the country and the world will know which bids will be shortlisted.

Question put and agreed to.

7.28 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 5 July 2017

[MRS CHERYL GILLAN *in the Chair*]

Road Infrastructure

9.30 am

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered road infrastructure.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I am conscious that many right hon. and hon. Members are in the room; I shall try to give way as much as I can and leave time for other Members to make speeches.

It is somewhat fortuitous that this debate is taking place today. According to the front page of *The Times*—I am sure it can, as ever, be believed—today is the day when the transport investment strategy for the next decade is to be announced, which will include a £1 billion per year fund to allow local authorities to bid for bypass projects. Can I be the first hon. Member in this House to make an oral application to the Roads Minister—for bypasses for Little Common, off the A259, and for Hurst Green, off the A21? I am sure I will not be the last applicant today.

Both those roads are busy, single-lane A roads that cause congestion and danger through two villages in East Sussex. They have the misfortune to be managed by Highways England. If the Roads Minister came and visited both roads—he would be absolutely welcome—he might be surprised that they are part of the Highways England portfolio. The reason is that they are deemed to be trunk roads, off the A27 and M25 respectively. The villages badly need to be bypassed, but Highways England naturally focuses its resources on the motorway or dual carriageway network within its portfolio.

As my colleagues here today will be aware, there are only 11 km of dual carriageway in the entire county of East Sussex. My ask is that the new fund should be accessible for local authorities to deliver bypasses, even if that bypass would be off a Highways England road. It is a misfortune for the two roads that I mentioned that they are controlled by Highways England—it is illogical—but my concern is that the new, £1 billion fund is available only to local authority-managed roads. That would be an obstacle for those two roads. I ask the Roads Minister that the issue of qualification should be type of road, rather than the entity managing it.

The A21 is a trunk road that runs from the M25 through Kent, then through East Sussex and down to the coastal town of Hastings. Highways England is continuing the dualling from Tonbridge to Tunbridge Wells in Kent, but it thereafter turns to single file when it enters East Sussex—a bit of discrimination, I would say, that benefits Kent. Some miles further on, the road goes through the heart of the village of Hurst Green in my constituency. In 2014, the A21 was deemed by the Road Safety Foundation as the most dangerous road in the UK—so much so that one section of dual carriageway

that we do have in East Sussex has been closed and coned off as a single carriageway due to the dangers of speeding.

A bypass for Hurst Green was in the pipeline and homes were purchased by Highways England, but it was postponed in the 2010 spending review. Now those homes are being resold. Last year, Highways England announced that it would introduce average speed limits on to the A21, from the end of the new works at Tunbridge Wells all the way down to Hastings. Although that would not improve or remove the congestion, or decrease travel times, it would perhaps do something about the appalling safety record.

The villagers and I were therefore dismayed to find out last year that Highways England had decided that that work would not be forthcoming and that better options are available. None of those options has been given to us. I am afraid it just compounds our issue in East Sussex: that Highways England does not appear interested in our road network.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman mentioned a dual carriageway where one lane is closed off because of speeding. Does he have any views on average speed cameras, which the Scottish Government have installed on some roads in Scotland? They meet a bit of resistance from drivers but have been proven to make roads safer and they control speeding on those roads.

Huw Merriman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point. The project put forward by Highways England was to have average speed cameras all the way down through the village—there is a primary school in the heart of the village. The A21 was modelled on a road in Scotland—it may be the one he referred to—which apparently reduced the traffic accident rate by 80%. We were very excited to copy that fine example from Scotland, so were dismayed when the scheme was cancelled. I very much take the point and I hope Highways England will do so as well.

My second example is the A259. Again, that road is managed by Highways England, unfortunately for us. It runs along the Sussex coast and takes over from the A27, which itself is in bad need of dualling, as championed by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) and others. As the A259 approaches Bexhill at a village called Little Common, it acts as a dangerous bottleneck. Again, the village was due to be bypassed, as part of the Highways England south coast trunk road, which was due to come from Devon all the way to Dover and give us a much better transport system. That was scrapped in 2001.

Fortunately, a new link road was built by East Sussex County Council and our local enterprise partnership, with Government funding, and has opened between Bexhill and Hastings. It opened last year and has delivered not just improved journey times, but 50,000 square feet of land for a business park and 2,000 new homes—it is as much a business road as a transport system.

East Sussex County Council and our local enterprise partnership are now building a second road off that new link road, so we are effectively now two-thirds through bypassing a town of 40,000 residents. The last remaining section is for a bypass around the remainder

[*Huw Merriman*]

of Little Common, which would deliver a bypass for the entirety of Bexhill and make it easier for the Sussex coastal towns to join up.

I have asked my local authorities and the local enterprise partnership to consider whether the housing infrastructure fund—the £20 billion fund announced by the Chancellor last year—could be tapped for Hurst Green and Little Common. The issue is that, having delivered the link road with its room for 2,000 houses, the local authorities rightly feel that they have already delivered housing and do not need any further. I will certainly be asking them to apply for the new bypass fund, but we first need clarity from the Roads Minister that they will be allowed to apply, given that the road is managed by Highways England.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. On housing, would he agree that particular consideration needs to be given to key arterial routes that link major motorways, such as the A5 in my constituency, which connects the M69, M1 and M42? It is already under huge pressure, and will be even more so due to proposed housing and the development of High Speed 2.

Huw Merriman: I agree. Perhaps my hon. Friend will agree with me on some of the points that I will come on to talk about with respect to Highways England and some of the problems that many hon. Members may have had in facing that agency.

At the A21 reference group, which I sit on with my right hon. Friends the Members for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) and for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), we asked Highways England representatives what we could do to dual the rest of the A21 all the way down to Hastings: how we could commission an economic study and what boxes that study would need to tick in order to meet Highways England's programme. I am afraid to say that the Highways England reps before us displayed a lack of dynamism and a "no can do" attitude, which is caused, in my view, by the fact that it has no competition on its strategic road network programme for building.

The link road that I described was delivered by a small outfit called Sea Change, in conjunction with the county and our local enterprise partnership. They were able to deliver that road to time and cost. I ask the Roads Minister whether it is possible to let counties, LEPs and their agencies put tenders together to bid for Highways England- managed roads. I put that proposal to the chief executive of Highways England during a sitting of the Transport Committee, on which I sit, and he claimed he is confident that Highways England cannot be beaten on value for money. Let us put that to the test and allow others to tender for the work.

Time does not allow me to speak for much longer, because I want to let others in, but I want to open up the debate by talking about a few more points. This is about not just building more roads, but ensuring that the roads we currently have are moving for traffic. To that end, I would like traffic enforcement provisions to be moved from the police to the local authority for moving traffic offences. I would also like there to be some form of compulsion to ensure that local authorities that still rely on the police to enforce parking on the

highways take responsibility for that. There are only 15 remaining, and two of those districts are in my authority. As a result, it is a free-for-all when it comes to parking and blocking up space.

For the visually impaired—I have some sympathy, having undertaken a guide dogs test in a blindfold—we have to ensure that it is an offence to park on the kerb outside London, as it is inside London. We have to change the situation. I would also like new roads and existing roads to encourage cycling. London does a great deal for cyclists, and I would like that practice to be adopted throughout the country. I will finish my speech now to allow others to make their own cases.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I am minded to put a limit of five minutes on speeches. I am not going to do that at this stage; I am just going to ask people to exercise some self-denial, bearing in mind that 13 or 14 Members want to speak. I would be grateful if Members kept standing if they wish to contribute to the debate.

9.41 am

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) on securing this important debate. We heard about the need for improvements to the A21 and the A259. Given that the road investment strategy is reaching a critical phase, this is a timely discussion.

Improving road infrastructure is a priority for many of our constituents. I was proud to be part of a cross-party campaign to secure the widening of the A453—the main trunk route between Nottingham and the west midlands. The project has improved the lives of thousands of my constituents.

I want to focus on two of the immediate issues confronting the Department for Transport: the delivery of the road investment strategy and the condition of local roads. The investment strategy was launched to significant fanfare. More than £15 billion was promised for investment in motorways and major A roads. Unfortunately, two years on, the progress report is decidedly mixed. Highways England is failing to meet its target for maintaining road conditions, as the Office of Rail and Road warned in February. The pledge to resurface 80% of the strategic road network, which was so widely trumpeted, is also set to be missed. I hope the Minister will update hon. Members on what the actual figure is likely to be.

Most seriously, the delivery of new capital investment schemes worth £11 billion is also in doubt. Many hon. Members might be familiar with Network Rail's current problems. Major projects were committed to at an early stage in their development when there was a limited understanding of their costs and deliverability. I am concerned that a similar story looks to be playing out on our roads. In the ORR's February update on capital planning, the regulator warned that there are significant differences between the initial cost forecasts and the latest estimates, and that the investment strategy "is not fully demonstrated to be affordable".

There is currently an £800 million gap in Highways England's capital works budget, on top of the £140 million of extra funding that the Department granted last year. Those overruns are at least partly due to headline-grabbing claims taking precedence over realistic pledges. I therefore suggest that those who are dusting down their bids for a bypass do not start to celebrate just yet.

Internal Highways England minutes that I obtained through the Freedom of Information Act blamed the cost increase on a

“lack of focus on affordability in an environment where an emphasis has been placed on the imperative to deliver as quickly as possible”.

Given that 60 projects—more than half the total—are due to begin construction in the final year of the road investment period, there will be an exceptional strain on Highways England and external contractors. The regulator said that there is “limited evidence” that the construction timetable is “deliverable or efficient”. That could have a knock-on effect on investment in the roads investment strategy, too, so we need to look at which projects are priorities within the strategy.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): Prioritisation is very important, but, moving away from Highways England, does the hon. Lady agree that local authorities find it difficult to allocate funds to produce feasibility studies and business cases to move projects forward? There has been a problem in my constituency with moving forward the York outer northern ring road, which is regularly congested—many constituents call it a car park. Does the hon. Lady agree that if the bypass fund is properly targeted, it might allow local authorities to move some of those long-term projects forward?

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order. May I remind Members that interventions should be short?

Lilian Greenwood: I will come on to the role of local authorities, but there needs to be certainty about costs and affordability.

To return to the national network, there was a clear case for ending spending on removing the hard shoulder from more than 500 motorway lane miles. Those proposals were taken forward despite an inadequate evidence base, safety fears, concerns from the emergency services, and drivers' unwillingness to use the former hard shoulder lane, as evidenced by Atkins' recent review, which the Department commissioned.

It was reported last week that the Transport Secretary has ordered changes to the roll-out of the scheme, including the fitting of more refuge areas. Will the Minister confirm that those reports are accurate? If so, will there be a formal statement to the House? What is the expected cost of those changes? The Transport Committee raised that issue and suggested that

“the proposed schemes be replaced by schemes based on the M42 Active Traffic Management design.”

It may be slow, but we know it will be safer.

The priority for many drivers is the fixing of damaged local roads, not the strategic network. Potholes do not just impair the quality of driving, extend journey times and damage vehicles; they are a real safety risk for drivers and cyclists. Everyone is a road user, so tackling the poor condition of our local roads should be a national priority.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): It is projected that by 2020 the spending on roads will be £86 per head, whereas the spending on cycling will be reduced to just 72p per head. Does my hon. Friend think that, when we are talking about road infrastructure, we should include cycling, which the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) mentioned?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend is a doughty advocate for cyclists. Of course, when planning investment in our roads, we should consider the needs of all road users, including pedestrians and cyclists.

According to the Department's own data, spending on routine maintenance has fallen by 30% in real terms since 2010, and the situation is set to get even worse. We have to consider the amount of funding available, especially in the light of the emerging problems on some of Highways England's projects. It is time for Ministers to look again at whether we have the right mix of national capital spending and local revenue allowances.

I am conscious of time, so I will just mention a couple of things. This is not just about spending more; it is about being smarter—that relates to the point made by the hon. Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy). With annualised budgets, councils are forced to adopt a rather limited patch-and-mend approach, with the result that the busiest roads often receive temporary repairs over and over again. In the longer term, that is a highly inefficient approach to maintenance. The Department should look at the case for granting local authorities their highways budget up front for a period of five years, which would enable the entire resurfacing of the worst affected roads. It should not be in the business of writing blank cheques, but that mechanism could allow longer-term planning to take place.

Before I finish, I will say a quick word about suicide prevention, which has perhaps not received widespread attention but which should be prominent on the Department's agenda. Obviously, every death is a private tragedy, and the recovery stage can be a traumatic process for staff. With about 1,000 suicide attempts on the strategic road network every year, we urgently need a national road suicide prevention strategy. We know from the railways that we can be effective and make a difference, but the best time to incorporate changes into new infrastructure is at the design stage. The Highways England health and safety five-year plan commits the organisation to establishing a suicide prevention group and developing an action plan by March 2018, but that is three years into the investment strategy. That is not good enough and I urge the Minister to prioritise the issue and to instruct Highways England to bring the work forward.

Many challenges confront road infrastructure in this Parliament, and on some important points the Department needs to change course. I appreciate that many hon. Members are waiting to speak, but I hope the Minister will address the points I have raised when he replies to the debate.

9.51 am

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) on initiating this debate.

[Nick Herbert]

I will talk about the A27, which runs through my constituency. It was envisaged as a coastal highway although, as anyone who has travelled along it knows, it is too often a coastal car park. Stretches of dual carriageway give way to very congested spots that cause severe delays. Every single day, 25,000 traffic movements, most of them not local, pass through the historic town of Arundel, with severe delays every morning and afternoon. That exacts a price from the local economy in the relatively deprived areas of West Sussex—there are some, in fact—and places such as Littlehampton need better transport infrastructure. Sussex Enterprise estimates that the cost to the local economy of poor infrastructure links, including a poor rail service, is £2 billion a year, so there is certainly an economic case for upgrading the A27. There is also, however, an environmental case, and that is important.

The consequence of traffic queuing for long periods at Arundel is of course air pollution. Furthermore, people seek to avoid the congestion in Arundel either by rat-running through the historic town itself, which makes for high volumes of traffic there—so often the story up and down the country is that towns and villages suffer as a consequence of delays and of people seeking to avoid those delays—or by making the south downs suffer. In order to get from east to west, people will go above Arundel, driving up through the south downs.

The South Downs national park is therefore affected, and so are its villages and adjacent villages. Storrington, just above the national park, has some of the worst air quality in the whole of south-east England, caused by queuing traffic. It is important to weigh claims that the construction of a much needed bypass at Arundel might damage the environment against the environmental damage caused by queuing traffic and traffic passing through the national park.

On one route, an Arundel bypass would have to pass through a short section of the South Downs national park, but the A27 already passes through extensive parts of the national park, including at Arundel. The part of the park in question, right at the bottom of it, is not chalk downland but replanted woodland. My contention, which I hope will be borne out, is that there will be a net environmental gain from construction of the bypass, even though a small section of the national park would be passed through; that could be mitigated.

The environment could even be enhanced—I have made this case before, although my hon. Friend the Minister, whom I welcome to his place, may not have heard it—if we constructed a beautiful bridge across the river Arun. My hon. Friend is learned and erudite, and I am sure travels through France extensively, so he will know that the French are very good at constructing beautiful infrastructure. The Millau viaduct over the Tarn gorge was controversial when first proposed, but is now a sensation and a sight in its own right. Designed by a British architect, it is considered to enhance the environment and not to despoil it.

The former Roads Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), who is still a Minister of State in the Department, has spoken about the importance of beauty in construction. If we ensure that schemes will be attractive, we could

deal with much of the public opposition that can sometimes find its way into debates about such projects.

That said, it is important for the Minister to know that there is strong local support for an Arundel bypass—there always has been, since it was first planned more than three decades ago. On the preferred route, which is now the starting point for a consultation that I will come on to, there was near-universal agreement by all the local authorities. Those authorities remain committed to an Arundel bypass, and it is my judgment as the local Member of Parliament, as it is the judgment of local councillors, that there is overwhelming support for the bypass among the local population. Indeed, that support increases the further away from Arundel one is—but even in Arundel, my judgment is that there is strong public support for the bypass.

In December 2014, when the Government announced that they would invest in an Arundel bypass under the roads programme, we were delighted. That came after the previous Labour Government had shelved the scheme. In conclusion, I simply ask: will the Minister confirm that the public consultation that Highways England is due to hold on the Arundel bypass route will go ahead this summer, or later this year?

Highways England states not only that the scheme will still go ahead, that the cost will be between £100 million and £250 million and that the start date will be before the end of March 2020, but that the public consultation remains subject to agreement with the Secretary of State. I noticed that the list of schemes announced last week by the Department for Transport, although not exclusive, made no mention of the Arundel bypass. I therefore seek the Minister's assurance that the bypass will still go ahead and that the consultation will be announced this year. I am convinced that this road scheme will benefit the local community, the economy and, crucially, the environment.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order. Twelve colleagues have indicated that they would like to speak. That will be difficult so I am again appealing for contributions to be kept short, because I would like to get in as many as possible.

9.58 am

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): Thank you, Mrs Gillan, for calling me to speak in such a broad debate on road infrastructure. I will not make it too broad because in my constituency investment in road infrastructure is a matter for the Welsh Assembly and the Welsh Government. Montgomeryshire, however, has a very long border with England—Shropshire—and I want to speak specifically about the general principle of how we deal with cross-border road schemes, making reference to two schemes in particular.

Several schemes cross the border between England and Wales, but the two in my constituency are hugely important. The first one that I want to speak about is usually known as the Middletown bypass—you will know it well from your previous responsibilities, Mrs Gillan. It is an 8-mile road between Welshpool and the English border, and the gateway to central Wales. However, it is hopelessly inadequate and a real bottleneck.

The problem is that the cost-benefit analyses are different. The two Governments have to agree for a scheme to go ahead, and the cost-benefit analysis in each of the two countries is different. In Wales it is hugely important that we have access to the market in England, so the cost-benefit analysis in Wales is high and we are keen for the project to go ahead, but of course in England it is not. When I became a Member of the Assembly, then a Member of Parliament, my main interest was for devolution not to have a negative effect on the way in which Britain operates—but it does. In this specific instance, it certainly does.

Two schemes are good examples of this negative effect. The first is the Middletown bypass. It is 90% in Wales and 10% in England, but it cannot go ahead unless the UK Government commit their 10% to a scheme that any cost-benefit analysis would say was not worth while for England. But of course it is hugely worth while, and the scheme would go ahead if we had that agreement between the two Governments. That is absolutely crucial for the way Britain's economy operates.

The second scheme is the Pant-Llanymynech bypass, for which 90% of the investment would be in north Shropshire and 10% would be in Wales. The case argued locally is often about the environment of the villages of Llanymynech—it is a village, not a town; I do not want to cause any offence—and Pant, and about traffic danger issues, but the key issue for me and for the economy of Wales has always been that the scheme concerns the A483 Manchester to Swansea road, which is a key piece of infrastructure into Wales. Again, the cost-benefit analysis is different on each side.

I conclude with a general point. When the British Government look at investing in roads in England—roads are devolved to Wales and to Scotland—they must look at the benefit to the United Kingdom as well as the benefit just to England. That is absolutely crucial if we are going to make certain that devolution does not have a negative impact, as it currently does, on the two road schemes that I mentioned and on other road schemes between England and Wales. We must look at how such schemes benefit the United Kingdom overall.

10.1 am

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) on his incredible timing. How he knew that this debate would take place on the same day as the Government's announcement, I honestly do not know.

Many people want to speak, so I will get straight to the point. There are two main schemes in my constituency about which we are particularly concerned. One concerns the A12, which is the main A road through East Anglia. We sit on the Essex border. The A12 will soon have three lanes from Chelmsford to Colchester. It then gets to our stretch, which is extremely bendy. Our main concern is safety. Roads from villages join the A12, where the speed limit is 70 mph, at extremely short junctions into bends. Those junctions are lethal. I can only presume that the casualty count is not higher because of the caution that local drivers take approaching the junctions, but there is massive anxiety in surrounding villages, and I will look to pursue that issue.

Since it is bypass day, the main scheme that I want to refer to is the Sudbury bypass. My right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) talked about public support for a scheme that has been around for decades. The Sudbury bypass has been around for many decades. In fact, there has been an outline of the bypass in the local "A to Z" for a long time.

The essence of the issue will be familiar to many hon. Members. The A road goes right through the heart—right through the historic centre—of Sudbury, our main market town, which is full of heavy goods vehicles and all the pollution and impact that that implies. The historic town centre includes Gainsborough's house, where Thomas Gainsborough was born—a museum that will shortly receive millions of pounds of lottery funding. We are desperate to regenerate our town, but the sheer pressure of HGVs is a problem.

I am pleased to say that Suffolk County Council has brought forward an initial business case for a Sudbury relief road, which it found could lead to a 60% reduction in HGVs and would have a 3:1 cost-benefit ratio in terms of economic gain, but the most important point is the environmental impact, which others have referred to. Our scheme was previously rejected on environmental grounds because, unfortunately, the only way to avoid the town—I am sure this is true of other rural areas—is to go into the countryside to some degree, but I think there is a trade-off. On the streets that the bypass would avoid, nitrogen oxide levels are very high—they are, in effect, illegal. The safe level is 40 micrograms per cubic metre of air; in Cross Street, the main road that we seek to bypass, the level is 59.4 micrograms. That is dangerous and unsafe. I therefore think the environmental argument is now in favour of the relief road, not least because the road would also protect the historic heritage environment of our town, where there are many fine wool town buildings going back hundreds of years.

Unfortunately, Sudbury's biggest employer, Delphi Diesel Systems, which is a major exporter, has just announced a consultation on the entire closure of its plant, which would lead to the loss of 520 highly skilled jobs. We are obviously worried about that. While we are doing our best to prevent that from happening, we need to think positively about ways to revive the town. We have a strong industrial base that would benefit very much from a new bypass that would mean lorries could avoid the centre of town.

I hope that the Minister will be able to visit and give our schemes due consideration. I welcome this timely debate and the Government's timely announcement. We all need greater support and, when it comes to relieving congestion in a historic market town, you can't beat a good bypass.

10.5 am

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) on securing this debate on today of all days. Who would have thought it?

I shall not detain hon. Members for too long. No doubt they will show no surprise at all that I will spend three minutes unashamedly banging on about the North Devon link road. In the extraordinarily unlikely circumstance that anyone here does not understand the

[Peter Heaton-Jones]

vital importance of the North Devon link road, let me give Members the 20-second lesson. It is the A361 between Tiverton and Barnstaple and onwards to the beautiful North Devon coastline. It links our part of the world with the M5 and the rest of the country. However, we do not see it as North Devon's only link to the outside world; we see it as the outside world's only opportunity to visit us.

We therefore need real investment in the North Devon link road. We must ensure that it is fit for purpose. At the moment, it is not. It is single carriageway for about 85% of the distance between Tiverton and Barnstaple—two towns some 30 miles apart. Where it is not single carriageway, it has short stretches of overtaking lanes that merge quickly into the main carriageway with little warning. That leads to risk taking, speeding, dangerous overtaking and, sadly, a high incidence of accidents in which people are killed or seriously injured. Sadly, two summers ago, three people were killed on the link road just a mile or so from my home in North Devon.

We need to change that, but not just because we need holidaymakers to be able to get to North Devon more quickly in August. We need real investment in the North Devon link road because it currently hampers economic investment in our area, which has so much to offer as far as a growing economy is concerned.

We have made real progress. Devon County Council is doing absolutely fantastic work, and we have secured £1.5 million from the Government to carry out detailed planning work, including putting together a comprehensive business case. We are currently in the third phase of a public consultation, with a series of exhibitions—I was at one in South Molton myself less than a fortnight ago—that show what could be done to improve the road. We have a plan. We are, to use the awful phrase, shovel ready. We now need the money. I am not the first and I am sure I will not be the last to say to this Minister—this excellent Minister, this wise Minister, this almost noble Minister, whom it is a pleasure to see here—“Please look at this scheme, because you will get so much bang for your buck if you invest in it.”

Normally, people would not find a cigarette paper—perhaps these days we should say an e-cigarette paper—between me and my good friend the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle, but it rather suits our purposes in North Devon that it seems that the new £1 billion roads fund announced today will be targeted at roads that were de-trunked and are purely the responsibility of local authorities. That is exactly the situation in which we find ourselves in North Devon. Why? Because a Labour Government chose to de-trunk the A361. That happened under a Labour Government's watch and, I have to say, under the watch of a Liberal Democrat MP in North Devon. [Interruption.] Absolutely. That should not have happened, but it did happen, and it hampered investment in this road. I am however pleased to say that, if *The Times* is to be believed—of course it is; it is *The Times*—we can see the way out of this and, through the new fund being announced today, we can get some real investment in the North Devon link road.

