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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 12 July 2017

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr Speaker: I remind Members, in so far as a reminder is required, that the ballot for the election of Select Committee Chairs is taking place today until 4 pm in Committee Room 8. The results will be announced when they are available; that is a statement of the blindingly obvious, but it is what it says here, to which I add, if this is helpful, that I expect to announce the results of the ballots at the end of the debate on Grenfell Tower this evening.

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Aid Programmes: Africa

1. **John Mann** (Bassetlaw) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of UK aid programmes in Africa. [900363]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): UK aid plays a vital role in helping the world's poorest and tackling global challenges such as disease migration and terrorism. In Africa, since 2015, we have provided humanitarian assistance to 13.7 million people.

John Mann: I congratulate the Secretary of State on her announcement this week on population. Given what Mrs Gates said about the impact on migration, will the Secretary of State consider how the core funding for organisations such as the International Planned Parenthood Federation and Marie Stopes International can be reinstated to allow those organisations to deliver what they have been doing effectively for some years?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right; these are important organisations. Of course, the United Kingdom has led the way on the whole issue of family planning, as we showed yesterday through the summit we held. We are constantly looking at how we can work with important partners on that critical issue and, in particular, on family planning and modern methods of contraception. We will of course review these programmes, too, as all programmes are always under review.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): In welcoming the fab decision by the Prime Minister to appoint a joint Minister from the Department for International Development and the Foreign Office to

sub-Saharan Africa, will the Secretary of State confirm what her priorities are for driving forward Her Majesty's Government's priorities in Africa, rather than just DFID and FCO priorities?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to commend the fact that the two Departments are working together on Africa. There is a very good reason for that. We are, of course, one HMG—one Government—and our priorities are the same priorities when it comes to Africa: tackling the big issues of disease, migration and economic development, which is critical, and growing regions such as Africa so that they can become our trading partners.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): What is the Secretary of State's assessment of the current humanitarian and political situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo? In particular, what are the Government doing to assist in tackling the humanitarian crisis there, and also to ensure that Congo can move to democratic elections as soon as possible?

Priti Patel: I thank the hon. Gentleman, the Chair of the Select Committee, and congratulate him on his reappointment to that role. He is right to stress the significance of what is going on in the DRC. The situation is very worrying; there are many humanitarian pressures that we know of in-country, and the current electoral and democratic situation is not sustainable. We are of course working on the ground and with our partners to ensure that we continue to provide the support that is necessary to get the country back on track.

14. [900376] **Luke Hall** (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): In recent years, UK aid has played a key role in helping Ethiopia to become more resilient to crises by ensuring that people have a safety net so that they do not starve when a crisis hits. Does the Secretary of State agree that the British public can be immensely proud of all the work this Government have done?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is right. I visited Ethiopia again recently—just a month ago—and saw UK aid in action. There is no doubt about the fact that UK aid is keeping people alive in the humanitarian situation, with the drought taking place there. However, at the same time, we are supporting the industrialisation of Ethiopia, with trade opportunities and British firms now creating jobs in the country.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): The Independent Commission for Aid Impact has reported that UK development assistance to Africa was down by a massive £20 million in 2016 and warned that Africa is losing out on aid spending as the Government divert money to countries in Europe and Asia. Considering that Africa has the highest proportion of population living in extreme poverty, will the Secretary of State update the House on what she intends to do to reverse the cuts and to ensure Africa does not lose out on funding from DFID?

Priti Patel: I welcome the hon. Lady to her new role and congratulate her on joining the Opposition Front-Bench team in that role.

We have the 0.7% commitment, of course, which we are proud of, and 74% of that is spent on DFID programming. The majority of that money goes to Africa programmes, but it is important to recognise a couple of points. There is an enormous humanitarian crisis in Africa right now, and we have throughout the year scaled up, and led the way in calling on other donors to put more money into Africa famine relief. We are also working across all Government Departments to ensure that Africa is a development priority.

Humanitarian Crisis: Syria

2. **Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Defence on ensuring that the Government's operations in Syria help to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in that country. [900364]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): I have regular discussions with the Secretary of State for Defence and other ministerial colleagues in response to the conflict in Syria, and of course we are doing more on the humanitarian side as well.

Carol Monaghan: Will the Secretary of State tell us what measures her Department is taking to ensure that civilians are able to leave Raqqa safely, and what information it is giving them on escape routes?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady highlights the terrible situation of the mass conflict involved in the recapturing of Raqqa. The regional support that we are providing includes medical supplies, food and shelter—all the basics that people in the region need. She asks specifically about information. We are working with our partners on the ground, who are working in very challenging situations, to give them information and guidance as to where the safe places are for them to go.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. We might not reach the question tabled by the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), so if she wants to come in now, she can, although it is not obligatory.

7. [900369] **Victoria Prentis** (Banbury) (Con): How kind! May I use this opportunity to thank you, Mr Speaker, for your support for Singing for Syrians? I also thank the Department for International Development for its support. As a result of all the support we have received from across the House, Singing for Syrians is now able to support not only medical aid in Syria but a school for disabled children. Does my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State agree that aid is always worth more when it is spent in the region, and that what the people caught up in this terrible conflict really want is to be able to stay as close to home as possible?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I congratulate her and everyone else who has been involved in Singing for Syrians. It is an incredible charity, and I commend her for her work. She is right to highlight the fact that providing support in region is what makes a difference in terms of changing and saving lives. We have led the way in this. The United Kingdom has spent

more than £2.46 billion in Syria and the region, providing hope and opportunity to those who have been displaced through conflict.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): It is quite obvious that senior Ministers in the Government wish to expand this conflict to target actors other than Daesh in Syria. Has the Secretary of State made an assessment of what that would mean for her Department on the ground, and is she being the voice of reason in cautioning against expanding the conflict?

Priti Patel: It is wrong to suggest that we are expanding any conflict at all. The focus of this Government, particularly from the humanitarian perspective, is to ensure that UK aid goes to the people who are suffering as a result of the bleak situation on the ground right now. Of course we are working across Government and with our partners in the region and our international partners to bring hope where there is despair and, importantly, to end the conflict.

13. [900375] **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): Before the conflict, about 11% of the Syrian population were Christians. The Government rightly have a programme to admit refugees from the camps on humanitarian grounds, but in the early stages of the programme, many Christians would not go to the camps because of intimidation. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that, when the Government admit refugees for very good reasons, a fair proportion of them will be Christians?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We are prioritising reaching the most vulnerable people across Syria, including Christians, and UK funding is distributed on the basis of ensuring that civilians are not discriminated against on the basis of race, religion or ethnicity.

UN Target: Aid

3. **Matt Rodda** (Reading East) (Lab): Whether the Government plan to continue to meet the UN target of spending 0.7% of GDP on aid to developing countries for the duration of this Parliament. [900365]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): Meeting the 0.7% of GNI target for overseas aid is a manifesto commitment. It is enshrined in law, and the Government have been unequivocal that we will continue to honour that pledge.

Matt Rodda: As well as committing to the United Nations target of spending 0.7% of GDP on aid to developing countries, does the Secretary of State agree that poverty reduction must be at the heart of UK aid spending?

Priti Patel: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to the House. He is absolutely right, and that is exactly what our aid spending does. Importantly, poverty reduction is at the heart of the definition in terms of official development assistance spending, and that is something that the Government are absolutely focused on.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): The 0.7% is extremely valuable in alleviating poverty. Will the Secretary of State update the House on the important summit on family planning that she attended yesterday and tell us what it achieved?

Priti Patel: Family planning is an enormous issue for development and poverty alleviation. Yesterday, we convened a summit with our co-hosts, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and many representatives from around the world made big pledges and commitments to tackle family planning. The United Kingdom has led the way on the issue, but we are also working with the private sector to put more money into this area and to develop new commodities.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): What percentage of the budget will be spent on helping developing countries to tackle climate change? Will the Secretary of State follow Scotland's example and establish a climate justice fund, or will the Government tie themselves to Donald Trump's attitude to climate change, which Professor Stephen Hawking recently described as pushing "the Earth over the brink, to become like Venus, with a temperature of 250 degrees, and raining sulphuric acid"?

Priti Patel: Let me be clear about this Government's commitment to climate change reduction. We are a signatory to the Paris agreement, which we are committed to delivering. As for the spending percentage, it is important to stress that we have a range of spending across Departments. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, which leads on climate control and climate change, is working with DFID, because climate change issues such as drought and famine have a massive impact and cause a great deal of harm in various parts of the world.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Constituents from Chipping Barnet are coming to Parliament today to set out their concerns about Christians in Syria facing oppression and persecution. Will the Secretary of State use the aid budget to alleviate the suffering of Christian communities during their times of trouble?

Priti Patel: I thank my right hon. Friend for her question and commend her and her constituents for the work that they are doing. UK aid and funding are distributed to those in need, including persecuted Christians around the world. Importantly, we are standing up for them and giving them a voice in parts of the world where conflict is happening.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): As well as recommitting to the UN target of spending 0.7% of gross national income on aid to developing countries, will the Secretary of State consult civil society before proposing any further changes to or relaxation of the rules on what ODA can be spent on?

Priti Patel: This is an important area and I have committed to working with all partners, particularly civil society. In fact, a range of NGOs and stakeholders spent some time with me two weeks ago, and we had a constructive discussion on that very issue. The dialogue is ongoing, and I would welcome the views of many other partners.

Kate Osamor: With the Government's new-found desire to reach out to other parties for new ideas, precisely which of the 13 policy ideas in Labour's 2017 manifesto does the Secretary of State now intend to implement?

Priti Patel: When it comes to development, it is fair to say that we agree on the national and global commitment to the 0.7% target, hence why we are having such a constructive exchange right now. In reference to the hon. Lady's previous question, we should be working collectively and with our international partners on ODA reform.

Famine and Food Shortages: Africa

4. **David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): What steps her Department is taking to support people affected by (a) famine in South Sudan and (b) food shortages in Somalia and Burundi. [900366]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): This year, we are providing a package of £276 million of humanitarian support to those countries, supplying food, shelter and water to those in desperate need.

David Linden: What is the Department doing to encourage the Ugandan Government to engage fully in diplomatic efforts to bring the warring parties in South Sudan around the negotiating table?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise that issue. The conflict in South Sudan is abhorrent, and I saw that first hand on my visit earlier this year. I have been pressing the Ugandan Government and other neighbours in the region. They need to step up and call out the appalling behaviour that we have been seeing in South Sudan with President Salva Kiir. The United Kingdom is doing everything it possibly can to ensure that that message is being heard.

Mr Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State and DFID on co-ordinating the aid effort in South Sudan with other countries. Does she agree that that is yet another example of where British taxpayers' money is being wisely spent on keeping alive men, women and children who happen to share the same planet as us?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. South Sudan is a man-made crisis that has killed thousands and forced almost 4 million people to flee their homes. UK aid is not only saving lives but making an enormous difference in a country dominated by war and conflict.

Small Charities Funding

5. **Mary Robinson** (Cheadle) (Con): What steps she is taking to enable small charities in the UK to access funding allocated by her Department. [900367]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): Last week, DFID launched the small charities challenge fund, which is specifically for small UK-registered charities with an annual income of less than £250,000.

Mary Robinson: I am particularly proud of the work that many of my constituents in Cheadle undertake for small charities, which are vital to our aid programme, as highlighted by this funding. Does my right hon. Friend

agree that, by providing these funds to our local small charities, we can improve the connection between our civil society and the important work of helping countries overseas?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is no doubt that small charities are a crucial part of the UK's development offer internationally. There are many extraordinary grassroots charities, and I urge all colleagues on both sides of the House to encourage their small charities to apply for this fund. There is a great opportunity to build links, both nationally and internationally, on these important issues.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give priority in allocating funds to areas of the world such as Yemen? There is a humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen, where 300,000 people are facing a cholera epidemic.

Priti Patel: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I commend him for again raising the issue of Yemen, where the conflict is having a devastating impact and, of course, there is a cholera crisis. The Government are spending hundreds of millions on providing necessary life-saving support to the people who are engulfed by that awful conflict.

12. [900374] **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): What assessment has my right hon. Friend made of the remarkable voluntary charitable contribution made alongside the Government's work to relieve the crisis in Syria? How does the Department help to facilitate that work?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is right to raise that point. UK aid is playing a significant part supporting Syria and the region—we are one of the largest donors—and many small charities are also involved. My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) has spoken about how UK charities are playing their part. The small charities challenge fund will help to facilitate more UK small charities to do more on international crisis and conflict.

Agenda 2030

6. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the implementation of the Government's report, "Agenda 2030: Delivering the Global Goals", published in March 2017. [900368]

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Rory Stewart): As the hon. Lady knows, the UK was at the forefront of drafting those goals and is leading a great deal of the implementation. We published our report on 28 March. DFID leads on international implementation, and the Cabinet Office is ensuring that the single departmental plans drive it through domestically.

Kerry McCarthy: The Minister will know of my interest in food waste, which is addressed by sustainable development goal 12.3. Does he agree that it is not enough just to have a DFID-led approach? We will not be able to help farmers in developing countries unless we also tackle the relationship with supermarkets in this country.

Rory Stewart: The hon. Lady has been a leader in this House on addressing food waste, which fundamentally needs to be driven by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and its Secretary of State, monitored by the Cabinet Office through the single departmental plan. DFID's role is then to ensure that, internationally, we are consistent by showing exactly the kind of leadership on food waste that the hon. Lady has provided.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I know that the commitment to implementing the sustainable development goals comes right from the top of Government. By when did my hon. Friend ask the Office for National Statistics to report on the UK's progress?

Rory Stewart: The Office for National Statistics is compiling a report for the UN, and we will be submitting ourselves to a voluntary assessment of the UK's performance on the sustainable development goals at home and abroad.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Briefly, Mr David Hanson.

15. [900377] **David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): Does not President Trump's declaration on the Paris agreement blow a hole in the UK's objectives on the climate change agreement as part of the millennium development goals?

Rory Stewart: The UK's obligation under the sustainable development goals is to remain committed to our own performance. We are sticking with the Paris agreement, and we will demonstrate at home and abroad that we really care about clean, renewable energy and the future of this planet.

Topical Questions

T1. [900378] **Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): Yesterday I hosted a fantastic family planning conference here in London, dealing with the population challenges of regions such as Africa, demonstrating UK leadership and UK aid in action, and helping those who do not have a voice on that essential issue.

Neil Gray: Will the Secretary of State commit to not changing the UK definition of international aid without consultation with and the approval of this House—yes or no?

Priti Patel: I have already said that I am engaging all parties, meaning not just political parties but stakeholders and international colleagues. We have very clear guidelines on OECD development assistance committee rules. We will work with all partners to make the necessary changes.

T2. [900379] **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): If someone's tools or land are stolen and there is no redress through the justice system, or if someone is

fearful to walk to school because they have been raped and no action has been taken, development is restricted and poverty continues. What action is the Department for International Development taking to make sure that justice systems function properly in the developing world?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is right to raise that important issue. Strengthening justice systems around the world, particularly in developing and poor countries, is an essential part not only of our fight to combat global poverty, but of building safer communities and countries. That is the focus of DFID and UK aid.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): What are the Secretary of State and her ministerial colleagues doing about the plight of the hundreds of thousands of Syrians who cannot access any UK aid because they are still under siege from the al-Assad Government?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman mentions the very serious situation in Syria and the besieged areas, where we and all other agencies are collectively struggling to get support and aid to people who desperately need it. We are working with many aid agencies on the ground and with the United Nations in particular, which is leading the way. The situation in Syria is devastating and we are working with everyone possible and all parties to see what we can do to get supplies in as and when windows of opportunity appear.

T3. [900380] **Mary Robinson** (Cheadle) (Con): Free trade is essential if poorer countries are to escape poverty. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on the steps she is taking to address that issue?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The UK is committed to ensuring that developing countries can reduce and combat poverty by focusing on free trade and open markets. We are at the forefront of an economic development strategy and are encouraging trade preferences with poor countries to help to trade their way out of poverty. DFID is absolutely focused on that area.

Mr Speaker: Order. So that the whole House can benefit from the mellifluous tones of the right hon. Lady, perhaps she would be good enough to face the House in answering, and then we can always have a richly satisfying experience.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): School students from Wrexham and Leribe in Lesotho in southern Africa have had a tremendous relationship over 10 years as a result of personal contact between students in Europe and Africa. How are we going to enable that to continue?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise those amazing partnerships between schools in Africa and the United Kingdom. DFID is leading the way with many programmes, including the connecting classrooms programme in schools in the constituencies of many right hon. and hon. Members. We are absolutely encouraging more of that dialogue.

T4. [900381] **Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): Trade, not aid is the route out of poverty for developing countries. Does the Secretary of State agree that leaving the EU will allow this country to lower its tariffs, and developing countries to trade with us?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend makes a very important and relevant point. As someone who also campaigned to leave the European Union, I think he is absolutely right. Our trade preferences, which will be introduced by future legislation as we leave the EU, will enable many poor countries to leave poverty behind and get on the path to prosperity through open markets and free trade.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): With 95% of its drinking water now unsafe to drink, Gaza is fast approaching the point of becoming uninhabitable, as predicted by the United Nations. What are the Government doing to ensure that we do not reach that point and to push the EU plans to fund a desalination plant there?

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt): According to the UN Office for the Co-Ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, most homes in Gaza are getting water for only a few hours every three to five days. The availability of safe drinking water has become worse. The UK is urging all parties to find a sustainable solution to the current situation, and in the longer term continues to urge the Israeli authorities to ensure fair distribution of water across the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

T5. [900382] **Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): Will the Secretary of State assure me that her Department will work closely with disability-focused organisations so that the UK's efforts to improve access to education for disabled children in developing countries are successful?

Priti Patel: I welcome my hon. Friend to the House and thank him for his question. We are committed to using UK aid to focus on disability in poor countries and, importantly, to enable disadvantaged people in some of the poorest parts of the world to access some of the innovation and great ways of working we have in the United Kingdom.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): The right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) and I recently went to Jordan, where we met people on the ground who are really worried about the potential instability resulting from Jordan's acceptance of so many Syrian refugees. Do the Government agree that ensuring stability in the host countries that are opening their doors is an absolute priority?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Like me, she will have seen at first hand the impact of Syrian conflict on Jordan and the region. As a host country, Jordan is being heavily supported by UK aid—the British taxpayer—to provide all the essentials.

T6. [900383] **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Will the Secretary of State ensure that her Department works with Population Matters to make sure that more women in the developing world have access to advice and support for contraception and family planning?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that. Yesterday, we hosted a summit on that very issue. We will continue to lead the way and to be at the forefront of standing up for women's rights in developing countries, as well as pioneering more work on and support for family planning and contraceptives.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that recent proposals in Israel on the construction of a Gaza sea port, such as those advanced by the Israeli Labor Knesset Member Omer Barlev and discussed last month by the Israeli Cabinet, would offer a much-needed route to easing the situation in Gaza? Will he support that initiative?

Alistair Burt: Yes, a new sea port at Gaza could open up all sorts of things in Gaza and change the situation for the people there quite materially. It is an interesting proposal and I am of course interested to see how far it is taken.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: I call David "Top Cat" Davies.

T7. [900384] **David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con):** Thank you, Mr Speaker. British-funded refugee camps throughout Turkey have been saving lives and preventing illegal migration into Europe. Is it now time to operate a similar scheme in north Africa?

Priti Patel: We are of course providing a great deal of support and humanitarian aid to migrants and refugees in north Africa. We are working across the Government on how to deal with migration routes: we are looking at the flows of people so that, when we need to, we can send them back to their home country.

Mr Speaker: I do not want the hon. Member for Havant (Alan Mak) to feel excluded.

T8. [900385] **Alan Mak (Havant) (Con):** The British Government are leading the response to the famine in east Africa. Will the Minister update the House on the Department's work in this area?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to speak about east Africa, where there is one of the four famines that the world faces this year. In east Africa specifically, we have led the way in humanitarian and emergency food assistance and helped more than 2.4 million people.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [900401] **Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab):** If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 12 July 2017.

The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Damian Green): I have been asked to reply. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is in attendance on Her Majesty the Queen, welcoming their Majesties King Felipe and Queen Letizia of Spain on their state visit to the United Kingdom. I am sure the whole House wishes them well.

Caroline Flint: Is today's report that in 2015-16 National Grid made £3 billion of profit at the expense of households not further evidence that the Government are not delivering fair energy prices? Will the Government agree to an immediate rebate for overcharging, and will they now commit to an energy price cap for the 17 million households on the most expensive tariffs?

Damian Green: The right hon. Lady is right to identify the issue of energy prices, and I am sure she will welcome the announcement in the Queen's Speech that the Government will

"ensure fairer markets for consumers"

and that

"this will include bringing forward measures to help tackle unfair practices in the energy market to help reduce energy bills."

I am sure this is an issue on which we can work across the House together.

Q2. [900402] **Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con):** Mr Speaker, yesterday you kindly hosted two important talks on the future of health and social care, and their funding, including one by my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston). My right hon. Friend the First Secretary knows that the NHS in Staffordshire and Stoke is delivering fine care, but under great financial pressure, in common with other parts of the country. May I encourage the Government to bring together people from across this House to make this Parliament the one that puts the NHS and social care on a firm and sustainable foundation?

Damian Green: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that. I know he has been campaigning vigorously on behalf of health services in his constituency, including his local hospital, and he is absolutely right to do so. I am sure we both welcome the fact that the Government have committed an extra £8 billion over this Parliament to the NHS, and we are also committed to having a full debate, across the House, and much more widely with people, about how we can improve our social care system, because this is indeed one of the big issues facing this country.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): First, let me welcome the First Secretary to his new role. By my reckoning, in the 20 years since he first joined this House he is the 16th Member to represent his party at Prime Minister's questions, so how about I give him until the end of this session to be able to name all the others? In the meantime, I am sure he and the whole House will join me in congratulating Jo Konta and the British and Irish Lions on their historic achievements of recent days.

On British and Irish co-operation, the First Secretary has huge expertise on the practicalities of the common travel area, so can he tell the House: what will happen to the Irish land border if no deal is reached between Britain and Europe by the end of March 2019?

Damian Green: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for her kind remarks; I might take her up on her offer and try to name all 16 in the Tea Room later, rather than delay the House now. There are many, many distinguished people, of both sexes, who have done this in my party, because we of course elect women leaders

occasionally. I also absolutely share her view about the British and Irish Lions, although it strikes me as a particularly British thing to do to celebrate a drawn series quite as hard as we have—nevertheless, that is the way we do sport. I know you, Mr Speaker, will be very keen on following Jo Konta's progress through Wimbledon, and Andy Murray's. Let us hope we have two finalists over the weekend.

On the substantive question the right hon. Lady asked about the Irish border, she will know that it is the aim of this Government to make sure we get the best deal for Britain. As the Prime Minister set out in her Lancaster House speech, one of the key issues that we want to bring forward, and have brought forward at the start of the negotiations, is precisely the issue of the Irish border, because it is extremely important that we get that right, not just for our own citizens in Northern Ireland, but for the Irish Republic. I have already had meetings with my opposite number, the Tánaiste, on this and other matters.

Emily Thornberry: I mentioned at the outset that the right hon. Gentleman is the 16th Member to represent his party in Prime Minister's questions since 1997. Only three of those have been women and the last one before the current Prime Minister was 16 years ago. I believe we have had three women Labour MPs doing this job in the past two years alone.

Let me return to my question. My question was not: what deal do we hope to get? My question was: what happens if we get no deal at all? This is not some sinister nightmare dreamt up by remainers: it was the Prime Minister who first floated the idea of "no deal"; the Foreign Secretary who said it would be "perfectly okay"; and the Brexit Secretary who said we would be prepared to "walk away". But, since the election, the Chancellor has said that that would be a "very, very bad outcome"; and a former Minister has told Sky News that "no deal is dead". So will the First Secretary clear this up: are Ministers just making it up as they are going along or is it still the Government's clear policy that no deal is an option?

Damian Green: I recommend that the right hon. Lady read the Prime Minister's Lancaster House speech, as that is the basis on which we are negotiating. We are also saying that it is conceivable that we will be offered a kind of punishment deal that would be worse than no deal. That is not our intention; we want a deal and we want a good deal. May I also point out to her that it is the position of her leader and her party that, whatever is on offer, they will accept it? That is a terrible way to go into a negotiation. All that I can congratulate them on is their consistency. They have been consistently in favour of unilateral disarmament. They apply that not only to military matters, but to matters of negotiation on Britain's future prosperity.

Emily Thornberry: Apparently, the First Secretary of State did not get the Prime Minister's memo—you are supposed to be building consensus, man. If we ignore the political bluster, I think that what we heard was that no deal is indeed still an option. If that is the case, can we turn to what I might call the East India Club question? That was the question that the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) was trying to

ask before she suddenly turned herself into Nick Griffin. What does no deal actually mean for our businesses, for our people and for issues such as the Irish land border? Will the right hon. Gentleman address this question now: what does no deal look like in practice?

Damian Green: I am very happy to address the right hon. Lady's first point about consensus. As she knows, I am a moderate person who is keen on consensus. I very much look forward to sharing the Labour party's views this morning on the unemployment figures. Unemployment is now down to its lowest level since the early '70s. There are many Members of this House who were not born when unemployment was as low as this Government have made it. I would hope that, in the course of her questions, she can bring herself actually to welcome lower unemployment. On the substance of her question—as she knows—we are seeking a good deal for Britain that will enable us to trade as freely as possible with the European Union to protect our prosperity at the same time as getting trade deals with other important markets around the world. In the past week alone, both the United States and Australia have said that they would like to sign trade deals with Britain as fast as possible. I am happy to report to her that negotiations are going well and that her fear of no deal is probably overstated.

Emily Thornberry: If the First Secretary of State wants to talk about unemployment, let me ask him this: will he publish the Treasury's assessment of the impact that a no deal outcome would have on jobs and growth in Britain? Will he publish that today—I don't think so. Let us continue. If he will not tell the House—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The right hon. Lady must be heard, and she will be, as will the First Secretary of State. Members must calm themselves.

Emily Thornberry: If the First Secretary of State will not tell the House what no deal means, can he at least clear up the confusion over whether a plan for no deal actually exists? Yesterday, the Foreign Secretary told me that, indeed, there was no plan for no deal. Two hours later, No. 10 fought back and said that there was a plan. *[Interruption.]* The Brexit Secretary might be laughing, but I am turning to him next. He was so busy fighting with himself that, on 12 March, he said that there was a plan. On 17 March, he said that there was not. On 19 May, he said that he spent half his time thinking about it. Yesterday, he said that he was not prepared to comment. Can the First Secretary of State clear up the confusion today: is there, or is there not, a contingency plan for no deal? If there is, will he undertake to publish it?

Damian Green: The right hon. Lady says that she is happy to talk about unemployment; I notice that she cannot bring herself to welcome falling unemployment figures. We will clearly have to try harder to establish consensus on what I would hope would genuinely unite both sides of the House.

On the issue of the report, the Office for Budget Responsibility is publishing its fiscal risks report tomorrow. If the right hon. Lady can be patient, she will see the report that she wants.

Emily Thornberry: So let us be clear: the First Secretary seems to be saying that no deal is still on the table, but he will not say what it means; and that there is a no deal contingency plan, but he is not going to publish it. This really is two steps forward and two steps back. After all, if the Government seriously want open, cross-party debate about the best way forward for Brexit, surely they have to spell out what all the options look like.

Can the First Secretary at least provide some clarity on one issue? Let us try to make some progress today. He has said repeatedly that we want to avoid a cliff edge Brexit, but under a no deal scenario, he knows that that must be impossible. The Prime Minister can hardly storm out of the negotiating room saying that she will not accept the deal, and then pop her head round the door again and ask can she have two more years to prepare. That is not how it works. Does the First Secretary accept that no deal also means no transitional arrangements?

Damian Green: Let me try even harder to establish consensus with the right hon. Lady. I think we both want a deal; I hope she will agree to that—that she wants a deal at the end of this. The reason why I am optimistic that, because of our negotiating stance and the position set out by the Prime Minister, we will get a deal, is that we have, for example, made a fair and realistic offer about citizenship to try to remove that problem from the equation.

That is a first indication of how we will approach these negotiations. We approach them in a positive state. We believe that it is in the interests of not just Great Britain but the other member states of the European Union to reach a deal with one of their biggest trading partners. It is in everyone's interests to reach this deal. Frankly, the right hon. Lady has so far said nothing constructive that might contribute to a deal, but I will give her another chance.

Emily Thornberry: I know the right hon. Gentleman is new to this, but the way the rules work—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not know whether this is spontaneous or orchestrated, and I do not really care which. But whichever it is, the idea that it is going to stop the right hon. Lady from asking her questions is for the birds. Members are wasting their vocal cords. We will carry on for as long as necessary to accommodate the Back-Bench Members whom I wish to accommodate.

Emily Thornberry: I know that the right hon. Gentleman is new to this, but the way it works is that he asks the—that I ask the questions—[*Interruption.*] We are quite happy to swap places with them. Frankly, if he does not want to continue under these rules, I am sure there are plenty of other people on the Front Bench there who would love the opportunity to audition as Prime Minister.

I do appreciate all the First Secretary's answers, but they just serve to illustrate what a mess the Government have got themselves into by threatening to walk away even before talks began. Is it not the truth that we have a no deal option on the table but the Government will not tell us what that means, and that they have contingency plans but they will not let the public see them? We have got a Chancellor demanding transitional

arrangements, which a no deal option makes impossible. We have got a Foreign Secretary making it up as he is going along. We have got a Brexit Secretary so used to overruling his colleagues that he has started overruling himself, and we have got a Prime Minister who is so bereft of ideas that she has started putting suggestion boxes around Parliament. But as a country we have 20 months to go until Brexit. We absolutely have to get a grip. If the Conservative party has not got the strength for the task, then we absolutely have to get rid of them.

Damian Green: There may have been a question in there somewhere. I assure the right hon. Lady of two things. This Government are already in the negotiations, as she will have seen. We have started the negotiations, and they are going well. We said that the first thing we wanted to do was to negotiate citizens' rights, and that was the first item on the agenda of the first meeting. We want to ensure that European citizens in this country and—equally importantly—British citizens living in other European countries, have as much certainty about their rights as soon as possible. That is what we are negotiating, and that is the sign of a practical and pragmatic Government getting on with work in the interests of the British people.

I have counted that the Labour party has so far had nine different plans on Europe. Labour Members want to be both in and out of the single market, and in and out of the customs union. They said that they wanted to remain, but they voted to enact article 50. They split their party on that. The right hon. Lady said that she would prefer to be at this Dispatch Box, rather than that one. I remind her of the other event that happened recently, where the Conservative party got more votes and more seats than the Labour party and won the election.

Q3. [900403] **David Morris** (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): I do welcome the jobs that have been announced. Furthermore, after 65 years of people in my constituency talking about a link road, one actually opened on my watch. I am also trying to obtain an enterprise zone or business park, about which I had a productive meeting yesterday with the powerhouse Minister and the Chief Minister of the Isle of Man, who I believe is here today. Would my right hon. Friend help, in any way possible, to ensure that this business park becomes a reality so that we can create more jobs in Morecambe and Lunesdale?

Damian Green: I agree with my hon. Friend. He will be interested to know that employment in the north-west of England has increased by 2.5% over the past year. Labour Members may wish to welcome that, rather than to heckle. He is absolutely right to highlight the importance of business parks and enterprise zones as drivers of economic growth. I wish him well in his campaign, and I am sure that the Business Secretary will be happy to look into the matter.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I am sure that the whole House will join me and my colleagues in marking the 22nd anniversary of the sad events at Srebrenica. I thank those who held last night's memorial in London to ensure that we never forget. Will the First

Secretary of State confirm that the devolved Administrations will not face a diminution of powers as a result of the repeal Bill?

Damian Green: I join the hon. Gentleman in commemorating the dreadful events at Srebrenica. I am happy to reconfirm what the Prime Minister and others have said—that there will be no diminution of the devolved Administrations' powers under the terms of the Brexit deal that we will negotiate, and that we will look to devolve more powers as a result of the process.

Ian Blackford: I thank the First Secretary of State for that answer. Will he confirm that there will be a cast-iron guarantee that all powers that come back into the United Kingdom on devolved matters will be returned? Furthermore, do the United Kingdom Government intend to amend schedule 5 to the Scotland Act 1998 to change any aspect of the devolved competences that were approved in the 1997 Scottish referendum?

Damian Green: I can only keep repeating the assurances that we have already given. I am slightly surprised by the Scottish nationalists' approach. My understanding of their position is that they want the powers taken from London to Edinburgh so that they can give them back to Brussels. Perhaps their inability to explain the logic of that position might explain their recent general election result.

Q5. [900406] **Neil O'Brien** (Harborough) (Con): Earlier this year, the brilliant new St Luke's Hospital opened in my constituency, but the old cottage hospital that it replaced contains an important and unique war memorial. Does the First Secretary agree with me that, however the NHS redevelops that site, it is vital that the war memorial is preserved in a fitting way so that future generations can remember the sacrifices of those who came before us?

Damian Green: Perhaps particularly at the moment, when we are about to commemorate the centenary of the terrible battle at Passchendaele, it is very important that we consider the issue of war memorials. Memorials like the one my hon. Friend mentions call on us to remember the horrors of war and to honour the memories of those who died. In this case, I understand that the war memorial is protected by an Historic England grade II listing, so specific planning consent would be required to relocate the memorial as part of any future plans. I hope that will provide the protection he and his constituents need.

Q4. [900405] **Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My constituent has serious mental ill health and has had over 50 separate admissions to psychiatric care. She requires regular monitoring to prevent her condition from worsening and becoming a danger to herself and others. She could access support under the disability living allowance, but she stands to lose £110 per week under the personal independence payment. As the former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, will the First Secretary look urgently at this case and change the loophole in PIP that leaves very vulnerable people without the continual support that keeps them safe?

Damian Green: Obviously, the House will be concerned to hear about the case of the hon. Lady's constituent, as I am. The hon. Lady will know that one of the effects of the transition from DLA to PIP is that more people are now eligible for support—particularly those, as it happens, with mental health problems. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions will have heard her point, and I have no doubt that if she contacts him, he will look into the case personally.

Q7. [900408] **Kit Malthouse** (North West Hampshire) (Con): Some of the most distressing cases that I and other Members see in our constituency surgeries are those involving domestic violence. The Queen's Speech has promised a Bill to help to strengthen our confrontation of this problem, so will the Deputy Prime Minister—sorry, the First Secretary—tell us when we can expect this legislation, urgently needed as it is, and what the Government are doing about this problem while we await it?

Damian Green: I agree that this is a hugely important issue, and my hon. Friend is right that we have committed in the Queen's Speech to introduce a domestic abuse Bill in this Session, which I hope will be a landmark in this important area. What we want to do in the Bill is set in motion a transformation not just to protect and support victims, but to recognise the lifelong impact domestic abuse can have on children and to make sure that the agencies respond effectively to domestic abuse. We will, of course, be consulting all the relevant professions and voluntary groups on this, but we are absolutely determined to press ahead with this very important legislation.

Q6. [900407] **Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Little Max Johnson is nine. He is in hospital, and he is urgently waiting for a heart transplant. His mum, Emma, and his brother, Harry, join us today to support Max, but also the 10,000 people around the country who need an organ transplant. We can do more to help them. Wales has already moved to the opt-out system, and Scotland plans to do the same. Does the First Secretary agree with me that, in England, we should change the law to one of presumed consent for organ donation, to give Max and all those other people the best chance of life?

Damian Green: I am sure that the thoughts of Members across the House are with Max and his family at this incredibly difficult time. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that organ donation is clearly a hugely important part of our system, and I am pleased that there are now more than 23 million people on the organ donor register. Over the past year, we saw the highest ever donor and transplant rates in the UK, but, of course, there is more that can be done. As the hon. Gentleman says, the law is different in other territories inside the UK, and the Department of Health is looking at the impact of those changes to see if they can give rise to further improvements in the number of available organs.

Q8. [900409] **Mr Graham Brady** (Altrincham and Sale West) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the quarterly economic survey of the Greater Manchester chamber of commerce predicts economic growth at 3.25% annually, which it has been, broadly, since 2013? Is he further aware that Manchester airport is planning

a £1 billion investment in the coming years? Does that not indicate a welcome rebalancing of the economy, underpinned by sound economic management? Will he undertake to continue that sound economic management, which is so necessary to our country?

Damian Green: My hon. Friend has made a number of important points, particularly about Manchester airport, which I know has been a significant driver of the excellent growth figures of the increasingly excellent economy of Manchester and the surrounding areas. Everything that he has said is true, and I think it is a tribute to the work that has been done on the northern powerhouse that we are now spreading that prosperity across the north of England.

Q9. [900410] **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The First Secretary said the other day that we needed a national debate on tuition fees, and admitted that student debt was “a huge issue”. Given that the Prime Minister is touting for ideas, may I recommend page 43 of our manifesto, and ask the Government to adopt Labour’s pledge to abolish tuition fees—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not remember the contents of page 43, so I would quite like to hear this.

Dr Huq: May I suggest that the Government consult page 43 of our manifesto, and commit themselves to Labour’s policy of abolishing tuition fees?

Damian Green: People often stand at this Dispatch Box and say, “I am pleased that the hon. Lady raised that question.” I am genuinely pleased that the hon. Lady raised that question, because it allows me to draw attention to the very slight problem with her argument, which is that her own party’s Education spokesman has admitted that the tuition fees policy has a £100 billion—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) has admitted that there is a £100 billion black hole in Labour’s student fees policy. That is nearly as much money as we spend on the NHS in a year, and it is equivalent to two years’ worth of disability benefits.

The Labour party was particularly incredible on this issue at the general election, and I am astonished that Labour Members now want to bring it up at Prime Minister’s Question Time. I remind them that misleading students and young people is a very dangerous thing to do. If they do not believe me, they can ask the Liberal Democrats.

Q10. [900411] **Mrs Maria Miller** (Basingstoke) (Con): Just one in five of our public art sculptures and statues is of a woman. Next week, to mark 200 years since the death of the world-renowned novelist Jane Austen, the first ever sculpture of her will be unveiled in my constituency, the borough of her birth in the county that inspired her. Will my right hon. Friend join me in calling for more areas to do what Basingstoke has done, and celebrate their famous daughters?

Damian Green: I am delighted to echo my right hon. Friend’s call for a welcome for the new statue of Jane Austen in Basingstoke. I am genuinely astonished that there is not a statue of Jane Austen anywhere else in the

country, given that she is one of our greatest authors and is still popular 200 years after her birth. I am also happy to echo my right hon. Friend’s desire for more statues of Britain’s greatest women to be spread around the country.

Q12. [900413] **Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): Politicians are said to be here today and gone tomorrow, but whatever tomorrow may bring, the Prime Minister is not even here today to mark the end of her first year in power. I also note that, for the first time since she became Prime Minister—*[Interruption.]* Listen: you might like to hear this. For the first time since she became Prime Minister, her image has been removed from the front page of the Conservative party website. Can the First Secretary tell us why she has gone from being the next iron lady to “The Lady Vanishes”?

Damian Green: The hon. Gentleman is ingenious in asking very personal questions, and I commend him for it. Unfortunately, he has his own record on this subject. As recently as June last year, he said that the leader of the Labour party was

“not destined to become Prime Minister”,

and called on him to resign. I suggest that he might want to make peace with his own Front Benchers before starting to be rude about ours.

Q11. [900412] **Michael Tomlinson** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Today’s jobs figures show that we have the highest employment rate since comparable records began. We have more people in full-time employment, and we are touching on the lowest youth unemployment since records began. In the light of the Matthew Taylor review of modern working practices, what more can be done to ensure that that record continues, and that we continue to rid the country of the scourge of long-term youth unemployment?

Damian Green: My hon. Friend is exactly right, specifically on the subject of youth unemployment. One of the particularly welcome figures among the consistently low and falling unemployment figures over which this Government have presided is the fact that youth unemployment is now at historically low levels and lower than in many other comparable economies. We will continue this in this Parliament, not just with our moves on more apprenticeships, but with the introduction of new and better technical and vocational education, which is key to providing long-term prosperity not just for the economy as a whole, but for everyone in this country.

Q14. [900415] **Rosie Cooper** (West Lancashire) (Lab): How can the Government continue to justify not providing fair and equitable funding arrangements for West Lancashire to support water level management organisations, otherwise known as drainage boards, to help protect homes and the agriculture and horticulture industries critical to the local economy, instead of causing the Environment Agency to threaten to turn off the Alt Crossens pumping station?

Damian Green: The hon. Lady raises a reasonable point about the Environment Agency. It is the Environment Agency’s duty to ensure that water supplies are good and safe. If she wishes to bring up this issue with my

right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, I am sure he will be happy to talk to her about it.

Q13. [900414] **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Zero-energy bill homes at below market prices are being built by British architect Bill Dunster, with the support of the Building Research Establishment. Given their potential to help people find affordable housing, what more can the Government do to help expand this type of housing as part of our commitment to both enterprise and social justice?

Damian Green: I know that my hon. Friend is an energetic campaigner for social justice. This is a very good example of how having a dynamic and flexible economy is not just good for the economy, but actually good for the whole of society. I am happy to join him in welcoming this type of innovation. Bill Dunster's firm is a good example of such innovation. I know that it has been supported by the Government's enterprise investment scheme, so the Government are doing their best to support this type of measure. We are stimulating the growth of the off-site construction sector, which enables more houses to be built, through our accelerated construction programme and the home building fund. This is another very important issue to make sure that we spread the benefits of prosperity around this country.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I wonder if the First Secretary of State might imagine what it feels like to be a parent forced to uproot their children from their one settled home to flee war and persecution, as millions of refugees around the world have done. Then would he imagine further how it might feel for those who become separated from their family members—with one family member making it, for instance, to the United Kingdom—when they are needlessly kept apart from their families due to cruel and unnecessary barriers to family reunification? Will the Government today endorse Baroness Hamwee's Bill in the other place to bring those desperate families back together?

Damian Green: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. He will be aware that this Government, and this country, have done a huge amount—particularly in the region, but also here at home—to help refugees from countries such as Syria. We have expanded the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, so we make sure our doors continue to remain open to people who most need our help. In particular, we work very closely with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to identify and refer the most vulnerable refugees. That is the most sensible humanitarian way we can help these very desperate people.

Since I assume this was the hon. Gentleman's last question, I suspect, as the leader of his party, may I wish him a fond farewell from that job? I am delighted that the Liberal Democrats have taken so seriously the Government's fuller working lives strategy, which is about providing more jobs for older workers, and that they are about to skip a generation in their leadership.

Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): At the recent G20 meetings, the Prime Minister had excellent and constructive trade discussions with the leaders of India, China, Japan and America, which collectively represent 43% of the world's population

and six times the population of the European Union. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that this demonstrates the potential for a prosperous and positive future for Britain post-Brexit, and that it really is time for the pessimists to look at the cup being half full rather than half empty?

Damian Green: I am happy to endorse my hon. Friend's approach and emphasise to him and the House that it is really important to do both—we need a good trade deal with the European Union, which is still a hugely important trading partner for us, but we also need to take the opportunity to strike trade deals with economies around the world, not just currently advanced economies but those that are growing very fast. That is the route to future global prosperity for this country.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): We have had two general elections where the Government have promised investment in the northern powerhouse, and yet again, within weeks, they have U-turned on the Trans-Pennine electrification. Is the £1 billion deal with the DUP to keep the Prime Minister in power being funded at the expense of investment in Bradford and the north?

Damian Green: No, not at all. The money that has gone for infrastructure in Northern Ireland is richly needed there. For example, we have signed city deals in England, Scotland and Wales, but none yet in Northern Ireland. The hon. Lady is right about the importance of the northern powerhouse, and we will continue with that programme, which is hugely important. As she has already heard, we are seeing unemployment falling consistently in the north of England as a sign of how the economy there is going as well as anywhere else in the country. We are determined to continue that.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I know that the First Secretary will be delighted to see that Parliament Square is now displaying the flag of every British overseas territory to welcome the King of Spain this week, including the flag of Gibraltar. Will he ask my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to remind the King of Spain that Gibraltar is British and that its sovereignty will remain paramount?