Let me look wider across the south-west, because it is no good people being able to get to North Devon if they cannot get beyond there to the rest of the south-west. Last week, I was delighted to see media reports of a new

£6.1 billion programme to open up road access to the south-west. In particular and for so long, many colleagues in the south-west have been asking for a proper dual carriageway linking the M3 with the M5. Too many bits of the A303 and A358 are single carriageway and not fit for purpose. The Government have announced real investment, which will see a major change in that, and I warmly welcome it.

I say to the Roads Minister that we will be knocking on his door. The Government have invested £1.5 million in ensuring that we are shovel ready for this vital scheme to improve the North Devon link road. The message that needs to go out today is, “Come to North Devon. Come and do business in North Devon. Come and spend your tourist pound in North Devon, and come and live in North Devon and contribute to the local economy.” I want to be able to say, “You can do all those things and get there safely, sustainably and efficiently, thanks to investment by this Conservative Government.”

Several hon. Members rose—

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order. I will call Layla Moran next, but as I have nine colleagues standing I will put on a time limit of about three minutes, and maybe even less, if people cannot keep their contributions short.

10.11 am

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Thank you, Mrs Gillan. This is my first debate in Westminster Hall, and I am delighted to be here. I would be remiss not to mention the A34. Many hon. Members will know about the issues of Lodge Hill junction, and I will be speaking to the most wonderful Minister about that junction. It has been the subject of cross-party campaigning for 25 years and it is reaching the point where, if we do not secure it now, it will impede the unlocking of Abingdon's future forever.

My point is actually about taking people off roads. Oxford is one of the UK's great cycling cities, and we should be doing much better. There are many reasons why we should consider taking people off roads completely. We have many active groups in the area who are campaigning for, in particular, a path from Eynsham to Botley. I am delighted to see my fellow Oxfordshire MP, the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) in his place and I hope we will work together on that issue. That community path, which will go along the B4044, has been well documented—there have been lots of warm words—but what we need now is investment to get it going. We also have many groups in Didcot who have lobbied for a cycle path from Oxford to Didcot—that is quite a long way, so it is not something I would do, but those groups are insistent that they would and I would love to be able to deliver it for them.

A parent in Abingdon contacted me within days of the election because her son had been mown down by a car. Luckily, he survived, although sadly in 2009 a child died on a cycle route approved by the school—a route that goes through 14 major junctions. We need to do much more to protect our children.

Finally, I want to talk about air quality. It is a danger to children's health to be knocked down by a car, but also to breathe in the noxious fumes released by cars.

It is estimated that a third of nitrous oxide emissions in the UK come from road use, and 14% of children's asthma is estimated to be caused by air pollution. That, incidentally, is the same as passive smoking. While it is no longer acceptable to light up in front of children for fear that they will breathe in the fumes, we have yet to make the case for taking children out of dangerous air pollution areas, such as those around North Hinksey and Botley schools, for the sake of their health.

I ask the Minister to apply a lot of creativity to the way we look at local infrastructure. It is not just about roads. Let us also look at different ways we can take people off the roads, because in the end it is better for the environment and better for their safety—but, above all, for their wellbeing, too.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order. I am going to put on a time limit of three minutes.

10.14 am

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) on securing this debate. I will not go over the preamble of how pleased I am, but I hope that today's announcement will help the bottlenecks in places such as Bury St Edmunds and alleviate problems in the historic town for the reasons my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), gave earlier.

I want to turn to the A14. I must declare an interest as chair of the "no more A14 delays" campaign. The route is vital for Suffolk, the region and the nation, with 70% of the cargo out of Felixstowe—our biggest container port—travelling down it, and 80% of Suffolk businesses relying on it. In my constituency, I have the headquarters of Greene King, Treatt and Muntons, large businesses and enterprise zones in Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket. The economy of Norfolk and Suffolk is £28 billion-plus, but the A14 holds us back.

To build a vibrant, modern economy we need a functioning A14. The 20-mile stretch in my constituency gives people the chance to enter for business, tourism and leisure, but UK congestion costs us £2 billion per annum. We could generate £362 million in additional gross value added, saving each commuter 13 minutes a day. There is potential for some 45,000 more jobs in the next 10 to 15 years if we get on and do this work to the A14. The accompanying homes and growth in the economy must be worth something in that argument. However, as my hon. Friends the Members for Bexhill and Battle and for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) said, we need to think strategically about total values across the piece and not always look at what the value is for one singular constituency.

We have congestion around junctions in Bury, but we have dreadful problems around Nacton and Ipswich in freeing up the Felixstowe traffic, and we also have issues going up to Newmarket. We have poor lay-outs, short slip roads and lack of capacity, which causes frequent delays. That does not encourage getting business done, and we need to get on with the job of building the roads quickly.

There is a lack of adequate pull-offs, and there are frequent delays. A constituent told me it had taken her three and a half hours to do 28 miles between Bury and Cambridge. Under RIS 1, the Suffolk map was white: I really look forward to meeting the Minister and ensuring that we have some coloured dots for investment under RIS 2, that the consultation goes ahead in the next few months and that we are listened to. Remedial work is welcome, but that is all we are up for. Please invest in Suffolk.

10.17 am

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) on securing this important debate. House building, not just in my constituency but in the area surrounding it, has been an issue of huge concern for many years. It has created huge pressure on the local roads, and that pressure is getting greater and greater with the current proposals and with yet more house building coming down the line soon. Junction 7 of the M61—I realise that is not in this narrow remit—should have been built many years ago. The fact that it has not been built means that the roads in Horwich are under far more pressure and strain than they ought to be, and the A roads and other roads suffer because of a lack of motorway investment.

If we look at Westhoughton, a bypass should have been built decades ago. We think about joined-up government. Equally, when we have house building we must also look at the infrastructure needed to support it, whether that is medical, educational or other infrastructure such as sporting facilities. Joined-up government really has not happened on a local level. Symbolically, locally, the boundary between the Wigan borough and Bolton borough highlights that lack of thought-through decision making.

People travel along the Wigan borough on the Atherleigh Way A5225, which is a pretty good road, so they can travel pretty fast, but when they get to the boundary with Bolton they come across huge concrete blocks where the road stops, because Wigan and Bolton did not work together to deliver the most obvious local road. So all the traffic that travels through Wigan gets to the concrete blocks and is diverted through Daisy Hill and Westhoughton, creating huge misery for residents. Bolton Council, or previous Governments, should have delivered on that road many years ago, but they have failed to do so.

One of the worries now is that given the huge amount of house building, without nearly enough useful infrastructure, that is planned for the Greater Manchester spatial framework, it is more than likely that building will begin on the options for the Westhoughton bypass. Houses will occupy the land where we need the bypass to be built; so we urgently need it to be built before Bolton Council builds there and prevents it from ever happening.

10.20 am

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) on securing this important debate. I shall take hon. Members through the issues affecting

[Robert Courts]

my constituency, travelling through them quickly, as it were—which is more than anyone could do trying to travel on the roads themselves. I assure our excellent and generous Minister that, despite what may be heard from other hon. Members present, there is no project more worthy of investment than the A40 running through West Oxfordshire.

As anyone who has visited West Oxfordshire or spoken to a local MP will realise, the A40 is the pre-eminent issue there. Not only do my constituents spend hours stuck in traffic doing the short journey from Witney to the centre of Oxford, but the economic potential of an enormously successful area is being constricted. One need only look at Carterton, where world-beating industries such as Boeing and Airbus are present on the base, but where the slip road access to the A40 is restricted; or Eynsham, where Siemens, with its world-beating medical engineering, is restricted in relation to travel on the A40. There are many other businesses there, as is shown by the West Oxfordshire business awards, but I cannot mention them all because time is limited. They are restricted in the economic growth that they could deliver, because of the road.

The A40 is the central issue in West Oxfordshire, but not the only one. It has spin-off side effects. Traffic trying to avoid the A40 travels, for example, on the A4095 through Bladon, where I live. It is a world-famous village because it is where Winston Churchill is buried, and we have many coaches per day. Visitors are of course welcome, but through the narrow pinch point and the coach parks further on there is excessive congestion. There is also particular congestion in Burford, with its world-famous hill, with traffic backed up along it.

Hon. Members will realise that that high street is called the gateway to the Cotswolds; nearly every building is listed, and there are HGVs stacked up on it, because there is nowhere to go. A bypass for Burford would also be high on the list for residents in that part of the world. Horsefair in Chipping Norton and Bridge Street in Witney are two areas in West Oxfordshire that have high levels of pollution, and a bypass around Chipping Norton to remove the weight of traffic—figuratively and literally—is absolutely necessary.

There is also a great need for public transport. We have already heard from the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) about cycle paths, and I would like the B4044 cycle path to happen. I cycled from my home in Bladon to Oxford, when I worked there, along the A44. There is an excellent cycle path there, but we need more of them. I have now concluded my quick canter through issues of health and economics, in relation to road infrastructure, and I am grateful for the opportunity to speak.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order. If hon. Members can keep their remarks to two minutes, we may get everyone in.

10.24 am

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): My main aim in this short contribution will be to talk about the condition of the A180, but perhaps I may join other hon. Members in mentioning two quick asks. I feel somewhat guilty in

doing so, because last Friday the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), was in my constituency opening the upgrade to the A160, which improves access to the port of Immingham. That was a £100 million project. We were pushing for it during the entire 26 years when I was a councillor in the area, so things do not happen all that quickly; but I am pleased that the coalition Government gave the go-ahead, and that the Minister of State duly attended to open it. If we are to finish the jigsaw of routes that give us access to the south Humber port, the dualling of the A15 and/or the A46 are the next asks, and it would be helpful if I could bring a delegation to meet the Minister to discuss that, as I have done with his many predecessors.

My main aim this morning is to draw attention to the condition of the A180, parts of which, from junction 5 to the Grimsby boundary, have a concrete surface that causes no end of problems, particularly to residents. I have sat in the homes of constituents living as much as a mile from the road, and heard the constant rumble of HGVs over the surface. In 2000 the then Labour Government said in their transport plan that all concrete roads would be removed by 2010, on a priority basis. Surely the clinching factor in the need for the work was a report in the *Cleethorpes Chronicle* of 25 March 2010 that directors of Grimsby Town football club said prospective footballers were being put off signing, because of the poor state of the A180. If that does not clinch it, nothing will.

As we know, the Minister is a rising star, and he would not want to be compared unfavourably with one of his predecessors. In a 4 pm debate in Westminster Hall on 17 December 2003 a certain Mr McNulty, who was then Under-Secretary of State for Transport, said at column 320 that residents near the A180 needed a rest, and promised that he would ensure they got one. Improvements followed, and the Minister would not want to be overtaken or beaten by his illustrious predecessor. My plea is for him to arrange for Highways England to make a proper assessment of the costs and alternatives. If he wants to join me and residents to listen to the constant rumble, he will be very welcome.

10.27 am

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I want to draw the Minister's attention to something that I hope is already front and centre of his desk: the well progressed application for a Middlewich eastern bypass. It has been a 30-year wait, and the support in Middlewich and beyond is strong. It would open up employment land for 2,000 jobs, which would help to transform the local and wider economy. It would reduce congestion, and not only through Middlewich. That congestion is chronic, and not only at peak times. The bypass would improve transport efficiency from the M6 across that part of Cheshire to the west. Middlewich is a severe bottleneck, which is holding back economic development in the area.

I am grateful that the Government granted business case funding last year under the fast-track scheme of the large local major transport schemes programme. The business case was produced this spring. As time prohibits my speaking about it in detail now, I hope that the Minister will allow me to hand him an executive summary of the business case after the debate. It was

produced by Cheshire East Council with the support of the local enterprise partnership, and it was the only one proposed by that large unitary authority.

The council leader and I were due to discuss the matter in a meeting with the Minister's predecessor—now the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones)—before the election intervened. I hope that the Minister will look favourably on the idea of putting such an appointment in his diary soon.

Middlewich is a fine historic town with an aspiration to grow, including by taking in new housing, which the scheme would also support. That is not something that every town in Cheshire wants. The road would also bring benefits by facilitating HS2 construction and operation for the nearby link with Crewe, and the reopening, we hope, of Middlewich railway station for passengers.

I want finally to make a brief mention of Congleton. The Congleton Sports Trust's vision for the future, following the successful Tour of Britain through Congleton, is a project spearheaded by the deputy mayor, Councillor Suzie Akers Smith, to improve circumnavigation of the town. Obtaining funding for that is proving challenging. The project would facilitate the improvement of infrastructure across the town, and make safe cycling possible—including for children going to school. My key message to the Minister is that for rural and semi-rural areas it is proving challenging to find cycling funding. Will Ministers look at that again?

10.29 am

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Thank you for calling me, Mrs Gillan. I will briefly talk about the ideas brought forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman).

Something I have found in my constituency is a lack of joined-up thinking between the local enterprise partnership, the county council and Highways England. For example, Highways England and the county council would like to work together to create an air quality management site on Hamble Lane near junction 8 of the M27, but that has not happened; there are air quality management sites around the Eastleigh Borough Council offices and through Botley village in my constituency. Indeed, the bypass around Botley has been waiting to be built for 20 or 30 years, and we are progressing, but this kind of fund is exactly what we need to get it over the line.

The other road we have been waiting three decades for in Eastleigh is the Chickenhall link road. Not having that affects Tower Lane and the village of Bishopstoke, traffic coming from Southampton and up towards Winchester and, indeed, air quality. It also means that some people in my constituency do 12-mile journeys each day that can take up to an hour and a half. Several Roads Ministers have said, "I've been to lots of congested places; I am sure Eastleigh is nothing different", and all of them have found it quite surprising. In fact, one was so delayed that he missed an appointment.

HGVs running through villages such as Botley really do affect the quality of people's lives, including our children's. As a Conservative majority Government, we can do better. During the coalition with the Liberal Democrats, my constituency got nowhere. I would like

to prove that this Conservative majority Government can actually do things that affect people's lives, because that is what politics does. It can deliver what really matters to people: getting home at night to see their children and making sure that they have a good, productive day at work—if they can get there.

10.31 am

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan; I congratulate you on managing to fit in 12 additional speakers after the opening speech. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) on securing the debate, and further congratulate him because the debate was originally due to be about Southern Rail; it was changed following the debate in the main Chamber yesterday. That saves me from having to speak in another debate on Southern Rail. We have seen how popular the hon. Gentleman's debate is.

Given the comments from the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), I had to keep checking the title of the debate in case it was called the "Bypass Bid" debate; it certainly felt like that is what it was. It shows just how passionate and understanding of the needs of their communities hon. Members are, and how much demand there is on the road infrastructure network. I look forward to the Minister's replies to each individual bid as we go forward.

The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle highlighted a good mix of local issues and the strategic thinking that needs to accompany their resolution. He was correctly angry about having the UK's most dangerous road in his constituency, and I wish him luck in his ambition for improving its safety with the speed camera solution and through other bypasses that were mentioned. That brought back memories for me: I remember doing a school project way back in 1988 about local bypasses. I had actually been able to access plans from 1947, when the bypasses were first planned, and we are still waiting on them. That story has come out time and again today.

I also agree with the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle about strategic issues around traffic enforcement moving from the police to local authorities. I think that has benefits, although it can also put pressure on local authorities. I also fully support the comments about pavement parking. I also did a blindfold tour of my local town centre, which certainly illustrated to me that vehicles on pavements are a further obstruction that does not need to be there.

We certainly had quite a run through of hon. Members. The hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) focused on strategy, delivery and issues including further funding pressures. I look forward to the Minister's response to that. I liked the good, interesting comments from the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) about beautiful infrastructure; I am actually a civil engineer by trade, so I appreciate infrastructure. Clearly, the issues of congestion, air pollution and national parks need to be addressed.

The hon. Members for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) and for South Suffolk also bid for bypasses, while the hon. Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) talked of a North Devon link road to allow holidaymakers quicker access to Devon during August. Perhaps if the road gets the upgrade he is looking for, more Scottish

[Alan Brown]

holidaymakers will be able to access it before August, because our holiday period starts at the end of June. That might extend his area's holiday season.

The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) highlighted issues about major junctions, while the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) highlighted issues with the A14. The hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) highlighted that house building can cause issues, which again shows the need for strategic thinking. For me, that is also an issue for strategic local planning, in terms of the council looking ahead at where it will build houses and what infrastructure is needed to accompany that.

The hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) highlighted the A40. Listening to some hon. Members' contributions, including his, took me back to listening to maiden speeches, which can give us a tour through constituencies and a reminder of the beautiful villages that exist. The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) again highlighted a bypass, while the final contribution, from the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), again highlighted the lack of joined-up thinking between Highways England and local councils, which needs to be resolved.

I genuinely wish hon. Members all the best with their bids for funding. It seems to me that the £1 billion fund announced today will not go far enough, so I ask the Minister to look down the back of his couch to see if he can find more money. Certainly, investment in infrastructure leads to job creation, an economic return and, as we have heard, can increase safety and improve air quality. Any additional investment in roads in England and Wales will hopefully have Barnett consequential and would lead to further investment in Scotland.

I remind the hon. Member for Eastleigh that this is not a majority Conservative Government but a minority one. Perhaps the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle, who put in the first bid, may have seen how successful the Democratic Unionist party was in securing money from the UK Government. Maybe Conservative Back Benchers need to get together and do a wee bit of backroom bidding with their Government colleagues.

Some people are for investment in road infrastructure and some are against, but nobody here today spoke out against. Earlier, I touched on my being a civil engineer by background; I also now have the role of spokesperson for transport and infrastructure for the Scottish National party, so I am certainly all in favour of strategic road upgrading. However, it needs to be strategic, and it also needs to link in with other transport upgrades. We have heard about safe cycling, which is important, and we also need to invest in rail and public transport so that we have better connectivity; that all goes hand in hand.

On Scottish Government investment and looking at trunk road maintenance, the Scottish Government look for three strategic outcomes: improved journey times, reduced emissions to tackle climate change, improved air quality and health, and improved accessibility and affordability. Those have to be the Government's key objectives when they look at their £1 billion investment fund. All hon. Members here certainly have local issues, but the Government have to look a bit more strategically.

Under the previous UK settlement, Scotland suffered from a lack of investment in roads. It took devolution and the Scottish Parliament's coming into being to

actually increase road investment. The SNP Government have taken that to a new level, with the M74 and M80 motorways and the recently completed M8 motorway between Glasgow and Edinburgh; it is actually incredible that it has taken until 2017 to have a continuous motorway link between the two biggest cities in Scotland.

We have heard about single carriageway roads in the debate, but rural Scotland actually has single-lane roads, which only allow cars to travel in one direction, with pull-off passing bays. Again, that shows the lack of investment over the years. Also, the "Road to the Isles", the A830, was the last single-lane trunk road in the UK and was only upgraded in 2009 with the aid of European funding.

That is another concern going forward: what will happen to that European funding? Will the UK Government backfill that lack of money? Scotland secured £1.3 billion of investment from EU structural funds, which has allowed those important road upgrades. I would appreciate it if the Minister could answer that. I wish the Minister luck in answering all the bids for bypasses. I certainly support any additional expenditure on infrastructure and would like to see further Barnett consequential and expenditure in Scotland.

10.39 am

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Gillan. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) on securing this important debate on a matter that has broad implications for all our constituents.

This debate is particularly timely, because by chance, the Government made an announcement overnight that they will be shifting £1 billion of vehicle excise duty away from investment in main roads and towards a bypass fund. I suspect that the announcement was made not just to give the Minister something positive to say in this debate, but as a result of constant pressure from the Opposition. On that point, I put on record my gratitude to my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) for the work she did as shadow Secretary of State for Transport to push these important issues.

While Labour welcomes the news that local roads will be receiving some much-needed investment, we note that the money will not be seen by local authorities until 2020, as the Government conduct their consultation. The announcement therefore does not deal with the immediate backlog of billions of pounds' worth of work to fix potholes—a backlog that will only increase over the next three years. Moreover, the announcement does not increase the overall spending on roads. In fact, it could be seen as the Government slashing £1 billion from investment in main roads.

Our road network needs proper investment across both main and local roads. In recent years, our road infrastructure has been severely neglected. The Asphalt Industry Alliance says that roads need to be resurfaced every 10 to 20 years. Only London comes close to that, with the capital's roads repaired every 23 years on average. Across the rest of England, roads are resurfaced every 55 years on average. That is clearly not sustainable.

A report published by the Office of Rail and Road in February highlighted that Highways England—the company responsible for the management of motorways

and main A roads in England—will have a funding shortfall of approximately £0.8 billion. It seems that the Government want to add a further £1 billion to that figure with their announcement this morning. Highways England has committed to delivering the Government's road investment strategy, which includes investing more than £11 billion between April 2015 and March 2020, maintaining and renewing the network, delivering 112 major improvement schemes and carrying out targeted improvements through dedicated funds. In doing so, the company is also required to deliver £1.2 billion of efficiency improvements.

However, the Office of Rail and Road report showed that despite efficiency savings made by Highways England's improvement plan that have reduced the funding shortfall from £1.7 billion to £0.8 billion, the company has plans to propose a range of changes to the road investment strategy, with schemes likely to be reduced in scope, delayed or even removed entirely. Labour has warned consistently that the Government have been over-promising and under-delivering on investment in England's roads, and the report lays bare their entire failure on this. The road investment strategy is beginning to look like a wish list, and even more so with the decision today to take away £1 billion of funding.

The Office of Rail and Road report was published only months after Highways England reported a drop in its network condition key performance indicator that reports road surface condition, which fell to 92.3%—significantly below the road investment strategy target of 95%. We were promised the biggest upgrade to roads in a generation, but Highways England is now having to come up with plans to address a budget shortfall of nearly £1 billion, as well as to guarantee driver safety after allowing the condition of our roads to fall short of targets. Labour is very concerned about the fundamental mismatch between the Government's expectations and the effectiveness and efficiency of Highways England, the Secretary of State having refused to rule out cancelling or delaying promised schemes. Will the Minister explain today which projects will be delayed and which will be cancelled, or if projects will be neither delayed nor cancelled, where the additional funds are coming from, especially now that the Government have announced a £1 billion cut to investment in main roads?

The situation is no better for local roads, which make up 97% of the UK transport network. As I said earlier, there is an estimated £12 billion backlog of road repairs. The funding that the Government have so far committed is a drop in the ocean, even with the extra £1 billion of funding, which will not be seen for three years. Local authorities are finding it impossible to catch up. The permanent pothole fund announced last year set aside additional funding of £250 million over the next five years to tackle potholes, on top of nearly £5 billion of funding for road maintenance announced previously. However, the additional £50 million a year until the funding announced today comes into effect, if spread over the same 148 highways authorities as last year, is clearly not enough to address the £12 billion backlog.

The recently published annual local authority road maintenance survey, produced by the Asphalt Industry Alliance, found that almost a fifth of roads were in poor condition, while local authorities have said that one in six roads across England and Wales are in such a bad state that they must be repaired within the next five

years. The ALARM survey showed that last year, more than 16,000 potholes were filled per non-London local authority, costing £111 million, and more than 4,000 potholes were filled per London local authority, costing £11.4 million. In 2012, around 12,000 potholes were filled on average per non-London local authority, costing £80.6 million.

In England, excluding London, the average local authority budget for highway maintenance saw a decrease of 16% from £23.4 million last year to £19.8 million this year. That was unexpected, given the Government's commitment to £6 billion of funding for local road maintenance over six years, which began this financial year but appears not to have yet been seen by local authority highways teams.

Every journey begins and ends on a local road, so the ALARM report's warning that Britain's roads are in "terminal decline" is deeply concerning. It is time the Government acted to give this vital part of our road network the attention and investment that it deserves. These findings lay bare the Government's failure to maintain Britain's local roads, which are blighted by potholes, causing real danger to road users. Indeed, three quarters of claims received by authorities for compensation for damage to persons or vehicles as a result of poor road condition relate specifically to pothole incidents. The Office of Rail and Road report on Highways England stated:

"While there is not a direct correlation between the road condition indicator and safety, a reduction may indicate an increase in safety risk which Highways England must manage. The company has given us assurances that the safety of the network is not compromised. We have required the company to evidence the actions it has taken to mitigate any safety risk and how it will improve road condition to meet the target."

Will the Minister tell us today what action has been taken to mitigate the increased safety risks brought about as a consequence of the mishandling of the road investment strategy?