Damian Green: I am happy to assure my hon. Friend that the Government's position on Gibraltar is that the primacy of the wishes of its inhabitants, which are overwhelmingly to stay British, will be respected.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): What assessment have the Government made of the effect on radiotherapy for cancer patients of their decision to withdraw from Euratom, given that the Royal College of Radiologists said this week that half a million scans a year are done using imported radioisotopes and that thousands of patients could be affected by this decision?

Damian Green: I am again genuinely happy to answer this question, because this is a very important issue and there has been some unnecessary worry caused to cancer patients by speculation on it. Let me set out the position.

The import or export of medical radioisotopes is not subject to any particular Euratom licensing requirements. Euratom places no restrictions on the export of medical

isotopes to countries outside the EU, so after we leave Euratom our ability to access medical isotopes produced in Europe will not be affected. I hope that clears the matter up and reassures cancer patients around the country that the scaremongering that is going on is unnecessary.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: It is a hopeful try by the hon. Lady, but points of order will come after the statement.

When the hon. Members for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) and for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) have resumed their seats—ah, I see that the latter has forged a new alliance with members of the Scottish National party; I am not sure which of them should be more afraid—we will proceed with the statement.

Humanitarian Situation in Mosul

12.44 pm

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will update the House on my Department's continued support for the people of Mosul.

On Monday, Prime Minister Abadi declared Mosul to be liberated, three years after the city fell to Daesh. Victory comes after three years of unimaginable oppression by Daesh—three years of fear, executions, abductions, forced marriages and the destruction of Iraq's ancient heritage. It comes after nine months of heavy fighting by the Iraqi security forces, who faced brutal Daesh tactics, including the use of human shields and suicide bombers. My right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary will provide the House with a more detailed update tomorrow on the ongoing military campaign against Daesh in Iraq and Syria, and the UK's role in this effort.

The declaration that Mosul is once again free is a great victory for the people of Iraq and a great stride forward for global security. I am sure that the House will join me in commending the extraordinary bravery of the Iraqi security forces, who have put the protection of civilians at the heart of their military campaign, acting to reduce civilian casualties wherever they could and risking their lives to help to evacuate civilians fleeing the bullets of Daesh fighters. We should recognise their professionalism, courage and significant sacrifice. They have been backed up from the air by the international coalition forces, including the RAF, who have taken all reasonable precautions during the planning and execution of airstrikes to reduce the risk to civilian life.

We should also recognise the bravery of the people of Mosul: children who have been out of school for years are now back in the classroom and sitting exams; doctors who had to stop working under Daesh are once again giving life-saving treatment to their fellow citizens who were injured in the fighting; and volunteers are clearing the rubble from the streets and public buildings.

However, we must be realistic about the challenges ahead. Almost 50,000 homes have been destroyed and although 200,000 people have returned to their homes in eastern Mosul, over 700,000 people are still displaced and in need of continued humanitarian assistance. Explosive remnants of this war will be a problem for many months to come.

After winning the battle for Mosul, it is important to win the peace, and now starts the painstaking task of rebuilding and reconciling so that families can return home as quickly as possible, communities can live peacefully alongside one another once more, and citizens can start to rebuild their lives. Needs in and around Mosul will not fall immediately, even as the fighting ends.

As a global humanitarian leader, the United Kingdom has been at the forefront of efforts to support the humanitarian response and will continue to stand alongside the people of Iraq in the months ahead. From the very start of the Mosul military operations, the UK has provided shelter, medical care and food to those who have either lost their homes because of the fighting or been forced to flee for safety reasons.

The UK is the largest donor to the Iraq humanitarian pooled fund and we are providing practical, life-saving support, including water in camps for over 166,000 displaced

people, cash assistance to over 50,000 vulnerable people, and life-saving healthcare, including a trauma hospital to treat the victims of the fight against Daesh.

Today I am pleased to confirm that the UK will provide £40 million of humanitarian funding this year, taking our total commitment just in Iraq since 2014 to £209 million. This funding will help to ensure that displaced communities and people will receive much-needed shelter, food and medical support, and it will also provide protection services for the most vulnerable, including minorities, women and girls. Already, £18 million of this funding has been allocated to partners who are working hard to deliver assistance around Mosul.

The United Nations has set funding requirements for Iraq in 2017 at \$984 million. The UK is stepping up, and I continue to call on my colleagues in the international development community—the donors—to follow Britain's lead. The international community must continue to support the people of Mosul and Iraq.

As people return home to liberated areas, they will need support to rebuild their lives. Humanitarian and stabilisation partners are helping to re-establish basic services, including by distributing food in areas where markets are not yet functioning and providing cash assistance so that vulnerable people can buy what they most need.

In east Mosul, the Department for International Development's humanitarian funding to the International Organisation for Migration and UNICEF has already helped to reopen health facilities and provide clean water in liberated areas, which is essential for people to be able to return home. DFID will also provide £6 million this year for stabilisation efforts. That funding will help to restore basic services and infrastructure in liberated areas, including in Mosul. Through the United Nations Development Programme, UK funding has already helped to rehabilitate the al-Qasour water plant in eastern Mosul. Over 750 schools have already reopened, allowing 300,000 children to sit exams. Our funding will also support local reconciliation, helping displaced people to reintegrate back into their communities when they return home. Across Iraq, over 1 million people have returned to their homes in areas where UK-funded stabilisation projects are working.

But ultimately, to win the peace in Iraq, the Government of Iraq will need to unite all Iraqis against extremism, address the grievances that led to Daesh's rise and persuade all Iraqi communities that they have a fair stake in their nation's future. The UK will continue to be steadfast in our support for the Government of Iraq's efforts to drive forward reform, reconciliation and stabilisation.

This week's victory against Daesh in Mosul marks an important moment in the campaign to defeat this terror group and its poisonous ideology. We join our Iraqi friends in celebrating the liberation of this historic city. The UK will continue to provide much-needed humanitarian and stabilisation assistance to those who have been affected by the conflict, and to support the Government of Iraq's efforts to build a stable, secure and prosperous Iraq. I commend this statement to the House.

12.51 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement, and I particularly welcome the news of Mosul's liberation after three

[Kate Osamor]

years of oppression. It is important to defeat Daesh's violent ideology wherever it emerges. I would like to pay tribute to the Iraqi security forces and the people of Mosul, who have shown remarkable courage in the face of Daesh's continued oppression. I pay particular tribute to the role of the UK Government in their important work to provide critical aid and emergency support. The UK's continued role in the coming days and weeks, and the significant funding commitments announced by the Secretary of State, which I welcome, will save lives and help to rebuild Mosul. This commitment also demonstrates the important role that UK aid plays not only in standing alongside the people of Iraq, but in contributing to long-term peace and stability.

I would like to ask the Secretary of State a series of questions about her announcement. First, although there is cause for real celebration in the liberation of Mosul, Amnesty International has identified countless human rights violations on all sides—both by Daesh and, possibly, by the Iraqi forces—in the fight for Mosul. These include the use of civilians as human shields by Daesh fighters and violations of children's rights. Amnesty International has called for a thorough investigation of all human rights violations and possible war crimes carried out during the liberation of Mosul, and the UN human rights chief has called for a strong culture of accountability now that the city has been liberated. Does the Secretary of State support those calls and will she tell us how we can help?

Secondly, while I welcome the UK Government's aid response to the situation in Mosul, the forced displacement of numerous refugees in and around Mosul as a result of the past two years of Daesh occupation requires widespread action, not only on rebuilding, but on the resettlement of those displaced. Will the Secretary of State update us on how we will be able to help all those who have been displaced? I thank the Secretary of State again for her welcome statement to the House.

Priti Patel: I thank the hon. Lady for her generous comments and support for what has been achieved in Mosul. I absolutely agree that we should pay tribute to all the forces involved, and also to the people of Mosul, who have suffered considerably at the hands of Daesh.

The hon. Lady is right to point to Amnesty International's report today, which makes allegations and raises concerns about the coalition—well, Iraqi—forces and human rights violations. It is important to stress that the security forces and the coalition have made every effort to protect civilians during operations. Now that we are hearing of alleged violations or abuses, it is quite right that they are thoroughly and transparently investigated, and those found responsible must be held to account. We also welcome the previous statement by Prime Minister Abadi on this and encourage reporting on the outcomes.

The hon. Lady raised the issue of the displacement of people. Hundreds of thousands of people have been affected by what has happened in Mosul and in Iraq more broadly. The focus now has to be on resettlement and the reunification of the country as a whole.

The hon. Lady will have heard me speak briefly about the stabilisation efforts which, of course, have to be the focus right now. UK aid, and my Department in particular,

are working with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence, others across Government and the international community not only to support UN stabilisation efforts in Iraq and secure the liberated areas, clearing areas of explosives and making them habitable again, but, importantly, to provide the basics to people by putting in water facilities, power networks, clinics and schools. We also know that 1.8 million people have been displaced in Iraq since 2015 and have returned to their homes when possible, so it is important to focus on resettlement and stabilisation, and how we can bring prosperity and stability back to Mosul and the outlying areas of Iraq.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Mosul was home to one of the oldest Christian communities in the region, but religious minorities suffered dreadfully at the hands of ISIS. What can DFID do to ensure that such minorities are able to return to their place of origin?

Priti Patel: I thank my right hon. Friend for her question and for once again raising the issue of minorities who have been persecuted and displaced in the conflict. We know that what has happened, particularly for Christian communities and others, has been absolutely abhorrent. We are now focused on stabilisation, and also on ensuring that Iraq as a whole can be rebuilt and reunified so that all communities can come back to their homes and feel that they can contribute to a new Iraq following the conflict.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): We very much welcome the military defeat of Daesh in Mosul, but for the victory to be truly complete, it is imperative that we address the now critical humanitarian needs of the people of the city and the surrounding region. As we have already heard, Amnesty International has described the horrors that the people of Mosul have witnessed and the disregard for human life by all parties to the conflict. That must not go unpunished. Entire families have been wiped out, many of whom are still buried under the rubble today. The people of Mosul deserve to know that there will be justice and reparation so that the harrowing impact of this operation is fully addressed.

The UK Government must finally learn the lessons from Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan. It cannot be allowed to happen in Mosul, as it has happened in so many places before, that the cost and impact of UK military action dwarfs the relief and reconstruction efforts that follow. How are the Government working with civil society on the ground to alleviate the suffering of those in the refugee camps who lack sufficient food, water and electricity to survive the scorching desert heat? Will the Government support the creation of an independent commission, as recommended by Amnesty International, to investigate the killings of civilians by all sides in the conflict, including by air strikes carried out by the UK?

Priti Patel: I reiterate the comments I made to the hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) about the Amnesty International report, the violations that may have taken place and the need for investigations. It is right and proper that all attention is given to the investigations and that people are brought to justice in the right way, but we must also recognise that there have been horrific attacks across the whole of Iraq because

of the poisonous ideology of Daesh. The conduct of Daesh, the displacement of people and the atrocities that have taken place are absolutely unforgivable and will no doubt scar generations to come.

It is important to stress at this time when many have worked to liberate Mosul, in particular coalition forces and the Iraqi security forces, that our priority is to continue the humanitarian support we provide through UK aid to the displaced and to support the stabilisation efforts. Of course that is the focus of not just the British Government but all our international partners, including the United Nations. We will continue to stand up for those who have been displaced and work collectively to bring peace and stability to Iraq.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I warmly welcome the tone of the Secretary of State's announcement, and in particular the extra funds the UK is giving to the wonderful people in Mosul. However, she will know that if the experience of Fallujah and elsewhere is to be followed in Mosul, the vicious tactics of Daesh will mean that every single house, street and public place will be booby-trapped and mined, and it will take many years to clear that. Will she therefore commit the Government to doing what we can to help on the technical matter of removing the explosives? Secondly, it is not the scorching heat of today that we should be worrying about; it is the cold of the Mosul winter, which will come in only three or four months' time, by which point we must have found decent accommodation for these people.

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I referred to the fact that we will spend a great deal of time, resources and effort in rebuilding not only Mosul but Iraq as a whole through the stabilisation approach that we will put forward. But there is no doubt that we will have to invest to reclaim land, and particularly to de-mine huge swathes of the country. The British Government announced earlier this year a substantial commitment to our de-mining efforts in countries that have been unstable through conflict.

My hon. Friend is also right to say that the weather conditions in Mosul will change in the latter part of the year—they will become much harsher—so all of us in the international community will have to not just step up our efforts, but focus our resources on those who will be in need in the harsh winter to come. Importantly, we need to rebuild, put houses in and start building infrastructure sooner rather than later.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement, and particularly welcome the additional humanitarian assistance she has announced and what she has just said about de-mining. When the people of Mosul do return, many will be deeply traumatised. What will the Government do to ensure there is the mental healthcare and support for those families when they do return?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman is right to speak about the psychological, mental and physical trauma involved in recovering and rebuilding after what has happened across Iraq, and in Mosul in particular. I spoke about the fact that we will obviously need to rehabilitate the country at every single level—infrastructure,

water, schools and health centres. It is also vital that we work with our colleagues and counterparts internationally and in the health community to ensure that the medical assistance, support and expertise of those who can give the necessary help to those who need it is provided.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): The people who wish to return to Mosul have been traumatised, as we have heard from many Members, but while the ones who stayed in the area want to go home, there are very few homes to go to. What exactly is this country doing to help to rebuild the infrastructure and put a roof over people's heads? Is the Secretary of State also encouraging other countries to support the people of the area?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend rightly highlights the immediate needs of the more than 1.8 million displaced people in Iraq who have returned to their homes. We are working with the Iraqi Government on stabilisation, as well as with UN stability programmes in the areas where they are working to provide necessary infrastructure—renovated water facilities, power networks, clinics, schools, and also homes. The destruction that has taken place is incomprehensible to us. Vast swathes of land and homes were deliberately destroyed by Daesh, and it is our responsibility through UK aid, and working internationally with our partners, to ensure that we rebuild and rehouse the many millions who have been displaced.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I welcome the statement and thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of it. Tens of thousands of children have been without education in Mosul for many years, so it is good news that 750 schools have reopened, but what work is being done to assist schools to tackle the very particular and sensitive challenge of helping older children, teenagers and young adults to plug the significant gap in their education and prevent there being a lost generation?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to speak about the lost generation. There is a high level of displacement, including a horrifically high number of displaced children, across the whole region affected by conflict—Syria and Iraq. Many children have lost their education; they have been out of school for several years because of the extent of the conflict. The hon. Lady knows that the United Kingdom is an enormous supporter and big funder of the Education Cannot Wait programme, which focuses on exactly this in areas of conflict, as well as host communities—Jordan and Lebanon, for instance. We are providing resources to introduce a double-shift system of education. She also mentioned older children, and it is important, with the funding we put in through the partners with which we work, and particularly through Governments directly, that organisations provide education—they are—as well as technical and vocational training opportunities.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con) *rose*—

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Ah, a competition between cream-suited colleagues. I call Mr John Baron.

Mr Baron: Thank you, Mr Speaker. My hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) is obviously a man of taste.

The Government have previously acknowledged that the cutting of the food coupon in the Syrian refugee camps in the summer of 2013 led to the mass exodus thereafter. While acknowledging the UK's proud track record on humanitarian aid, will my right hon. Friend make it clear to the House that the international community must step up to the plate on the funding of any temporary arrangements with regard to displaced people, and that we must learn those lessons?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. On lessons learned, effectively it is now about the implementation of a lot of the programmes for those in humanitarian crisis situations, in terms of food provision, water and other essentials. We have learned many lessons through the Grand Bargain work; partner organisations on the ground delivering services and provisions are working collectively, in a way that they were not in 2013, to bring vital aid and food to those who need it.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I congratulate the Secretary of State on her measured and comprehensive statement. I have a friend in Baghdad who was an MP in Mosul and who was also Culture Secretary; for her, the devastation of this historically very important city will have been awful, but I am glad that the Secretary of State is focusing on the humanitarian needs right away, because as Members have said, the traumatising, particularly of children, in the area needs to be addressed immediately.

The Secretary of State talked about the importance of peace. Of course, we all want to see peace in the region, and I congratulate the Prime Minister of Iraq on hopefully getting rid of Daesh, at least from Mosul, but Kurdistan is a very important part of the country; does the Secretary of State agree that it is important that the Parliament of Kurdistan, which has not met for over a year, should meet as soon as possible?

Priti Patel: I thank the right hon. Lady for her thoughtful observations on how we need to work together to bring peace and stability to Iraq and the region. This is not something that one country can do on its own; the international community can provide guidance, support and, in particular, assistance with getting the democracy functioning again. That would be the ultimate symbol of beating Daesh and the poisonous ideology that it has been propagating across the region. She is right to highlight the fact that stabilisation, peace and, ultimately, a functioning democracy should return all over again. This is a long-term objective, and we know that it will be difficult because of the levels of conflict, instability, destruction and displacement that we have seen. Our immediate focus is on putting people, including children, first and rebuilding the country in the best way we can through the international coalition.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I do not want the hon. Gentleman to feel left out: I call Mr Alec Shelbrooke.

Alec Shelbrooke: In all my elections, I have proudly stood in support of our manifesto commitment to spend 0.7% of GDP on international aid, although

many people have criticised it. Does my right hon. Friend agree that in situations such as these, such a commitment is not only morally right but enables us to invest in Iraq? A lot of the situation with Daesh in Mosul came about because the residents were worried about divisions in the Baghdad Government. It is investment from this country through my right hon. Friend's Department that allows people to be educated and ensures that that Government will work for the entire country to prevent this happening again.

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend for re-stating the importance of UK aid and our commitment to the world's poorest through the 0.7%. We have been undertaking urgent humanitarian support for a number of years, but we are also looking ahead to the stabilisation that we will work to achieve collectively within the international development community. We can see UK aid making a difference to people, and bringing peace, stability and global influence to countries such as Iraq in the way that we would all expect our aid budget to do.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Following the comments from the Scottish nationalist spokesman, the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), does the Secretary of State agree that the crucial difference between the actions of the British and coalition forces on the one hand and Daesh on the other is that we got out of our way to minimise civilian casualties, while Daesh does exactly the opposite? At a time when one of our colleagues is being hideously bullied and threatened over her vote in favour of the action against Daesh, do we not need to send a clear message that this House was absolutely right to take the decisions to carry out military action against Daesh, both in Iraq and in Syria?

Priti Patel: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that we did the right thing, and we will continue to do the right thing by standing up to those poisonous ideologies and the conduct of those awful groups around the world. The liberation of Mosul speaks volumes about the sacrifices that the people in that community—and those who fought against Daesh—have made.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement. Sexual violence is one of the consistent horrors of war, both conventional and unconventional. It is a deliberate act, and a recognisable but repugnant tactic designed to shatter the cohesion of oppressed people, as well as being a grotesque example of individual human rights abuses. Will the Secretary of State assure us that she will look at what DFID can do to mitigate this vile form of violence and to support the Yazidis and other fragile, damaged communities? Moreover, will she tell us what DIFD can do to deter would-be oppressors from using this form of violence in future conflicts?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to mention the abhorrent sexual violence against women and girls, particularly in the Yazidi community. He is also right to highlight the fact that Britain has been calling this behaviour out, and standing up for and giving a voice to many people who have been subjected to horrific abuses and attacks by Daesh. In countries of conflict, it is women and girls who suffer such atrocities

and acts of violence, and we will continue to stand up for them through our work with the United Nations and with our partners in other countries. In answer to his question on what else we can do, we will follow through the prosecutions of those who are responsible and hold them to account.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I visited the outskirts of Mosul last October during the conflict and met counter-terrorism personnel. I also visited six camps for refugees and internally displaced people and saw the huge humanitarian operation, which I was very impressed by. I note that on Radio 4's "Today" programme this morning, the deputy commander of the coalition forces, General Jones from the United Kingdom, said that everything had been done to protect citizens. However, he went on to describe Amnesty's report as "naive" and reckless. This is in the week in which the Amnesty report on Saudi Arabia arms sales—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are all very interested in the contents of the Amnesty report, but there is no need for a verbatim regurgitation of its contents. I just point out that so far, progress has been lamentably slow. That is not just the fault of the hon. Gentleman; it applies much more widely. We have got through only about 10 Back-Bench questions in 15 minutes, but I am sure that he is reaching his peroration, which we eagerly anticipate.

Graham Jones: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I was going to say that we need a new democratic settlement in Nineveh province. What are the Secretary of State's Department, the Foreign Office and our ambassador, Frank Baker, doing to ensure that we include minorities in that settlement?

Priti Patel: The Iraqi and coalition forces have made every effort to protect civilians. On the hon. Gentleman's last point, we are working with the Iraqi Government and with all partners on the ground on stabilisation and support for the rebuilding of Mosul.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I call the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy); he can be the author of the brevity textbook.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I pay tribute to the Iraqi security forces and the British armed forces for their work. Will the Secretary of State update us on another humanitarian threat to the people of Mosul, namely the Mosul dam, which is in an incredibly dangerous condition and, being upstream of Mosul, threatens the city?

Priti Patel: That is a very serious situation and, again, we are working on stabilisation and are making every effort to provide the support required in that area. We will continue to do that; this is an ongoing situation. We are not only monitoring it but are being very active in the support that we can give.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Last November, I raised the plight of the thousands of Yazidi women and children who were being held in

slavery by Daesh in Mosul. I asked the Government whether they would seek to provide specialist psychological care once the liberation of Mosul had been completed. Will the Minister tell me what plans the Government are putting in place, now that Daesh has been driven from the city, to tend to the specific psychological needs and physical wounds of one of the most wickedly abused communities on this planet?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman is right to point out the awful abuse of minorities, and of the Yazidi women in particular. I refer him to my earlier comment about the medical support we are providing. Mental and psychological support are absolutely essential, given the abhorrent nature of this conflict.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I welcome the resources that the Government are making available for the relief of the suffering following the conflict, but will the Secretary of State ensure that the international community at no stage loses focus on the politics of the settlement around Mosul? We must ensure that there is no continuation of the institutionalised marginalisation of the complex number of communities around the city, and that they all have a stake in the future.