A total of 24,620 people were killed or seriously injured on our roads in the year ending June 2016, and hon. Members have talked about road deaths in their constituencies. Over the past two decades, the UK has earned a reputation for having among the safest roads in the world, but in the past seven years progress has stalled and begun to reverse. The Tories have scrapped road safety targets and caused a decline in the number of dedicated road traffic police officers in England and Wales. In contrast, Labour's manifesto stated clearly that we would reset the UK's road safety vision and ambitiously strive for a transport network with zero deaths, reintroducing road safety targets. In conclusion, will the Minister set out exactly where the £1 billion will be spent?

10.49 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): It is a delight to see you in the Chair, Mrs Gillan, and a privilege to be able to speak on these very important issues in the presence of so many hon. Members, and particularly Government Members, who have taken a great interest in them over the years.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) on securing this debate about road infrastructure. He is a kind of prognosticator of prognosticators; I do not know what goats were

[*Jesse Norman*]

opened or other auguries consulted that allowed him to ensure that this debate coincided with the announcements this morning, but I congratulate him on his Delphic powers of prophecy. I also think he has done no little good in advertising his own claim to potential membership of the Select Committee on Transport. I place that on the record without, of course, expressing a view on any candidate for such a position.

Following the Air Travel Organisers' Licensing Bill on Monday and a debate in this Chamber on road safety for horses and riders yesterday, this is my third debate in three days. I can only salute the courage and indefatigability of some of my colleagues, who may have sat through all three debates—and the strength of their stomachs. I hope colleagues feel that taxpayers are getting their money's worth from this exercise.

I had originally planned to go through in some detail some of the many schemes that will be covered under the Government's present plans, but such has been the level of interest in and importance of the debate that after some opening remarks, I would like to engage specifically with the points raised by colleagues throughout the Chamber.

In many ways, as has been rammed home many times today, our road network is the backbone of Britain.

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): Will my hon. Friend the Minister give way?

Jesse Norman: I would be delighted to do so.

Trudy Harrison: Could I ask about the Government's commitment in relation to the improvements on the A595 in my constituency of Copeland and, in particular, the Whitehaven relief road?

Jesse Norman: I am glad that my hon. Friend has mentioned that; it is entirely appropriate for her, not having spoken in the debate so far, to do so. I am aware that there has been some very inaccurate reporting locally about the status of that road. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has told me that he is looking forward very much to setting the record straight himself. I would say that there is very strong recognition of the importance of that scheme in its relation to the new nuclear programme—I say that as a former Minister in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy—so my hon. Friend's point has been well recognised.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Jesse Norman: If the hon. Gentleman does not mind, I will crack on, because I have taken three minutes already and I have a lot to get through.

As I was saying, the road network is the backbone of Britain. Roads are vital lifelines for our economy. They matter whether people drive or cycle, or travel by bus or coach. They matter when people travel to work or to buy goods, and 95% of people use our road network every day. That is why the Government are in the midst of a £23 billion programme of investment in England's roads; £15 billion of that is going on England's motorways

and major A roads—the long-distance roads that link regions together, connect us to our ports and airports and enable economic growth. That funding underpins the “Road Investment Strategy”, a five-year plan, launched by the previous Government in December 2014, that sets out the schemes and funding levels for the period 2015 to 2020. That covers more than 100 major schemes up and down the country. At the same time, there was the creation of Highways England and of a watchdog, the Office of Rail and Road, to ensure that motorists get what they are promised.

The investment plan is well under way. Since 2015, 16 major schemes have opened for traffic and 15 more have started construction. They include major investments such as the £1.5 billion A14 improvements between Cambridge and Huntingdon, and the £191 million upgrade of the M1, M6 and A14 Catthorpe junction near Rugby. However, that is only the start, and the pace is picking up.

As announced last Friday, over the coming six months, the Government will take the next steps on 55 road improvements across the country—opening eight schemes, consulting on 10 more and publishing final plans for another 29. In the course of that, we will be seeking to hear from local people, organisations and businesses to help to shape our plans and ensure that they benefit local communities.

This has been an extraordinarily interesting debate. I can only congratulate colleagues on the many schemes that they have brought not only to my attention, but that of officials and Highways England. I look forward to the debate's being closely scrutinised in my Department and by Highways England for those points.

Several key themes have emerged from the debate. The first is the necessity of increased investment. The welcome nature of today's news was, I think, recognised on both sides of the Chamber. The second theme is the importance of bypasses—the environmental case for them, and their heritage effects and economic effects. The third theme is the integrated nature of the road network. In other words, one does not want to beggar Peter to pay Paul; there has to be parallel investment in motorways and in A roads. Finally, there are the themes of the importance of safety and of cross-border funding and the like, on which I think all colleagues would agree.

Before I respond to some specific comments, let me turn briefly to the remarks of the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner). I was surprised that, judging by their comments, there is so little recognition by Labour of what has actually happened. The new investment should be absolutely welcomed. I can tell the House that the investment by the last Labour Government, in the period 2005-06 to 2009-10, was a little over £6 billion, and the amount currently being planned is £11.4 billion. I think that is a difference—

Karl Turner: Will the Minister give way?

Jesse Norman: No, certainly not. That is not a difference—

Karl Turner: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jesse Norman: The hon. Gentleman had his chance to speak. [*Interruption.*]

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order.

Jesse Norman: The fact of the matter is that this is twice as much money as the last Labour Government put in, and that should be recognised. To fail to do so is, frankly, to insult our motorists—to insult the people who use these roads.

If one looks down the list, it is perfectly true that the National Audit Office has talked about a degree of over-programming. It has also praised the significant improvement in the road investment strategy, and I think rightly so. The NAO report should indeed acknowledge what is well known in transport circles, which is that there is always a bit of over-programming in these things; not all these schemes arise, in terms of public investment, at the same time. An over-programming of 7%, which is what it amounts to, is not substantial. Where there are bottlenecks, undoubtedly we as a Department will be looking at them.

Let me turn now to some of the specific points. I absolutely welcome the points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert). I can confirm that construction will begin this year, as he has requested, on the A27.

Nick Herbert: “Consultation”.

Jesse Norman: Sorry, consultation; I cannot read my own handwriting. Consultation will begin on the schemes that my right hon. Friend mentions. He rightly highlights the importance of beautiful bridges and infrastructure—a point made by my right hon. Friend the Minister of State. His points have also been raised—

Graham Jones: Will the Minister give way?

Jesse Norman: I will not. The points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs were also raised elsewhere by my hon. Friends the Members for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) and I welcome those comments.

In the few seconds that I have left before handing back to my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle, let me say that the point about cycling was well made by the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran)—I am a very keen cyclist myself. The Government are investing £1.2 billion to support cycling schemes, and rightly so. The point about constraints on economic growth from lack of investment in roads was very well made by my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts). I am running out of time and I want to be sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle has the chance to close the debate if he wishes, so let me end here and thank colleagues on both sides of the Chamber very much indeed for their comments.

10.58 am

Huw Merriman: I thank you, Mrs Gillan, and all colleagues for making this such a fascinating debate. I also, as I should have done earlier, welcome the Minister responsible for roads to his place. If I continue as a member of the Transport Committee, I shall look forward to spending more time with him.

If I may, I will mention my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), who did not have an opportunity to speak. She is my constituency neighbour and has worked tirelessly to get the A27 upgraded. She has fantastic ideas, which we were not able to hear today, but we are, and will continue to be, led by her to get the A27 upgraded, and it will be to her credit, on this particular side of the geography, if that occurs.

I absolutely welcome the extra investment from the Government announced today. I perhaps should have welcomed that a bit more strongly when I opened the debate. It is interesting that so many Government Members are in the Chamber today. That suggests that they are working hard on behalf of their constituents. There are fewer Opposition Members, which suggests either that all the money was spent in their constituencies or perhaps that they are not as interested in this issue as we are. However, I thank all hon. Members for their contributions, and I look forward to more bypasses being built across the UK.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered road infrastructure.

Srebrenica Genocide Commemoration

11 am

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the support for the Srebrenica genocide commemoration.

I am very grateful for the opportunity to hold this short debate today, one week before the official anniversary commemoration of the terrible massacre that took place in July 1995 in Srebrenica. I begin by drawing the House's attention to my interest in this matter. In October last year I visited Bosnia as the guest of the UK charity Remembering Srebrenica, and I am now a member of the charity's north-west regional board. I know that other colleagues have also visited Bosnia with Remembering Srebrenica, and every single one of us who has done so has been profoundly affected by what we saw and heard there.

The House is familiar with the history of this terrible atrocity. In July 1995 Bosnian Serb forces overran and captured Srebrenica, a town that in 1993 had been declared a UN safe area. In the days after the fall of Srebrenica more than 8,000 Bosnian Muslim boys and men were separated from their families, systematically massacred and buried in mass graves—some after desperately trekking for days to seek safety. Many of those graves were then dug open again and the remains removed and scattered across new graves in a bid to hide the evidence of what had happened, leaving families with the agony of not knowing where their loved ones have been buried. Thousands of women, children and elderly people were forcibly deported, while throughout Bosnia between 20,000 and 50,000 women and girls suffered rape and sexual violence. The appalling events that took place at Srebrenica have rightly been characterised by international courts as genocide.

Serbian aggression and a determined process of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia lie at the root of this atrocity, but the international community also has charges to answer. UN troops responsible for protecting the safe area status of Srebrenica turned away thousands of Bosnian Muslims who had travelled there to seek their protection, in some cases delivering them directly into the hands of the Serb army. Then they ran away themselves. It is not surprising that the sense of having been let down by the international community is palpable in Bosnia, and not just in Srebrenica. Again and again, during my visit last year, Bosnians told me of their anger and bafflement at the US decision, in the autumn of 1995, to end NATO bombings of Serb positions in Sarajevo following the desperate siege that the city had endured since 1992, just as the Serbs were within days of being defeated.

The anger and hurt continues today because 22 years on families are still living with not only the horror of what they saw and experienced but the agony of losing their loved ones—still, in many cases, waiting desperately in the hope that their remains will be found and identified. I pay tribute to the work of the International Commission on Missing Persons, which continues its painstaking efforts to identify the victims.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I first congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate? In Northern Ireland we have a particular understanding of those who are missing and have never been found;

therefore, this resonates clearly with us as elected representatives from Northern Ireland. Does she agree that the poignancy of last year's memorial, where the bones of a further 127 victims were identified and then buried 21 years on, must live in our memories? Does she agree that this House and the Government must look to ensure that this never happens again, whether in Northern Ireland, Srebrenica or anywhere else in the world?

Kate Green: Yes, the hon. Gentleman and his fellow Northern Ireland compatriots have a particular understanding of the horror that occurs when violence and murder take place. He is right that we repeatedly fail to learn the lessons, and yet even in our own lifetimes we have examples close to home, in the Balkans and in Rwanda—around the world—that remind us of the lessons that we should take on board.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. May I also draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests? I have also been on one of Remembering Srebrenica's visits to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and she is right that it is a profoundly moving experience. I am glad that she mentions the work of the International Commission on Missing Persons, which has been absolutely vital in helping about 70% of families to know what happened to the remains of their loved ones who were missing as a result of the conflict.

There is still a huge amount of work to be done—around 8,000 victims of the war are still unidentified and missing—so the work of the commission is really important, including its groundbreaking work on data matching and DNA matching. That work is useful and crucial not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina but in natural disasters, and I fear it will be increasingly important in tracking down missing persons from conflicts such as the current one in Syria. Does my hon. Friend agree that while Britain and other donors have been quite generous in supporting the international commission, it often lives too much from hand to mouth and we really need much more predictable, long-term funding for its work? Even though it should not have to exist, it does have to; it is vital and sadly will remain so for a long time to come.

Kate Green: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. Anyone who has seen for themselves the exceptional work carried out by the ICMP will understand how protracted, detailed and painstaking it has had to be and that its applicability both to natural disasters and to—should they occur, God forbid—other conflicts could be of importance for many years to come. I hope that in responding to the debate the Minister will say something about continued funding for it, because during my visit last year there were certainly concerns that that could no longer be assured.

It is not just the memory of what happened 22 years ago that causes such concern, consternation and dismay in Bosnia today. Still today Bosnian Muslims experience discrimination and injustice. In 2015, in an aggressively muscular display of power, Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik held an illegal referendum attempting to mark 9 January as an official holiday. It was deemed unconstitutional by the constitutional court of Bosnia and Herzegovina for not drawing on the values shared by all three of the constituent nations.

During my visit I was told of continuing levels of unemployment and poverty, and of young people leaving Bosnia because there is no hope for their futures. I was told that Serbs refuse to allow the history of the genocide to be taught in schools, while the Dayton agreement, which ended the conflict, has baked in territorial and political arrangements that reflect and embed the ethnic cleansing that took place and leave non-Serbs shut out of public office.

It is right to recognise the positive actions of the international community and the convictions secured at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. The UK has been at the forefront of steps to address Bosnians' continuing sense of injustice, leading the way in drafting a UN Security Council resolution to mark the 20th anniversary of the genocide and calling for 11 July to be established as a memorial day for its victims—a resolution that, shamefully, was condemned by Serbia and vetoed by Russia. But discrimination against Bosnian Muslims continues to this day. The wider threat to peace continues, as do efforts—in particular by Russia—to disrupt the legitimate use of power in the region. I hope the Minister will update the House on UK and international efforts to address that.

In the second part of my remarks, I shall turn to action here in the UK to recognise and honour the victims of the genocide and learn lessons from it. I am sure that the House will join me in paying tribute to the aims and work of Remembering Srebrenica, teaching current and future generations about the consequences of hate and intolerance. Let me give some examples from my own city. In May this year, one of my fellow travellers to Bosnia, Dr Robina Shah—deputy lieutenant of Greater Manchester, working with Greater Manchester police—and Paul Giannasi of the International Network for Hate Studies, organised a hate crime conference in Manchester to raise awareness of how low-level prejudice can escalate to full-scale murder. On 16 July, local community champions in my region will walk 23 miles from Blackburn cathedral to Manchester city centre to commemorate the atrocity and show community cohesion. On 13 July I shall be proud to join predominantly female contributors in Manchester cathedral as part of Remembering Srebrenica's annual remembrance service.

I know that the Government, too, are working to remind young people and communities of the terrible genocide and encourage them to learn lessons from it. The Department for Communities and Local Government funds activity to raise awareness of the massacre, but it is not clear how well that work is integrated into wider Government strategies to address hate crime and extremism, including work with the Department for Education and with schools. Will the Minister update the House on cross-Government action to ensure that the anniversary and the lessons we must learn from it are never forgotten?

Tragically, extremism and hate are still everywhere around us today, as we have been so painfully reminded by the return of terror to the streets of Manchester and London in recent weeks. We are trying once again to make sense of the hatred and intolerance that give rise to such extremist violence, which is all too often followed by reprisals and, for example, by a rise in Islamophobic hate crime. The lesson from Srebrenica and other genocides is that such violence and hatred creep up on us in stages. They begin with differentiation and discrimination, fostering and fostered by a sense of grievance or perceived grievance.

Genocide results when they proceed through stages of organised persecution and execution, followed by denial of what took place. Yet at every stage, as we watch hate unfold, we have the opportunity to break into that journey and halt it.

The Government have promised to bring forward counter-extremism proposals in this Parliament. I suggest that in doing so they could learn from an understanding of the steps that lead to genocide. In particular, I hope Ministers take note of how low-level prejudice can escalate to crime, violence and murder. In our strategy for tackling extremism and extremist hate, we must actively promote tolerance in and between our communities; work with them and encourage them to educate and share with one another; support individuals bravely speaking out against hate speech; recognise and act on inequality and injustice; and intervene at the earliest possible stage.

I am glad that we have the opportunity in Parliament today to commemorate the atrocity suffered by the people of Srebrenica. But commemoration must be accompanied by action, so I urge on Ministers a determination to learn the lessons of how intolerance takes root, to be alert to the markers that identify its growth, and to be resolute in working with our diverse communities to tackle it early and comprehensively. That would be a fine memorial to those who died in Srebrenica 22 years ago.

11.16 am

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) on her heartfelt and powerful contribution to this timely debate. It was also interesting to hear interventions from the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden), and I will try to address some of the points they raised.

As has rightly been pointed out, the genocide committed in and around Srebrenica some 22 years ago undoubtedly represents one of the darkest chapters in the post-war history of our continent. Because of my family background, I had more reason than many, perhaps, to have hoped that genocide had been consigned to the history books. My late mother was from Silesia in Germany; she was born in November 1939 and was forcibly removed—a phrase that later became “ethnically cleansed”—in the early part of 1945, towards the end of the war, as the red army advanced. Unspeakable atrocities took place, as many hon. Members will know; perhaps there was less sympathy for the civilian population of Germany at that time, but none the less those episodes were something that I was brought up with and told about as a young boy.

I was 30 when the terrible events in Srebrenica took place. There was a sense that we were seeing them with our very own eyes; in many ways, they seemed more horrific because there were live TV broadcasts. Many of us will remember how the Dutch UN peacekeeping force was pushed to one side by Mladić. The bellicose rhetoric of Milošević and others in that part of the world, in the years before and immediately afterwards, was close in our minds.

I want to address a number of issues that the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston raised. I am proud, as she is, that the United Kingdom takes the matter

[*Mark Field*]

seriously; I hope we will continue to do so, and to fund it accordingly, in the years to come. It is difficult to talk about lessons being learned. The evil that man does, has done since time immemorial and will probably do in future, in a whole range of different ways, is a terrible thing. Clearly we need to try to educate young people about the precise aspects of what has gone on, whether in the holocaust in the 1940s or in this important genocide in our backyard in the western Balkans. However, I am always a little concerned about that easy phrase that politicians use—"lessons will be learned". That is not to say that we should not address these issues fundamentally, in historic terms, but ultimately I fear that there will always be people with evil in their heart and evil in their mind.

When one looks at the collapse of Yugoslavia, it is very easy to blame it on forces that go back many hundreds of years or on the actions of particular politicians in the early 1990s. There were a number of decidedly evil people who held their sway because of the power that they had, military and politically, in that region at that time.

Kate Green: I very much appreciate the tone that the Minister is taking in responding to the debate and I absolutely understand that the history of humanity is littered with evil and genocide; as I said, there has not been just one genocide even in our own living memory. However, one of the interesting things that Remembering Srebrenica and other campaigners have drawn attention to is the staged process that begins with low-level prejudice and can ultimately lead to the type of terrible atrocity that we saw in 1995. Does the Minister agree that that staged process at least offers some sort of structure for trying to prevent such evil from completing its journey and, if so, can he say whether it is informing the Government's thinking in relation to counter-extremism strategies?

Mark Field: I very much hope that it is; the hon. Lady made her point very powerfully. Of course, trying to break the process down so that some concerted strategy can apply across the board does not necessarily bear with the facts, but the hon. Lady has certainly referred to one of the most important strands of the broader counter-terrorism strategy.

The hon. Lady is right that this anniversary is a moment not only to remember those who died but to reaffirm our own determination to prevent genocide in the future. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the work of the International Commission on Missing Persons, which was mentioned earlier. It has identified over 70% of those who were missing at the end of the Bosnian conflict, as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield made clear. That work includes identifying the remains of some 7,000 of those who were killed at Srebrenica. In a way, that is a remarkable achievement, but I accept that for many hundreds, even thousands, of relatives there is still a lot of work to be done. I take very much on board the suggestion that we remember those who are still missing and stand in solidarity with their families.

In March, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office welcomed some of those who are still searching for their loved ones, including people such as Nura Begovic,

whose brother is of course still missing. We had a meeting at that time that was jointly organised with the ICMP. The hon. Lady rightly talked about the ICMP's work. This Government—like, I hope, all UK Governments of whatever colour in the future—will continue to provide resources for that work. We have provided some £3 million overall since 2000, a period that obviously extends across the political divide. I am delighted that my FCO colleague, the Minister for the Middle East, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), remains a commissioner for the ICMP.

The Government have been a strong supporter of the Srebrenica commemorations, both in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the UK. On the 20th anniversary in 2015, Her Royal Highness the Princess Royal represented the UK at the Potočari memorial site. Representatives of the British embassy in Sarajevo attend commemoration events every year and in their doing so I hope that we are playing our part in demonstrating that the United Kingdom stands together with Bosnians in expressing our horror at the crimes committed in Srebrenica. Those representatives show our continued support for justice and reconciliation.

As has been pointed out, we also rightly commemorate Srebrenica here in the United Kingdom. Last year, the erstwhile Foreign Secretary, now the Chancellor, hosted a memorial event in the FCO. Her Majesty's Government support this year's commemoration at the Guildhall here in London; we will, of course, be represented at it.

We are also giving some £1.2 million to the Remembering Srebrenica project, which works to ensure that this appalling episode in European history is properly commemorated. The project itself aims to bring together people from all walks of life, from all cultures and from all faiths to highlight the destructive nationalism and hatred that lay at the heart of the Srebrenica massacre. In my view, one way of doing that is through raising awareness of genocide by taking people out to Bosnia. I appreciate that the hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield have already been a part of that process.

I know that the hon. Lady has been there and I hope that many other MPs will go out to the western Balkans, not only to commemorate Srebrenica but to see some of the positivity in other parts of that region. Croatia, which is next door, is a member of the European Union, while other nations in that region seek to join the European family. We are rightly very proud in this country of our role in this valuable project.

The United Kingdom also strives for Srebrenica to be remembered around the world. In 2015, we drafted a United Nations Security Council resolution marking the 20th anniversary of Srebrenica; as was rightly pointed out, it was disappointing, but perhaps not entirely surprising, that both Serbia and Russia objected to it and ultimately Russia, which has the power of veto, vetoed it. I hope that we will continue to make similar efforts for similar anniversaries in the future and hopefully we will eventually have a unity of purpose within the UN.

Of course, we wanted at that juncture in 2015 to remember all the victims of the Bosnian conflict, to show solidarity with survivors and to reflect on the UN's failure to stand up and be counted on that very dark day in Srebrenica in 1995. Of course, that failure is recognised as one of the organisation's darkest moments. As I have said, sadly Russia vetoed our resolution in

2015, but we remain committed to working through the international organisations to prevent genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.

The theme of the Srebrenica commemorations this year is “Breaking the Silence: Gender and Genocide”. As the hon. Lady rightly pointed out, it is important to remember that while those killed in Srebrenica were almost exclusively men and boys—they were very deliberately chosen to be killed—many, many thousands of women and girls suffered appalling sexual violence and of course were left behind after the Bosnian conflict came to an end.

The FCO has been at the forefront of international work to tackle this issue since we launched our preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative in 2012. Our current focus is on ending the stigma associated with sexual violence. Last Thursday, the Inter-Religious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina signed a declaration against that stigma. The UK had a hand in that declaration, because the text was brokered by the United Nations Population Fund as part of a UK-funded project. It is just one example of our work to end such stigma, which obviously applies well beyond the issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina; it really applies across the world, with elements of sexual violence in areas where there has been a major stigma associated with it. We fully support the decision by Remembering Srebrenica to highlight the issue of stigma in this year’s commemoration.

As the hon. Member for Strangford will know from his part of the world, it is also important that we look to and build for the future. It is vital that, in looking back, we remember the victims and try to do our best to prevent anything like Srebrenica from ever happening again. However, we also need to look forward, to build

for the future and to ensure that Srebrenica is not forever defined by the terrible episodes in 1995 or indeed by the past in general.

As has rightly been pointed out, reconciliation is a vital step on that road, which is why tackling stigma is so important. It is also why the UK has funded projects to help displaced people returning to the Srebrenica area; those projects have helped to create some 90 new jobs for young people in the region.

I conclude by saying that we must never forget the terrible events in Srebrenica 22 years ago. Remembering is important, not only to honour the dead but to remind ourselves that even in these modern times—civilised times, as we like to think of them—such horrors definitely remain possible and we must try to prevent them from ever happening again.

The UK can be proud of what we have done to ensure that the victims of Srebrenica are never forgotten and I very much hope that we continue that work in a similar vein. We can also be very proud of the work we are continuing to do to help the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina to look forward to the future and hopefully to build a more prosperous, harmonious and stable nation for the future. However, I fear that such work will come to nought unless, as my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary made clear during his own visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina as recently as April, the present-day leaders of Bosnia and Herzegovina deliver much-needed reforms. It really is time for the politics of hope to prevail over those of division.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

State Pension Age for Women

[SIR EDWARD LEIGH *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the state pension age for women.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward, for the first time in this Session. I thank everyone who has contacted me prior to this debate and all those raising awareness of the issue. I also thank Members for their support for early-day motion 63, which is in my name.

It is a testament to the importance of the issue that though I have been a Member of Parliament for seven years, I have never seen so many MPs in Westminster Hall. Nor have I seen so many people in the Public Gallery. Many others cannot get in. I will be disciplined in my remarks, as you have requested, Sir Edward.

I have been told by Government Members that the proposal in my early-day motion is unrealistic and that no Government would agree with its aims.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I can remember this issue being raised when I was shadow Pensions Minister at the start of the previous Parliament. The situation has been going on for so long, and the Government are doing nothing. Does my hon. Friend agree that they are simply slamming the door in the face of the 1950s women?

Grahame Morris: Absolutely. I am grateful for that intervention. If I may develop my argument, there clearly is an opportunity, particularly given the new parliamentary arithmetic, for the Government to do something and put right a wrong and a glaring injustice. Judging by the fact that early-day motion 63 has been signed by Members of every party, there is cross-party support for such a solution.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Most people would agree that it is about time the matter was resolved. In the previous Parliament, before the general election, we had a lot of debates about it. I asked the Minister then responsible to meet a delegation to discuss it, and they refused. Does my hon. Friend not think that that is a disgrace?

Grahame Morris: Yes, I do. I understand that any pension changes will always be difficult and contentious, but in this case there has been a clear injustice.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is right that there is an opportunity to put this injustice right. The Conservative manifesto said:

“We abhor social division, injustice, unfairness and inequality.”

The Government have an opportunity to put their money where their mouth is so far as the 1950s women are concerned.

Grahame Morris: That is absolutely true. It is widely accepted that many of those affected by the Pensions Act 1995 did not receive adequate notification. As such, they did not have enough time to plan for their retirement.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Lab): It is really good to see my hon. Friend back in good health; I think everyone here would agree. Does he agree that if the Government can find £1 billion to prop themselves up, they can find the money for these women who have contributed to their families, our communities and our economy over so many years? If they can find £1 billion simply to save themselves through a pact with the Democratic Unionist party, they can find the money for these women.

Grahame Morris: I agree with my hon. Friend. Indeed, there is an opportunity, given the apparent support for such a solution from a substantial number of DUP Members and Conservative Members who were members of the all-party group on state pension inequality for women.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I thank my comrade for giving way. There is this mystical letter that so many women are supposed to have received about their retirement age, but I have not met one constituent who received it. The Government say that they do not have enough of a timeframe, but does he agree that many women in this country did not have enough time to prepare for this issue?

Grahame Morris: I am grateful for that intervention, and I was just about to come on to that point. These are not just my opinions; the former Pensions Minister Steve Webb said the same things. He said:

“I accept that some women did not know about it, and not everybody heard about it at the time.”

In fairness to him, he said that

“it was all over the papers at the time”.—[*Official Report*, 13 October 2013; Vol. 568, c. 54WH.]

However, I do not think that is good enough. The Government have failed to contact anyone affected by the pension increase.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. Mr Morris, you can see how many people are trying to get in. You have been very generous taking interventions, but the more interventions we have, the longer your speech and the fewer people who will be able to get in. It is entirely up to you, but you may not want to be too generous with interventions.

Grahame Morris: Thank you, Sir Edward. I will give way one more time.

Dr Whitford: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Would it not be reasonable for women facing a change in pension age of up to five or six years to expect a direct letter? The responses are, “You could have asked”, and, “We had a leaflet”, but why would women ask when they thought they knew what the retirement age was?

Grahame Morris: That is an excellent point, well made.

Mr Keith Simpson (Broadland) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Grahame Morris: I think the right hon. Gentleman will have heard the admonishment from the Chair, so I am afraid I will have to be disciplined.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Go on, let a Tory in!

Grahame Morris: Go on then, I will. I am generous to a fault.

Mr Simpson: I am very grateful, and I am aware of the Chair's advice. I have to declare an interest, in that my wife is one of the women who have been affected. She feels incandescent with rage. She had no correspondence whatever, exactly as the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) said.

My second point is that, as I am sure many of the ladies have found out, the website of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs is incoherent. I was on it on Sunday morning, and the information that people get is contradictory. I hope the Minister will do something about it.

Grahame Morris: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention, and I hope that the Minister is taking due note of it. When a large delegation of women adversely affected by the changes came to see me, I checked the HMRC website, and a lot of the information is out of date, even on the number of people affected. I think that 2.4 million was the number originally quoted, but it is now generally accepted that the number is 3.5 million.

Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Grahame Morris: I will give way just one more time.

Mr Hepburn: My hon. Friend is very generous. Just to place the numbers in context, is he aware that more than 4,000 women in the Jarrow constituency alone have been robbed of their thoughts of a happy retirement? That has been stolen from them by a Tory Government, who are more willing to give a £1 billion bung to the DUP to save their necks in government than they are to look after people who have worked for a lifetime just to be happy in retirement.

Grahame Morris: Absolutely. There is a moral argument and a factual argument. I hope the Minister and his advisers will go away and reflect on the debates that have taken place—not just this debate in Westminster Hall, but the number of debates in the previous Parliament where the arguments were soundly put.

I find it difficult to understand how in any other circumstances the House would not consider this issue of inadequate notice—or, indeed, no notice—to be a case of maladministration. Various Members have raised that issue. Had any other public body failed in such a way, whether that was a Government agency or local government, there would rightly be demands for support and compensation for those affected. Those are legitimate demands, and I understand that they have been made collectively on behalf of the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign in a joint letter to the Department. I hope the Minister will comment on that.

The decision to accelerate the increases in the state pension further compounded the failings, with an impact on the same cohort that had already been failed by the 1995 Act. Age UK research found that some of the people affected, who had not been aware of the 1995 legislation, now face waits of up to six years more than they had been expecting before they can access their pension.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Grahame Morris: I will give way one more time. [*Laughter.*] It is like the last gala plate.

Derek Twigg: My hon. Friend is making a very good speech. To take up his point, it is the human cost that matters here. Some of my constituents have told me that they have taken up, or plan to take up, caring responsibilities and are facing real financial difficulty—and once someone is over 60 it is difficult for them to get a decent job as well. Those are real issues and the Government need to take those points on board. It is about time that the Government listened and found a way forward, rather than burying their head in the sand.

Grahame Morris: I am grateful for that intervention; indeed, every constituency is affected. I believe my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Mr Hepburn) said that 4,000 women are affected in his constituency; almost 5,000 are affected in my constituency of Easington. The women deserve both recognition of the injustice that they have suffered and some kind of financial help to alleviate the poverty that many of them are now suffering. I know that we are short of time, but I have heard some harrowing stories from women who have worked all their lives and now, through change of circumstance, have found themselves in the dire situation of having to sell their homes. They are facing enormous financial pressures because of changes in legislation that they were not aware of. That really needs to be put right.

The Labour party intends to extend our commitment to pension credit to hundreds of thousands of the most vulnerable women. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) will go into a little more detail about exploring the options for further transitional protections to ensure that all the women have security and dignity in old age.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Grahame Morris: I will give way, Sir Edward, but just because it is the Minister.

Guy Opperman: I accept that I am to be brief, Sir Edward. I want to clarify the hon. Gentleman's position. I looked at his blog from June 2016, which maintained that the Pensions Act 1995

"timescales were such that they gave sufficient time for people to plan".

The impression from that blog is that the hon. Gentleman had no criticism of the Act. Is that still the case?

Grahame Morris: I do not think that is necessarily a fair reflection. The changes were accelerated in 2011 and, for the record, I do not think that women were given adequate time. In fact, they were not given individual

[*Grahame Morris*]

notification that the legislation had changed, and I think that Parliament and Government had a duty to notify all those affected at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry North West) (Lab): On the point about the abuse of procedure inherent in the non-notification of those affected, is my hon. Friend aware that the WASPI women are now seeking legal advice from Bindmans as to whether the non-notification was improper and indeed an abuse of procedure? Would the money not be much better used by the Government to settle this case, over which they have procrastinated disgracefully?

Grahame Morris: I am grateful for that very pertinent intervention; it gives the Minister an opportunity to find a solution. I am not sure what the cost of a collective action would be: HMRC suggested £2.4 million; the real figure is probably £3.5 million. If all those cases of maladministration were found against the Government, we could be looking at a huge settlement. Given that the Prime Minister seems to have discovered the magic money tree, perhaps a few leaves could be brought down to mitigate the effects for those who are worst affected.

In this new Parliament, it is my intention to work with all Members, irrespective of party, to secure justice for the WASPI campaigners. As I mentioned before, the arithmetic has changed. It would have been difficult to secure meaningful changes to help the women affected without the support of the Government in the last Parliament. However, we now have that opportunity.

I have received the names of those Members who signed the WASPI pledge and there are 20 Conservative and Democratic Unionist party Members in that number. That is a significant number, for people following the maths—I see the Government Whips here. I am confident that my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North will outline the Opposition's position and the support Labour would offer to the women affected by the changes. However, in this Parliament, the extent and scope of any changes, transitional arrangements, bridging pensions or compensation depend upon those 20 Members from the Conservative party and the DUP. I would say to those 20 right hon. and hon. Members that they hold the balance of power on this issue.

I urge the Government to take a pragmatic approach. I am concerned that, to date, the Department for Work and Pensions has failed to provide an adequate and substantive response to the letter from Bindmans, the legal representatives of the WASPI campaign, which my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) raised. That has highlighted the maladministration by the Government—

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman has now been speaking for 15 minutes. As a courtesy to his colleagues, will he please come to a conclusion?

Grahame Morris: I urge the Government to acknowledge their error, provide all those affected with some level of compensation, and provide those worst affected—those who are waiting six years longer than they had planned before they receive their pension—with some support to bridge the gap between 60 and 66.

I end with a quote from the DUP manifesto. I must confess that in all my days I never thought I would quote from the DUP manifesto; this may be my one and only opportunity to do so. It says that they would “support an end to the unfair treatment of women pensioners.”

Alongside the Conservative MPs who have signed the WASPI pledge, we have the numbers to change this policy. I ask the Minister to take this opportunity, secure the change that is needed and provide dignity in retirement for all the women penalised by the changes.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. In view of the very large number of hon. Members wishing to take part and my intention to try to call as many as possible, I must now impose a two-minute limit on speeches.

2.46 pm

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I am grateful to be called so early in the debate. I have 4,000 women in my constituency who are affected by this issue, and I have met many; I am sure other honourable colleagues have done the same. I will have to rattle through my speech. I am sorry not to be as eloquent as I would like on their behalf.

It is a complex picture. Not only do my constituents feel that they were not given adequate information about how to plan their future, but they feel cast on the heap, so to speak, now that they are having to look for jobs. Their experience in the jobcentre has been abysmal. People who have been in senior positions are being given advice on how to dress and present themselves at interview and update their CV. There is nearly 0% unemployment in my constituency, so their chances of getting a job are pretty remote and they are finding it incredibly dispiriting to have to take part in that process.

I would like to mention Daphne—I will not give her second name—who has been instrumental in bringing the issue to my attention in St Albans. What she says reflects the position of many women, and I am actually a WASPI woman as well. She says that generations ago, people did things differently. Daphne started work very young and was only informed of the pension age change in October 2012, two and a half years before she was due to retire. She is married to a man five years older. She says that this was not how she planned to spend her retirement—scraping around trying to get a job, being advised by people at the jobcentre who have absolutely no idea how to get her a job, and feeling a sense of injustice that she was given so little time to plan.

That is the nub of it for the WASPI women. They accept that there should be equalisation in pension age, but what they do not accept is being given a matter of months to turn their lives around—to turn around their future plans with their spouse or partner. They do not accept not having some comfort in their retirement, so that they can live the life they thought they had planned for and had made all the preparation for.

The fact that those letters did not arrive, desperately needs to be looked into by the Minister, and something should be done to redress the imbalance.

2.48 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to join other hon. Members in speaking up for these women, who have worked hard all their life, working to a presumed retirement date, only to

see the Government move the goalposts at the last minute, giving them little or no notice and, as we have heard, causing real financial hardship.

This is the first such debate in this Parliament, but it is just the latest in a long line of debates, questions and lobbies calling on the Government to right this wrong. It is necessary now because, up until now, there have been no positive messages from the Government, no mention in the Tory manifesto and no mention in the Queen's Speech.

The WASPI women I have spoken to made their voices heard clearly in the general election by lobbying candidates, and voting for candidates who listened and committed to fight this huge injustice. The Government should not and cannot take these women for granted any more. Their voice will be heard and needs to be heeded. They are women who have sacrificed their careers for caring; who were unable to take up suitable workplace pensions, often due to unequal pay in the past. Many, because of ill health, are not able to work the extra years the Government now expect of them. That is illustrated by a constituent who asked me to raise her case and sadly died recently. At the age of 62, she had to give up work after 45 years after a long battle with cancer. She had a demanding job, and she just could not continue. The change meant that she was denied more than £38,000. She was unable to enjoy her retirement and was very worried about the financial hardship that that meant. That shows the real human impact of this Government policy. That is just one voice, but I ask the Minister to listen to the many thousands like her and work to find a solution to end this hardship and right this wrong.

2.51 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Here we are again: it is déjà vu all over again. I am delighted to see so many people supporting this debate, as they did for so many of the debates we had in the previous Parliament. I welcome back some of the longstanding supporters of the campaign, and I particularly welcome new conscripts to the campaign and longstanding Members newly converted to the campaign—partly, I am sure, by the fantastic campaigning efforts of the various WASPI campaigners during the general election, who got people to sign the pledge. I pay tribute to them again.

It is essential that we all keep united on this important campaign. I speak as a co-chair of the all-party group on state pension inequality for women. I and the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who co-chairs it with me, pledge that we will be re-forming the group shortly, to ensure that the WASPI women's voices are heard loud and clear in this place until we get justice for them.

It is worth reminding ourselves that the state pension system is founded on a contributory principle. It is not a state benefit, for which no prior commitment is involved. Yet that group of women, who have been paying national insurance contributions over many years in good faith and have fulfilled their end of the deal, face being short-changed retrospectively. That is the nub of this injustice.

There is an unfair, disproportionate burden on women born in the 1950s. We have heard so much about the poor communication—they were not made aware of what they were going to face—and the promise of transitional

arrangements that have still not materialised, despite various Ministers saying they would. In my view, that represents a breach of trust for those hundreds of thousands—indeed, millions—of women who worked hard, did the right thing and did their bit all their life. The problem is more widespread than we were ever led to believe. It threatens real hardship for many of our constituents now—not at some stage in the future, but absolutely now.

This problem is not going to go away. I hope that, with a new Minister and a new Secretary of State, we can have a new start and a clean break, and that we can recognise this injustice and do something about it at long last.

2.53 pm

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): The 1950s women have faced challenges and disadvantage throughout their working lives. Those women—I include myself among them—started work before the Equal Pay Act 1970 came into force, and they predated the principle of equal pay for work of equal value. They regularly experienced harassment and discrimination in the workplace, and they frequently had to resolve to accept low-paid, part-time jobs because flexible working was not then available to them. They are the group of women who, because of a lack of childcare provision and paternity leave, gave up work to raise children, which not only affected their personal occupational pension, if they were lucky enough to have one, but their future earning capacity.

The Government's decision to accelerate state pension age equalisation is the most recent affront to that group of women, who, despite facing such adversity, have contributed all their working lives and deserve a decent retirement, built on solid foundations of stability and certainty. Unfortunately, the gross unfairness of the Government's decision, combined with their inability to communicate properly the changes they introduced, has robbed that group of women of the capacity to plan their retirement with certainty and to make informed decisions. They have not been given the time needed to adjust to their new circumstances.

The Government must now act to address that intrinsic unfairness by introducing transitional arrangements for those women. Everyone agrees that the retirement age for the state pension should be the same for men and women. That is not the question. It is not equalisation that is so unfair; it is the pace of the changes and the way the Government are bringing them in, along with the indifference shown towards those affected. That needs to be resolved without delay.

2.55 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): We have had this debate many times previously, and it is unlikely that much that is said today will be new. In the previous Parliament, the Work and Pensions Committee report highlighted some of the issues that the WASPI campaigners themselves raised. Among them is the key problem of communication and the lessons that can be learned from that—in particular, that all those who will be affected by future state pension age changes should be given much longer notice of them, and that there needs to be a much better communication programme to ensure no one has reason to say that they did not know when their state pension would arrive.

[Richard Graham]

There are the real issues of equality and European law, which some people have overlooked—in particular, to do with the Pensions Act 1995. There are also real issues, sometimes under-emphasised by some of my colleagues, about the costs to the DWP, which are estimated to be about £30 billion, with a further cost to the Exchequer of about £8 billion from reduced tax and national insurance contributions. That is a completely different sum of money from, for example, the additional funding given to help mental health in Northern Ireland.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Earlier, the hon. Gentleman referred to communications. How can it possibly be right that when I wrote to women in my constituency whom I identified might be affected, many wrote back and said that was the first time they had ever been told by anybody? That is the injustice of the situation. [Applause.]

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. I know this is a very important issue, but I am afraid it is a custom of the House that the Public Gallery has to remain silent. I apologise.

Richard Graham: I understand the point the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) is making. That was covered in considerable detail in the report of the Work and Pensions Committee, which was chaired by his colleague, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field). There are claims both ways on that. I suspect that there were definitely people who did not know, but perhaps not quite as many as has been suggested.

Let me come on to the Opposition parties' proposals. In the first debate in this very Chamber some time ago, which, as the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) should know, was as well-attended as this one is, I warned the WASPI campaigners that they were in real danger of being led up the garden path by Labour and the Scottish National party. I note that, in 2016, the Labour party said it would commit £860 million to extend pension credits. That was reduced in its manifesto to £300 million, alongside a line that said:

“Labour is exploring options for further transitional protections.”

After two and a half years, I would have thought that it would have come up with some result from its explorations, but there is none so far. The Scottish National party, which simply said in its manifesto:

“We will also continue to support the WASPI campaign”, now has the devolved powers in Scotland to give additional discretionary sums of money to those affected.

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Richard Graham: No, I will not take any further interventions. There are many people who want to speak.

My strong recommendation to the Minister is this. He is a new, capable Minister, and I know he has looked at this issue. He should focus on what extra support he and the Government can give to those women who are still in work longer than they otherwise expected to be. In particular, he should spell out more about what the

Government's strategy for “fuller working lives” involves. Meanwhile, he has in his in-tray two important issues to look at, which affect other pensioners: the fact that there are real issues for people who are getting net pay and not benefiting from their employer's contributions, and those people with too little to get over the hurdle to get the pension at all—

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. Time out, I am afraid.

2.59 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Let me correct the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham). If he reads section 28 of the Scotland Act 2016, he will see that the Scottish Government are prohibited from doing anything about pensions or relating to age.

The key issue is communication. The Work and Pensions Committee said that people should have 15 years. The Government said, “Well, you did. It changed in 1995”. But they wasted 14 of those years by not informing women. They only started to write to women in 2009, one year before the first batch of women found that their pension age had changed. Many only discovered in 2011, when they were informed of the second change, that they were being hit by a double whammy.

The problem, as I mentioned earlier, is one of communication—an article in the *Financial Times* is not an acceptable way to inform women such as me, born in the 1950s, that our pension age is changing. HMRC and the DWP can certainly find us when they want to, so I would have thought they could send a personal letter. The idea that we should have to ask for our pension age is ridiculous when we have known what it was for our whole lives. The Government owe those women a duty of care; those women who have suffered the gender pay gap, raised children and cared for the sick—

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr Whitford: I will give way.

Norman Lamb: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way—

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. The right hon. Gentleman has to approach the microphone. Strictly, under the rules of the House, he should be sitting before he stands. I know it is difficult, but he has to be near a microphone.

Norman Lamb: I was sitting.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): I apologise, but he must speak into a microphone.

Norman Lamb: I am very grateful. Is it not part of the problem that all those women who have given up much of their adult lives to caring responsibilities then face real discrimination when seeking work at this age? They are therefore left in unacceptable poverty.

Dr Whitford: Those women have also faced discrimination while they were working. As a Member said earlier, they have been in poorly paid jobs—part-time or flexible work was not available. Women still occupy the bulk of low-paid jobs; women have faced and suffered 86% of all the austerity cuts since 2010. Those women have paid and paid and paid, and some of them are losing almost £50,000 of pension in the move from 60 to 66. That is utterly unjust. The Government could correct it. They should sit down on a cross-party basis to work it out, to deliver some justice, fairness and dignity for the WASPI women.

3.1 pm

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): This is a simple question of justice, of fairness and of righting a wrong that has been done to women of the 1950s generation. I was born in the 1950s—many in the Chamber will not remember them—and women did not work. We were told that we would have to rely on our husband's pension.

Later, when we went into work, given the opportunity, we were told, “You're working part-time; you cannot enter a private pension agreement.” We did not work not because we did not want to, but because there were no employment opportunities for working women. Some women could not be in teaching if they were married in the early 1950s; they had to give up work.

Now, those same 1950s women are called—I find this quite offensive—the “sandwich generation”: we are the ones looking after grandchildren and our elderly parents. At the same time, we are having to give up work because our pension is not there. Too many women are now living in poverty. Too many women, when they can get work, are having to accept zero-hours contracts, temporary jobs and low pay, no matter what their qualifications or skills base.

It is wrong that a generation of women have been treated in this way, ignored by Government and not even communicated with—the contempt that that generation of women have had to cope with all their working lives has been exacerbated by this Government. It is time for justice for the WASPI women.

3.3 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on bringing forward this debate at a convenient and appropriate time.

Last October, I presented a petition signed by 2,249 Waveney residents in support of the WASPI campaign. At the same time, Waveney District Council unanimously endorsed that campaign on a cross-party basis. The general election campaign, when I was knocking on doors, confirmed for me that this a very real problem for many women who face serious hardship. It will not go away.

The all-party parliamentary group on state pension inequality for women, which will be re-formed shortly, will I am sure play its role in finding a solution. I ask the Minister, whom I know well, to consult and consider with his ministerial colleagues and to come forward with proposals to start a process to find a solution that is fair, fully considered and affordable.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): I call Chris Bryant.

Chris Bryant: I had not asked to speak, Sir Edward, but if you force me to—

Hon. Members: No!

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): I call Mary Glindon.

3.5 pm

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on securing this debate.

Five thousand women in North Tyneside are affected by the changes to the state pension age and many of them have contacted me about the acceleration of their state pension age. Women in this age group went straight into work after leaving school, so by the time they reach their state pension age they have already worked more than the 35 years expected for a full state pension. They have at least 39 to 44 qualifying years and have paid more than their fair share of contributions, but are losing at least three to four years of pension entitlement.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that those women who did not contract out of the state scheme but remained in it are disadvantaged against those who did contract out, in that a pension can often be drawn early if it is a private pension that someone contracted out to, but a state pension cannot be drawn out early?

Mary Glindon: Quite right—I have nothing to add to that.

My point is that the Treasury is making quite a saving. One of my constituents, who worked until she was in her late 50s and gave up her job to look after her father—who had dementia—thought she could manage because she thought that she would get her pension at 60, but she found she was unable to claim her pension. She then had poor health herself and was forced to claim employment and support allowance with the support of her GP. That claim was denied and, despite ill health, she now has to work two cleaning jobs to support herself—that is a disgrace.

I feel both sorry for and angry on behalf of the 5,000 women in North Tyneside and the other millions of women who have been cheated of their pension entitlement by the coalition Government and this Tory Government. I hope that the Minister will disagree with his predecessor, who claimed that going further than the Government have already gone could not be justified.

Our welfare state began on 5 July 1948. On 5 July 2017, I say to the Minister that a commitment by him to further transitional arrangements for those women would be a fitting birthday tribute to that great institution.

3.7 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I had a very long speech—but that will now become a very short speech.

I want to make one particular point. I was a personal finance journalist, writing about pensions, for about 15 years; also, my mother is one of those affected by

[*Julian Knight*]

the changes. She was informed about them, but she found out relatively late, and I have many constituents in the same position.

I accept and genuinely believe that over the past 13 years—remember, the Labour Government saw through the majority of this—Governments have fallen down on the job of informing people directly, as they should have done. There was some discussion in the personal finance press—I know that because I used to write about it—but now Labour are coming along and saying, “Everything is terrible under the Conservatives”, or whatever. They were in charge for 13 years during the period in question.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Julian Knight: I will not give way, I am afraid, as I am short of time.

My other point is that the current state pension arrangements will have to rise as well. When we meet those issues in the future, we have to get them right because this country is heading for an enormous black hole. The figures are frightening—absolutely frightening. People talk about £30 billion here, £30 billion there, but the reality is that if the Opposition parties want to form a Government in the future, they will have to accept that the pension system in this country needs continued radical reform. If they do not do so, and continue grandstanding, taking on policies and ignoring their own past errors, that is not going to do any good whatever.