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is right to talk about the political stabilisation and about inclusivity in relation to the rebuilding. We will continue to work with Prime Minister al-Abadi and the Iraqi Government to ensure that this happens.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): The tributes that the Secretary of State has made were right, and the ambition is commendable, but the question is: how is this going to be achieved? People talk facetiously about learning the lessons from Iraq, but is it not an example of the collective failure to reconstruct the country that many Sunni families saw Daesh as their protectors against the legitimate Government, rather than the marauding killers that they were? How will things be different, and what role will the UK Government play?

Priti Patel: The UK Government will play their part in every way that is necessary. There are no easy solutions to rebuilding a country or to making it operationally functional again after such an abhorrent and appalling conflict. We will continue to support Prime Minister al-Abadi and the Iraqi Government and to aid in the response that is required. We will also support inclusivity and getting the politics, security and stabilisation right.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that reconstruction depends on the removal of mines and booby traps? Is she satisfied that there is adequate capacity, and that enough money has been allocated to deal speedily with that task? Is there any timetable?

Priti Patel: We provide support for the vital de-mining and clearing up of improvised explosive devices. The British Government have provided specific resources, and we will use various Government funds and support the UN Mine Action Service. However, the task is not easy, and the level of destruction in Iraq is absolutely

[Priti Patel]

atrocious. Our work is cut out for us, but we will give all the necessary support to ensure that mines are cleared and that land is returned to its former use.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): The liberation of Mosul is a significant step towards the defeat of this evil terror, but does the Secretary of State agree that the rebuilding and de-radicalisation of communities are just as important as that defeat?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady is right that de-radicalisation must be a feature of the stabilisation and rebuilding. Divided and fractured communities need to be brought back together. Once again, Britain will lead the way on this, providing all the necessary support to the Iraqi Government and doing our bit to bring stability and peace to the country.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): The atrocities of Daesh have failed to deliver a caliph and the so-called caliphate. My right hon. Friend rightly recognises the role of the Iraqi forces, but will she join me in recognising the role played by the Yazidi fighters, especially the female fighters? What work is being done to ensure that their voices are heard during the reconstruction?

Priti Patel: Taking back control of Mosul has been a hard-fought battle, and all the forces and communities should be commended for their efforts. Stabilisation obviously needs to happen, but the focus must be on bringing together the minority groups from all the communities that have been divided by this atrocious conflict.

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): I join the right hon. Lady in paying tribute to our brave servicemen and women. I welcome her announcement about UK humanitarian aid, but what specific funding will be offered to women and girls who have been subject to the most unimaginable sexual violence of Daesh? We must do more to support them.

Priti Patel: I announced today that we will be providing the necessary humanitarian aid, but 46,000 vulnerable and displaced people, many of whom are women and girls who have been subject to such atrocities and violence, will also receive support through that money.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am sure that the Secretary of State will agree that the liberation of Mosul is a vindication of those on both sides of the House who were prepared to vote to give our allies on the ground the military support that they needed, rather than those who only wanted to offer warm words and hand-wringing in response to Daesh's advance. Does she agree that getting people back into work is vital for getting things back to normal? What specific work will the Department be doing to bring Mosul's economy back to life?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is right that the liberation of Mosul represents a great opportunity to rebuild the country and put infrastructure in place. We need to work collectively with our partners and with the companies that will go in and help to create jobs, new economic opportunities and prosperity. That is a major feature of the stabilisation and rebuilding work that DFID is leading on with colleagues from across Government and with our international counterparts.

Points of Order

1.23 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Have you had any notice from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions about an impending statement on Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs' "Building our Future" programme? Today, the Department made the outrageous decision to move over 1,000 jobs from my constituency to Edinburgh, despite the publication of a National Audit Office report just before the election that damned the programme. Questions are being asked about the inappropriate use of funds during purdah, and the public and my constituents cannot have confidence in this Parliament and its processes until they get answers. What can you do to assist me and my constituents?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. In short, I have received no indication from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions of an intention to come to the House to make an oral statement. I think that something has been announced, either in the form of a written statement or some media communication, outwith what I would call oral discourse. That said, the hon. Lady, in her relatively short time in the House, has become an adroit deployer of the various mechanisms available to her to pursue the interests of her constituents. There are some days to go before the House rises for the summer recess, and if she judges that there is an urgency attached to this matter, I am sure that she will have recourse to the appropriate mechanism, and I will look out for it. What is more, I rather imagine that she will be in her seat, and leaping up and down from it, at business questions tomorrow.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Many people, myself included, will have been disappointed to read in today's papers that the Prime Minister has postponed the publication of a report, which she ordered as part of her mission to tackle "burning injustices", that audits and examines how people of different backgrounds are treated by public services. The reason for the delay is reportedly because it is "explosive" and "pretty bad". Given the genuine and growing concern, is it in order for the Prime Minister to postpone a publication because she does

not like the findings and because it will look bad for her Government? Is there a way that Parliament can have sight of the report that the Prime Minister is trying to hide?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order. The short answer is that nothing disorderly has taken place. The timing of Government statements and the release of Government reports are matters for Ministers, not the Chair. However, if there is a completed report and if the hon. Lady and others are keen to know its contents and are not aware of any particularly compelling reason why it cannot be published sooner rather than later, it is open to the hon. Lady to seek to cajole or entice an appropriate Minister to come to the House in the remaining days before we rise for the summer recess. I cannot commit that that will happen, but I have this keen sense that the hon. Lady will return to the issue and probably seek some sort of adjudication from me in the days ahead.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During Prime Minister's questions, the First Secretary of State claimed that people with mental health conditions are more likely to be supported by the personal independence payment than the disability living allowance. The mental health charity Mind has made it absolutely clear that 55% of people with mental health conditions transferring from DLA to PIP have no award or a reduced award. I would be grateful if you could advise me on how we can have the record corrected.

Mr Speaker: It is fair to say that the hon. Lady has found her own salvation, in that she has put her thought on the record in characteristically robust, but thankfully pithy, form, and that will now form part of the *Official Report*. I am well aware—I would be failing in my duty if I were not—that she has strong views on this matter, and that those views differ markedly from those of the First Secretary of State. I think it is fair to say that this is properly a matter for debate, but we shall leave it there, albeit only for today.

If there are no further points of order, we come to the general debate on the Grenfell Tower fire inquiry, and I am looking to the First Secretary of State to open the debate at his second outing at the Dispatch Box today.

Grenfell Tower Fire Inquiry

1.28 pm

The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Damian Green): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Grenfell Tower fire inquiry.

I begin by expressing my deep sympathy to all those who lost family members and other loved ones in this terrible tragedy. Their suffering is beyond imagining. Our thoughts also go out to all those who lost their homes and possessions in the fire. Since that terrible event of 14 June—a month ago—we have all been deeply affected by that unprecedented tragedy, and words feel inadequate.

I pay tribute to the men and women of our emergency services, many of whom risked life and limb in their efforts to tackle the fire and showed extraordinary courage in their determination to save lives. Equally important, I pay tribute to the many volunteers and charities that have given their time and much, much more to help the bereaved and those who have lost their home.

Sir Martin Moore-Bick, the chair of the Grenfell Tower inquiry, is currently consulting on the scope of the inquiry's terms of reference, so this debate provides an opportunity for Parliament to express its views on the inquiry before the terms of reference are set. Of course, it is most important that the chair listens to the views of those most affected by the tragedy and takes account of those views when considering the scope of his inquiry's terms of reference, but I am sure Sir Martin will want to reflect on the views expressed in this House today—we should all be conscious that the survivors of this terrible tragedy will also be listening.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way so early. Does he agree that it will be important to have an interim report? If there are recommendations that address crucial safety issues with high-rise blocks, clearly they need to be attended to as soon as possible.

Damian Green: My right hon. and learned Friend is correct, and he may be aware that there is an intention to produce an interim report as soon as is practical. I am conscious that one of the great wishes of many survivors, and of the groups representing them, is for as many of the questions as possible to be resolved as quickly as possible.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure there will be lots of comments on the scope of the report during this debate, and I do not want to widen it too far, but can the First Secretary of State assure the House that the scope will include private blocks and not be confined to social housing? In my experience as a city centre Member of Parliament, it is often much more difficult for residents of private blocks with opaque ownership and unresponsive managing agents than for residents of social blocks to have their voices heard.

Damian Green: The hon. Lady makes a good point. I cannot guarantee what the terms of reference will be, because that is obviously a matter for Sir Martin, but one of the purposes of this debate is precisely to allow

such views to be expressed. I am happy to assure her and the House that the testing regime for the safety of blocks does extend to private blocks.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Will the First Secretary say what has happened to the independent recovery taskforce, which was announced about a week ago by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government? We do not know who the members are, what they are doing or whether they have been to Kensington. If the taskforce has not yet been convened, will he reconsider sending in commissioners, particularly given what we heard this morning? We heard that the person to whom the taskforce is reporting, the new leader of Kensington and Chelsea London Borough Council, despite being a councillor for 11 years and a cabinet member for five years, has not seen fit to go into any of the tower blocks in her borough.

Damian Green: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that the taskforce is an independent body that will report to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, not to Kensington and Chelsea Council.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Pursuant to that point, will the First Secretary clarify whether the recovery taskforce has any executive authority whatsoever, or is it purely advisory?

Damian Green: It is an advisory panel, not an executive one, reporting to the Secretary of State. That is the proper way to proceed.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Is the First Secretary saying that the taskforce has no executive authority and that executive authority remains with the council? Is there a distinction between the taskforce's powers and the powers that would be available to a commissioner, if one were appointed?

Damian Green: The taskforce will be overseeing what the council does but, as I have said to other Opposition Members, it will report to the Secretary of State, who can then decide the appropriate way to proceed. The taskforce is independent of the council, is not reporting to the council and will oversee what the council is doing.

The Prime Minister rightly identified the immediate priority when she announced the inquiry: establishing the facts of what happened at Grenfell Tower in order to take the necessary action to prevent a similar tragedy from happening again. The inquiry will fulfil that purpose and will report in two phases, with an interim report being published as quickly as possible.

Beyond that immediate focus, it is also important that all the wider lessons from this catastrophe, and from the inspections of other buildings around the country that followed it, are identified and learned. Sir Martin has said:

"I should make it clear that I shall want to consider a broad range of evidence, including on the role of the relevant public authorities and contractors, in order to help me answer the important questions."

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I am grateful to the Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member

for Reading West (Alok Sharma), for answering my written question on the privatisation of housing functions in Kensington and Chelsea Council. I find it extraordinary that there is no central management, nor even records kept, of housing contracts within the housing department. We now have a situation where there is no accountability and no transparency on the nature of local authority contracts with the private sector involving housing, or on the degree to which housing contracts are subcontracted to other private providers. In view of this tragedy, will the First Secretary advise me on whether there are plans to revisit that policy?

Damian Green: There is clearly a large range of issues on which the inquiry may wish to make recommendations to the Government, and the hon. Lady has put that thought on the record. As I said, I imagine that Sir Martin will wish to take note of the views expressed in this debate.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): On a wider point, my right hon. Friend will appreciate that many survivors suffered from carbon monoxide poisoning. Of course, carbon monoxide is known as the silent killer. Will he ensure that, among the many other lessons that are learned, the planned review of carbon monoxide alarms actually goes ahead in October 2017?

Damian Green: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. A range of lessons need to be learnt from this terrible tragedy. As he knows, an expert panel with a range of skills and expertise across a number of areas will be helping the inquiry. Again, he raises an important issue that not only the Government but the inquiry itself will want to consider.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The First Secretary is right that no stone should be left unturned in uncovering the truth behind the horror that was the Grenfell Tower fire. On wider lessons and action in the meantime, Birmingham has 231 tower blocks and the city council has rightly decided that it will retrofit sprinklers in all of them, costing £31 million to a council that has suffered £700 million of cuts to its budget. Will the Government unequivocally commit to funding all the necessary safety measures, pending the outcome of the inquiry?

Damian Green: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said that the necessary safety measures recommended by the fire service will be met by the Government. The inquiry is designed to ascertain the causes of the tragedy.

Jack Dromey: For clarity, the First Secretary has just made an important statement. Is he saying that the necessary safety measures to protect 10,000 households in 231 blocks will be funded by the Government?

Damian Green: For clarity, I will go all the way through this. If the fire service recommends that something needs to be done for safety reasons, the local authority will be the first port of call to pay for it—I am sure all local authorities will want to follow the fire service's recommendations on this. If a local authority can show that it cannot afford it, central Government will obviously

then step in. That is a matter for local authorities and the fire service in the first instance. Clearly, that is the sensible way to proceed.

Lucy Powell: Will the First Secretary give way?

Damian Green: I have been very generous in giving way and I really need to make some progress.

The inquiry will need to examine all relevant circumstances leading up to and surrounding the fire at Grenfell Tower, its spread to the whole building and its effect on residents. That necessarily means looking at circumstances well beyond the design, construction and modification of the building itself. It will mean looking at the role of relevant public authorities and the contractors, and the broader implications of the fire for the adequacy and enforcement of relevant regulations. It will also mean looking at the handling of concerns previously expressed by local residents.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab) *rose*—

Damian Green: May I make some progress and then I will give way? I am conscious that many Members want to contribute to this debate. I have been extremely generous in giving way during my opening remarks, and I think the House will benefit from my making progress.

Sir Martin is highly respected, and as a recently retired Court of Appeal judge he brings with him many years of judicial experience. He and the Government fully agree that, for this inquiry, consulting on the terms of reference is an important way of involving those affected by the tragedy. It is clearly right that those affected by this terrible tragedy, and others with an interest, are given the opportunity to shape the terms of reference, which will in turn give direction and focus to the inquiry. Sir Martin has started that consultation process and is keen to give as many people as possible the chance to contribute to the consultation. He will consider all suggestions made to him when drawing up the terms of reference. He will then make a recommendation to the Prime Minister, who under the Inquiries Act 2005 is responsible for setting out the terms of reference.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Damian Green: May I do so in a moment? I will give way again, but first I wish to finish this section of my speech.

I will quote Sir Martin at length, because this is at the heart of many of the issues that have arisen:

“I am determined to establish the causes of the tragedy, and ensure that the appropriate lessons are learnt. To do this, the Inquiry will need to examine all relevant circumstances leading up to and surrounding the fire at Grenfell Tower, in order to understand its causes and prevent such a tragedy ever happening again.

To produce a report as quickly as possible, with clear recommendations for action, I will listen to people and consider a broad range of evidence, including on the role of the relevant public authorities and contractors, in order to help me answer the important questions.

I therefore want to hear from people directly affected by the fire and others involved, to listen to their views on the shape of the Inquiry's work and the questions we should be seeking to answer.”

[Damian Green]

That is clearly the right approach. Sir Martin has set a deadline for comments of Friday 28 July, extended by two weeks from the inquiry's original deadline, following discussions between Sir Martin and survivors of the fire and other residents of the estate, which made it clear that those affected need more time to respond to the consultation. That extension will allow the inquiry to begin its work in August. I am sure we are all agreed that the sooner the inquiry can begin its work, the sooner we will have the important conclusions of its interim report. It is important to point out that the public and others with an interest will of course be able to feed into the inquiry throughout the course of its work, by writing to it or emailing the contact address provided on its website. The terms of reference can always be revised during the course of the inquiry, and that may be likely as the inquiry reflects on what it has learned at the interim report stage, before it begins phase 2 of its work.

Rebecca Pow: I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. I am heartened to hear about the inclusivity of the inquiry, and public safety must be at its forefront. Will the inquiry look back historically and examine the effectiveness of the fire regulations and enforcement regime introduced in 2005 and 2006 respectively?

Damian Green: My hon. Friend raises a valid and important point. I assure her that the expert panel, which covers a range of different expertise, is already looking at that, and it will feed into the inquiry.

Jim Fitzpatrick: Following on from the question asked by the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), the building regulations should be due for review. In this country that usually happens every 10 years, and 11 have now passed. The Lakanal House inquiry recommended in 2013 that building regulations should be reviewed. The Government have been saying since 2011, including after Lakanal House, that that would be done by this year. We do not have to wait for a public inquiry to say that building regulations should be reviewed. When will the working party be recalled, to show that that work is under way?

Damian Green: I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman has huge experience and expertise in this area. I assure him that the expert panel is considering whether any advice needs to be given urgently to the Secretary of State to act on.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The First Secretary is right that there should be a consultation on the remit to try to help to rebuild the local community's trust in the inquiry, but is he prepared to go further? Should not there be an advisory panel made up of genuine and diverse community members?

Damian Green: The right hon. Gentleman may know that a similar group, namely Grenfell United, has already brought together many other groups. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and the Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), had a long and extensive meeting with the

group last night. I assure the right hon. Gentleman that the views of those most affected are being fed to Sir Martin directly, and they are also in direct communication with the Secretary of State.

In terms of the potential appointment of panel members, the priority at this stage is for consultation on the terms of reference, which once agreed will allow the inquiry to start work. The chair will then want to consider what other expert assistance might be required and how that should be provided to the inquiry, including the process of consultation.

I assure the House that Government work is already in hand to address issues highlighted by this terrible tragedy. The Department for Communities and Local Government and the Cabinet Office are working together across the piece and on the wider building safety programme, about which I know hon. Members on both sides of the House are concerned. DCLG has written to local councils and housing associations, calling for checks to social housing. A survey of the public sector estate began on 28 June, with a request for Government Departments and arm's length bodies to review all public buildings in line with provided guidance and to submit samples for testing from priority buildings with aluminium composite material cladding.

Annaliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Is the First Secretary aware that a lot of DCLG advice has been contradictory? It initially informed us that certain kinds of cladding had to be removed, but then its position changed and it said that certain kinds of cladding could still be safe as part of fire safety systems. There was also a lack of clarity about whether that testing regime was compulsory. That appeared to be the initial position, but now we have been informed that the Department was responding to landlords' concerns. Is the First Secretary aware that such flip-flopping is causing a lot of confusion and concern, including among tenants?

Damian Green: The expert panel, which I have mentioned on a number of occasions, includes precisely the people to provide advice and it continues to do so. Its advice has been consistently followed by the Department because it has that expertise. It may well discover more and decide that its advice needs to change, but it is all done on the basis of fire safety experts who are independent of Government.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I grew up in a two-bed flat in a council block and the traditional advice was always to stay put and await rescue. I wonder how many souls perished following that traditional advice. Will the advice change?

Damian Green: That issue may well be addressed by Sir Martin in the public inquiry, which is clearly the appropriate forum for that sort of investigation.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Even as we speak, and before the inquiry has begun, new tower blocks continue to be constructed and developed in my constituency and around the country. What new advice has been issued to planning authorities, those who monitor construction standards and the building industry?

Damian Green: The expert panel published new advice last week in a memorandum of understanding about what should be done about new blocks, so that issue has been addressed very directly over the past month.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): On the points that were just made, I have constituents with disabilities who live in tower blocks on higher floors who have expressed great concern about what they should do in the event of an emergency. Sometimes they have been given conflicting advice about, for example, whether people in wheelchairs should be using lifts, which is contrary to general advice. Will the First Secretary encourage the inquiry to consider people with disabilities who live on higher floors?

Damian Green: As the hon. Lady will know, rules are already in place to cover precisely that type of thing. The best advice is obviously that those rules should be obeyed. The fire safety advisers are looking at what happened and what should happen in future, but it will be the local fire safety authorities that give that advice. I am sure they will all have been looking carefully at the advice they have been giving, particularly to people in wheelchairs and so on, who clearly will be understandably concerned about whether they are getting the right safety advice. I advise the hon. Lady to talk to her local fire safety officials.

Over the past month, the Cabinet Office has established a cross-Government working group called the public estates response group, with a technical sub-group to ensure that all technical advice is understood and is being properly applied. The Government are ensuring full engagement and alignment with activity in the devolved Administrations—I am conscious that they will be concerned as well. As I said, DCLG has formed an expert advisory panel made up of a range of building and fire safety experts to advise the Government on any immediate action required to ensure that buildings are safe. The Cabinet Office is working with DCLG's expert panel and others to establish a remediation plan and the next steps towards the review of building regulations that several Members have asked for. All that work is under way outside the inquiry's timetable, so its completion will not be dependent on the publication of the inquiry's report.

Some of those affected by this terrible event are concerned that an inquest would be more appropriate than an inquiry, and that the inquiry might delay the identification of those who died. I can reassure them that there will be an inquest: the coroner, Dr Fiona Wilcox, is already investigating the deaths—that is a statutory duty. Once the identification of each of the deceased has been completed, I understand that the coroner will open the inquest into each individual death and then adjourn proceedings pending the outcome of other investigations, including the inquiry. The coroner will consider the inquiry's recommendations to determine whether to resume the inquests. The process will not delay the formal identification of victims.

I can reassure those who want a criminal investigation into this terrible tragedy that that is in hand. The Metropolitan police announced the investigation on 16 June. It is one of the largest and most complex investigations ever undertaken by the Metropolitan police, with around 250 specialist investigators currently engaged.

I hope that Members will be reassured by the clear statements about the investigation from the Metropolitan police. Detective Superintendent Fiona McCormack said on 23 June that the investigation would “identify and investigate any criminal offence and, of course, given the deaths of so many people, we are considering manslaughter, as well as criminal offences and breaches of legislation and regulations”.

That point was reinforced on Monday by Assistant Commissioner Martin Hewitt, who said:

“The investigation we are conducting is a criminal investigation that quite obviously is starting from the potential that there was something that effectively amounts to the manslaughter of those people.”

It is clear that it will be a rigorous, detailed investigation; the police are determined that, if wrongdoing has occurred, the perpetrators will be brought to justice.

The Grenfell Tower inquiry's task is of the utmost importance to establish the facts and make recommendations about the action needed to prevent a similar tragedy from happening again. The Government will provide the inquiry with all the resources it needs to complete its work thoroughly and rapidly. This was a terrible tragedy; we must learn the lessons to ensure nothing like it can happen again.