In 2003, the Turner commission report—

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Julian Knight: I am sorry, I cannot—I did not give way to the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) either.

In 2003, the Turner commission report was born out of cross-party consensus on pensions. That has broken down. Going forward, we need a bit more co-operative work so that it does not happen again.

3.9 pm

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on once again securing a debate on this important matter. He has already stated the reasons why the policy is so unfair: the lack of adequate notice given to the 3.5 million WASPI women and the lack of opportunity to make contingent plans for the future in the face of such injustice. More than 4,000 women are affected in Haslingden and Hyndburn.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Catherine Vernon is one of more than 4,000 constituents in Weaver Vale affected by this issue. The only garden path the WASPI campaign led me up was to election victory and the removal of the Conservative Member for Weaver Vale. Do the maths: the majority of the former MP was 806; I had 4,400 very powerful WASPI women. I want to thank them for their campaign and I hope they continue to shake this place up until they get justice.

Graham Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. Many people want to raise concerns. This debate has been thrashed alive. I will turn to some of the comments that my constituents have made to me.

Jennifer Smith, aged 63, works as a nurse on night shifts and does not see why she should run around an extremely busy ward while her pension has been moved back. Kath Talbot, also in her 60s, has described the change as a six-year sentence and says it is heartbreaking to watch her plans go up in smoke because she has to use savings to get by. Elaine Walker, aged 62, has worked all her life, but is now disabled. On top of the changes to pensions, the Government have also cut her benefits. Joanie Fraser, aged 62, worries about an uncertain future for her and her friends, who simply cannot cope with further demoralisation after more than 45 years of hard work.

Sylvia Cottam, aged 63, wrote that she is undergoing chemotherapy and worries whether she will receive her pension if she stops work for good. Helen Grace wrote that she has had to take medication because of the stress of this change. She works in early years but said she would not have chosen that career if she had known about the pension equalisation. She and Julie Sanderson both want to emphasise the problems of means testing and the so-called transitional arrangements of 18 months. Helen Brewin says the very least that the Government could do is to look at the effect it is having on people in their 50s. Thousands of women are suffering. Finally—time is short, and I want to allow other people to speak—Wendy Critchley wrote to point out that the 1950s women were brought up in an age when working hard was encouraged. How have we ended up with such injustice?

The Government need to step up now and implement clear transitional arrangements for the women that remedy the situation they face. Their financial situation is insecure and the Government need to recognise that.

3.12 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): As other Members have observed, we have had many debates on this subject so it is fair to say that the WASPI campaign has been a success in raising its profile. However, the only measure of success that hon. Members and campaigners will judge things by is a change in Government policy.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Is it not the case that because of the arithmetic of this Parliament, the Government will have to come forward with a proposal? That is absolutely clear. The only question is whether it is a derisory one. The Minister needs to understand that point before he comes up with his inevitable offer in the near future.

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend is right that there is an arithmetical inevitability about this matter. That is a tribute to the WASPI campaign and the way in which campaigners focused on people who stood for Parliament and gained their support. Given the timescales and the people we are talking about, the sooner something comes forward, the better, because the women cannot afford to wait another five years until the end of this Parliament. I urge the Minister, as my hon. Friend has suggested, to come up with proposals sooner rather than later.

As we have seen following the election, Ministers have changed their minds on a range of matters, so why should the WASPI campaign be any different? Anyone who has spoken to campaigners cannot help but be moved by the compelling case that they make. I have met many of them and they have told me about how they have been affected. Many have received little or no notice at all about changes to their pension age, forcing them to reconsider retirement plans or, worse still, rejoin the jobs market some time after they thought that they would not need to work again.

I have heard from constituents who volunteered to take redundancy to save the jobs of younger colleagues on the false assumption they would receive their pension at an earlier date. They deserve better. It is no longer acceptable when we hear the Government say that change is unaffordable. As we have heard from various Members already today, we need only to look at what has happened in Northern Ireland in the past week to know that where there is a political imperative, money can be found.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP) *rose*—

Justin Madders: I will not give way any more.

What about the cost in unintended consequences? Constituents have told me that the position they find themselves in now has had a detrimental impact on their mental health. That has a cost to the public purse as well. If the moral and financial arguments are not persuasive, perhaps the Minister will reflect on the message that this sends out not only to the WASPI women, but to everyone.

The state pension is part of the social contract that the Government have with the people of this country. It is an important part of the state's guarantee to people that if they pay their taxes they will be looked after in their old age or when they fall ill or otherwise face misfortune. If people do not trust the Government to deliver on that promise, we are heading down a road that we will come to regret.

3.15 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): First, I want to make clear the commitment in our manifesto; the proposer might find more enlightenment and balance in our manifesto than he does in his own. Our manifesto has committed us to continue this campaign and to continue giving the support that we afforded in the previous Parliament.

The issue is one of fairness. People have already said that the main problem is not that the pension age should be changed, but that when it is changed people ought to know that their circumstances have changed. The issue does not concern only one Government, but a range of parties. Perhaps it does not do any good to point fingers here today, but the Liberal Democrats, the Conservatives and the Labour party have all been in power during the time when information should have been given, but was not. As a result, many people have found that their pension age has been substantially changed and they are left without any provision for their immediate needs.

We are not wedded to any particular outcome. First, we have to recognise that there are some fiscal restraints. Having said that, some suggestions have been put forward,

all of which would help to address the problems faced by those who first face an immediate loss of income and secondly have no provision made for filling the gap that has been caused. During this Parliament we will work with the Government and use whatever influence, however minimal or maximal, to try to get a solution. It will inevitably have to be cross-party, but the solution must help to address the problems faced by people who bear no responsibility for their problems, but had them foisted on them.

3.18 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): The WASPI campaign has been hugely effective and I congratulate the campaigners. They have been especially effective in my constituency and in my party, and we are steadfast in our support for them. As we have heard, millions of women have worked hard but have had their lives totally disrupted. They are angry and they are not going away. Often they face unemployment with little hope of getting a job that is well paid, especially in a constituency like mine, which is a low-pay area. That is a poor reward for long years of work.

We do not oppose equalisation of the state pension age. Everyone says it is the way that it has been done that shows such disregard and indeed contempt. The Minister knows that it has long been the case and that it is argued on all sides that such profound changes require at least 10 years' notice. For example, the House might be interested to know that most recently the Cridland review published in March this year recommends raising the age to 68 over a two-year period between 2037 and 2039, 20 years hence.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): My hon. Friend is completely right to point out the despicable way in which women born in the 1950s have been treated. Does he agree that women in Wales are disproportionately affected by the administration of the changes?

Hywel Williams: It is not just in Wales that that happens, but in other deprived areas of the UK—the north-east and south-west.

The Government claim to be making the changes in response to increases in life expectancy, but life expectancy varies significantly from region to region. Wales will be particularly hit. In some parts of England newborn babies might now expect to live to the age of 87, but in parts of Wales they might expect to live to just 76. Payments in might be equal, but payments out vary enormously. I urge the Government to phase in transitional state pension arrangements for all WASPI women. That requires a bridging pension and compensation for those affected, to cover the period between the age of 60 and the new pension age.

The voices of the women who have been so badly treated must be heard and heeded. Otherwise it might seem that the Minister believes that accepting unfairness and keeping quiet is just a girl's job.

3.21 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Today's attendance is testimony to the depth of feeling on the issue, and the Minister will know how passionate I and my colleagues are about such a grave injustice. I am sure that his

[*Carolyn Harris*]

predecessor left him a health warning about my personal passion on the issue. I need say nothing more about it, because my colleagues have been saying it for me. However, I feel compelled to say that the Government have betrayed the women. They have stolen their security and shattered their dreams. Without the time to prepare and make the necessary alternative arrangements, many women born in the 1950s have been left in financial despair. They do not ask for special treatment—merely for respect and fair play.

In the recent general election all my Labour candidate colleagues, most of those in the current Opposition parties and, indeed, some Conservative candidates signed the WASPI pledge. I believe I saw that on many Twitter accounts, including that of the hon. Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones), who showed support for the west WASPI campaign. I applaud those who made that brave move. Now is the time for the Government to respect their colleagues, if not the WASPI women, and to do the right thing. The women have suffered for too long. The injustice must stop now. It cannot be allowed to continue.

3.22 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The WASPI women are angry and the Government are mistaken if they think, as I suspect they have thought up to this point, that if they hold firm the women will get bored—that they will be broken or beaten in the face of intransigence and give up. They will not give up. Even if they wanted to, they cannot. It is not a matter of pin money, but money to put food on the table and keep a roof over their heads. It is about being paid the pension to which they are entitled, so that they can have some kind of dignity in their retirement. They are not asking for a handout. They are not even asking for a hand up. They are asking for what is rightfully theirs—for what they should be able to expect.

The women have every right to be angry. Any fair-minded person who knows anything about the issue must surely be angry on their behalf. The delay to their pensions effectively deprives them of, potentially, tens of thousands of pounds. It is a travesty and must be addressed. Let us not forget that an attack on their pensions is ultimately an attack on the pensions of us all. The contract between the governed and the governing lies in tatters.

If the Minister feels that the Government have painted themselves into a corner and that retreat is difficult, I say this: there is courage and strength in admitting being wrong, in doing the right thing and in giving the women their due, not because the parliamentary arithmetic demands it but because it is right. I urge the Minister today to make the right choice and right a terrible wrong—to pay the women what they are owed, so that we can start to have a serious, mature and grown-up discussion about the future of state pensions. No one is opposed to the equalisation of state pensions. That is the way forward and I urge the Minister to start walking that path today.

3.24 pm

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): I have yet to meet anyone who does not agree that the WASPI women are in a terrible position, and that the failings

are the Government's, not theirs. It is hard to dispute the idea that not enough energy or resources were put into informing the women of the changes early enough for them to prepare psychologically and comprehend what the rest of their working life and their retirement plans would be.

Approximately 5,000 of the affected women live in North West Durham, and I have not met many who have been able to save. They now live in hardship. What an indignity that is, after they have served their communities through their labour for so many years—to end their lives in poverty. I do not think that it is disputed that adequate notification was not given. The DWP's own research said that six out of 10 women expected to reach state pension age earlier than they will do.

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is right on that point. There are 4,000 WASPI women in Leigh and they have had to set up their own group to support other women who are affected by the changes. From the time they found out what they had not initially been made aware of, the issues have been ongoing.

Laura Pidcock: My hon. Friend is right to point out that when the state fails people will organise.

I have witnessed what is happening at first hand. My mam only found out about her pension changes because of the WASPI campaign and I saw her disappointment, worry and anger that after working from the age of 13 she had to work more and more, and was robbed of nearly £40,000. For those women, who have not had enough time to prepare, who have had inadequate correspondence from the DWP and who through no fault of their own have ended up in poverty, the right thing to do is to compensate those who have already reached state pension age and provide a bridging pension for those who have not, in humble recognition that, as other hon. Members have said, it is not a benefit—it is rightfully theirs.

As other hon. Members have recognised, in the past couple of weeks we have seen that, when the political will is there, money can be found quickly to remedy a problem. I urge the Government to apply the same urgency to the present situation. There are many lessons to be learned from what is happening, but there is no justification for not putting it right. I want pension justice for those women now.

3.27 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): What a difference a few months can make in politics. At the start of June the Prime Minister told us that there is no magic money tree. At the start of July the UK Government could magically find £1 billion to save her career—at least for the short term. Of course, if things do not go to plan it is helpful to have a safety net to fall back on. That is a luxury that many women have not been given, since the UK Government unfairly and unexpectedly changed their pension rights. Those women are often forced to accept low-paid and insecure work because some employers are unwilling to take on workers who are close to retirement age. The resulting financial hardship has forced some to sell their homes. Others have developed health problems, or have had aggravations of existing long-term health conditions, because of the stress and anxiety of their situation. Too many still face an uncertain future.

It is estimated that around 3,900 women have been affected in my constituency. Local campaigners such as Elizabeth McQuarrie have done a tremendous job of making sure that the issue is not brushed aside by the Government. If it were not for our local WASPI campaign many more women would be caught out by the pension changes, some of whom stand to lose £35,000 over five years. If the UK Government can find £1 billion to help save the Prime Minister, why have they not devoted a single penny to helping the 2.6 million women affected by unfair pension changes?

Affordable solutions are available. An independent report commissioned by the Scottish National party outlined five options that the UK Government could take to mitigate the impact of the changes. The research found that for £8 billion over five years we could return to the original timetable set out in the Pensions Act 1995. It concluded that the money could come from the national insurance fund, which is predicted to have a surplus of £30 billion by the end of 2017-18.

The women of the WASPI campaign have fulfilled their part of the bargain by being productive citizens, some of them having worked since they were 15 years old. Now it is time for the UK Government to honour their side of the contract.

3.29 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for bringing another debate on this important issue. In the short time available to me I want to make a couple of points. First, the Government have set a dangerous precedent by breaking a contract with the people of this country. What does that say about what will happen in the future?

Those women have been cheated. I resent—and I am sure they do too—the implication that the Government cannot afford what they seek, and that the women are asking for Government spending. There is a contract, which the women entered into with the Government, in good faith. They worked hard, they paid in and they reasonably expected that, at 60, they would be able to collect their pensions. As many Members have said, there was no desire to fight equalisation, but there is a right of fair notice. Many of my constituents found out—some of them on their own initiative—only six weeks before their 60th birthdays that they would not be able to retire at 60 as they had expected. This is not about them fancying putting their feet up but having to work a bit longer; many women are having to continue working in physically demanding jobs when they clearly are not fit to do so.

Julie, a nurse in my constituency, relies on her income to support herself. She has worked in the NHS for 47 years. She recently experienced ill health. She thought she could just stagger on in what is a very physical role, but she now has to work for another three years. She got no notice whatever.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that, although it is crystal clear that this is a state error, only women are having to pay for that fault of the state?

Julie Cooper: Absolutely. Women cannot pay the price of the financial deficit in this country. Those women, who have worked hard, deserve to get what they are entitled to.

I spoke to another woman in my constituency who works in a foundry doing heavy physical work. She said she drags herself to the bus station at the end of the day and she is in bed at 7.30 pm so that she can get to work the next day. She thought she could stagger on for another 18 months until she was 60. Now, she finds she has to work extra years. Not working is not an option for her; she cannot choose not to work. She is not qualified to do anything else. She is 61; who is going to employ her to do anything now? This is unacceptable. Those women were not notified. The very least the Government could do is make transitional arrangements so there is at least a semblance of fairness and those women are allowed some sort of dignity in retirement.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): I am grateful for Members' co-operation. I am sorry for the short time limits, but I think we have got everyone in. We now pass to the winding-up speeches. I call Mhairi Black.

3.32 pm

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I was going to congratulate the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on bringing this subject to the House again, but I actually find myself wishing that he had not, because I cannot believe that we are still debating it. I am absolutely scunnered with banging on about the injustice to this group of women. The fact that we have to have another debate is an absolute disgrace and says a lot about the Government and their priorities.

We are at the stage where these debates are almost scripted for me. I know exactly what is going to come back from the Government Benches and, like most people here, I know what I am going to say. We have heard the Government argue, "Well, the 1995 Act gave 15 years' notice. That is exactly what the Turner commission recommended, so what is the problem?" Let me say it as clearly as possible: the problem is that nobody knew about these changes. The first letters were not sent out until 2009—14 years after the changes. To put that in context, I have been alive only eight years longer than that. That is 14 years in which consecutive Governments sat on their backside and did nothing, and the Government are now complaining that women are—quite rightly—angry that they never knew about the changes.

The thing is that the Government did not tell us about this issue with their hands in the air and say, "Aye, you're right, sorry. We got that a wee bit wrong." The information came from the hard-working women behind me in the Gallery through freedom of information requests and constant letters to the Government. The Government have been nothing but obstructive and downright stubborn the whole way through this campaign and since the issue was raised—so much so that the SNP actually went away and re-did its own work. We used our own money to commission our own report, which shows that this issue could plausibly be sorted and the legislation could at least be amended a wee bit.

All it would take is £8 billion spread across five years. That is a substantial amount, but as was said by the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham)—I had the pleasure of serving with him on the Work and Pensions Committee—the idea that the Government will genuinely stand in front of everyone here and say,

[*Mhairi Black*]

“We can’t afford it,” is quite frankly laughable. It has been pointed out many times that they found £1 billion for a deal to cling on to power, but they say they cannot find the money to give women the pensions they are due.

Ian Blackford: My hon. Friend is a very reasonable person; let us see whether we can help the Government. We know that the national insurance fund has a surplus of £30 billion. Let us lay to rest the myth that there is a black hole. The Government Actuary’s Department’s own figures suggest that that fund will remain in surplus until at least the mid-2030s. May I suggest to the Government that they use that surplus? Women have paid in to the fund; let us make sure they get their pension, and let us do it today.

Mhairi Black: Not surprisingly, I agree with that statement. I heard some muttering from the Government Benches about how that is a lot of rubbish. Let me just say this: if that is a lot of rubbish in their heads, they should bring their plans forward. They do not get to criticise other parties’ plans when they have not even bothered to come up with their own.

Like I say, the debate is almost scripted, because I know that the Minister will say at some point, “We did look at this in 2011 and we did make the concessions at the time.” I guarantee that the Minister will say that. Let my reply be this: that is not how the world works. That is not how society works. If citizens come to them with a time-sensitive problem and say, “This still isn’t working,” it is the Government’s job to listen. It is not the job of the Government to look back and go, “We talked about that a couple of years ago, so I’m afraid there’s no movement there whatsoever.” If that is the case, I am looking forward to the next time the Army needs new funds, the next time this Parliament needs doing up, and so on. The idea that we cannot afford it is ridiculous.

Fundamentally, the worst part of this whole issue is that these women are targeted. The Government like to sit back and act as though these women are just unfortunate casualties of austerity and say, “Our hands are tied; we can’t do anything.” That is not the case; they are targeted. These are women who have suffered pay inequality and social inequality all their lives. We even heard earlier that women were told to use their husbands’ pensions. Society has changed a lot since then. What are we doing for these women now? And what about lesbian couples—women who are in equal marriages with other women? Are they just expected to bear the brunt? [*Interruption.*] It is not even a double whammy; it is a quadruple whammy at this point.

I am amazed that I feel the need to point this out. These women are blameless. They are guilty of nothing. They have done nothing wrong other than, for instance, not reading the back pages of the *Financial Times* in 1995. The only other two things they are guilty of are being born in the ’50s and being women. The Government do not get to plead that this is all in the name of equality; when only women are suffering under their definition of equality, it is time for them to reassess that definition.

Fundamentally, Governments should look after their people. When their people are coming to them and saying there is problem, it is their job to fix it. Let me

put a little reality into this. I got an email today from a WASPI woman. I cannot remember where she is from—it is somewhere in England. She told me that her friend committed suicide after seeing the general election result because she could not face what would happen to her. Citizens are committing suicide over an issue that could be solved just like that—an issue that the Government could do a U-turn on at any given moment.

The Government managed to fork out a magical £1 billion to cling on to power; they must really want the job of having to fix these things. When they can find £1 billion for self-interest, they do not get to claim that money is the reason they cannot help.

The Government quite rightly dropped their manifesto pension plans—two of them in total, I think—because they saw how damaging, unworkable and unpopular they would be. That was wise. In actual fact, I have a bit of respect for them for being able to go, “Aye, we got that wrong, guys, so we’re pulling back. We’re listening to you.” I say, I hope for the last time: just drop one more plan. Realise that this issue is cross-party and affects people from different backgrounds and different areas. These are people’s mothers, aunties, sisters and cousins. Please do the right thing. Do the job of the Government—fix the problem and start looking after people.

3.39 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I thank my hon. Friend and north-east England colleague the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for securing the debate, and I thank everybody who has contributed this afternoon. Speaking of north-east colleagues, I also congratulate the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman) on his promotion to Pensions Minister—it appears his jockeying for position in the political world has finally paid off. I was pleased to have a good—even friendly—working relationship with his predecessor, the hon. Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), and hope for the same with him.

We can start that right here with a friendly offer from the Opposition to work together across the House to deliver much fairer transitional arrangements for the much-wronged 1950s-born women, who saw their pension age accelerated by several years with little or no notice. The Minister is in a strong position to deliver change. All of us on the Opposition side, including the Government’s allies in the DUP, back the ’50s-born women’s cause. My hon. Friend the Member for Easington spoke of the 20 Conservative and DUP Members who have signed the WASPI pledge, but it gets even better. There are 37 MPs on the Government Benches who have supported the WASPI campaign either through membership of the all-party parliamentary group or through election pledges; others have done so today. That is enough to provide a majority in the House of those who want to see action taken to alleviate the difficulty faced by the most vulnerable women, now in their 60s. I am sure that each and every one of those Members will want to report back to their constituents that they have fulfilled their promises. It is quite a list, and I would love to share it with the Minister if he wants it.

I have spoken for the official Opposition on ’50s-born women more than half a dozen times since I accepted my role nine months ago, with other parties throwing

their weight behind some form of support for the women who have been affected by these changes. Still—perhaps just until today—the Government have stuck their collective head in the sand. Yes, we now have a new Secretary of State and a new Pensions Minister—and, as has already been said, even a new Parliamentary Private Secretary, the hon. Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones), who is a declared WASPI supporter, having signed one of WASPI's pledges to “do all he can to work for a solution if elected”.

He could not be better placed to influence change for the better. Perhaps now the Government will take positive action and introduce new measures to reduce the strain on the most vulnerable women and men who have been affected by these increases in the state pension age.

I have heard from numerous women affected by the changes, and heard stories of their desperation and fear about how they will cope now that they have to wait even longer for their state pension. Does the new Minister understand how difficult it is for a woman in her 60s to retrain and gain employment? The job market and skills needed in today's workplace are a different world from that of 40 years ago. What we have is a system that does not help older people retrain and get back into meaningful employment, a welfare system being torn to pieces, disabled people being humiliated through repetitive assessments, and now a state pension that is becoming increasingly difficult to access. Once again it is Labour, and others, who are standing up for the vulnerable. It is Labour calling out the injustice that ordinary people face, and Labour is the loudest voice demanding action. I know what the Conservatives are doing: they are trying to ignore the issue in the hope that the years will pass, the number of women affected by this measure will drop, and they will get away with leaving older people to struggle for many years to come.

We heard during the election that there is not a magic money tree—others have referred to that—but whenever the Government need funds to support their aims, they find it. There is no magic money tree, but they found that £1 billion to which others have referred to secure that deal with the DUP, to keep Theresa May in No. 10. That is just the up-front cost. The DUP will be back for more and Northern Ireland will get the priority investment that areas in the rest of the country also desperately need. I would never recommend selling out to the Tories, as the Lib Dems did in 2010, but I can understand our 10 DUP colleagues, striving to do the best for their communities with their £1 billion deal. I am sure many other MPs have wondered what they could do to help their constituency if they had their own £100 million magic money tree. It should not be about one versus the other. We must make investment where it is needed and protect the most vulnerable. Just as communities in Northern Ireland and elsewhere need a lifeline, so do '50s-born women, many of whom are destitute.

The Labour party laid out its approach to reducing the strain on vulnerable and struggling women, which is to extend pension credit to those who were due to retire before the pension increase. That would alleviate the toughest circumstances and restore the faith and dignity that many feel they have lost. Extending pension credit would provide support worth up to £155 a week to half a million of the most vulnerable women who have been affected by the increase in the state pension age. We are

continuing to look at other ways to ensure that those who need support receive it, but we need the Government to get on board and work with us. If the Minister would like a conversation about how we can deliver a cross-party approach to secure fair transitional arrangements to the most vulnerable '50s-born women, I will be pleased to meet him. The general election result delivered a verdict that the Conservatives no longer have the full confidence of the country to govern. That strengthens the case for a joint approach in this case.

I have a number of questions for the Minister. Has he had any discussions with the new Secretary of State about the plight of '50s-born women? Do they accept that many women had little if any notice of the change in their pension age, and that those women ought to be recompensed in some way? Will he and the Secretary of State agree at least to a review and then change their policy, offering at least the most vulnerable women something to get by on? That is what it is about—getting by.

Previous DWP Ministers wanted to help these women, but they had the Treasury doors slammed shut in their faces. In these very different days of unstable Government, I hope the Minister will now be able to assure the House—including those 37 Members of his party—that he takes this matter seriously and that he will work with us and others to deliver a fair and meaningful solution to this problem and, above all, win some friends and make himself the Government champion for these very wronged women.

3.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): We are from different sides of the political fence, but the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) and I are united by one key thing: we have both beaten cancer. I would like to start by saying how pleased I am to see my fellow tumour survivor back in his place. I wish him well with his future treatment. He can imagine my joy when, on day three of my new job as Minister for Pensions and Financial Inclusion, I was told that he had secured a debate on women's state pensions—the first debate I would have to answer here in this House.

Jo Swinson: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: Not yet, no—I am not going to. All of us here, as constituency MPs, have met women who have been affected by the state pension age rises. I have met them ever since my election as Member of Parliament for Hexham in 2010, and during the passage of the 2011 Act. Whether they are affiliated to the WASPI campaign or not, I have seen them in and out of my surgeries, like all colleagues have done. Like many, I have answered correspondence on the issue. I make it clear that I will be delighted to meet the all-party parliamentary group when it is re-formed, as I am sure it will be, and will be in a position to sit down with them to discuss their ongoing situations.

The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) said that she expected me to speak only about the 1995 Act, the 2011 Act, all the transitional arrangements and so on. I accept, and she will understand, that I have to make the case on those matters, not least because of what has been said, but I want this debate to be done in a different way. I want to say two things at the outset.

[*Guy Opperman*]

If individual Members of Parliament have specific cases where they feel their individual constituents are affected by state pension age changes and find themselves in financial hardship, whether they are people who have to reduce their hours because of sickness, disability or caring responsibility, I and the London DWP team will look into those individual cases. As Members pass them on to us, we will do what we can to provide assistance, whether that is understanding of the availability of carer's allowance, housing benefit, tax credits, income support, employment and support allowance or other benefits. However, the essence of what I want to address the House on is this.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: No, I will not. It is not the Government's position that we will make further concessions by the 1995 or 2011 Acts. The fundamental point—at this point I really wish to address the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South—is that the Government have done a massive amount on a progressive basis to get people back into employment or retraining in their pre-pension years.

First, we created, and we have now extended, a network of older claimant champions in all 34 Jobcentre Plus districts in the country. The champions work with Jobcentre work coaches to provide advice and best practice on skills provision, digital and social support and job-search support, which leads into the “Fuller Working Lives” strategy issued by the Government on a cross-Government basis in February this year.

Secondly, we have committed massively to lifelong learning. The reality is that more than 200,000 people aged over 60 have entered further education since 2014-15. [*Interruption.*]

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. Everybody else was heard in silence, so let us please listen to the Minister.

Guy Opperman: Thirdly, we have also extended apprenticeship opportunities—one of the best routes into skilled employment—for people of all ages and gender. For example, in England in 2014 to 2015, 12% of those starting apprenticeships were aged over 45.

Carolyn Harris: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: I am going to set out these matters; please bear with me. In the 2017 Budget, the Chancellor allocated £5 million to increase the number of returnship schemes. We are working with employers across the public and private sectors to understand how returners can be supported back into permanent employment, building on successful examples run by companies such as Centrica.

I realise it is not going down well, but the point I am trying to make is that the Government are actually doing a significant amount to address the individual difficulties for those persons attempting to enter the labour market. Last year, the Government appointed Andy Briggs, CEO of Aviva, as the dedicated business champion for older workers, to spearhead work with employers on a business-to-business basis. I met Mr Briggs

two days ago. He is clearly passionate about his mission to persuade employers to increase the number of older workers they employ by 12% by 2022. [*Interruption.*]

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. The Minister is entitled to give way or not.

Graham Jones: On a point of order, Sir Edward. Did the Minister just say that women aged 64 could go on an apprenticeship course? I could not hear because of the noise. Perhaps he could clarify that.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): The hon. Gentleman is very experienced and knows that that is not for me.

Guy Opperman: In May 2017, Mr Briggs launched the “Commit and Publish” campaign, challenging employers to monitor the age of their workforce and publish figures by the end of 2017. A significant number of companies have already bought into that, including Aviva, Barclays and the Co-op. I assure colleagues that I will be assisting Mr Briggs in pursuing that campaign with all the rigour that I brought to my campaign for the introduction of the living wage.

In February 2017, the “Fuller Working Lives” strategy was launched on a cross-Government basis. I urge colleagues to read it, because if we are frank, an assertion has been made in the debate that the Government are doing nothing to try and encourage persons who are prior to pensionable age into employment. There are a number of different matters, which I have set out, and those are particularly set out in the “Fuller Working Lives” strategy.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: I will not, because I have a lot of points to make. The strategy aims to increase the retention, retraining and recruitment of older workers, and bring about a change in employers' perceptions and attitudes—surely something that we would all endorse and wish for. We know that many people approaching the state pension age want to continue working or would like to be in work, and we have changed the law to abolish the default retirement age. I do urge colleagues to read the strategy.

After extensive debate, the 1995 Act changed the 55-year-old status quo by equalising pension ages for men and women at 65, with that change taking place between 2010 and 2020, depending on age. That statute was debated at length, and the changes were then the subject of widespread advertising, debate, leaflets, letters and 16 million state pension forecasts.

I am not here to criticise the 1995 to 1997 Conservative Government, nor the 1997 to 2010 Labour Government; I suggest that they made real efforts to communicate the change passed by Parliament in 1995. I rely in support of that on what the hon. Member for Easington said when he wrote of the 1995 Act in his blog in June 2016:

“The timescales were such that they gave sufficient time for people to plan for their new circumstances, and legislation was already in place that would have seen the equalised State Pension Age rise...in gradual stages”.

Grahame Morris: I ask the Minister to recognise that the issue was not the timescale; everyone agrees that 15 years is enough time. I was trying to highlight in my blog that the individuals were not given notice.

Guy Opperman: With great respect to the hon. Gentleman, the whole thrust of what he said in June 2016 was that there was no objection to the 1995 Act, due to the passage of time. He has now changed that position. I am only pointing out that the 1995 Act had a 15-year time limit. He knows full well that that is the case, and that that was his position at the time.

Sixteen years later, the coalition Government changed the approach in the Pensions Act 2011. The change was in a context where the impact of the post-war baby boom years is clearly still being felt. The number of pensioners is going up dramatically; notwithstanding any of the changes made by the 1995 and 2011 Acts, there will be around 25% more pensioners in 2050 than today. That is an extra 4.5 million pensioners compared with now.

Life expectancy has increased massively. In 1940, Government policy making indicated a retirement age at 60, and our forebears looked at a life expectancy of three score years and 10. Those days are long gone. A girl born today has an average life expectancy of 93. Those changes in life expectancies are significant, and the reality cannot be ignored. It is not ignored, and is set out in greater detail in the Cridland report, which looks at the future situation in relation to long-term pension age changes.

Carolyn Harris: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: I have a minute and a half to finish, so I will culminate on this point. In 2011, there was extensive debate on those changes in the House of Commons. The matter was debated on a number of occasions between February and November 2011 in both the Commons and the Lords. Subsequently, the Department for Work and Pensions and the coalition Government made efforts to notify those affected, with 5 million letters sent out and a range of information provided, to make individuals aware of their state pension age.

I will make three final points. In relation to the transitional provisions, it is the case that the position was different in the original 2011 Act. Following extensive parliamentary debate in both the Commons and the Lords, that Act was changed such that no woman affected by the 2011 Act would have to wait more than 18 months from the date that they might have been expecting their pension. For some, the time will be much less. I also make the point that the new state pension introduced in 2016 is better and much more generous for many women than that which existed under the old system.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Easington on securing the debate. It is not the Government's proposal to repeal or ameliorate the 1995 or 2011 Acts, but I accept that we must do all we can to assist everyone affected into retraining and employment, and to provide support if that is not possible. The commitment to provide support is clear, unequivocal and ongoing.

3.58 pm

Grahame Morris: I thank all Members from all parties and on both sides who have attended the debate and spoken with such passion on behalf of WASPI women. In defence of the Minister, who is a good and honourable man, I hope he will have a chance to reflect on the arguments that have been made and the passions that are running high, and apply the principles of natural justice to the women affected by these changes. As a nation, we owe a debt of honour to the WASPI women, many of whom are now in ill health, who have paid their contributions and who are not looking for apprenticeships at age 64 but for some recognition of their contribution—sometimes over 44 or 45 years or more. I ask the Minister to discharge his responsibilities; otherwise, the people may discharge this Government.

Question put and negatived.

Working Conditions in the Private Hire Industry

[MRS MADELEINE MOON *in the Chair*]

4.1 pm

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): I ask colleagues to leave quietly, so that time is not lost by the mover of this debate.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the regulation of working conditions in the private hire industry.

I am immensely pleased to introduce the debate under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I hope that the Minister can be more accommodating on this issue than his colleague was in the previous debate. Indeed, I shall begin by buttering him up, if I may, although I realise that there is a limit to what buttering up will do in the House of Commons, particularly of this Minister. During our parliamentary lives, we have often debated, and debated well, across the Chamber, and I know perfectly well that if he is able to make or clarify the Government's position before the Taylor review is published, he will do so. However, I also know that he is a loyalist and will probably be the last Minister standing who believes in collective responsibility, so the buttering up must be accompanied by a sense of reality about how far Ministers can go in helping to clarify Government policy.

My aim in this debate, as I hope the Minister knows, is not to have a preview of the Taylor report—although if he wished to give one, that would be wonderful—but to ascertain whether he can help the transport executives to clarify the powers that they have to give licences to companies such as Uber. I shall dwell in a moment on where I see Uber both contributing positively and being a destructive force for many people's living standards.

I begin the debate with a reference to a report on Hermes, "Wild West Workplace". That and two subsequent reports have my name on them, but also that of Andrew Forsey, who works with me. The truth, as MPs know, is that it is often the other name on the report who has actually done the work, and I pay tribute to Andrew for the extraordinary way in which, among all his other activities as chief of staff in my office—including steering me away from elephant traps and helping me to make as positive a contribution as I can to the House of Commons—he can take on work of this nature.

The second report, "Sweated Labour", was on Uber, and the third one, which will be published tomorrow, is "A new contract for the gig economy". I want to record in this debate that when Andrew and I—it was very much Andrew—completed the first report, "Wild West Workplace", we wrote to the Prime Minister, and we said that the circumstances that we had described had shocked me and my guess was that they would shock her. They were certainly at variance with her statement when she became Prime Minister about the sort of society that she wished to create and the protections that she wished to extend to those who were weakest.

If we look at any of the three reports—if people would like copies of "A new contract for the gig economy", which is published tomorrow, they can by all means have them—we see that four forces are pushing down wages in this area. Let me explain what I am not saying, and I hope the Minister will accept this. Nothing I have

ever said or published does not admit that Uber-type conditions certainly serve a large part of consumers' wishes for quick and cheap transport, or that perhaps many Uber workers are very content with their lot, as shovelled out by Uber under what I think is a bogus self-employed contract. I am talking about people who regularly write to Andrew and me, giving more examples of how bogus the self-employed contract that they are forced to work under is, and of the appalling conditions that those employers get away with. As we know, they not only get away with paying incredibly low wages to some workers; they do not pay their fair share of taxes, so I would hope that the Chancellor of the Exchequer would be on the Minister's side. If we are interested in VAT, national insurance and income tax returns, we should be rather keen on what the Minister says today and what the Taylor review will come up with, I hope, next week—perhaps the Minister will be able to give us a date for its publication.

Wages have been pushed down for those who suffer worst in this gig economy in four ways. The first is the very low fares, which have been cut in recent years, which some people think is great fun because they can get home cheaply. Second are the high rates of commission demanded by the company, which now vary clearly between newer workers trying to make a decent living out of being a driver, and older drivers, who—thank God—are more protected, although now that I have made that statement, perhaps that image will be challenged by people who contact us after the debate. Third is the cost of renting a vehicle that meets Uber's very strict requirements, and fourth is the cost of refuelling and maintaining those vehicles. Those are the downward forces in the economy that make it very difficult for people to make a decent living and, indeed, as I shall argue, to make a living in which they are covered by the statutory minimum wage.

I welcomed it when George Osborne initiated the minimum wage strategy in the previous Parliament. It is very important to try to cover and protect people at the bottom of our society. I saw the then Chancellor of the Exchequer's move as a very welcome one, but we know that it is failing by the way Uber and other companies get round regulations on how people earn, what they earn, the hours that they undertake, and their employment status.

The Government responded to Andrew's report by establishing the Taylor review, which is to report soon. We hope that it will accept the main recommendation on which Andrew and I have been campaigning, which is that the definition of hours of work is immensely important in this area and that, on the basis of a satisfactory definition of hours worked—satisfactory to the workers rather than to Uber—the minimum wage should be applied on an hourly basis.

That brings me to the real kernel of the debate—the part to which I would love the Minister to respond. Uber and similar companies are registering in London, Leeds, Liverpool and Glasgow, getting the necessary licences from those areas' transport executives. Is it because the legislation is uncertain or difficult to interpret that these transport executives are not saying, "These are the minimum conditions that you, the company, must meet if you wish us to grant you a licence to operate in our area"? I would like to hear the Minister's view, but I think the position is quite clear.

It would take just one transport authority to say, “This is the interpretation.” We have not heard any of them say that, although, thankfully, here in London Sadiq Khan has said that he is unsure about Uber and is giving it a very short licence to continue to carry out its business while this essential issue is debated. Is the Minister in a position to give us a clearer ruling on the encouragement that he might give to transport authorities to recognise that they do have powers, and to such companies to behave within the culture that the Prime Minister spoke of when, perhaps unexpectedly, she became Prime Minister?

Before I conclude, I shall be more than happy to let any hon. Member make an intervention.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): My right hon. Friend has touched on some troubling issues in the current employment market, particularly in relation to private hire vehicles. The Law Commission looked at some of those issues in its 2014 report, but new factors have since emerged, including Uber’s increased share of the market and the Deregulation Act 2015. Does he agree that there is a clear case for looking again at the regulation of the taxi and private hire sector more generally, even as we await publication of the Taylor review?

Frank Field: Yes, I do. I am grateful that I gave way, because my hon. Friend has put it better than I could have and has raised another question for the Minister.

Let me conclude. There have been two great movements in our recent history as a country. One was the movement of people from the countryside into towns. When that happened, decent people sought to find out what was happening to their fellow citizens, because they were horrified by the exploitation that they suffered. There were local statistical societies in all our towns, and the theme was taken up by the House of Commons in Select Committee reports, by the House of Lords, by royal commissions, and by the Government, who set up a national statistical service.

The second big movement, which has occurred in our lifetimes—one is sometimes unaware of just how big it is—has been the falling away of the bottom of the labour market. We are now in a situation that I would have thought inconceivable when I first came into the House in 1979. People are scrambling around for jobs. When I was growing up, there was the idea—almost a law of nature—that our economy would produce jobs that gave people wages that allowed them to marry and begin their families securely. For an increasing number of our fellow citizens, that world has long since passed.

I will not be controversial, as the previous debate was, but what has been happening at the bottom has been much affected by what the Government call welfare reform, but I prefer to call welfare cuts. However, in the spirit of the Minister—who I know is one of those Tory Members who has a sense of what the human spirit is about and why we are here—I ask him to help us in just one small area: the protective role that transport authorities could play.

I also hope that the Minister will reply in the spirit of the Prime Minister’s pledge to throw a new form of protection over the bottom end—the vulnerable tummy—of English society, which has lost out so greatly from the changes documented to us by our constituents.

If we cannot be moved only by a wish to extend human dignity or to make a further commitment to the Prime Minister’s pledge, I hope the old money—the till—will play some part for the Chancellor. The way in which these companies are constructed means that they are fiddling: they do not pay their dues in VAT, national insurance or income tax, which means the rest of us have to pay for them. They are now registering returns on their very limited capital that are out of this world and should be tamed. In the west, with our democratic traditions, we usually look to government as one of the instruments for taming the wildness of wild capitalism. I happily turn over to the Minister.

4.16 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): What a delight to respond to the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field)! He knows that I admire him almost as much as I admire Lord Birkenhead, F. E. Smith, whom we have discussed from time to time and who said that

“glittering prizes”

were available

“to those who have stout hearts and sharp swords.”

The right hon. Gentleman has both those qualities, as he has illustrated once again by bringing these important matters to our attention.

I had a long speech prepared for me by my civil servants, whom I hold in very high regard, but I am never inclined to deliver speeches written for me by anyone else, and I am certainly inclined to try to answer the right hon. Gentleman’s specific points. It seems to me that Westminster Hall debates have to fulfil a greater purpose than simply parroting what the Government have already thought or said. They have to move policy on, do they not? At least, that is how they should operate. We will try to make sure that that happens today.

In a way, the right hon. Gentleman has already set the scene for me, but perhaps it is worth affirming some of what he said. I am aware of concerns about the changing character of the landscape for taxis and private hire vehicles. He is right that technology has played a big part in that, and technology has a consequent effect on consumer expectations and demands. Supply changes to meet those demands but it stimulates changing demands, too, and that is precisely what has happened in this area.

Taxis play an important part in the life of London. I use taxis a lot, as do my family. My son, who is in the Public Gallery today, is a devotee of London cabs, like many others before him and, I hope, after him. London taxis are iconic. One thinks of London—indeed, the whole kingdom—in terms of certain totems and emblems. One of those emblems is the London black cab. The right hon. Gentleman described my concern for the human spirit, but I also have a profound concern for aesthetics, inasmuch as they are part of how we perceive the world: how we come to terms with our own consciousness of reality. London cabs are a part of that.

London cabs provide a vital service, not just to tourists but to Londoners. It is true that the tourist looks to the London cab for the reasons that I have given—they see them as iconic. If a tourist comes to London, they want to ride in a black cab just as, if they went to New York, they might want to ride in a yellow one, but cabs also provide valuable utility.

[*Mr John Hayes*]

The history of London cabs is that people know what they are going to pay, they can be confident of the driver's ability to get them where they want to go as quickly as possible and London cabs have a good record on safety and security, which of course are important matters when one gets into a vehicle with a driver one has not previously known and perhaps not even met. Those things are of profound and lasting importance.

None the less, requesting a vehicle via an app, whether a taxi or a private hire vehicle, is increasingly popular with the public—and unsurprisingly so. The desirability of being able to call up a vehicle as required is obvious, and that is having a quite significant effect on the market, as the right hon. Gentleman described. The difference, as I am sure those in the Chamber know, is that in addition to dealing with pre-booked journeys, a taxi can ply for hire in the area in which it is licensed. That cannot be done by a private hire vehicle.

These things lead to different models of ownership and employment, as the right hon. Gentleman said. The emergence of a different set of protocols, if I can put it in those terms, in that area is also significant. He mentioned the various reports—I have read them all, by the way, including “Sweated Labour” and the Select Committee report. The Committee did a great service in looking at these matters closely, in respect of not just taxis and private hire vehicles but more widely.

The right hon. Gentleman will be aware of all those reports, as I am, and of the ongoing legal case regarding the employment status of drivers in the private hire vehicle sector. He made it clear at the outset that his expectations of me were set very low—I do not know if you noticed that, Mrs Moon; I thought a bit too low, given what I will say later—and made it clear, in his usual spirit of fairness and reasonableness, that there is a limit to what I can say. I certainly cannot say anything that might prejudice that legal case, which is ongoing.

What I can say is that the emergence of so-called disruptive businesses—I use the term in its strict sense; I hope it will not be misinterpreted—through the application of new technologies enables new ways of working and creates new products and services. As I said, it is a different relationship between supply and demand. That has an appeal to certain consumers and provides a service that perhaps has not been provided before. However, those benefits must be balanced against the impact on those who work in these new ways. Greater flexibility in working arrangements can increase employment opportunities for those who have other commitments or aspirations, but we must equally be aware of the negatives. Nor must we regard the traditional private hire vehicle driver and operator relationship through rose-tinted spectacles and perceive it as some sort of ideal where operators work solely in the interests of drivers.

I am aware of the concerns raised by the right hon. Gentleman and others about the risks in respect of employment. Let me lay my cards on the table: I take a very strong view about the rights of workers. I am proud to be a member of a trade union. My father was a shop steward. I have enjoyed very close relationships with the trade unions throughout my time in each of the six Departments in which I have been a Minister, and continue to do so in the Department for Transport.

One problem with this sector is that because of the character and nature of employment in it, significant numbers of people may well be under-represented or not represented at all by any body that can make a case on their behalf. That puts people at a considerable disadvantage. They may not even have reasonable expectations of what their entitlements ought to be. They may not know that they are being underpaid if they do not have the opportunity to express through the kind of collective arrangement that a trade union brings their entitlements—I hesitate to use the word “rights” for philosophical reasons that I will not go further on about today, because we do not have time.

Lawful entitlements to fair treatment are at the heart of what good employer-employee relationships are all about, and that is what the right hon. Gentleman has once again implicitly advocated by bringing the matter before us today.

Lilian Greenwood: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hayes: I will. It is good to see the hon. Lady, who is now becoming such a regular feature in my transport life that I would have been disappointed had she not been here.

Lilian Greenwood: I listened carefully to what the Minister said about employment rights. Does he agree that because of the nature of mobile applications, there can be a temptation for employees, who feel under undue pressure, to work excessive hours? That can have a severe and detrimental impact on not only their health and wellbeing but, potentially, the health and wellbeing of other road users.

Mr Hayes: The hon. Lady is right. The relationship between the app or gig economy operators and their drivers is very different from what we have experienced previously. She is right, too, that that brings challenges and may even bring significant risks. I do not want to say too much, because a legal case is ongoing and the Taylor report, to which the right hon. Gentleman referred, is also awaited.

What the House needs to know is that I am very conscious of this matter. I do not come to it with any prejudices, apart from the prejudice that I have described, which is that people should be treated fairly in their place of work. I have always believed that and will do all I can to ensure it happens.

Frank Field: While the Minister may not be able to satisfy my demands today, are we able to conclude, from what he just said, that he would encourage transport authorities to interpret the law in the way that he thinks, so that the most vulnerable are protected? Uber says that stacks of workers are so pleased with what it does. If we are to believe Uber, any ruling would affect a minority, but a crucial minority. Can we expect him to say something about that today or will that follow on from the Taylor report, which might deal with this specifically, and about the particular issue that people should be able to earn the national minimum wage by hour of work? Uber gets round that for many people now.

Mr Hayes: I may have some good news for the right hon. Gentleman in that respect, but I will save that for the very end of my speech, in order to build excitement.

When I begin my pre-peroration, he can wait expectantly for the final part of my speech, in which I think I will be able to give him positive news of the kind he just mentioned.

I move now—I like to give people notice of these things, so that excitement can build—to my pre-peroration. The commitment I gave to the interests of working people and their pay and conditions is unsurprising, given the party of which I am a member. In my ministerial office, I have a bust of Lord Shaftesbury. Lord Shaftesbury, the great Tory 19th-century social reformer who, against Liberal opposition, did so much to free children from factories, fought for the ragged school movement and helped to reform asylums for those with mental health conditions. Mine is the party of Wilberforce and of Shaftesbury, as well as Disraeli, so of course I care about the welfare of the people and their interests. It may be unsurprising that I should do so, but that has to be a modern reality too. As the right hon. Gentleman said, we live in a different world now from the one that Shaftesbury, Disraeli and Wilberforce encountered, but human frailties remain, and the human willingness to do bad things, unfortunately, is endemic following the fall from the state of grace.

Having said all that, let me move to what I propose to do about this matter. It is not good enough simply to wait for the Taylor report, although we must consider that carefully, for it is a wider report. Dealing with the changing employment conditions we have briefly considered today, I am going to set up a working party in my Department, with an independent chairman, to look at the specific things that the right hon. Gentleman has raised as a result of this debate. I will consider in due course the terms and conditions of that working party, its membership and how it might have an effect on future policy.

Furthermore, as the right hon. Gentleman requested, I will look at the guidance issued to local authorities. They may be unaware of the extent of their powers and certainly of their ability to use them. He is right to say that there are problems with different local authorities interpreting those powers in different ways, and it seems to me very important that we give clarity about that through the advice we offer to local government.

Finally, I will engage with both him—I invite him to come to my Department and meet my officials accordingly—and the representatives of drivers and operators. Let us have a grown-up discussion about this. Let us expose what is wrong and celebrate what is right, but there will be no veil, no mask and nowhere to hide for people who do not do the right thing.

Frank Field: May I say one sentence?

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Order. We have now reached 4.30 pm.

Frank Field: We started late.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): I appreciate that, but I am advised that we have to keep to time for the next debate.

Frank Field: I merely wish to thank the Minister.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Order.
Question put and agreed to.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): As people leave the Chamber, may I advise officials that they should not enter the Chamber and loiter around the door before the debate is called? Thank you. It is warm, so if anyone wishes to take their jacket off that is fine.