1.54 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): It is four weeks to the day since the truly dreadful Grenfell Tower fire—the worst fire and greatest loss of life in this country since at least the London blitz. One hundred and fifty-eight families have lost their homes, and many others have lost loved ones. All are struggling with the horror and trauma of losing family members, of their own escape, and of being left with absolutely nothing. This is the time when they should feel that they can look to their council and their Government for help, as well as to the overwhelming solidarity and support of their local community. But so many do not, and so many feel that they simply cannot trust those in authority to listen to them and do what they promise. This is a very strong message to Ministers, Kensington and Chelsea Council and the chair of the Prime Minister's public inquiry.

Today is one week on from the Prime Minister's deadline for everyone affected to have been found a home nearby, yet just four of the 158 families from Grenfell Tower have moved into a fresh home—and those are only temporary. Today is 24 days on from the start of the Government's testing programme; the Prime Minister said that we could test more than 100 buildings a day, yet only 224 tests have been done, almost all on one type of filler in one type of cladding. Today is four years and four months since two official coroners' reports following other fatal tower-block fires, yet the Government have still failed to act on their recommendations. And today is almost three weeks since the Prime Minister said that

“we simply have not given enough attention to social housing”—*[Official Report, 22 June 2017; Vol. 626, c. 169.]*

Yet, in her speech yesterday crying out for ideas—any ideas for a domestic policy programme—there was no mention of housing and no mention of the words “social housing”.

This is the measure of the Government's response to the Grenfell Tower tragedy: too slow to act; too slow to grasp the gravity and complexity of the problems; and

[John Healey]

one step off the pace at every stage. Let me spell out to the First Secretary and his colleagues the pledge that the Labour party makes, as the official Opposition, to, above all, the survivors and the relatives of the families from Grenfell Tower: we will not rest until all those who need help and a new home have it; until all those culpable have been brought fully to account; and until all measures needed to make sure that this can never, ever happen again are fully in place.

We welcome the Prime Minister's public inquiry and what the First Secretary said about this debate helping to inform the terms of reference and the way the inquiry will be conducted. We will make a submission to the Prime Minister on the terms of reference and recommend an approach like that of the Macpherson inquiry, with the appointment of panel members with deep experience in community relations to help to overcome the serious gulf in trust that many in the north Kensington community feel.

Let me turn to housing and the help for the survivors. The pledges that the Government have made to the families and the survivors—no-strings financial assistance, open access to trauma counselling, guaranteed school places, no legal action on immigration status or sub-letting, and rehousing—are all welcome and important. But there is still a big gap between what Ministers are saying to us in the House and what the residents and the community in north Kensington are saying is happening to them.

On housing, how is it, one week after the Prime Minister's deadline, that only four families have moved into a fresh home and 13 others have been offered somewhere they feel they can say yes to? Who is finding, checking and offering this temporary accommodation? Who is providing the reassurance needed for the families? Who is in charge?

Rebecca Pow: The right hon. Gentleman is making a good point, and of course these people, their homes and rehousing them is of the utmost importance, but to politicise the figures and to argue—[*Interruption.*] I do not know where he is getting his figures from. I was led to believe that 139 people had received offers of accommodation and many families have agreed not yet to engage, because they are not quite ready—we cannot force them to either. I am not sure where the statistics are coming from or whether all the scaremongering about statistics is helping to solve the actual problem, which this Government are getting on with doing.

John Healey: The First Secretary's speech to this House was fact and figure free. If I am wrong about the fact that only four of these families, after nearly one month, have moved into a fresh home—a temporary home—and the rest are still in hotels, he can get up and correct me, but he is not doing so. The hon. Lady talks about scaremongering and political point scoring, but it is precisely the decisions and policies of those in power that the Grenfell Tower residents want challenged. And it is precisely the questions of policy, ideology and responsibility in government that lie at the heart of the deep changes needed to fix the housing crisis in this country, and her own Prime Minister has recognised that.

Damian Green: Just to clear up any confusion in the right hon. Gentleman's mind, 159 families have been offered accommodation, as my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) rightly said. Some of those have said—I heard the leader of Kensington's council say this this morning—that they do not wish yet to make the move into the housing they have been offered. Of course everyone across the House will recognise that we need to meet those wishes. These people have to decide how they can try to cope with this, but I can assure the right hon. Gentleman and the House that 159 of the families identified have been offered accommodation—some of them have been offered more than one type of accommodation. That commitment has been met.

John Healey: I think the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government may want to set the record entirely straight when he winds up this debate. I take the First Secretary at his word for now, but last week we were told that 158 families lost their homes in Grenfell Tower, and 139 had been offered accommodation by the Prime Minister's deadline. Last week, only three had moved out. This week—today—four weeks on, four had moved out and only a further 13 have actually been given offers that they feel they can accept. There is a huge gap between what Ministers are saying here and what residents are saying there. That is the problem, and the question to the First Secretary and the Secretary of State is: who is sorting this out? Who is in charge? Who is responsible for this continuing failure to provide the homes and the start again that people need? I am sure the First Secretary would accept that a hotel room is no home and that temporary accommodation is no place in which to try to rebuild a shattered life. So the top and the urgent priority must be for Ministers to find the permanent homes that are needed.

We welcome the 68 homes in Kensington Row that now will be available, as social housing, for the residents of Grenfell Tower. The rest could be done straightforwardly by doing a deal with local housing associations to make new homes available; by leasing or buying vacant private properties in the area; and by funding the council to build or acquire the new homes needed. The Government might even force Kensington and Chelsea Council to use some its reported £274 million in reserves to take this urgent priority action.

Andy Slaughter: Most of the residents who have been decanted are in budget hotels—I know that as I have visited a number who were unceremoniously dumped in my borough by Kensington and Chelsea Council, without money, a change of clothes or anything of that kind—and have been there for four weeks. None of those people are there because they want to be there; they are there because they have not been made appropriate offers. Does my right hon. Friend therefore agree that the Government should stop this sophistry and get on with offering decent, permanent homes to people who have suffered extraordinary trauma?

John Healey: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend about that. He speaks with a special authority, as a neighbouring MP who has spent a great deal of the past four weeks in the North Kensington community, working

alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) to try to support and give voice to the concerns of survivors.

Let me move on to the issue of safety testing. It is totally unacceptable, four weeks on from the Grenfell Tower fire, that Ministers still do not know and cannot say how many of the country's other tower blocks are unsafe. The Government's testing programme is too slow, too narrow and too confused. This is a testing programme in chaos. Only 224 tests have been done, yet an estimated 530 tower blocks have the same cladding and we have a total of 4,000 tower blocks across the country. That means that 24 days after the start of this testing programme, which we were told could test 100 buildings a day, we find that tests have been done on only half the highest-risk blocks and on fewer than one in 20 of the total number of tower blocks around the country.

Ms Buck: Last week, the Secretary of State said that there was "no backlog" in testing and that tests would be processed within a matter of "hours". Given the continuing shortfall in the number of high-rise buildings that have been subject to testing, does my right hon. Friend share my bafflement that the Government do not appear to know where any of this material actually is?

John Healey: Yes, I share my hon. Friend's bafflement entirely. I also hear of councils and housing associations that want to test their buildings, which may not have the same type of cladding, but simply cannot get the tests. I note, again, that the First Secretary's speech was entirely free of any facts or figures that can update the House on the chaos of this testing programme.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): My right hon. Friend will be aware that Camden Council has done the testing in my constituency and, as a result, has evacuated more than 3,000 people from the Chalcots estate. The council is spending its own money to try to ensure that the buildings are fit for purpose before the residents are placed in them again. Does he agree that the Government should be giving financial support to councils such as Camden after cutting their budgets for years on end?

John Healey: The short answer is yes; the longer answer is that I pay tribute to Camden Council for taking the tough decision that it had to make in those circumstances. My fear is that other housing associations, councils and landlords of high-rise blocks around the country will hold back or perhaps cut corners because they know they cannot afford to do the works required—either to remove and replace cladding, or to make the inside safe and fully fire-safety compliant—and that they will do so only because they cannot get a straight answer from this Government on a clear commitment to up-front funding where it is needed to make sure that this essential work is done. The situation leaves hundreds of thousands of residents in tower blocks around the country still uncertain as to whether their block is safe.

I hope that Ministers will stay to hear the debate because a number of colleagues from around the country will set out concerns about the testing system, including the problem that landlords and residents are confused.

The testing system does not meet the needs of those residents or landlords. We know from the Lakanal House fire that cladding is not the whole problem—nor, I suspect, was it in Grenfell—yet only one component of one type of cladding had been tested until very recently. We are therefore talking about no tests on cladding systems, on insulation materials, on the interaction between cladding and insulation, on installation, and on the fire breaks between floors. I can tell the First Secretary of State and the Secretary of State that housing associations across the country, such as Bradford-based Incommunities, cannot get their type of cladding tested, so they cannot reassure their residents that their tower blocks are safe. Councils such as Salford have stopped stripping off cladding from their high-rise flats because they have no guidance from Government on what to replace it with.

Seema Malhotra: I wish to comment on that point in relation to Hounslow Council. I commend it for the speed with which it was able to de-clad a block in my constituency, but it has hit some of these concerns about what to replace that cladding with. Given the amount of re-cladding that might take place across the country, I am worried that the producers of that cladding could jack up the prices, thus making the replacement even more expensive.

John Healey: My hon. Friend is right. Her council, like Oxford, is in the dark on this—it simply does not know what the Government's guidance and advice will be. If it takes off the cladding, what does it replace that with, because the council must be certain that it is safe?

The First Secretary of State rightly made great play of the panel of independent experts in his speech. The panel is there to advise Ministers on the urgent lessons that need to be learned and the action that needs to be taken, and that is very welcome. I hope that the panel can help the Government to get back on track and deal with some of the following concerns, which Ministers will hear about from colleagues right across the country. What advice will the Government give to landlords—and what reassurance will they give to residents—if cladding systems pass the new second round of tests despite the fact that they failed the narrow first test? If cladding fails the Government's tests, must it be taken off tower blocks in all circumstances, and will the Government cover the costs of taking it down and replacing it? When will councils and housing associations be able to get other cladding or insulation tested? How will the Government make sure that all internal fire safety works that are now being carried out inside tower blocks meet the highest safety standards? Will the Government launch an immediate review into the approved inspectors responsible for building control checks, as well as who hires them, who pays them and who approves their qualifications, starting with all those responsible for signing off the systems that are being failed by the Government's tests?

Four weeks on, Ministers must widen their testing programme and reassure all high-rise tenants that their buildings are safe, or commit to fund the urgent work necessary to make them safe. The clearest warnings that the system of fire safety checks and building controls was failing came more than four years ago following the inquest into fatal tower block fires at Lakanal House

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and Shirley Towers. Both coroners wrote formal rule 43 letters to Ministers with recommendations to improve fire safety in high-rise buildings. Such letters are written by coroners only when the Government can prevent further loss of life—that is their importance. Some of the recommendations were simply rejected, such as making internal cable supports fire resistant and providing onsite information about a tower block to firefighters arriving to fight a blaze.

Ministers said that they would act on other recommendations, but they have not. The Government passed all responsibility for retrofitting sprinkler systems on to landlords. In 2014, one Minister even said:

“We believe that it is the responsibility of the fire industry, rather than the Government.”

On overhauling building regulations, the Government promised a review but it did not happen. The Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), has just told me that

“this work will now need to be informed by any recommendations that the independent inquiry into Grenfell Tower fire makes.”

Rather than waiting months or years to start this work, Ministers must put this right now. They must start installing sprinkler systems in the highest-risk high-rise blocks and start the overhaul of building regulations, into which any findings from the fire investigations or the public inquiry can be incorporated.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Has my right hon. Friend picked up on the rumour about the review of building regulations in the Department for Communities and Local Government? I have heard that the review was paused because the civil servants who were leading on it were put on to other work related to Brexit. If that is true, how many other pieces of essential, urgent and safety-related work are on pause in government right now?

John Healey: I had not heard that rumour—I prefer to deal with the facts in front of us—but my hon. Friend is dead right that there is a serious question of capacity in DCLG. There is an even greater question over leadership, which I shall come on to in a moment.

Finally, I want to turn to the “fundamental issues”, as the Prime Minister described them, that were raised by the Grenfell Tower fire. When a country as decent and well-off as ours fails to provide something as basic as a safe home for its citizens, things must change. Let me mention two areas, the first of which is regulation. Surely Members in all parts of the House would agree that all markets, organisations and consumers require regulation to guarantee quality and safety, to ensure fair practice and to stop abuse, yet that is not the current Government’s mindset. Never again can we have a Government Minister who, when challenged on fire safety measures after the fire in Camberwell, said that they were not the Government’s responsibility, justifying that with the “one in, two out” approach to regulation. If the Prime Minister and First Secretary of State are serious about change, they should start by confirming that that approach came to an end with the Cameron-Osborne era of Conservative government.

Sir Edward Davey: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. He and the House might like to know that when I was a junior Business Minister, people from No. 10 and the Cabinet Office asked me whether we should get rid of fire safety regulations for girls’ and ladies’ nightdresses and furniture. I said no. We did not get rid of them, nor should we have done. He is absolutely right that we have to change the culture.

John Healey: I am grateful for that unexpected support from the Liberal Democrat Benches. The right hon. Gentleman’s very important and specific point supports my general argument.

The second area is social housing. For decades after the second world war, there was a national cross-party consensus about the value of social housing to help to meet the housing needs and aspirations of many ordinary families. There is a recognition that there has been only one year since the second world war in which this country has built more than 200,000 new homes without the public sector doing at least a third of them. This is the first Government since the second world war to provide no funding to help to build new social-rented housing, and they have also ended all funding through the Homes and Communities Agency programme for decent homes, which is investment to bring social housing up to scratch. If the First Secretary of State and the Prime Minister were serious about social housing, they would lift the cap on councils borrowing to build and maintain their homes, restore central Government investment to help to build new social housing, guarantee “first dibs” on new homes for local people, and strengthen the hand of councils to get better deals from big developers for their residents.

Finally, we hear that the Prime Minister wants us to “contribute” rather than just “criticise”. I have to ask this: has she asked her Cabinet to contribute? What does the Secretary of State have to contribute to solving the country’s housing crisis; to doing more on social housing; to reversing the plunging rate of home ownership, especially for young people; to giving 11 million private renters basic consumer rights; and to preventing the rapidly rising numbers of homeless people sleeping on our streets? Where is the plan? Where is the hope? Where is the leadership? If the Prime Minister wants a domestic policy programme, and if she wants to find common cause and to make fundamental changes to Government policy, we stand ready to contribute—we offer our Labour housing manifesto, published last month, as a starter.

If the Government want our support for a plan to tackle the country’s housing crisis, they must raise their sights. If Ministers want our support for their recovery programme post-Grenfell, they must raise their game.

2.20 pm

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): I agree with the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) on one aspect: this accident should not have happened in a country such as ours. He is also right to argue for a national and clear approach that does not just concentrate on one issue but considers all the issues involved.

Slightly uncharacteristically, the right hon. Gentleman was not prepared to accept—at least he seemed not to—that, over the years, both main parties have made mistakes in this area when in government. If he thinks

back to 2005-06, when the enforcement regime was weakened and the building regulations changed, he might wonder whether that tackled the problem. The previous Labour Government also had a deplorable record on building houses. I do not think that the right hon. Gentleman can be holier than thou in this debate, as he was tempted to be.

I should like to pay tribute to the local community for all it has done at the Westway centre. People were generous and warm-hearted; they put their arms around the victims' families. Our thoughts are, correctly, with the victims and families, but I pay tribute to the communities of Latimer Road and the Westway, who come out of this very strongly.

It is time that fires that claim lives in high-rise buildings were a thing of the past. In February 2005, there was a fire in Stevenage in my constituency, at Harrow Court, a high-rise, 17-storey block of flats. Two firemen lost their lives, including my constituent Jeff Wornham; a member of the public died as well. Jeff came from a family who are very committed to public service. He was extremely brave in the fire and saved lives. His loss was felt in my constituency and by his family, friends and the fire service in Hertfordshire more widely.

The incident led to a fire investigation by Hertfordshire fire and rescue service—a very good service with a lot of experience of dealing with hazardous materials. It fought the Buncefield fire as well as that could have been fought. It is generally a highly respected fire and rescue service, and one of its recommendations was that the UK fire service should explore options for high-rise buildings to have provision for sprinklers. I felt at the time that that was an important matter, and we had a Westminster Hall debate about Hertfordshire firefighters' safety. The then fire Minister, Sadiq Khan, met Jeff's father, Robert Wornham, and fire safety experts to discuss the case for sprinklers being retrofitted to all high-rise blocks; sprinkler experts also went to the meeting. That retrofitting has not happened, but Robert Wornham still believes that it is an important way of helping to ensure fire safety in such blocks. He contacted me recently to say that he hoped that the issue can get back on the agenda.

After 2007, the rules were changed for new buildings more than 30 metres high, which are now required to be fitted with sprinkler systems. Some local authorities have gone ahead and retrofitted sprinklers to some of their blocks. As the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne mentioned, coroners have recommended retrofitting sprinklers on two occasions. But that has not been the general rule. We need a national approach—something clear.

The British Automatic Fire Sprinkler Association estimates that the cost of fitting a system in Grenfell Tower would have been about £200,000. We need to establish the truth of what happened in Grenfell Tower and make sure it does not happen again. I hope that the retrofitting of sprinkler systems can be firmly and urgently considered, because that may be long overdue.

I turn to the investigations that have been ordered. There is a police investigation, which will look at criminal wrongdoing, but it is good that a judicial public inquiry has been announced by the Prime Minister. The two types of investigation have different purposes. Public inquiries investigate issues of serious public concern, scrutinising decisions and events. The Inquiries Act 2005

ensures that witnesses can be compelled and documents brought forward without any difficulties—something that did not happen with other forms of inquiry.

Public inquiries are different from criminal investigations, but the parallel criminal investigation into the fire that is being carried out by the Metropolitan police will be informed by the public inquiry. Facts are given and recommendations made in a public inquiry, and if the inquiry comes across criminal activity during its investigation, it will obviously pass that information to the police. That is its duty.

There has been some discussion nationally about the choice of chair for the public inquiry. People from all over the world come to our country to have their legal issues resolved. They come here because we have independent-minded judges who do not mind telling the Government where to get off when they are wrong. Our judges are of the highest quality and there is a transparent system that people trust. That is why the English legal system has been copied all over the world, and why people respect it so much. Our common-law system is excellent.

The choice of chair for the public inquiry is a senior judge. Think of the Hillsborough case, over which a senior judge presided. Nobody would argue that such judges are not capable of dealing with a complex case and getting right to the heart of the issues. The Lord Chancellor asked the Lord Chief Justice for a recommendation of a judge who would be best suited to leading a public inquiry of this sort. The Lord Chief Justice recommended Sir Martin Moore-Bick. Sir Martin is one of our most respected judges, with extensive experience of trying complex cases, including the investigation of disasters. He was vice-president of the civil division of the Court of Appeal—one of our most senior judges—until he retired in December. He will be thorough and get to the heart of the issues.

Members in all parts of the House are determined that there will be justice for victims of the tragedy and for their families. I believe that the combination of a judge-led inquiry and a police investigation will achieve that. We can judge how well a judge will run an inquiry by how speedily he gets on with the matter in hand. By immediately consulting—he opened the consultation on 5 July—to establish the terms of reference, Sir Martin has shown that he is seeking a wide range of views. That bodes well for the inquiry. He wants to hear from those directly affected by the fire and from others who have a contribution to make. He is having a series of meetings to listen to victims' families, survivors and others affected, and to take their views.

It is welcome that the chair has been so open to ideas, and that he said he wants to establish the terms of reference as soon as possible, so that the inquiry can begin making sure that we know what happened and how to stop it from ever happening again. I am personally a strong supporter of a judge-led inquiry, and I hope it will be possible to have a relatively early interim report that will deal with some of the key issues, such as sprinkler systems and cladding, so that we have the national, clear approach mentioned by the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne. I am a strong supporter of the inquiry, and I would like sprinklers to be strongly on the agenda.

2.29 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Scottish National party welcomes the Government's announcement of a full public inquiry into this terrible tragedy. But we are clear that, as others have already said, no stone should be left unturned in ascertaining not just the immediate cause of the fire but the wider causes of what happened and what went wrong in order to ensure that the appropriate lessons are learned and to get justice for those affected.

Our thoughts and sympathies are very much with those affected by this terrible tragedy, and it goes without saying that we pay tribute to the bravery and professionalism of the first responders and the emergency services who dealt with the matter. I want to address, though, the scope and nature of the inquiry. I am glad to say that the days when inquiries in the United Kingdom were establishment whitewashes are long over. Our modern society could not tolerate the sort of cover-up we saw in the now notorious Widgery tribunal after the Bloody Sunday massacre, or the delay that occurred before the Hillsborough families found justice. However, we should always be mindful that the history of inquiries has seen many examples of justice being delayed and being denied altogether.

It seems that this most often happens when those affected by death and disaster come from among the ranks of those who do not have wealth, power or influence in our society. I am thinking about the fleeing unarmed Catholic civilians who were shot dead by the Army on Bloody Sunday while protesting for their basic civil rights, and the innocent Liverpool football fans who were unlawfully killed at Hillsborough while going about their lawful business and then wrongfully blamed for so many years for being the cause of their own deaths. Those two incidents are very different from the Grenfell Tower inquiry, but I was struck by the words of one Grenfell survivor that were recently brought to my attention by the Scottish journalist and commentator Lesley Riddoch. The man's name was Mehed Egal, and he told the BBC:

"We are not poor people, we are working-class people. We are leaseholders. We are homeowners. We pay tax. We pay council tax. We make the economy turn while the rich put us in hazardous positions. I'm not going to hold back—we have been neglected from the get-go and we are neglected still."

Those words may be uncomfortable for some to hear, but they cannot and should not be ignored as they come from a survivor and someone who lived in the tower block.

Underlying this tragedy is the stark contrast in our society between those who have wealth, power and influence, and those who do not. What I mean by that is that it seems unthinkable—to me, at least—that those with power, wealth and influence would have been condemned to live in accommodation that seems to have been such a death trap. The tragedy raises real questions about the inequalities in our society and the inadequate provision of social housing in cities such as London. There is real issue as to whether the inquiry will be of adequate scope to address not just the immediate causes of the fire and its rapid spread, but systemic issues underlying the tragedy. The terms of reference are vital. It is also vital that the participants have confidence in the chair, and that all participants have adequate funding to ensure representation and equality of arms. I will take each of those issues in turn.