Yemen: Political and Humanitarian Situation

4.30 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the political and humanitarian situation in Yemen.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today for this important debate, Mrs Moon.

I am delighted to speak on this issue today and to have been granted this debate so early in the new Parliament, particularly given the pressing nature of the humanitarian crisis in recent weeks, not least as regards cholera, as we will all have seen on our television screens.

As many Members will be aware, this is, sadly, one of many debates that we have secured on Yemen in the past year, including in the last Parliament. I must start by expressing my deep sadness, regret and, quite frankly, abject frustration that we have seen so little progress, so much further decline into misery and chaos, and such a failure to grasp the nettle by the international community, the UK Government—I am sorry to say—and the parties to this conflict, who must ultimately bear full responsibility for the shocking scenes that we have seen in recent weeks of emaciated bodies wracked by the preventable, treatable disease of cholera, along with the further needless civilian deaths from bombing, blockades and siege tactics.

This House is already significantly occupied by Brexit, and vast parts of our diplomatic and civil service apparatus have been turned to its machinations, but I fear that it will only exacerbate our apparent lack of focus on Yemen and so many other humanitarian crises around the world.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): May I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate so early in the new Parliament? It is true that the Foreign Office may be concerned with Brexit, but at the United Nations we hold the pen as far as Yemen is concerned and it is not preoccupied by Brexit. What we need is a UN resolution adopted as quickly as possible—immediately, in fact—to deal with the crisis that he is talking about and has raised so many times in the House.

Stephen Doughty: I thank my right hon. Friend for those comments and agree with him. Indeed, I welcome the steps that the UK has taken in securing a recent presidential statement on Yemen, but frankly at this stage words are now simply not good enough. I fear that the lack of progress we have seen is not only morally lacking, but fundamentally not in Britain's national or security interests. We know all too well the consequences of leaving vast ungoverned spaces, from Libya to the deserts of Helmand, to descend into poverty, misery and death, and those who would exploit such spaces.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): May I very strongly endorse what the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) said? The Minister, who has great experience of these issues, is here from the Foreign Office. If Britain is able to take action at the United

Nations, not only will that hopefully avert the catastrophe of a famine in this day and age, but it will get the Saudi Arabian kingdom off a terrible hook. It is not going to win this war; it will be humiliated in the longer term. For a cessation of violence, led by the British at the United Nations, to take place now would be advantageous on many different levels.

Stephen Doughty: I wholeheartedly agree with the right hon. Gentleman. He speaks with great eloquence and passion on an issue that I know he has spent much time engaging on personally, both in government and subsequently.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. To add to the points that have already been made, does he agree that one thing the UK Government and others could do is urge all sides to allow unimpeded humanitarian access, which would clearly assist with the situation?

Stephen Doughty: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. Indeed, that message has been made clear to me in my conversations with organisations such as Oxfam, Save the Children, Médecins sans Frontières and many others in recent weeks and the past few days.

Unfortunately the crisis in the country is now even worse than we could have imagined a few months ago, with the disastrous failure in governance and the decimation of the Yemeni economy. The United Nations has estimated that it is only a matter of months before Yemen faces total and utter collapse. The sheer scale of the devastation is astounding. At least 18.8 million people, almost two thirds of the population, are in need of some kind of humanitarian aid or protection. Close to one third of the population are in acute need of assistance—that is 10.3 million people. Some 7 million people do not know where their next meal will come from or are at risk of famine. One child under five in Yemen dies every 10 minutes. Cholera has now spread to every part of the country, with more than 200,000 suspected cases and 1,300 deaths, according to Oxfam and other agencies.

The United Nations' humanitarian chief, Sir Stephen O'Brien—a former Member of this House, known to many of us—described the situation in Yemen as a “man-made catastrophe”. I wholeheartedly agree with that, but I would go further. I am sorry to say that on the one hand the UK has delivered lifesaving aid through the Department for International Development, which I and my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) rightly praised in the last Parliament for its work in Yemen on the humanitarian crisis, but on the other hand the UK is responsible for a clear failure in our foreign policy and the moral approach we have taken to our arms export policy. No humanitarian response can adequately meet the increasing needs that the ongoing conflict is causing, and there needs to be an immediate cessation of hostilities by all sides.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. On the issue of responsibility, yes of course the UK, the European Union and other countries in the UN should be pushing for a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Yemen as soon as possible. But does he agree that the Americans have a lead role as far as the World Food

Programme is concerned, in particular in addressing the famine in Yemen, and that this is not the time for the American Administration to be cutting the budget of the World Food Programme?

Stephen Doughty: I wholeheartedly agree with those comments. I am deeply worried by the comments made by President Trump about wider US aid policy, and the way in which the US appears to be increasingly engaged actively in the conflict, with recent attacks that have led to civilian deaths.

We need to look at the causes of the humanitarian situation. More than half the health facilities that were open pre-conflict have either closed or are now only partially functioning, leaving 40 million people without basic healthcare. A similar number are also facing a daily struggle to access clean water and adequate sanitation facilities, both of which continue to pose significant risks to public health and are contributing to the cholera outbreak. The naval blockade that has been imposed by the Saudi-led coalition is having an impact on food and humanitarian supplies reaching those who need them. Save the Children told me just this week of three ships containing its supplies that were turned around, delays in secondary screening and 17,000 medical items that had to be re-routed.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I pay tribute to the work my hon. Friend has done on Yemen in this Parliament, and in others before it, along with many right hon. and hon. Members across the House. He mentioned the port situation. There must be a solution to try to get Hodeidah port open again, so that these lifesaving medical supplies are not turned away or taken to other ports where they are unnecessary or unused.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend rightly mentions Hodeidah. The fear is that a future battle over that port might lead to a full-blown famine, as nearly all Yemen's food is imported through it. There is also the crucial issue of wages. According to UNICEF and the World Health Organisation wages have not been paid to health and public services staff for nine to 10 months in many areas, meaning a complete collapse in waste collections and water and sanitation facilities, let alone health facilities. That, of course, leads directly to the crisis we see with cholera, which has now surpassed 200,000 cases with the number growing by 5,000 a day. Cholera is a disease that is entirely preventable and easily treatable with the proper resources. It is a symptom of a totally failing state and of the parlous situation that Yemen finds itself in. It is also due in part to the direct bombing of water supplies in the country and the hits on those who aim to help. Shockingly, Oxfam has told me that its own water and sanitation warehouse facilities were hit by bombing, and the Houthis have precipitated a further humanitarian crisis in Taiz by siege and blockade tactics that have left some people, it has been alleged this week, with only leaves to eat.

UNHCR field teams have observed a huge spike in humanitarian needs, with displaced people now living on the streets and many of them seeking shelter on the pavement. Some of the most vulnerable people, including women and children, are turning to approaches such as begging and child labour, which is now rampant across Yemen. The situation on the humanitarian front is

utterly disastrous and we all need to step up as an international community to play our part.

As I have said in the past, I accept the serious concerns that have been raised about the wider regional nature of the conflict, and indeed the wider power plays that are going on out there, and I will make it absolutely clear that I have no agenda against Saudi Arabia or a legitimate defence industry in this country that adheres to the rule of law. However, I have great concerns about UK policy continuing in this area. We have heard about the atrocities committed by the Houthis and I will be absolutely clear that I utterly condemn them. We have heard stories about child soldiers, the blockading of humanitarian access, siege tactics, the use of landmines and other indiscriminate weapons, and appalling and indiscriminate artillery attacks that kill civilians. However, we are not selling arms to the Houthis and we are selling arms to the Saudi-led coalition, and the UN estimates that more than 60% of civilian casualties are the result of attacks by the Saudi-led coalition.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): First of all, I congratulate my hon. Friend on a speech that I pretty much agree with; it is welcome that he has brought this debate to Westminster Hall. However, does he understand or recognise that part of the problem that the UN has recognised is the amount of arms that are entering Yemen, and that one reason for the blockade—the UN supports it to a degree, but does not support attempts to stop aid getting in—is to stop the arms getting in to the Houthis? That is one reason for the blockade, as the Houthis control 90% of the population and are getting these arms from places such as Oman and Iran. Of course the blockade has an adverse effect, but does he understand and respect that the issue is that there are too many arms in Yemen right now, and they are not just coming from Saudi Arabia?

Stephen Doughty: There are too many arms in Yemen; I completely agree with that. Indeed, as I have said, all parties to the conflict must bear full responsibility for what is going on. However, we are selling arms to one side in that conflict, which is Saudi Arabia, and we have heard many times in this House of the allegations of Saudi Arabia's violations of international humanitarian law during its operations in Yemen. Hundreds of attacks have been documented and raised on many occasions in this Chamber and in the main Chamber. The Saudi-led coalition has failed to provide answers about those attacks and the investigations into them. Indeed, we have had hardly any reports of investigations by the Joint Incident Assessment Team and certainly not reports of an independent investigation.

As a result, I and many others have repeatedly called in this House for a suspension of arms sales to Saudi Arabia, pending a full independent investigation. That call was repeated in the joint report by the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee and the International Development Committee in the last Parliament, and I am delighted to have had strong support from my right hon. Friends the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Foreign Secretary, the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), on this matter.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and on the hard work that he has put in on this issue in particular.

[Ann Clwyd]

Does he agree that it is very important in this Parliament that we set up the Committees on Arms Export Controls as soon as possible, and that we do not have the delay in setting them up that we had in the last Parliament, when it took about six months and a lot of pressure from some of my hon. Friends around the table to get those Committees set up? It would be very regrettable if those Committees did not reconvene.

Stephen Doughty: As my right hon. Friend knows, I wholeheartedly agree with her comments, and I hope that all aspiring Chairs to the relevant Committees would perhaps make a public commitment that they are willing to set up the Committees on Arms Export Controls as soon as possible, as part of their internal election manifestos.

As you will be aware, Mrs Moon, UK arms exports are bound by the obligations within the arms trade treaty, the EU common position on arms exports and the consolidated EU and UK arms licensing criteria; I make particular reference to criterion 2(c) of the EU common position. All of them refer to the recipient country's respect for international law and require that export licences are not granted where there is a clear risk that the items might be used in the commission of a serious violation of international humanitarian law.

Mrs Moon, you will also be aware of the judgment that is expected any day now in the judicial review into whether Ministers have properly adhered to criterion 2(c) of the EU common position. I am conscious that these matters are potentially sub judice, but it is clear that some Ministers recognise that they have been treading on very thin ice with regard to UK compliance with the law in this matter. I draw the House's attention to a partially redacted letter that was recently released due to the proceedings. It was sent by the Secretary of State for International Trade to the Foreign Secretary on 2 February 2017. It states:

"I am concerned that the issue of export licensing to Saudi Arabia continues to be finely balanced...To this end I ask that you commission a further detailed assessment of Criterion 2c and send me updated advice...In the event that your assessment of the Criterion 2c threshold remains the same, I ask that you seek advice from"

senior Government lawyers, whose names have been redacted,

"before making your recommendation."

I will be frank—this looks like an exercise in covering one's own actions by the International Trade Secretary, who could ultimately bear responsibility for the authorisation of licences.

Licences have continued to be authorised in huge quantities. New statistics show that new licences under category M4 from October to December 2016 to Saudi Arabia totalled a staggering £1.2 billion. So, can the Minister tell us categorically today whether the assessment requested by the International Trade Secretary was produced, and whether all Ministers have continued to be satisfied at all times that we are adhering to the law? Have any permanent civil service officials issued accounting officer advice or any other warnings to Ministers at any point in the last 12 months on this specific issue? And can he tell us what

contingency plans have been prepared in the event of an unfavourable outcome for the Government in the judicial review?

In spite of the grave humanitarian situation in Yemen and our obligations under these treaties, the UK have supplied arms worth a total of £3.4 billion to the Saudi Arabian military during this conflict. Moreover, British companies, contractors and citizens are at the heart of what is happening. I draw the House's attention to a recent advert that shows just how deeply we are involved in this conflict. BAE Systems recently advertised for "Weapons Load Technicians" at a salary of £38,119, located in Dhahran in Saudi Arabia, with a job purpose "to accomplish safe reliable loading of munitions to Tornado aircraft".

The arms trade treaty, which I was proud to work on, forbids the authorisation of the supply of arms where there is an overriding risk of a violation of international humanitarian law. We have signed up to such commitments, so we need to adhere to them. They are the basis on which a legitimate, responsible defence industry in this country is based, but I have deep concerns that we have not been adhering to them in this case. Indeed, that is the view of others globally. The European Parliament and individual EU member states are also taking steps against arms exports. For example, in March the Dutch Parliament voted to deny arms exports to Saudi Arabia.

This conflict in Yemen has profound consequences for the entire balance of power in the middle east. Despite its superior firepower, the Saudi-led coalition has not been able to achieve much progress in recent months and the military situation can at best be described as a hot stalemate. The coalition has air superiority but it does not have the ground troops to drive the Houthi-Saleh side out of the territory that it holds, and some observers are rightly worried that Yemen might become, or is already, a destination for Daesh fighters or others associated with Daesh who have been expelled from other locations around the middle east.

I will draw people's attention to another worrying development. Reprieve has been working closely with colleagues on the ground to document the impact of recent US military action in Yemen, which has taken an approach under President Trump that is distinctly different from the one taken under President Obama, both in the approval of and the legal guidance around strike targets, and there have been unprecedented assaults on villages full of civilians. Of course, the UK plays a role in providing extensive operational and intelligence assistance for US strikes, including the location of UK military personnel in US air bases in places such as Nevada. Recent US drone strikes have killed and wounded civilians in Yemen, and they have been followed up by Navy Seal operations into a number of locations, including Yakla and Al-Juba, which have resulted in the deaths of significant numbers of civilians.

I can understand it when operations are being conducted against legitimate and tightly defined targets, including those potentially linked to al-Qaeda, Daesh and others, but I cannot understand how these operations, which seem to have had widely loosened rules of engagement, can be conducted in a place that is already enduring significant civilian casualties and significant disruption.

I will just quote a grandfather from the village of Yakla, where the first US military operation in Yemen took place in January. He said:

“In the...morning, after the operation ended, I went to the scene and saw the volume of destruction. I saw...dead bodies everywhere. While I was searching among the bodies, I found my daughter Fateem lying dead in the street with her child in her arms. She was covered with blood. I did not imagine this could happen. I cannot forget those painful moments...The child was slightly injured in the hand by a bullet that hit and left his mother’s body. Such a scene no one could imagine nor comprehend—this level of criminality and killing.”

The war in Yemen has destroyed the institutions that keep society running, such as utilities, banks, food systems, hospitals and, most importantly, water and sanitation supplies. We are failing the people of Yemen more than ever. Time and time again, research has shown that it is not only violence and bombings that are the killer of civilians in conflict, but the illness, hunger and poverty that come after that. Yemen is a case in point. The deliberate targeting of humanitarian assistance, warehousing facilities and humanitarian operatives, and the blockades are all violations of international humanitarian law and are, in my view, tantamount to war crimes.

Those of us who have influence over the parties to the conflict have a particular responsibility to act now, both at the international level—we have heard about the discussions at the UN—and, in particular, in our relationship with the Saudi Arabians. We have mentioned the situation in Hodeidah. Whatever happens in terms of any military conflict there, we cannot allow a blockade that results in a famine in the country. The international community is not doing enough to provide resources. I hope the Minister will tell us of the efforts he is making to get other countries to pay their fair share to the appeals, which are significantly underfunded. Only a third are funded overall, and only a third in the water and sanitation cluster are funded.

Although I welcome the UK Government’s efforts to secure the presidential statement, which we mentioned, it was quite frankly extraordinary to read the read-out of the Prime Minister’s official spokesperson’s call this week with Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia, which made absolutely no mention of Yemen. I find that particularly extraordinary, given that he led the coalition activities in his previous role, which I described earlier, and given the horrific worsening of the situation in recent weeks. Does the Minister have an explanation for that, or is Yemen simply not important enough for the Prime Minister to mention? Or is it, as I have been told in private on a number of occasions over recent weeks, that the Government are admitting their failure to influence Saudi Arabia on this issue?

Despite all the claims of a special relationship, the facts are stark: no further reports issued by the Joint Incident Assessment Team on any of the hundreds of allegations; continued civilian deaths due to the bombings; a growing humanitarian catastrophe; and a worrying escalation of US direct involvement, resulting in the deaths of civilians, possibly with UK involvement. What is the vision? What is the plan? Where is the coherence across Government policy? Or is this all just too difficult?

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): I have been notified of only two other speakers. I therefore call Keith Vaz, who is the next speaker. If others expect or would like to be called, bear in mind that I intend to call the spokesman for the Scottish National party at 5.10 pm, so we need speeches to be short and punchy.

4.52 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I hope to follow your instructions, Mrs Moon. It is easy to do so on this tragic subject, because my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) has spoken so eloquently and passionately about an issue that affects the people of Yemen—the tragedy that is occurring in the middle east, which we in this House seem so powerless to deal with. The fact that 20 Members are here today signifies that this House is concerned about Yemen. It is close to our hearts, and we need to ensure there is a political solution to end the humanitarian crisis that has gripped that country.

I commend the Minister on his new appointment. He was a Minister in the Department for International Development, but he is now leading on Yemen, as far as the Foreign Office is concerned. He has responded to many Adjournment debates on this subject, which I, as chair of the all-party group on Yemen, and other Members of this House have initiated. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) for the work she does as the secretary of the all-party group.

As this is the first debate on this subject since we have returned, I should pay tribute to Flick Drummond, a fellow officer who worked so hard and, like me and my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), was born in Yemen. I also pay tribute to a trio of Members of the Scottish National party, who were not born in Yemen but took up this issue strongly: Angus Robertson, Alex Salmond and Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh. We will miss their voice, but the good point is that we have Members here who will speak on behalf of Yemen today and in the months ahead.

I have only one point to make, which is to ask the Minister to ring up our permanent representative at the United Nations and to speak to the Foreign Secretary to ensure that we get a resolution before the UN at the next Security Council meeting so that we get a solution now. Unless we have that resolution, signed up to by all the countries of the middle east, Yemen will be broken into pieces. It is already fragile. It is already a catastrophe. One child dies every minute and 10,000 people have been killed in the conflict. We only have to hear the voice of the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) to know that. He managed to get into Yemen to meet people there, including former President Saleh. I hope the right hon. Gentleman will have the opportunity to catch your eye, Mrs Moon. The fact is that the situation will continue unless the United Nations acts. It will only act if Britain decides it is to act.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, and I always listen carefully when he speaks about Yemen. He has been a powerful voice on this issue. Does he agree that if the Government are not persuaded by the serious humanitarian case we have heard today and Yemen becomes a failed state, that will have serious effects across the whole middle east and north Africa—we have serious material interests in those places—and will affect this country?

Keith Vaz: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is not just about Yemen today; it is about the effect on the rest of the middle east and the threat of terrorism in our country. Yemen is a training ground for the people who wish to come and do damage to us. I urge the Minister

[Keith Vaz]

to act. I am sorry that I will not be able to stay until the end of the debate—there is another meeting that I have to chair—but I urge him to come up with a rapid solution to this agonisingly difficult problem.

4.56 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I thank the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), for securing this debate and giving such a comprehensive outline of the situation in Yemen. I also pay tribute to Flick Drummond and other colleagues in the APPG who worked so hard in the past two years to keep the issue on the agenda.

While we have not been in this place over the past wee while because of the general election, the situation in Yemen has deteriorated significantly. It is often called the forgotten conflict, but I have been watching the situation as closely as I can, and I am increasingly disturbed by the escalation in violence combined with the famine and the terrible cholera outbreak that is causing so much damage. My understanding, having spoken to many of the aid agencies involved, is that they cannot quite declare a famine; they do not have enough people on the ground to declare that it has happened. There is a technical definition for famine that they cannot meet, because they cannot get access. In all probability, the situation is actually much worse than we are able to ascertain from people on the ground. It is not so much that people are starving; it is that people are actively being starved by the conflict in the area and because no one can get in to administer the food and relief that are required.

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady is right to zero in on the humanitarian situation and to pay tribute to those that are on the ground, such as Oxfam. I had the pleasure and privilege to see it doing quite remarkable work earlier this year. Does she share my concern about the situation we have with the port at Hodeidah where the cranes have been disabled? The Americans have supplied new cranes, but they cannot be erected. One part of the coalition we support is destroying the cranes and stopping access to this vital port at Hodeidah, while another part of the British Government is trying to get food, medicines and urgent supplies into that very port. Does she not think that is one of the key issues that needs to be resolved? I hope the Minister will have some suggestions on how progress could be made.

Alison Thewliss: I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. I pay tribute to him for going to Yemen with Oxfam, as well as to Oxfam for its work on the ground.

After first mentioning that more than 2 million children under the age of 5 are acutely malnourished, including half a million who are at the most extreme level of that critical danger, I was going to come on to the situation with the cranes and the ports. The World Food Programme has, I understand, been refused access for the four new mobile cranes that it had provided to aid the situation. Could the Minister provide any further updates on the situation with the cranes? If food and medical supplies cannot get in, we are unlikely to see any alleviation of the problem.

It is not just about access to Hodeidah port. There is no access to Sana'a Airport, and the route through Aden is at capacity; people cannot get anything more through there. The aid that is getting through Aden is then subject to an overland journey, which is, as hon. Members can imagine, very difficult and extremely dangerous in a conflict situation for the aid agencies involved. They are having to take aid overland. Had access been possible, that aid could quite easily have gone through Hodeidah port.

On 2 July, the World Health Organisation managed to get a shipment in through Hodeidah, which included 20 ambulances, 100 cholera kits, hospital equipment and 128,000 bags of intravenous fluids. It sounds like big numbers, and it was a 403 tonne shipment that they managed to get in—but there are 200,000 cases of cholera. That is not even enough bags of intravenous fluids for every person that has cholera. It is a drop in the ocean in terms of the need in that region; there is a need to get aid in quickly and to prevent any further delays. We must make all the efforts we can to make sure that aid gets to the people that need it and gets there now. The people in Yemen cannot wait any longer.

I am glad that the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) mentioned the issue of arms sales. It is absolutely clear that aid agencies that are working so hard on the ground are being impeded in their work by the bombs falling from the sky above them and the danger that they face every single day. They cannot provide the services that they would like to, because they are constantly under attack.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a poignant speech. Would she agree that UK Government policy appears to be undermining itself, selling arms on the one hand and trying to provide aid through the Department for International Development on the other?

Alison Thewliss: I agree that it is a huge waste of money to be providing aid and to also be endorsing the bombs that are being sold in such huge volumes and at such huge financial value. That has to stop. We cannot continue to ask aid agencies to put their staff at risk every single day. It is not just international aid agencies such as Oxfam, Save the Children, the Norwegian Refugee Council or Islamic Relief, but the locally based aid agencies as well. They are at significantly greater risk, because they are right there on the ground facing severe dangers every single day. I implore the Minister to act to try to provide the support and ceasefire that we need to allow aid agencies to do their work and to prevent any more children dying from preventable causes. It is a situation that we can fix.

5.2 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for giving me the opportunity to participate in this debate, Mrs Moon. I join the congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on a powerful speech setting out the pace and scale of the challenge of the humanitarian and the political crisis in Yemen today. He and I served together on the International Development Committee in the previous Parliament and he has been an important voice on these issues, as have my two friends from the all-party parliamentary group, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) and the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss).

There is a paradox at the heart of UK policy, which my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth highlighted. When the International Development Committee looked at the issue in the previous Parliament, our starting point was the scale of the humanitarian crisis, but taking evidence on that took us inescapably to the United Kingdom's role, including the issue of arms sales.

I very much endorse what my right hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) said about the importance of re-establishing the Committees on Arms Export Controls as early as possible. Certainly, if I am re-elected as Chair of the International Development Committee, I will support that, and I hope that Chairs from other relevant Committees from all parties will feel able to do so, because our ability as a country to say that we have the most robust system of arms control in the world is undermined if we as parliamentarians fail to establish the bodies to ensure that accountability.

The voices of the Yemeni diaspora in this country are an important part of this debate. I have been pleased to work with the Yemeni community in Liverpool and I am delighted to see the new Member of Parliament, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), in the Chamber. The Liverpool Friends of Yemen have sought to highlight the crisis. On Saturday at Liverpool University, a group of young people from the Yemeni community in Liverpool produced a film called "Aden Narratives", in which they interviewed British service personnel who had served in Yemen in the 1950s and 1960s. It was a great example of community cohesion and the breaking down of barriers, both of ethnicity and of age.

I want to make two comments relevant to the debate. First, I very much support what my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East said about the urgent need for a political solution—not only urgent but overriding. We want to see that solution. The United Kingdom has a crucial role to play at the United Nations in bringing about a ceasefire and a political solution.

Peace is the top priority, but with peace must come justice and accountability. That is why I want to finish on the crucial issue of an independent, United Nations-led inquiry into violations of international humanitarian law by all sides in the conflict, whether by the Saudi-led coalition, the Houthis or others in the country.

In particular, I want to ask the Minister about the implementation of last September's resolution of the UN Human Rights Council that mandated additional human rights experts to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Yemen to investigate violations of international law. What progress has been made? The Council resolution did not go as far as I would like—I would like to see a fully independent UN inquiry—but will the Minister update us on progress, and on the Government's view of when we may be able to move British policy to the support of a fully independent investigation? There have been appalling allegations of violations of international humanitarian law by both the Houthi-Saleh forces and the Saudi-led forces. Accountability is vital.

Stephen Doughty: Does my hon. Friend share my frustration that, over many months, he, I, many other Members and indeed Ministers have expressed our concerns directly to the Saudi Government—with Ministers who

have come here to speak to us and with the ambassador—but we are still to see reports on the allegations, even from JIAT?

Stephen Twigg: I absolutely share that sense of frustration described by my hon. Friend. I am hopeful that we will hear of some progress from the Minister. I am keen to sit down now in case the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) wishes to catch your eye, Mrs Moon—but he does not.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): I call Toby Perkins.

5.7 pm

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing the debate and on his campaign—

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): I remind Members that I will call the Scottish National party Front-Bench spokesperson at 5.10 pm.

Toby Perkins: I was on target a few seconds ago.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth has done good work on this. I agree with what my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) said about how we need a humanitarian and political solution to such an urgent humanitarian crisis. We also need to recognise that there will be no military solution—the Saudis themselves acknowledge that there is unlikely to be a military victory and that it will be about terms on which the peace discussions take place.

Any breaches of international humanitarian law are unforgivable. I entirely agree with the need to have an independent UN-led inquiry into them. However, I am conscious that all the discussion in this debate has been about the Saudi side. I understand what my hon. Friend said about the fact that we are supplying only one side, but we should remember that the whole conflict started because the Iran-backed Houthis came in and took over from the internationally recognised Government. If we take a one-sided approach to this, I am concerned about the message we will be sending.

The International Trade Committee supported the UN Security Council resolution to support the intervention by the Saudis in the first place. Of course the Saudis should act in line with international humanitarian law and of course people should be held to account if they have breached that, but if all our focus is on one side we will be heading towards dangerous territory.

I am also keen to hear what the Minister has to say about how we can get a political solution to back up the immediate humanitarian solution that is required that actually puts pressure on the Houthis to recognise that they were the initial perpetrators and holds other people to account.

5.9 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing this debate. He has shown himself to be a voice of authority on this matter over the past few years, so I commend him not just for securing the debate but for all the work that he has done and will continue to do.

[*Stewart Malcolm McDonald*]

What we have heard about this afternoon is nothing short of the weaponisation of food and medicine. Our role in that surely should shame us all. I have heard nothing to disagree with on what people would like to see from the UK Government to help to ease the humanitarian situation. I am not sure whether I can call the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) the Chair of the International Development Committee, or whether I should call him the former or prospective Chair, but I echo his comments. He said that he would like to see an independent United Nations inquiry. We can of course support that.

I come back to our role in this matter—and, more fundamentally, our role with Saudi Arabia, which I make no apologies for focusing on. It seems to me that we weave quite a tangled web. I cannot understand why the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), when he was Justice Secretary last year, was able to withdraw from a contract with the Saudi Arabian Government over prisons co-operation because of human rights concerns, yet we cannot take real action on our role in the Saudi command structure. What exactly are UK operatives doing in that command structure? A joint Select Committee published a report demanding to know exactly that, but all the Government have done is tell us what they are not doing. That strikes me as something particularly dark that needs to be addressed.

I question the need for such involvement with Saudi Arabia. I understand that we need some form of relationship, and that our relationship is important in terms of the intelligence it gives us—that is sometimes overblown, but it is important none the less—but the optics of a Prime Minister rushing off to Saudi Arabia post-Brexit to secure a trade deal leave rather a bad taste in the mouth. The Government seriously need to revisit their entire relationship as far as arms sales and wider trade deals are concerned.

That relationship cuts to the heart of our entire involvement in the Arab world and middle east politics. It sullies and sours our reputation and our ability to get things done. It is quite obvious that America wishes to step back from its responsibilities around the world as far as humanitarian aid is concerned. That provides us with an opportunity—one that we would perhaps not wish to have—to get in there and lead from the front, but the Government seem awfully shy to do so.

This conflict clearly will not end any time soon, and this issue will dog the Government during this Parliament, however long that may last. As long as the debate is led by the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth and other right hon. and hon. Members who have tenaciously worked away at this issue for many years, the Government will not get off the hook.

5.14 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I join in the congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty). He has been a powerful advocate for immediate action in this terrible and appalling conflict, which reduces many of us to tears when we hear its shocking details. Because time is limited I shall not be able to go through some of the brilliant contributions that we have heard

this afternoon, but I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend's disappointment in the lack of action by the Government. He is, of course, angry with the parties themselves, who have perpetrated and continue the appalling conflict.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) made an important intervention about how vital and urgently needed the UN resolution is, and said that Britain's role on the Security Council could enable us to secure it. I hope that the Minister will address that. My right hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) mentioned the Committees on Arms Export Controls, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) among others. It is vital that the Committees, which are essential and on which I have served in the past, should be reconvened as soon as possible. It is essential to keep a close eye and a rein on the weapons that are being exported, and on those to whom they are being exported legitimately.

Yemen is the site of the world's largest humanitarian crisis, according to the United Nations. It is the "forgotten war", according to Amnesty International. We have heard about the massive cholera outbreak of recent weeks, in which 250,000 people have already been affected. That should shame us all. Forty-five per cent. of the population are under 15 years old, and 21 million people in the country, or approximately 80% of the population, are in need of assistance. That is more than in any other country, according to the United Nations. We have the power to do something about that, and are failing to do it, which should shame us all.

I want to consider our involvement in the conflict. According to Oxfam and the House of Commons Library, since 2015 the UK Government have approved arms export licences worth £3.3 billion. Yet at the same time we have pledged just £139 million in humanitarian aid from the 2017-18 Budget. We could do much more, and could do considerably less about supplying those arms. The Labour party strongly believes that Britain must immediately halt arms sales to Saudi Arabia and focus on negotiating a ceasefire. A Labour party press release from April stated:

"As it stands, the British-Saudi relationship is damaging to the people of Saudi Arabia, Britain and the wider Middle East, and helping to export insecurity to the rest of the World".

Yemen, as we have heard from a number of speakers, is dependent for almost all its food, fuel and medical supplies on the port of Hodeidah; 80% of all imports to the country arrive via that major port, in a densely populated area controlled by the Houthis. The Saudi-supported army of the official Yemeni Government continues to threaten to take the port by force, and other hon. Members have mentioned that that could have an even more serious consequence in relation to the breakdown of society and the humanitarian disaster currently encapsulating the country.

I will conclude by quoting the concluding remarks of a paper of 11 December 2015 by Professor Philippe Sands, QC, Professor Andrew Clapham and Blinne ni Ghrálaigh—great minds in international law—for Amnesty International, Oxfam and Saferworld:

"In the current circumstances we can be clear in concluding what the UK is required to do to bring itself into full compliance with its legal obligations: it should halt with immediate effect all authorisations and transfers of relevant weapons and items to Saudi Arabia, pending proper and credible enquiries into the

allegations of serious violations of IHL and IHRL that have arisen and that could arise in the future, as addressed in this opinion and the sources here referred to.”

That is consistent with the policy of the Labour party. I hope that the Minister can at least address that important conclusion in a legal opinion.

5.19 pm

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Rory Stewart): First, I pay tribute to the extraordinary range and passion of these debates. The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) is a doughty, redoubtable opponent. He knows an enormous amount about this subject. I was privileged to work with him on the Commonwealth Development Corporation Bill Committee, where I developed an enormous respect for his eye for detail and his ability to discover the most vulnerable and important points in an argument.

It will be difficult to touch on everyone’s points in 10 minutes, but I will run through them quickly. The hon. Gentleman produced a large overview of the context of the problems and pushed hard a strong moral line on what he felt the solution should be. The right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who has been probably the greatest champion for Yemen in the House of Commons since he entered the House—he was born in Aden, like his sister—has kept a focus in endless forums on one of the most horrifying situations in the contemporary world, and strongly on the UN resolution. The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) showed her own focus on this issue and in particular on technical issues around Hodeidah port.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) wanted to focus on specific questions about additional support on human rights. I very much hope he will again be the Chair of the International Development Committee, and I agree with the challenge that came from my friend the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) about the importance of setting up the Committees on Arms Export Controls as quickly as possible. The answer is that we are focused on providing additional support to the Human Rights Commission and have made that clear on a number of occasions—indeed we are already producing support.

The hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) brought us into the discussion about the role of the Houthi-Saleh alliance and its culpability in these affairs. Indeed, the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth focused on that as well. The hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) posed a big moral challenge to the Government, and the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) brought us back to questions that touch in particular on arms sales.

I will try to address those questions in total—they are very deep and important questions. Of course, the honest answer is that we do not have all the solutions to those problems. The British Government are doing an enormous amount—probably more than we are being given credit for in this Chamber—but clearly all the things we are doing are not sufficient to solve this crisis. The problem is—the hon. Member for Leeds North East pointed this out—although it is true that we are spending only about £180 million¹ in Yemen, we have to bear it in mind that, unfortunately, the situation in Yemen is not the only situation in the world. We are

spending 0.7% of our GDP on international development and we have to make some difficult choices, because—this is the main point—the situation we face in Yemen has similarities with situations we are struggling with all over the world.

Whatever solutions are proposed here—and whatever belief there is from the hon. Member for Glasgow Central that it is within the power of the United Kingdom to sort the situation out—need to be addressed also to the problems in north-east Nigeria, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, Syria, Iraq and Ukraine. I raise that because the fundamental problems on the ground in Yemen are driven by the region and the internal politics of Yemen. Those are fundamentally political problems. Some of their roots stretch back to the original formation of the Yemeni state.

I have not been to Yemen since March 2014. If any Member in the Chamber has been to Yemen more recently, I would love to hear from them. None of us in the Chamber has been to Yemen in the past three years. That is an important fact to bear in mind when we talk about the situation, and it is important because the situation is changing very quickly. Even since my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) visited, the situation has changed again and again.

Keith Vaz: Members of the APPG are very keen to go to Yemen in order to get the kind of information we need; the problem is that Saudi Arabia has to agree to it, because it is Saudi Arabia that allows aircraft into Yemen. The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) went in under his cloak; the rest of us would love to go, but we cannot. If the Minister can help us to get there, that would be great.

Rory Stewart: That is a challenge for me, and I would love to take it on. Let me try to touch on some things in the remaining five minutes. The one thing that I unfortunately cannot touch on—the elephant in the room—is arms sales. There is a serious legal proceeding looking exactly at the question that has been posed by everybody here: whether the UK Government were, as we believe, in compliance with our international humanitarian obligations. A judge and some expert lawyers will very soon be able to resolve whether Philippe Sands is correct or we as the British Government are correct.

Stephen Doughty: The Minister rightly states that he cannot do that, and I do not disagree with his wider analysis of the roots of this conflict and the wider dynamics in the region. However, can he explain why we are not using the full width of our diplomatic apparatus to put pressure on the Saudis and other parties in the conflict? Why did the Prime Minister not raise it in her call with the new Crown Prince, and why have we not called Saudi Arabia out on its repeated failure to give answers to the investigations into the allegations that have been made? The Minister said that they were running out of time and that we are getting frustrated, but we have not called them out on it.

Rory Stewart: The Prime Minister raised it directly on her April visit to Saudi Arabia, Ministers have raised it repeatedly and we have had senior military staff on the ground.

The overall picture, which I will try to touch on, is how we combine those political levers and our influence on Saudi Arabia with the influence that can be exercised

1. [Official Report, 20 July 2017, Vol. 627, c. 1-2MC.]

[*Rory Stewart*]

by others. What influence could we exercise on, for example, the United Arab Emirates, in order to influence Saudi Arabia? What influence can we exercise on the United States? The hon. Member for Glasgow Central raised the issue of the Hodeidah port. One of the most important things that happened in changing our fears around that port was General Mattis's intervention on the question of a military intervention there, which made a huge difference.

It is really important to understand that, along with those political and diplomatic approaches, we have to combine our humanitarian approach, which I do not think we have talked about enough, and we have to think about a long-term political solution. In terms of that humanitarian approach, we are doing an enormous amount. We are putting in people to focus on cholera and we have a huge focus on food delivery and shelter.

We are also doing an enormous number of smaller things, for which we are not getting credit. We are working with the UN specifically on the crane issue, on funding UN Humanitarian Air Service flights and on specifically funding the office of Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, who is the UN envoy to Yemen. Those are smaller, million-pound projects that are all trying to identify weaknesses in the system that we can then plug. We are also working on financial flows and on trying to make sure that wheat gets in.

However, the overall solution to this situation has to be political. That is where we need to get to—but what does it look like? It is fine for me to stand up here and spout jargon. In theory, that political solution involves a genuinely inclusive answer. It has to include not only the regional powers but, above all, without fear or favour—as identified by Simon Shercliff, our really good ambassador to Yemen—all the warring parties. It cannot be a military solution, and it must include other people.

The solution must include people in Hadramaut, who have not been included in conversations to date, and it must also really think about how we include women.

That is not a trivial point. One of the real strengths of what happened in 2013-14 was the genuine inclusion of Yemeni civil society. That made a huge difference, because although Yemen is now being presented to us as though it is nothing but some medieval tribal cockpit of violence, it is in fact a highly sophisticated society with a very active civil society, and the inclusion of women in civil society groups will be central to getting a lasting solution. It will also mean that we, the British Government, will have to be honest with Parliament about the real problems that we face.

There is a huge emphasis on the security side, huge diplomatic pressure and a lot of humanitarian spending. However, above all, these are the questions I will pose to finish on: first, where is the UN going to go on this? One problem is that it will be extremely difficult, in the current context, to get a new UN Security Council resolution through, because some members of the Security Council will oppose it. Secondly, what is the current relationship between Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed and the Houthis? He was shot at when he last went into Sana'a. Thirdly, what is the UAE's position? Fourthly, how will it be possible to integrate other groups? Finally, what is the long-term position of President Hadi? Those critical, detailed questions will determine our success or failure.

Graham Jones: Is the Minister not missing two final points: the rising threat of al-Qaeda in the Arabian peninsula and the rise of ISIS? It is across all of the UN reports that ISIS is moving into ungoverned spaces. Because of the aggression of the Houthis in threatening Sunni communities, they are responding by raising the black flag.

Rory Stewart: I will finish on this. What are the interests of the Yemeni—

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Site Assessment Indemnity

Wednesday 5 July 2017

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Grenfell Tower: Support

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): I am announcing today that I am intervening in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) following the Grenfell Tower disaster.

The scale of the recovery effort needed on the Lancaster West estate in the months to come cannot be underestimated. Support to survivors, the families and friends of those who lost their lives and residents in the wider community must and will be ongoing. The challenge of providing that support is and will continue to be significant. I want to help the council meet that challenge.

The immediate response to the disaster is being co-ordinated by the Grenfell response team, headed up by John Barradell. He is ably supported by a number of colleagues drawn from London Councils, the wider local government sector including RBKC, the voluntary sector, police, health and fire services as well as central Government. Their expertise and hard work is making a huge difference. However this is a temporary measure to deal with the immediate need.

As well as providing that immediate support, we must have an eye to the future. This intervention is putting in place the foundations that will support the longer-term recovery. I am therefore setting out my plans for strengthening the structures that will support that recovery effort.

Following an agreement with RBKC, I will appoint an independent Recovery Taskforce with the experience and skills to advise the council on the longer-term recovery needs. The remit of the Recovery Taskforce is to provide advice and practical and strategic support to RBKC. It will work alongside the council to make sure that they have the manpower, expertise and resources necessary to take on the longer-term recovery work beyond the immediate civil emergency response.

The Recovery Taskforce will report to me directly, and will be made up of experienced and senior people with a track record in delivery, including from local government. I will announce details of the chair and membership of the Recovery Taskforce shortly. The Recovery Taskforce will be in place for as long as is required.

The Recovery Taskforce will consider all aspects of the recovery operation but will have a special focus on housing, regeneration and community engagement. It will also consider the governance of the council and the way that it operates to ensure it is able to provide effective leadership through trying and difficult circumstances.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): On 12 October 2016, a written ministerial statement and minute were laid before Parliament, which set out that DCLG would be providing an indemnity to the official receiver (OR) of the former SSI steel works and would be giving the same indemnity to the South Tees Site Company (STSC) once it was established.

The indemnities are to facilitate the undertaking of site assessments at the former SSI site. These site assessments will help inform: costs to decommission the site, costs to regenerate the site and provide the necessary due diligence to enable the mayoral development corporation to take forward the regeneration of the area.

Following no objections the indemnity was given to the OR on 20 October 2016. The STSC is a wholly owned BEIS company that came into being on 1 November 2016 and was set up in order to keep the former SSI site safe and secure. On 26 January 2017 the DCLG Permanent Secretary wrote to the Public Accounts Committee and DCLG Select Committee setting out that the indemnity was being given to STSC.

The original indemnities set out that the site assessments would be commissioned by the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA). From here on, the site assessments will be commissioned directly by STSC in order to ensure greater efficiency and to give STSC greater control. The changing of the lead body taking forward the site assessments does not change the risk profile to HMG; it simply changes the lead body and the way the assessments will be procured. While the next phase of site assessments are put in place the current indemnities will continue, however, they will be withdrawn following the completion of the HCA phase of work.

Therefore the Government will be reissuing updated indemnities to the OR and STSC to continue to indemnify both bodies against all liabilities, costs, expenses, damages and losses suffered or incurred by them that are arising out of the site assessments.

It is not possible at this stage to accurately quantify the value of such indemnity. HMG has considered the risks of this indemnity and I believe the likelihood of such indemnities being called upon is low. The indemnity is limited to liabilities arising as a consequence of the site assessments. If the liability is called upon, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal Supply procedure.

As a matter of record a departmental minute for both Houses explaining the procedure followed and containing a description of the liabilities undertaken can be found as an online attachment. I can also confirm that I have made and laid an order to establish a mayoral development corporation, the South Tees Development Corporation.

The attachment can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-07-05/HCWS28/>

HOME DEPARTMENT

Grenfell Tower Fire

The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis): I wish to inform the House that I am today introducing a policy on leave to remain outside the immigration rules for residents of Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk.

The Government have been clear that their priority is to ensure that victims of this tragedy get the access they need to vital services, irrespective of immigration status. The Home Office will not conduct immigration checks on survivors and those coming forward to provide information to assist the authorities in their enquiries. However, we recognise that some foreign nationals directly affected by the fire may not wish to engage with the authorities due to concerns about their unresolved immigration status, or if their status is about to expire. I am therefore announcing today that those individuals directly affected by the Grenfell Tower fire who contact the Home Office via a specified process will be given a period of limited leave to remain in the UK with full access to relevant support and assistance. This will be done by using discretionary powers to grant leave to remain outside the immigration rules for a temporary period of 12 months and without a condition precluding recourse to public funds. I will place a copy of the policy document in the Library of the House.

This period of leave will provide survivors with the time to deal with the extremely difficult circumstances in which they find themselves and start to rebuild their lives while considering their future options, as well as to assist the police and other authorities with their enquiries about the fire. No fees will be charged by the Home Office in respect of cases granted leave under the policy.

Everyone affected by this tragedy needs reassurance that the Government are there for them at this terrible time and we will continue to provide the support they need to help them through the difficult days, weeks and months to come.

The policy will be kept under review and will remain in place until 31 August 2017.

[HCWS29]

TRANSPORT

Transport Investment

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): We have made significant progress in realising our ambitious plans for transport infrastructure, built on the investment of over £61 billion in the five-year period to 2021. We have taken big decisions on transformational projects like HS2 and our preferred option for a new runway at Heathrow, and are part way through delivering major investment programmes to maintain and upgrade our road and rail networks.

I am today publishing a Transport Investment Strategy, setting out how we will build on that progress and—through the investment decisions we go on to take—how we will respond realistically and pragmatically to today's challenges and deliver a transport network that works for everyone.

The decisions we take now will shape the transport network for decades to come and help to determine the contribution that transport can make to our national success and wellbeing. The Transport Investment Strategy describes what we are trying to achieve through our investment in transport infrastructure, the priorities and propositions that will guide future investment decisions, the institutional frameworks within which those decisions will be taken, and the actions we are taking to help meet our ambitions.

I want our investment to create a more reliable, less congested and better connected transport network that works for the users that rely on it; to build a stronger, more balanced economy by enhancing productivity and responding to local growth priorities; to enhance our global competitiveness by making Britain a more attractive place to trade and invest; and to support the creation of new housing.

As we shape and deliver the balanced investment programmes that deliver these objectives, we will be guided by a set of priorities and propositions that put the needs of transport users at the heart of decision making, whilst getting the best value out of the network and our investment, retaining a resolute focus on delivery and remaining adaptable in the face of change.

As part of the strategy I am announcing my intention to launch a consultation on the creation of a new "Major Road Network" for the most important local authority A roads. This would mirror the success of the Strategic Road Network which has created planning and funding certainty for motorways and major dual carriageways, and would mean our most important local authority A roads were actively planned and managed to deliver a better service for drivers. As part of this consultation, we will make proposals to allocate a proportion of the national roads fund to the MRN.

I am also determined that, through our investment, we should go further in helping to raise prosperity and productivity across the country. In the Industrial Strategy Green Paper, the Government committed to taking account of the balance of spending per head between different regions. In addition, we will develop a new assessment standard that will require transport investment programmes to be judged on how they contribute towards the creation of a more balanced economy, as part of the assessment of their strategic case.

I have placed copies of the document in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS26]

WORK AND PENSIONS

DWP Estates

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): DWP is today confirming the future of its estate, including jobcentres and back-office sites.

On 26 January 2017 DWP tabled a statement outlining proposals for changes to its estate, which will come into effect from 31 March 2018 when the current PFI contract with Telereal Trillium expires.

Today's announcement confirms that the majority of those proposals will go ahead. Some smaller jobcentres will merge with larger ones, and others will be co-located with local government premises. It will mean that DWP will be able to offer a more efficient service, while delivering good value for the taxpayer, saving over £140 million a year for the next 10 years.

The support provided to jobseekers will be further strengthened this year as more work coaches are recruited in every nation and region of the UK.

The plans reflect the fact that eight out of 10 claims for jobseeker's allowance and 99% of applications for universal credit full service claims are now made online. This means that DWP buildings are used much less with 20% of the estate currently underutilised.

Following more detailed planning work and further discussions with staff, public consultations and feedback from stakeholders, the outcomes for some sites have been revised. The list in the online attachment (DWP Estates Announcements 5 July 2017) details where such a revision has been made. There are a small number of

sites where commercial negotiations are ongoing. The Department is unable to announce these plans until this process is complete. These sites are also in the list.

In January, we were unable to announce our proposals for some offices because negotiations with landlords had not been concluded. We are now in a position to provide an update on proposals for these offices and they are listed in the online attachment.

For the vast majority of DWP offices there will be no change in location. Where we are closing a site, we will take all possible precautions to minimise disruption for customers. Vulnerable people will continue to receive home visits and postal claims where it is appropriate to do so.

The attachment can be viewed online at:
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-07-05/HCWS30/>.

[HCWS30]

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**not later than
Wednesday 12 July 2017**

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Public Sector Pay Cap [Col. 1171]

Answer to urgent question—(Elizabeth Truss)

Grenfell Rehousing [Col. 1189]

Statement—(Alok Sharma)

Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) Bill [Col. 1201]

Read a Second and the Third time, and passed

Criminal Law (Northern Ireland) [Col. 1202]

Motion—(Chloe Smith)—agreed to

Israel and Palestinian Talks [Col. 1224]

General debate

Perth's Cultural Contribution to the UK [Col. 1275]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Road Infrastructure [Col. 85WH]

Srebrenica Genocide Commemoration [Col. 111WH]

State Pension Age for Women [Col. 119WH]

Working Conditions in the Private Hire Industry [Col. 147WH]

Yemen: Political and Humanitarian Situation [Col. 155WH]

General debates

Written Statements [Col. 33WS]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