The Stephen Lawrence inquiry is often considered an exemplar of what an inquiry should do. It is worth remembering that that inquiry's terms of reference were simply,

"matters arising from the death of Stephen Lawrence."

In the Grenfell case, the survivors are concerned about some comments made by the judge chosen to chair the inquiry that suggested, at an earlier stage, that the inquiry will be restricted to issues relating to how the fire started, rather than examining wider issues about Grenfell Tower, the council, central Government, and the management and funding of social housing.

I note that the Communities Secretary last week told the House that the Government expect the inquiry to be as broad and wide-ranging as possible, and the First Secretary has today addressed the way in which there can be input into the framing of the terms of reference. What is not clear is whether this House will be able to scrutinise or have any input into the final framing of those terms of reference. In my view, a way should be found to enable that to happen because the Grenfell fire raises issues that concern the public and our constituents all across the UK.

Constituents have written to me, concerned about the extent of the death toll and its composition, which seems to include the poor, immigrants, the elderly, disabled people and undocumented people—people who are sometimes forgotten in society. Members of the public are concerned that the fact seems to be that a refurbishment budget for the block was spent with an emphasis on cladding that was pleasing to the eye, rather than fire-safe, and about the suggestion that not enough was spent on fire safety measures. They are also concerned about the adequacy of the response to the fire. People have asked, "Where was the publicly funded infrastructure dealing with relief? Where was the plan for the aftermath?" We need to ensure that the inquiry's terms of reference encompass those matters, while ensuring that the interim report deals with the immediate fire safety issues.

We should never forget that the decades of failure to investigate properly what happened at Hillsborough began with the controversial decision by the coroner in the inquest to close off certain questions from proper investigation, so we must be very careful not to close off from proper investigation certain questions arising from how the fire came about.

Turning to the chair, the problems with the historical child abuse inquiry show that it is vital to have a chair who commands the confidence of the victims. As a lawyer, I will not cast any aspersions on Sir Martin Moore-Bick's ability to chair the inquiry, but the residents' concerns about his ability must be respected and listened to. Doubt surrounding public confidence in his suitability cannot be ignored because it will undermine the efficacy of the inquiry.

Sir Oliver Heald: The hon. and learned Lady knows as well as I do that we are talking about a judge who has dealt with the most complex matters and disasters. How can she say that somebody of that sort of ability, who has been hand-picked to do the job by the Lord Chief Justice, is not the right sort of person to run a judicial inquiry?

Joanna Cherry: That is not a decision for me. I am bringing to the House's attention the perfectly valid concern of local people about the judge's ability to chair the inquiry. I was careful to preface that—*[Interruption.]* Will the right hon. and learned Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) let me develop my point?

The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey), who is no longer in his place, said that a properly diverse expert panel is required to sit alongside the inquiry judge to advise on a variety of issues. A local organisation, BME Lawyers 4 Grenfell, has made a number of demands, including that there should be such a properly diverse panel to advise on issues including housing need, and fire and safety construction. I respectfully suggest that doubts about the ability of the judge may be allayed if that suggestion is followed. *[Interruption.]* Whether Conservative Members like it or not, it is vital that the people affected by the disaster have confidence in the ability of the constitution of the inquiry to bring about a just result. We do not need to look far back in British history to see many examples where that has not happened, and which shame us.

Sir Oliver Heald: Will the hon. and learned Lady give way?

Joanna Cherry: I am going to develop my point. I will give way in a moment.

All that I and others are asking is that the Minister gives serious consideration to the demand that, in addition to the judge, there should be a properly diverse expert panel that has the proper expertise to advise on issues concerning housing need, and fire and safety construction. We lawyers are not necessarily experts on housing need. The point is that we may need a bit of assistance from somebody who is.

Sir Oliver Heald: People take cases against the Government to our courts the whole time. Judges are keen to do the cases properly, and they kick back at the Government on numerous occasions, as everybody in the House knows. Is the hon. and learned Lady really saying that one of the most senior judges in our country will not be able to do an independent and objective job of the highest quality? *[Interruption.]*

Joanna Cherry: As has been said by a colleague from a sedentary position, that was not what I said. This is not litigation; it is a public inquiry. All I am saying is that the Government have already accepted that a panel of advisers is required. The point I am making is actually quite simple: the panel of advisers should be of suitable expertise and diversity to inspire confidence.

Another thing we need to do to ensure justice is done is to make sure that not only victims but tenants' groups are given public funding for independent and separate legal representation sufficient to enable them to have a voice equal to that of local and national Government and the private management company. This is a simple matter of human rights and equality of arms, and I was pleased that, when I asked the Prime Minister about this on 22 June, she said that, although the way in which the inquiry is conducted is ultimately a matter for the chair, for

“those who require legal representation, that will be funded by the Government”

and that she was not going to

“set any limits in relation to the types of body or the individuals for whom”—*[Official Report, 22 June 2017; Vol. 626, c. 186-87]*—

funding would be available. I welcome what she said, because although funding and proper representation are matters for the inquiry, the inquiry can work well only within the constraints imposed on it by the Treasury. If the tenants' groups are not represented in this inquiry, I fear that justice will not be seen to be done.

Finally, before I say something about the position of the devolved Administrations, which the Minister alluded to, I want to turn briefly to question of the inquiry's recommendations being properly implemented. It is vital that this House is empowered to make sure that the recommendations are implemented promptly, because important recommendations are not always implemented promptly. We have already heard about the recommendations after the Lakanal House fire. After a tower block fire in Irvine, in Scotland, in 1999—just before devolution—a Select Committee of this House recommended that all cladding on high-rise dwellings should be non-combustible. Subsequent to devolution, that report was taken seriously by Scottish housing authorities, and building regulations in Scotland were duly amended in 2005. All new high-rise domestic buildings in Scotland are therefore fitted with non-combustible cladding, or a cladding system that meets stringent fire tests, and with sprinklers. The same recommendation was seen as optional south of the border, and it appears now that that has had tragic consequences. So it is vital that this House finds a way to make sure that the inquiry's recommendations are properly implemented.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I join the tributes that have been paid to the victims and the first responders. Many people in Scotland, including in my constituency, still live in tower blocks. Despite the reassurances my hon. and learned Friend has provided, they will nevertheless be looking to the recommendations that come from the inquiry's report. Does she agree that there will be lessons to be learned across the UK and that it is important that assurances are provided not just to the constituents she mentioned earlier but particularly to people who continue to live in tower blocks?

Joanna Cherry: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. I have many tower blocks in my constituency, and I was pleased that the City of Edinburgh Council, in very early course, had all elected representatives in to tell us what investigative steps it was taking to make sure these high-rise blocks were safe.

As I have indicated, Scottish building standards are devolved, and the Scottish Government have already set up a ministerial working group to make sure that our buildings are up to scratch and that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is satisfied with the standards in all local buildings. I am pleased to say that all 32 local authorities in Scotland have been able to confirm that none of the high-rise domestic properties they own use the type of cladding we understand was used on Grenfell Tower. However, the Scottish Government are not being complacent, and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service will continue to carry out additional operational assurance visits to high-rise buildings. The Scottish Government will continue to monitor the situation in Scotland, gathering information from local authorities and taking

[Joanna Cherry]

a proactive and safety-first approach to this issue while we await information from the investigation into the fire in London.

The point I have sought to make in my contribution is that the way this inquiry is set up—the framing of the terms of reference, and the way in which the expert panel that will advise the chair is made up—and the funding that is made available to all relevant participants are vital for justice to be seen to be done, and we cannot cut corners on any of those things. There is widespread concern across the United Kingdom about the circumstances surrounding this fire, and all our constituents, but particularly the people local to this fire, need to be satisfied that justice is done and seen to be done.

2.44 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): The House struggles on occasions such as this to get the tone of the debate right. When Members of this place awoke on 14 June, we were all horrified by what we witnessed. How on earth the residents are coping with this tragedy, I just do not know.

I pay immediate tribute to the local Member of Parliament, the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad). She has not been here very long, but in no time at all she has done her very best to support local residents. So I congratulate her, and I think that the House will come together at least on that point.

There are no words that are adequate to describe our feelings about this horror. The fire started on the fourth floor at one in the morning, when most of the residents were asleep. Within half an hour, a towering inferno took place. It was truly shocking to turn on our TV screens in the morning and see what had happened. This was just a month ago.

This House has a huge responsibility in terms of how we deal with this matter in the debate, and the tone must be moderate. Recently, an article was written by Nick Ross. He is not someone I know personally, but he appears on TV as a commentator. He said:

“no one has a right to a monopoly on anger, or grief...For 15 years I have been campaigning to update building regulations in England to improve fire safety and to have sprinklers fitted routinely to council and other social housing, and I can't recall a single Government minister or Opposition frontbencher—Labour, Conservative or Lib Dem—who ever campaigned with us...Three times I've addressed the Local Government Association...pointing out how the risks are disproportionate in subsidised housing—'It's the poor wot gets the flame'—as three times they applauded and did nothing.”

Now, I come to my hon. Friend the Minister. Mr Ross continues:

“Ministers are mostly here today, gone tomorrow”, although I hope my hon. Friend will be around for a little time,

“and few would claim to be expert in their briefs. Except for those who know it all because they are gripped by rigid ideology, most ministers do listen to their advisers...If there is any group whose actions allowed the catastrophe to happen it was these advisers”, and Ministers took their advice.

Finally, Mr Ross says:

“Sprinklers are not invincible. They can't function if the water supply fails. But—and this is the truth that makes me so angry—no one ever dies from fire when a home is protected by automatic sprinklers. That's why in the U.S. they're installing 40 million a year.

But let's not be persuaded that the risk is only in high-rise towers. There are 300-400 fire deaths a year and most victims live in low-rise properties.

We need sprinklers in all social housing, care homes, and multi-occupation premises including schools—and let's not forget our hospitals...There is a terrible anger after Grenfell. Instead of trading political insults we must put it to good use.”

We politicians are often criticised—we take the blame for most things that happen—and we have been criticised for not acting on this issue. However, that cannot be said of the all-party group on fire safety rescue, and I am delighted that a number of its very active members are present. Unfortunately, we lost one or two members in the last election, but the group has been going for a long time. I do not know whether colleagues here today are experts, although we found out this morning that one newly elected Scottish Conservative Member is a former firefighter, and he will no doubt bring his expertise to this. Most of us are not experts, however, and since 1986 the APPG has depended on two marvellous secretaries. First we had Douglas Smith, and then, in 2013, Ronnie King took over. Time after time—as was mentioned earlier by the group's vice-chairman, the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick)—we asked Ministers to look at the Lakanal House recommendation about the retrofitting of sprinklers, and we asked for the building regulations to be reviewed after 11 years.

The Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), who I think will be replying to the debate, has already met members of the all-party parliamentary group, and this morning it was agreed that I should put a number of points to him, which I hope he will consider. They are as follows.

“Without prejudice to the public inquiry or the police criminal investigation, the all-party group...want to respond to the Secretary of State's invitation to submit measures which can be put in place immediately to keep people safe”.

I entirely accept the frustration felt by Opposition Members who feel that something needs to be done now, and that we need not wait until the outcome of the public inquiry for that to happen. I hope my hon. Friend the Minister will reflect on that.

The APPG said:

“One such measure is to commence the long promised review of Approved Document 'B' to the Building Regulations, forthwith, and in particular to seek an immediate reinstatement of the provisions of Section 20 of the London Building Acts insofar as they are required a one hour fire resistance to outside walls of blocks of flats”.

It is crazy that we no longer have those regulations. The Minister will face a test: he will be given advice on the matter, and I hope that, unless it is in the affirmative, he will make his own decision and will agree with the recommendation from the all-party parliamentary group.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): My hon. Friend obviously understands these things better than I do, but one thing has really worried me about this tragedy. If there had been sprinklers inside the building, and the outside of the building had caught fire, would people have survived although the outside of the building was aflame? That worries me. I do not know whether there is an answer, but it seems to me that they might have survived.

Sir David Amess: That is an interesting point. All I will say is that people do not lose their lives when sprinklers have been fitted. That is the point.

Sir Oliver Heald: Does it not speak volumes that in 2007 we said that every new building should have a sprinkler system?

Sir David Amess: I will come to that point, but I also want the Minister to hear this, because it is not the responsibility of his Department. It is crazy that it is not mandatory for all new school buildings to have sprinklers fitted. We must address that, as a matter of urgency. Again, I hope that, if the Minister is not given the advice that I certainly want him to be given, he will make a contrary decision and recommend that all new school buildings have sprinklers fitted.

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): I am grateful for what the hon. Gentleman has said about sprinkler systems in schools, but does he agree that it is also imperative for the regulations to be changed to cover student accommodation? I understand that tower blocks more than 30 metres high will now be fitted with sprinklers, but that student accommodation more than 30 metres high will not qualify. I hope my hon. Friend agrees that that cannot be right.

Sir David Amess: I certainly do agree. The Minister has heard what has been said. I understood that every building more than 30 metres high would have to have sprinklers fitted. I hope that at some stage when the Minister is winding up a note will be passed to determine whether or not the hon. Gentleman—he was at our meeting this morning—is right, but as far as I understand, that cannot be the position.

The APPG also agreed on the following:

“without prejudice to the public inquiry or the police criminal investigation, the all-party group...wish to support the recommendation of the coroners at Southwark and Southampton arising from the Lakanal House and Shirley Towers tower block”—which was mentioned by the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey)—

“whereby both coroners recommended in a letter to the Secretary of State that the Department for Communities & Local Government, encourages providers of housing in high risk residential buildings containing multiple domestic premises to consider the retrofitting of sprinkler systems”.

I hope my hon. Friend the Minister will deal with that as well.

The APPG said:

“a letter to the then CLG Minister, dated 1st May 2014...drew the Minister’s attention to”

Ronnie King’s

“personal involvement with the Lakanal House Coroner’s Inquest, where clarification was given from the Department that the current Building Regulations allowed the composite panels under the external wall window sets of such tower blocks not to have any fire resistance”

—that is absolutely crazy—

“and that this weakness in the Regulations remains uncorrected today; despite the upward spread of fire which occurred, resulting in the deaths of six people.

(Under the current Building Regulations guidance Approved Document B, the external walls of Tower Blocks need only have a classification “O” Surface spread of Flame, with no fire resistance”).

The House would not expect the Minister to be an expert on all these matters, and he will have to take advice from somewhere, but I hope he understands the frustration that has been caused by the ignoring of the APPG’s recommendations. This fire should never have happened, and it would not have happened if notice had been taken of our recommendations.

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service—who is not in the Chamber at present—said:

“we are maybe looking at a system failure, built up over many years, which we now have to address urgently...over many years and perhaps against the backdrop of, as data shows, a reduced risk in terms of fire, in terms of number of incidents and deaths...maybe as a system some complacency has crept in.”

Well, it certainly has not “crept in” as far as the APPG is concerned.

Ms Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): I understand that the Fire Brigades Union has talked a great deal about the cuts in services and about deregulation, and the hon. Gentleman has talked a great deal about sprinklers today. Does he agree that the cuts and what has happened to the fire regulations cannot have failed to have an impact, and that they happened on the Conservatives’ watch? Let me add that I am a bit disappointed to see how many Conservatives are missing from this debate. It is a crucial debate, and Conservative Members should be here.

Sir David Amess: I know the general secretary of the Fire Brigades Union, and I shall be meeting him shortly to hear in more detail precisely what his criticisms are. I can assure the hon. Lady that the APPG will raise any issues that the union mentions to us. As for attendance on the Conservative Benches, in time the hon. Lady will have a view on attendance in the House. A long time ago, all the Benches were packed. I can only say that I regret that that is not the case on this occasion. Given that the general public can see our proceedings on the parliamentary channel, it is always disappointing when the Chamber is not packed, but I am afraid that, in recent years, that has been the trend.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Fire Brigades Union should have core participant status in the inquiry?

Sir David Amess: The Minister will have heard what the hon. Lady has said. I cannot believe that there will not be very close involvement. I do not want to trip myself up if there has already been a discussion about the matter, but I certainly do not see why there cannot be real participation in the inquiry. Perhaps the Minister will take up the point when he responds.

Finally, I want to highlight three points to my hon. Friend the Minister. The first is that building regulations no longer include a requirement for one-hour fire resistance for outside walls, as was the case under the London Building Acts. That has got to be corrected. Firefighters were horrified by the way this disaster took place. The second point relates to the testing of cladding. It costs £10,000 to fire-test a 30-metre cladded wall. Most testing is done on the desktop, which does not take into account materials used underneath or between cladding, such as

[*Sir David Amess*]

wood. I hope my hon. Friend the Minister will look at that point. The last point is about the retrofitting of sprinklers over the past year: in 100% of cases where sprinklers have been activated, they have controlled or extinguished the fire. I welcome the fact that there is a public inquiry, but I again ask my hon. Friend the Minister not only to listen to the recommendations of the all-party group, but to act on them.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. We have plenty of time for this debate. A lot of people wish to take part in it, and I should tell the House that I have had notifications from several new Members wishing to make their maiden speeches. I would like to manage without a formal time limit; especially for the benefit of those making their maiden speech, it is much better not to have a time limit. We can manage that if people, showing some self-restraint and some thought for their fellow Members, speak for about nine minutes. That means calculating on the basis of 10 minutes and then stopping a bit earlier. It is amazing how difficult people find it to do the arithmetic once they are on their feet, but I will try to help them. If we keep to about nine minutes, everyone will have an opportunity to speak without a formal time limit, and I know that I can rely on Mr Clive Betts to do this perfectly.

3.2 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): This is the most appalling tragedy. I am sure that our hearts go out to the friends and families of everyone who lost their lives, to everyone who has been traumatised by this appalling event, and to everyone who has been displaced and is now homeless. The only good that can come out of this is that we learn lessons quickly about what happened and make sure it never happens again.

On the practicalities, I first want to address the issue of funding to put right the tower blocks up and down the country that are now deemed to be failures and in non-safe situations. I was worried by the conditions that the First Secretary of State put on the funding that might be available. When challenged, he initially said that of course the Government would fund any safety work that the local fire authority deemed necessary, but he then withdrew that statement and said that the Government would fund such work when the local authority could not afford to do it, which is a very important condition. Will the Minister explain precisely what that means, what criteria will lead to Government funding, and if local authorities will be asked to find funding for themselves?

We must see this in the context of local authority finances as a whole—not merely in relation to the cuts to local authority budgets, but in the light of the fact that this work on social housing will come out of not the general fund, but the housing revenue account. In 2010, funding for social housing was cut by more than any other form of expenditure—by 60%. There is not a penny of Government money in the current spending round for new social housing, decent homes work or any remedial work on social housing. Local authorities have been asked to find the money all by themselves.

Ms Buck: Is it my hon. Friend's understanding that any works at the local level will, in effect, be paid for by tenants out of their rents and by leaseholder contributions? Does he agree that the basic repairs and maintenance budgets for local authority social housing have already been cut by 20% since 2010?

Mr Betts: Absolutely—that is precisely the point I was coming on to make. The money will come out of the housing revenue account, which is, of course, funded from rents. In the 2015 Budget, the Government decided that rents would not rise by CPI plus 1%, but would actually fall by 1% per year. It is estimated that that will have a massive effect, with many billions of pounds less—about £40 billion over 30 years—coming into housing revenue accounts. Councils can, of course, borrow money, but the amount is capped by the Government.

When the Government cap rents and borrowing, where can local authorities go to find the money to show, in the Minister's terms, that they can afford to do this work? All they can do is to cut other planned expenditure for the maintenance of social housing. Solving one problem will simply lead to other problems unless the Government are prepared to find the money. It is as simple as that, and I hope the Minister will reflect on this very seriously. Local authorities should not have to show either that they will not build a few social houses that they were going to build, or that they will cut maintenance programmes so that they can prove that they can afford to provide extra money for the necessary work on tower blocks. Instead, the Government should say that all the necessary work approved by local fire authorities to make tower blocks safe will be eligible for extra Government money. It is a very simple request, and if the Minister could say yes, he would resolve an awful lot of concerns and difficulties in this debate.

In a slightly wider context, we simply must start to view social housing differently. There has been a tendency in the past few years to see social housing as poor housing for poor people, and to think that anything will do for the people who live there. I have to tell Ministers that that is somewhat reflected in the pay to stay scheme. Fortunately, the Government have recently made the scheme voluntary for social housing landlords, not compulsory. In other words, there is a view that those who can afford it—slightly better-off tenants—should not be in social housing. I disagree: social housing should be there for those who need it.

Such thinking is also reflected in the proposal to sell high-value council assets. In other words, there is a view that if council housing is good and decent, it should not be council housing any longer. That is wrong as well. The proposal to fund the right to buy for housing association tenants seems to have been put on the back burner. Again, the Minister could address that by saying that we will have good-quality social housing in the future that will remain as social housing for those who need it.

Andy Slaughter: My hon. Friend is making an extraordinarily good case and I hope that the Minister will respond to his points. May I add an additional point? When social affordable housing is used for tenants who have been decanted—in the case of Grenfell or, indeed, of other examples—such housing also needs to be replaced, because otherwise we will again be looking at a net loss of social housing.

Mr Betts: My hon. Friend makes an extremely powerful point. Not merely should the Government fund the remedial work on tower blocks but, in the Grenfell case, they should fund the replacement of social housing to make sure people do not lose out.

There has been a call for an immediate review of the fire regulations, and the Minister could announce today that the Government will get on with that. I hope that whoever is elected as Chair of the Communities and Local Government Committee today will take a lead, with its new elected members, by getting the Select Committee involved, just as we were in relation to regulations for gas and electrical safety in the home.

Getting Ministers to agree to new regulations has, at times, been a bit like drawing teeth. I draw attention to the Select Committee hearing in 2013 at which Peter Holland, the new chief fire and rescue adviser, and the then Minister were questioned very strongly about the mandatory retrofitting of sprinklers. The then Minister said no to that, and one of the reasons given—it was also given in a Westminster Hall debate—was that we could not have a new regulation unless two old ones were taken off the statute book. What a nonsensical position! Regulations are either necessary or they are not. If regulations are necessary to keep people safe, they should be implemented without having to wait for two others to be cancelled. I hope Ministers will act rapidly, and I am pleased that my local authority in Sheffield has decided to retrofit sprinklers to all its tower blocks in advance of any Government statement.

Colleagues have made the point that cladding should not be fire-tested in isolation. The insulation, the firestops, the fire doors and all other aspects of tower blocks' fire safety systems must be tested. Sheffield, working with the fire service, has so far found only one block where the cladding has failed—the Hanover tower block in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield). However, the fire service has said that because of everything else that is in place in that block, it still believes its fire systems make it safe for people to live there.

Sheffield City Council has done very well. It has written to the fire authority and all the tenants. It has held meetings with them and said that if anyone wants to move temporarily because they feel unsafe, they can do so. It has also put a 24-hour fire watch in the block. But in the end, the fire authority believes that the block is safe because of how the cladding works with the insulation, the firestops and everything else. I hope that Ministers will now look at extending the tests beyond cladding to whole fire prevention systems in blocks, and encouraging local authorities to do the same.

Finally, will the Minister explain why there is to be a taskforce in Kensington and Chelsea and not commissioners? As I said the other day, I believe, as a localist, that commissioners should be used only in extremis, but this is an extreme example of a failure of governance.

Mike Kane: This point has not been raised so far in the debate. I am a Greater Manchester MP, and there was a first-class contingencies response after the Ariana Grande incident in Manchester. What does my hon. Friend think of the council's civil contingencies response after the Grenfell Tower incident?

Mr Betts: I think that the council itself and the Government have admitted that the response was not adequate.

I ask the Minister why there are not to be commissioners. The explanation has been that the taskforce will report to the Secretary of State, but it will not have executive powers. I say to him that this is a recipe for another disaster. When there are mixed lines of accountability and no one is sure who has executive power, that is exactly when things go wrong, because no one is sure who is responsible, everyone leaves things to everyone else and, when something happens, everyone blames everyone else. I ask that we please learn the lessons. Can we have an explanation of why commissioners have not been put in place? It seems to me that the Minister could have acted quickly, but now we have confusion rather than clarity.

3.12 pm

Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): I assure the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) that if he wins the chairmanship of the Communities and Local Government Committee by one vote, it will have been mine, and he is welcome to it.

On a more serious note, I would like to declare an interest. As is set out in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, I am an unremunerated director of 3SFire Ltd, a wholly owned subsidiary of Hampshire fire and rescue authority and a local authority trading company created to help to fill the gap left by the shrinking Government grant for the Hampshire fire and rescue service. 3SFire returns all profits to the fire and rescue authority, and all the directors are unremunerated.

On 6 April 2010, a fire broke out on the ninth floor of Shirley Towers in Southampton. I attended as chairman of the Hampshire fire and rescue authority as crews battled the fire. That fire was brought under control and 100 people were rescued on the night, but at a great cost. Two firefighters who entered the tower block to rescue residents died after becoming entangled in falling electricity cables. They lost their lives while trying to save others. Those two firefighters, Alan Bannon and Jim Shears, demonstrated the very best of our emergency services, and they are still very much missed by everyone who knew them.

The fire in Shirley Towers happened in 2010. The inquest concluded in 2012, and the coroner issued his letter in April 2013. In that letter he recommended—some of this has been said, but I will repeat it, because I think it is important—

“Social housing providers should be encouraged to consider the retro-fitting of sprinklers in all existing high rise buildings in excess of 30 metres in height, particularly those identified by Fire and Rescue Services as having complex designs that make fire-fighting more hazardous and/or difficult.”

After the coroner made his recommendations, Southampton City Council committed to retrofit sprinklers in three high-rise tower blocks. However, as the weeks and months passed, there was no move to carry out the work. I asked the council about it over and over again, and was always given assurances that a report was about to be written or that funds were being made available, but nothing actually happened. Months and years passed, but then finally, in February 2015, Southampton City Council approved a cabinet report saying that it would commit £1 million of housing revenue account money

[Royston Smith]

to retrofit three blocks: Shirley Towers, where the fire happened; Sturminster House; and Albion Towers in my constituency.

Two and a half years after the council agreed that report and allocated the funds, those sprinklers are still not installed. Coincidentally—the Labour cabinet member with responsibility for housing in Southampton has assured me that it is a coincidence—the sprinklers that the city promised more than two years ago for some of the most vulnerable blocks will soon be fitted. That is, at least, what I have been told.

The Leader of the Opposition will be visiting Southampton on Saturday. I hope that while he is there, he will ask the leader of the Labour-controlled council, who was also the Labour candidate in the general election, why he has not acted on the coroner's recommendations and carried out the retrofitting of sprinklers in the city's high-rise flats. I hope that the Leader of the Opposition will also explain to residents of those towers why he and his shadow Chancellor have sought to politicise the tragedy of Grenfell Tower, but have remained silent about Labour-controlled Southampton's failure to act on the coroner's recommendations, despite its promise to residents that it would do so. I am confident—or, more likely, hopeful—that seven years after the Shirley Towers fire, Southampton City Council will retrofit sprinklers in our tower blocks.

I recount these events not for political point scoring—[*Interruption.*] Labour Members may laugh, but that is what they have done from the day of the tragic event at Grenfell Tower. I have not tried to score political points in the way that Labour has sought to do, but for a really important reason. When the inquiry into the Grenfell tragedy has concluded and we know what happened, and how and why it happened, the recommendations flowing from that inquiry must be accepted. The Government must act on those recommendations and not allow the situation to drift for year after year in the way that has been allowed to happen in Southampton. In the years since Shirley Towers there have been dozens of fires in Southampton's tower blocks, and if one of those had turned out like Grenfell or Shirley Towers, there would have been no excuse and nowhere for the local authority to hide.

Andy Slaughter: The hon. Gentleman's case might be more convincing if he did not see everything from one particular vantage point. He says that there must be action after the public inquiry, but does he not agree that action should have been taken in the light of what happened at Lakanal House? Can he perhaps explain why Ministers did not make recommendations about retrofitting sprinklers after that, despite what the coroner said in his letter? [HON. MEMBERS: "We did."] No, you did not.

Royston Smith: As I understand it, and as I said, there was a recommendation that the use of sprinklers should be encouraged. The difference between Southampton and the local authority in the Lakanal case is that Southampton committed to that retrofitting but did not do it.

As I said, if one of the dozens of fires in tower blocks in Southampton since Shirley Towers had turned out like that fire or Grenfell, there would have been nowhere

to hide. If the Government fail to act on the findings of the Grenfell Tower inquiry, we will have nowhere to hide either, and the public will never forgive us.

3.19 pm

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Madam Deputy Speaker, thank you for this opportunity to address the House and make my maiden speech, and as a London MP I am grateful for the chance to speak in the debate about the tragedy of Grenfell Tower.

It is an honour and a privilege to be elected to represent Lewisham West and Penge, the area that I love. I was raised and went to primary school in Sydenham, and I went to secondary school in Penge. I am now raising my own family there and I am proud to call it home.

Growing up, if anyone had told me that I would go on to become the Member of Parliament for my area, I would have laughed. Society never seemed to have much aspiration for girls from Cator Park School, and all too often we were written off, but I am here, and my sister, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), is here, so as my former English teacher said during the general election campaign, Cator Park now has almost as many alumni in this place as Eton.

Our constituency is a collection of strong south-east London communities around Forest Hill, Bellingham, Perry Vale and Sydenham, within Lewisham. Since 2010, it has taken in the bustle of Penge High Street, the suburban calm of Clock House and the splendour of Crystal Palace park, including its legendary dinosaurs.

I am the 12th Member to serve either Lewisham West and Penge or Lewisham West, as it was before 2010. I feel privileged to be the first woman to represent it, 99 years after it was created, in the same year as the Representation of the People Act and the first election in which women could vote. My predecessor Jim Dowd represented the constituency for 25 years and devoted more than 40 years of his life to public service, both in this House and on Lewisham Council. A lifelong resident of SE23, Jim stood up for our local services and good jobs, and he represented his constituents with conviction on national issues. He held a range of positions both in government and opposition, and effectively used his position to further causes that were important to him, especially animals, which he loved, and their welfare. Even his general election literature from 2015 included a picture of him shaking hands with a giant cat.

Previously a bellwether seat, Jim and those who helped to run the local party have helped to turn Lewisham West and Penge into a strong Labour seat, while never taking anything for granted. It is in part thanks to them and their hard work that I am able to stand here now as their representative in Parliament. Jim has been a good friend to me and my family. His support has been immeasurable, and I know that he will be greatly missed in this place.

The enormous loss of life at Grenfell Tower and the preventable tragedy of what happened there have cast a shadow over the first few weeks of this Parliament. Hearing stories of the events that night, it was hard to hold back tears. The unimaginable horror of a mother throwing a baby from a 10th-floor window still haunts me.

The inquiry must now happen quickly, transparently and with the full inclusion of the victims, but what seems clear to me is that what happened at Grenfell Tower and then in the aftermath are symptomatic of a system that is broken; a system that neglects the poor and vulnerable; a system in which cost-effectiveness seems to have been put before health and safety; and a system that I have come to this place to change.

Around the time that Jim was making his maiden speech, I was at secondary school in the constituency. Growing up in the '80s and '90s, we had lessons in huts, class sizes of 35, and not enough books to go around. As the daughter of two teachers, I knew that teachers were undervalued and underpaid. My parents are here today, and I am thankful for the values and the support that they have given me.

It was my experiences, growing up, that made me want to stand up and fight to end inequality, and to make sure that every child gets the best chance in life, no matter what their wealth or background. I am saddened to say that all schools in my constituency face funding cuts, and our wonderful boys' comprehensive, Forest Hill School, is £1.3 million in deficit. I made a promise to my constituents that I would fight hard for our schools and our young people, and that is exactly what I will do.

Another issue that I want to fight for in this place is defending workplace rights. Before entering Parliament, I was an employment rights lawyer for more than a decade, representing working people day in, day out. I know at first hand how many of our employment rights come from Europe, such as paid holiday, limits on working time and many of our discrimination laws. I will fight tooth and nail to prevent any compromise of those rights as we negotiate Britain's exit from the European Union, but we need to go further than that and create a secure workplace and decent wages by banning zero-hours contracts and raising the national minimum wage. I was at a food bank in my constituency on Friday, and it is an absolute travesty that people are having to choose between feeding their children and feeding themselves.

An issue close to my heart is maternity discrimination. After the birth of my son, I set up a business to provide advice on pregnancy discrimination and flexible working to mums and families. I want to work to ensure that all jobs are flexible by default, and that all parents can take parental leave without fearing discrimination or the loss of their job.

I believe that a first-rate education, excellent healthcare, decent housing and proper employment rights are essential to the prosperity of us all. Rather than condemn our constituents to a race to the bottom, we must offer them hope and collectively ensure that our country is able to thrive, advance and progress, while no one is left behind.

3.26 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): May I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) on such a powerful and articulate maiden speech? It is clear that she will be a forceful and effective advocate for her constituents. Her sister, the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), who is sitting behind her, her parents, who are sitting in the Public Gallery, and her constituents, who are watching on TV, can all be proud.

I will say a few words about the public inquiry into this dreadful tragedy. At the risk of stating the obvious, it is of course vital that the inquiry is carried out with absolute impartiality and without fear or favour, and is motivated by a dogged determination to get to the truth, wherever it may lie and however convenient or inconvenient it may be. It is precisely because of those fundamental principles that I think Sir Martin Moore-Bick is the right man for the job, notwithstanding comments that have been made.

Let me be clear: I do not know Sir Martin from Adam. I have never met him, but I know the Court of Appeal, where he served with great distinction, and I have appeared there as an advocate on more occasions than I care to remember, and I can say with my hand on my heart that it is a jewel of the British constitution. In that body reside some of the most brilliant brains to be found anywhere in our country, and perhaps more importantly, that academic distinction is allied with absolute and ferocious independence. I am sorry to say that I have lost there far more times than I have won, but the most powerful tribute that I can pay to the Court of Appeal is that I have always left it understanding the judges' reasons and acknowledging the consummate fairness and integrity that they have brought to the process.

That is why I want to address a troubling insinuation that may be being made: that as an educated man with a title, Sir Martin is somehow ineligible for this job. Let me be clear that in our system of law, no one gets to his position by being nice to the Government. They get to it, more often than not, by being a nuisance—by holding the Government back when they overreach themselves, and by holding them fiercely to account—because the legal culture in this country is that the greatest accolade that can be paid to a judge is that he or she is fair. The Court of Appeal has that in spades; Sir Martin has that in spades. We owe it to the victims to let him get on with the job.

3.29 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): May I begin by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves)? She made an eloquent speech and is clearly going to fill the shoes of her predecessor. He was one of the more outstanding Members on the Labour Back Benches and will be remembered for many reasons, not all them to do with his approach to parliamentary debate, which we will all remember with affection. He was a forthright advocate on behalf of his constituents, and I can remember with a great deal of affection when he was my Whip too—we finished on good terms.

I associate myself with all the comments made about the first responders and the emergency services, about the officers of Kensington and Chelsea Council who went above and beyond the call of duty to try to respond to the needs of local people—it is sometimes overlooked that there were individuals who did an enormous amount of work; we need to recognise that—and, of course, about those affected by the tragedy.

The response exposed a complete failure on the part of Government, right the way to local government. It also exposed the fact that when local authorities reduce their manpower resources and the services they provide, and when they are so thin that they cannot respond in

[Clive Efford]

such circumstances, it is clear that we are going too far with reductions in investment in what is needed to support local communities. There is more to a council than a posh town hall; it is what is in it that counts. When a council prides itself on being able to give a £100 council tax rebate in the run-up to local elections, it leaves itself with few resources with which to respond in such circumstances. When that council takes what has to be described as a minimalist approach to providing and backing up those services and when it prides itself, first and foremost, on how little it spends, it is no wonder that there is no resilience when such a tragedy happens.

This is a tragedy that would have overwhelmed any local authority. The demand on local resources was huge, and any council would have needed the assistance of other local authorities to step in and support them, so one of the questions for the inquiry has to be: why, when those offers of help were made in the first 24 hours, did Kensington and Chelsea Council not respond to them? My local authority has been dealing with the concerns of local residents living in tower blocks, who want to know that they are safe, and using its communications and its housing officers and councillors to go out and talk to residents to reassure them, and to carry out the fire safety checks and everything else. At the same time it has been providing support to Kensington and Chelsea. It is quite clear from the response to those offers of help that there was something fundamentally wrong at the heart of Kensington and Chelsea. I pay tribute to those in the local community who spontaneously got together and responded to the needs of local people.

There are some lessons that we could have learned along the way, as the chair of the all-party group on fire safety rescue mentioned, and not just from Lakanal House. There have been incidents in other countries where exactly the same type of aluminium cladding caused the rapid spread of fires. The photographs of one that took place in 2014 in Melbourne, Australia—they are on the internet and were in the media at the time—look almost identical to those of the fire that took place at Grenfell Tower. What is surprising is that it is clear from talking to experts in the field—fire safety officers and others—that they knew the significance of that fire and the lessons that should have been learned about this type of cladding at the time. It is remarkable that there seems to have been no knowledge of that on the part of the Government or any review of the materials used for tower blocks at that time, because other countries did take action. They took steps to ban this type of cladding from being used on tower blocks.

There are questions to be asked. In the Lacrosse tower case in Melbourne, there was a sprinkler system in place, and some 500 people were evacuated from that block. No one died; they got out safely because a sprinkler system was in place. In some areas in that building the sprinkler system was overcome by the fire, but it was still sufficient to keep the fire from spreading within the building, thereby enabling people to leave. This question has to be asked: why have the Government not been learning these lessons along the way, not just from Lakanal, but from other fires that are clearly sending a message about the types of materials we use on these tower blocks? I want the inquiry to look into that.

Some countries take steps to limit the number of people who can live at height above a certain floor in tower blocks of specific designs. I also ask the inquiry to look into that. Do we need to have regulations in place to try to limit the number of people who live in tower blocks at height? This, again, was an issue in the Melbourne fire; because of shortages of housing and housing costs, so many people were crammed into the units in that tower block. Do we need to have a fire regulation on this? I ask the inquiry to look into that, too.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): When I met Sheffield local authority, it expressed concerns about the safety of not only tower block residents but individuals living in flats above takeaways and other commercial premises, which often share the same staircase, bathroom and kitchen as the commercial premises and often are very overcrowded—for example, with illegal immigrants sharing beds. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to look into the possibility of having regulations in this area?

Clive Efford: I entirely agree. We need to look at that, as in another situation the numbers of people in a block could become an issue—and we do not know that that was not an issue in this instance as well.

The inquiry must also look at the issue raised by the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), about building control. There are a number of issues about enforcement and making regular checks on the work done when refurbishments take place. Are the fire blocks being put in place between the floors, for instance? The advice to me from a constituent of mine who is an expert and who has been in the media speaking about this case, and about this issue for many years, is that we are very lax about the enforcement of the fire blocks between the floors and around windows, and we need to ensure that there is proper enforcement of this. The inquiry must look into that, too.

Responsibility for appointing the building control must lie with the local authority. There must be clear lines of responsibility for maintaining these standards, and we must stop local authorities being side-lined over ensuring that safety standards are considered of the utmost importance when these schemes go ahead.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is a scandal that no minimum qualifications are required to become a building control practitioner, and does he agree that we need urgent action on this?

Clive Efford: Yes, an incident such as this one shows that there must be a basic knowledge of fire safety regulations, and there are many other issues that building control has to cover, so of course there must be a minimum qualification requirement.

The current position on sprinklers makes no sense. New blocks built to new building standards over 30 metres high are required to have a sprinkler system installed. However, older buildings built to an older standard of building control are not required to retrofit. That is completely and utterly illogical. The Government—outside of the inquiry and everything else—must fund the retrofitting of sprinklers in those blocks of flats where

that has been recommended by fire safety officers. There can be no equivocating on that. This fire shows that that is essential, and the Government should just accept that we cannot hold back on it any longer.

We are told that there was a plan to put fireproof cladding on to Grenfell Tower but that it was £2 per square metre more expensive than the cheaper version that was actually put on. If that is correct, the inquiry will obviously have something to say about it. There are some questions here. As I have said, this cheaper type of cladding was already on other blocks where similar fires had taken place. Why was it allowed to be used on this block? Is it true that the contractors who were erecting the cladding raised concerns about whether they should be putting that cladding on that block at that height? If it is true, action must obviously be taken against the people who made that decision.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Clive Efford: I will not, because I am taking up some time and I want to sit down. I have had the nod from the Deputy Speaker, and if I do not sit down quite soon, I will not get called again.

My final question for the Minister is about the Building Regulations Advisory Committee. We were told that, in the light of the Lakanal report, that committee would meet to oversee fire regulations, but that meeting did not take place. The Minister said that that work would be completed by the end of this year, but the committee has not yet met. We need to hear from the Minister why, in the light of the report on Lakanal, that committee did not meet to review the fire regulations. In my opinion, this shows that the Government were asleep on the job. I hope that we will learn the lessons from this, once and for all, when the inquiry reports. Lakanal should have shown us the steps we needed to take to prevent this. Fires that have happened in other countries since Lakanal have pointed the way to the action that we should have taken. We have to learn the lessons once and for all to ensure that this type of tragedy never happens again.

3.43 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I should like to extend my congratulations to the new hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves). It feels a bit strange to be welcoming you to the House when I have only just arrived here myself, but you made a wonderful speech and I look forward to working with you—I mean “her”; I am still learning the conventions myself.

I greatly enjoyed making my maiden speech, but it gives me no pleasure to stand before the House today to talk about this tragedy that has befallen our country. I am afraid that it will be one of those disasters that mark this period in our history and that we will remember for a long time to come. The Prime Minister has responded to it entirely appropriately by calling for a judge-led inquiry, and I was pleased that the shadow Secretary of State did not question the basis on which we intend to proceed. The Prime Minister went to the Lord Chief Justice and asked for a senior judge to be appointed and to proceed with an inquiry that will look into the immediate causes of the fire as well as the wider issues. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for

North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) said earlier, that will give the inquiry the opportunity to report in two or more stages, so that local residents can hear the issues that have immediately affected them while the inquiry goes on to consider the broader questions that affect communities and councils in many areas across the country.

It is with reference to those wider issues that I want to make some remarks, and I declare a sort of interest in that for a while I was on the board of Yarlinton Housing Group, a housing association in the west of England.

The first thing that struck me came from a BBC “Newsnight” investigation which suggested that developers may have used only desk-based research to persuade inspectors that the cladding was safe to use. If that is the case, serious questions must be answered following the tragedy, and we would want to know where else in the country that has happened.

The second thing is tenant feedback. If the reports are true that tenants had complained to the tenant management organisation about safety in the building and if those calls were not listened to, we need to know why. We need to know why the TMO was not picking up on the important feedback that only someone who lives in a building can give. I am not saying that had that feedback been listened to the fire would have been prevented, but without that feedback we can be certain that people in other buildings are being put at risk.

That brings me on to my next point: illegal sub-letting. It is a delicate, sensitive subject, and the Government have been absolutely right to announce an amnesty to encourage everyone to seek help and to come forward. Illegal sub-letting in our tower blocks and social housing discourages people from coming forward and reporting their concerns—it breaks that feedback. We all have to think of ways to ensure that people living in social housing can come forward and have their concerns heard.

My fourth point relates to something that I said in the House the other day, and it has been picked up on by a couple of other Members. What happened in Kensington and Chelsea prompts some serious questions about emergency and contingency planning in our local authorities. Just as some other authorities have used the cladding that seems to have been a major contributor to the fire, so other authorities may have emergency planning that leaves a lot to be desired. However, I was reassured by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government that the Cabinet Office is already looking into that, and I am keen that that work is taken forward.

Before I sit down, I would like to reflect on something said by my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk). I am glad that we seem to be in agreement that we should have a judge-led inquiry. I was pleased that the shadow Secretary of State did not criticise Sir Martin, and I presume that he backs him in his role. Sir Martin is a highly respected judge and has achieved great things in his profession, dealing with extremely complex areas of law that will be relevant to this inquiry. That is an asset to the investigation, and we should all welcome that. His ability to do that work is not hampered by the colour of his skin or his social class. His skills have got him to where he is, and it is his skills that we should back. The inquiry will require some cool-headed thinking. It will not be helped by hot remarks that

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suggest to the families that the victims were intentionally killed by people in government. It will not be helped by remarks that suggest that someone's impartiality is undermined by their social class. While we can debate its particulars, we all have a duty to get behind the inquiry and to encourage people who live in the area and in other tower blocks to come forward and be part of it.

3.49 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I congratulate you on your election, Madam Deputy Speaker.

It is a privilege to make my maiden speech, but it is sobering to do so in this debate on Grenfell, which reminds us all of the seriousness of our duties as Members of this House. I am pleased to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves), who also made her maiden speech today.

I begin by paying tribute to my predecessor, Michael Dugher. The son of a railwayman, he has been true to his working class roots and a strong campaigner for Barnsley East on issues such as community pharmacies, Orgreave and brass bands. For all his achievements, he has been awarded the rare accolade of featuring on the wall of Strangers Bar—better the wall than the floor. Music is his passion, and now it is his job, as chief executive of UK Music. I know that family is important to him, and I wish him and Jo well in their new adventure. His predecessor, Jeff Ennis, has served as leader of Barnsley council and MP for Barnsley East, and is now mayor of Barnsley—a unique achievement.

Like Jeff, I was a teacher before entering this place. Working in education, I saw the profound power of learning, and I have learned myself that it is incumbent on all of us to support the next generation. I am particularly proud to be the first female MP for Barnsley East, but I would not be here without the help and encouragement of a former female Member, Sylvia Heal, who sat in your Chair for many years, Madam Deputy Speaker, as you will remember. I am delighted that she is here today, along with my parents. I am the daughter of a midwife and a care worker, and I owe them huge thanks for all their support.

For the past four years, I have been proud to fight for working people as an officer of the GMB trade union. As a Member of this House, I will continue that fight for working people, not least for the many trapped in jobs that are more precarious than ever before. Today's debate reminds us of what we have fought for over so many years, of how the lessons of the past are still as relevant today, and of how, even now, not all communities are equal and the protection of human life requires our action in this House.

Many people will know about Barnsley's history, and there is so much to be proud of, but still I have constituents waiting for justice for what happened to them at Orgreave in 1984. We must ensure that the Grenfell victims do not wait as long.

In Barnsley East, our industrial and cultural heritage runs alongside our history of working-class struggle. It is appropriate that the town is home to both the National Union of Mineworkers and the famous Grimethorpe Colliery band. Our communities were built on heavy industry—glass, steel and coal. Mining was a way of life

for entire communities. Some 30,000 people worked down the pits, and the impact of their loss is still felt today.

Many of my hon. Friends will know my constituency from the film "Brassed Off", which showed so powerfully the character, grit, humour, solidarity and struggle faced by honest, decent, hard-working people. No one who has seen the film can forget Danny's powerful speech when he says that nothing matters like people matter. It is traditional for Members to talk about the great history of their constituencies in a maiden speech, and I am very proud to do so, but nothing matters like people matter.

It is above all the people of Barnsley East who make the constituency what it is. People like the teaching assistant, her pay falling but her bills rising. She looks after our children; we should look after her. People like the insecure worker at a warehouse, labouring on the minimum wage. She works hard for her family; we should work just as hard for her. People like the veteran who served his country, yet is now homeless and jobless. He fought for us; we should fight for him. In Barnsley East we can be proud of our industry and our history. All of it matters, but none of it matters like people matter.

The NUM in Barnsley has a banner embroidered with the words, "The past we inherit, the future we build." I have spoken about our proud past, but the people of Barnsley East did not send me here to honour our history. They sent me here to build our future, and that is what I intend to do.

3.54 pm

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): This is only the second opportunity I have had to make a speech in this Chamber, so when I look at those making their maiden speeches today, I think, "That was only me last week." The Labour party has so far not had the presence of mind to elect a female leader, yet having listened to the speeches of the hon. Members for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) and for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), I think it cannot be long until it does so. There is such an amazing proliferation of female talent in that party that I just cannot understand why they have not taken it over and occupied all the Front-Bench positions, with the greatest of respect to those men who occupy them at the moment. While it is an honour to follow both hon. Members, it is also unfortunate, because that will only demean my own performance.

I feel not only that I should declare some interests—I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests—but that I should present my CV. I am still the chair of the board of a housing association that has 20,000 homes in Walsall. I am also notionally, at least until the end of this month—it is not paying me at the moment, but I am still trying to help out—the assistant chief exec of YMCA in Birmingham, which has 300 units of accommodation for formerly homeless young people. I am also a member of the Chartered Institute of Building and a civil engineer by degree. That is relevant because of the points I feel that I need to make.

I have sat in a number of meetings as chair of the board of Walsall Housing Group, an association that is currently on site or in contract to build approximately 800 properties, some of which will be for shared ownership.

The need for that type of property across the UK is understood. Some of the properties will be available under the slightly more innovative rent to buy scheme, so there will be opportunities for different tenures of housing, funded by this Government. Perhaps the part of that Government funding I am most proud of is Homelessness Change funding, which is received by the YMCA and will allow us to provide much-needed modernisation for a 72-bed hostel in Northfield. This Government are investing in housing of various tenures.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) said that we will talk about the Grenfell tragedy for many years to come. It was a significant and tragic event. Next year will mark the 50th anniversary of the Ronan Point disaster. Ivy Hodge lit a match to make a cup of tea, and the ensuing explosion, which was caused by gas leaking from a pipe to her cooker, blew her across the room and, more importantly, knocked out some supporting walls in her flat, which was on the fifth floor from the top. Not only did the explosion take out the supporting walls and damage all the flats above, but it led to catastrophic failure for all flats below, resulting in four people dying and devastation to the building.

Tests were subsequently done, and new structural supports were put in and the building was reoccupied. However, the consideration of the design criteria went on for years, with many people challenging complex issues such as wind loading, which was affected by whether or not the windows were open, and the building was taken down about 18 years later.

The point I am trying to make is that it is sometimes not easy to understand what has gone wrong. Speaking as somebody who has supervised the construction of these buildings and has been involved in their design, I know that designers invariably err on the side of caution.

Adam Afriyie: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech and I very much value his experience in the building sector. Does he agree that often the devil is in the detail of the legislation, which uses terms such as “limited combustibility”? A definition of a precise standard for fire retardancy might be more useful. Perhaps there will be an opportunity for the inquiry to provide some recommendations along those lines so that everybody knows the exact standards that need to be met.

Eddie Hughes: My hon. Friend is right. Any opportunity for interpretation means that people have the chance to err either on the side of caution or, as some might suggest, on the side of cutting costs. The inclusion of that explicit detail would prevent such an opportunity for interpretation.

We will never be able to mitigate all risk, so it is incredibly important that we work with the fire service to minimise risk. I am grateful to Lee Sketchley from West Midlands fire service who came to see us at the YMCA. He inspected the hostel and we are acting on some of the recommendations for improvement that he made. That is relevant because of the stay-put policy, which has been mentioned. Its concept is built on the idea of compartmentalisation: if the whole fabric of the flat allows two hours’ exposure to fire before it penetrates, people can reasonably stay in that flat for a period, safe in the knowledge that somebody should be able to come and rescue them during that time. However, we will have

all seen—we will have seen it in this building during the warm weather—fire doors propped open, sometimes with fire extinguishers, ironically, but that renders the door useless in the event of a fire. Similarly, we will have seen fire doors that have been painted: the intumescent smoke-seal strip on the edge of the door will be affected by the paint, which will prevent it from serving its purpose if there is a fire.

I say to Members on both sides of the Chamber that we all have a responsibility. It is up to us to go back to the big housing providers in our constituencies and seek reassurances from them, individually, that they are sticking to the legislation that is already in place. Before we go looking for too much new legislation, let us at least make absolutely sure about that.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we also have a responsibility to provide adequate resources to our fire services? Let us also deal with staff morale, as the pay cap that has been imposed on our emergency services, including the fire service, is not helping matters at all.

Eddie Hughes: I am not sure that I can totally agree with the latter half of the hon. Gentleman’s point. I think the fire service’s response to the Grenfell tragedy was absolutely fantastic, as was that to the bombing of the Ariana Grande concert. The service that I personally have had from Lee Sketchley at West Midlands fire service has been absolutely fantastic. The fire service is clearly managing to deliver a first-class service with its current resources.

I end by simply saying: let us make absolutely sure that we understand that fire safety is everybody’s responsibility.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I know that the hon. Gentleman is just about to finish his speech but, notwithstanding all his points about personal responsibility, and not painting fire doors or propping them open with fire extinguishers, people must be forgiven for leaving their windows open on a hot summer’s night only for flames to engulf their flats from the outside in.

Eddie Hughes: I could not agree more. We need to be certain that the design criteria we apply to these buildings mitigates that sort of circumstance.

4.3 pm

Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): At times of national disaster, poets laureate are often called on to commemorate and reflect on events. In north Kensington, we have our own Ben Jonsons and Alfred, Lord Tennysons. Our poets laureate are Akala, AJ Tracey, Lowkey and Peaky. We have Stormzy, and Potent Whisper calling out what he calls “Grenfell Britain” in gut-wrenching prose. We have poets and artists aplenty, but the Philistine council does not recognise their talent and would rather spend £30 million over 20 years on opera for a minority in Holland Park.

Why is all that relevant to this debate? Because for many years Kensington and Chelsea Council has misspent Government and council tax payers’ funds on countless vanity projects and handouts, as we have heard, while underfunding essential services such as nurseries, play centres, lunch clubs, homework clubs, youth centres,

[Emma Dent Coad]

advice centres, skills training and of course, as so tragically demonstrated, council housing. That is not to mention the recent controversial projects to hand our beautiful North Kensington library and neighbouring youth centre over to two private schools, at a cost to the council of £11 million, without even consulting the public, whose money is being used to fund private education. This is an £11 million gift to the private sector, while the council cannot find the money for sprinklers, decent cladding or fire alarms. Where is the accountability? To whom does Britain's favourite council report? Clearly, it is not to the taskforce.

As we have seen, and as has now been acknowledged, the council's response in the early hours and days after the fire was shockingly inadequate, and possibly even criminally neglectful; we shall see. So in the past four weeks, has it improved? Has the council learned from its mistakes? It has not. It has removed a chief executive and senior councillors have resigned, but who are replacing them? Where fundamental change is so desperately and clearly needed, we have had no change at all and a consolidation of the leadership that failed.

Survivors and volunteers are asking: where is the money so generously donated by the public? Where are the millions? Who is deciding where this money should go? Why is the council not using some of its reserves—near a third of a billion pounds—to purchase properties and support those whom it has so disgracefully failed? Has no one demanded that, after years of underspending revenue, money that has been shuffled into capital reserves for vanity projects be returned, quite properly, to those who need it? No one has. What is needed in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Council is fundamental change, and I can see that we are not going to get it without further outside intervention and the support of people who can be trusted. The longer the situation prevails, the worse it will get. I am asking for intervention.

I get daily updates from people on the ground. Where is the wrap-around support for bereaved and desperate people who are still staying in hotels, as the much trumpeted “high-quality” temporary accommodation has been unsuitable or has not materialised at all? Why offer a survivor a high-rise flat? That happened this week. Why offer a disabled woman a home reachable only by stairs, where there is no lift? That happened this week. Why offer a flat in Pimlico, which is too far away for people to reach survivors' networks? Where is the offer of temporary accommodation—

Adam Afriyie: I am listening carefully to the hon. Lady. Does she not accept that it should be for the people who are offered accommodation to choose whether to take it?

Emma Dent Coad: They have been offered one choice, so they have had no choice. It is that choice or the hotel. Normally, when someone is offered temporary accommodation, they have a choice of three or four places, and after that, they may be threatened with voluntary homelessness. On this occasion, they have been offered one each, so they have had no choice at all. All that happened this week, and I have direct communication with the people it happened to. Still no one is accountable.

More specifically on housing, can we please acknowledge that this process continues for many to be chaotic, daily? Why is a tenant management organisation that is under criminal investigation still in control of housing? The updates I get from survivors, members of voluntary groups and others directly involved in this project talk about a lack of cultural awareness among some social workers, and a lack of continuity of care. The issue of whether or not there is an amnesty where there are concerns about someone's immigration status continues. I know what the situation is, but those involved certainly do not, as the communication is very poor.

Issues relating to the walks or finger blocks continue. Are these things safe? What about the fire exits? The issues about communication from the TMO, the confusion about the payment of rent, and the threatened eviction of people who have not paid may have been dealt with, but the legacy is still there. Does everyone know where they stand? It seems not. Some near neighbours in blocks are too scared to return, saying that they hear ghosts and screaming. As far as we can ascertain, survivors are given one choice of accommodation. Why only one? There should be a choice. One person turned down a flat with mould. Another turned down a flat scheduled for demolition. Is there no centralised list of decent available housing? There seems to be no co-ordination here. Somebody this week had offered three impeccably refurbished flats to the council, only to be told that everyone had been housed in high-quality homes, which we know is not true.

Frankly, this continuing disaster and lack of care and respect for survivors is unacceptable. It comes from a culture at Kensington and Chelsea Council that needs to be addressed—soon. The longer this goes on, the worse it is for survivors. Will the Government continue to let the council fail its survivors in so many ways? This is Potent Whisper's Grenfell Britain.

Let me turn briefly to mental health. Many survivors are still in shock and cannot begin to recover until they can bury their loved ones. Many will have to wait a very long time for that. Many are fragile, and I have huge concerns for their mental health. I know people who are still in shock and not on any path to recovery. One was on the phone to her terrified best friend for over an hour, debating whether she should stay in the flat or try to leave. Then the phone went dead. The surviving friend calls and texts her friend every day, even though she knows that she is dead. Who is looking after her?

I am particularly concerned about those who may have mental health crises. There has already been one threatened suicide and one attempted suicide, and there may be more. We can be sure that many affected people will need urgent and intensive treatment at some point.

For many years, the minority party councillors in Kensington and Chelsea have been asking for an increase in the number of places of safety for people suffering crises. This followed a series of incidents in which people with mental health issues in sheltered housing had had crises and then ended up in a police cell overnight because there was nowhere else for them to go. Meanwhile, we hear that an entire ward at a London hospital is locked because there is not enough cash to keep it open. Patients are offloaded to private mental healthcare facilities at a cost of nearly £600 a day. Where is the logic in that, and who should be held accountable for it?

After four weeks, we are still witnessing a process that is reactive, not proactive. The council and the Government are one step behind. We need a sensible plan in place. We need to review that closed ward and allocate funds to staff it. Please can we have a proper strategic plan for housing and all the other issues? We are just reacting daily.

A lot of people and groups are beginning to plan for the future. Many come to me—many are well-meaning—and want me to tell them where they went wrong and how they can improve their approach or better serve their people. With my background in architecture and planning, I have lots of ideas, some of which I have been working on for years, but at a time when people feel so utterly betrayed and distrustful, I cannot possibly support any kind of top-down, outside intervention, however expert or well-meaning it is. At any time, but particularly at a time like this, good planning starts with the people whose lives will be changed by it. It starts with a blank sheet of paper, and should end in improving the lives of the people who live in the area, but often that does not happen. The estate development proposed by the council—and developments proposed by many councils of all political hues—is not for the benefit of existing tenants. We need a completely fresh approach. Overarching this is a genuine, often misplaced and sometimes insulting attitude that those in positions of power and influence know better than the “little people”, as some see them. I have never believed that, and perhaps that is why I was elected.

Members will have heard about our volunteer groups and organisations; they did not spring up from nowhere. They have always been there—always unappreciated and undervalued. They are amazing and self-organising. We need to learn lessons from them and bring them into the future.

What was so cruelly taken from our Grenfell people must be returned. They do not wish to be penalised financially forever for an act that they were not responsible for. They want their dignity back, and somewhere decent to mend and recover. We cannot return their deceased to life, but their families do want to bury something. They want the choice of where to bury their dead, and that has not always been offered.

This horrific event must be a game-changer. We need a thorough review of approaches to estate development and of the funding of social housing. We need to listen to the people affected and their warnings, and act on their concerns and priorities with the transparency and honesty that has so clearly been missing. Grenfell people do not want our pity or charity. They want their dues, they want justice, and they want change. Our poets and artists will continue to shame us all with their insight and intelligence until we recognise that, and accept their collaboration on the fundamental change that is so desperately needed.

4.14 pm

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): I welcome you to your place, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is humbling to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) and her powerful words. What a difference it makes having a Labour MP in that constituency to speak up for the voiceless and those without power following this tragic incident.

Many of us still find ourselves unable to comprehend the shocking fire at Grenfell Tower—the tragedy that so perfectly captures our deep national, political and social crisis. The Grenfell fire is also a symbol of the systematic running down of institutions that we all need. Inevitably, as those systems begin to break down, the poor and vulnerable are the first in line to experience that failure.

We need high-quality journalism and a properly funded legal aid system that allows ordinary people their rightful protection under the law. We need properly paid public sector workers, and local government with the resources and power to do what is needed—not just act as a rubber stamp for Westminster. Of course, it is critical that today we focus on the detail of what went wrong at Grenfell, but I would also like to make two short points that argue for wider action—the kind of action that never ends.

The institutions that have a critical role in preventing disasters and clearing up the mess when things go wrong do not exist by accident. If they are run down, we reach the point where we—the lawmakers in this place—are daily exposing families and communities to unacceptable risks. When that happens, as it has for too long, we are culpable because we have pushed systems and people to the limit. I stand here today with friends on the Opposition side of the House to say that we will fight hard to end the relentless running down of multiple civic functions. No longer will that be done in our name. It looks to me as though the country is with us in that endeavour.

It is clear that both local authorities and the fire service were heavily relied on, both before the Grenfell tragedy and in dealing with the aftermath as it unfolded. So far there are only a few buildings of concern in Norwich, but a small and diminishing army of public sector and housing association workers doing their jobs day in, day out, with diminishing resources and morale, have had to deal with the fallout from Grenfell. Too often, those workers have too little power and too few resources to regulate the private sector in the public interest. Of the six blocks being tested for flammable cladding in Norwich, five are in the private sector.

What, for example, is being done to check privately owned student halls of residence? Will the Minister address the fact that many are now privately owned and managed? How can the Government and the universities ensure that such residences are checked for flammable cladding and that the highest safety standards apply? Can they confirm that student halls are classed as “other residential buildings” and are therefore subject to weaker requirements for sprinklers? If so, will the Government consider closing that loophole?

On a similar note, parents rely on their children being safe in our schools. The Government had been planning to change the regulations on fire safety in schools, removing the expectation that most new school buildings would be fitted with sprinklers, on the basis that school buildings do not need to be sprinkler-protected to achieve “a reasonable standard of life safety”—

the Government’s own words. Since the Grenfell fire, Ministers have hinted that those plans will rightly be abandoned. Can they make their position absolutely clear to the House?

[Clive Lewis]

Schools in Norwich are suffering particularly badly from Government cuts and are threatened with the worst settlement in Norfolk under the proposed funding formula, although we are waiting to find out whether and how that will ever be implemented. Can the Minister tell us whether any central funding will be made available for essential safety work, so that those schools do not face yet more unfunded costs from the Government?

I turn back to the local authorities, which have been subject to 1,000 unnatural shocks in funding and changes to their ways of working. To name but one, there is the Government's mandatory 1% rent reduction, which, at a stroke, reduces Norwich City Council's ability to repair and improve its ageing housing stock by an average of £7.4 million a year. What is the reality of that mandatory rent reduction? There is less investment in our council housing stock, and council activities such as the daily safety checks carried out on our high-rise blocks are put at risk. In Norwich, we are fortunate enough to have a Labour-run city council that makes sure that those safety checks happen, but like many other local authorities, my council is coming up against the physical limits of what it can do with its resources, which have been cut year after year by this Government.

It is not just our local authority that is struggling to maintain safe standards. Our fire services—the men and women whom we are rightly so quick to applaud for their bravery—also have concerns. Whole-time firefighters earn less than £30,000 a year, so the Labour party welcomes the fact that the 1% cap was not imposed on their new pay offer. But there is a catch. Given that there has been no confirmation of how this will be funded, firefighters are concerned that the money will come from the service itself. Borrowing from Peter to pay Paul will not improve anyone's safety. The Government must understand that the ongoing funding cuts to our institutions and to those who work so hard for them are critical parts of the Grenfell story. Reversing them is essential to prevent another tragedy.

4.20 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I am pleased to be making my maiden speech in such an important debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) and for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) on their contributions today.

I am deeply proud to have been elected as the first ever woman MP in Croydon. I pay tribute to my predecessor, Gavin Barwell, who served our town for seven years. Among the many good things he did was his work to introduce Lillian's law, following the tragic death of 14-year-old Lillian Groves in 2010. The law means that drivers can now be prosecuted if they are caught exceeding new drug limits. Since it was passed, there have been more than 13,000 convictions.

Gavin is also an acclaimed author. I understand that his book, "How to Win a Marginal Seat", was much read among Conservative Members. I cannot wait for the sequel. I should also record my gratitude to the Prime Minister for giving me an early replay after my narrow defeat in 2015. I am so glad that I was able to repay the favour by helping her with her own staffing problems.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies), who was the MP for Croydon Central for eight years, and the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), who was the MP for the constituency for six years. I am delighted to be here with my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed), who is already a great champion of our town. I hope that two on the Opposition Benches will be better than one, and that we can truly stand up for Croydon.

I am privileged to have worked for two former Members of this House: the late Mo Mowlam, when she was a trailblazing shadow Northern Ireland Secretary; and as a civil servant for Tessa Jowell, when she was in charge of delivering the 2012 Olympics. They were both truly inspirational in completely different ways, and I am grateful to Tessa for the help she gave me during my recent campaign.

I am so proud to be part of a record number of women in this House, and particularly to be part of the women's parliamentary Labour party, which makes up 45% of Labour MPs. Just one more heaven and we will be there. With the growing number of women and men from ethnic minorities, we are getting closer to looking like the country we represent. That is really significant for our democracy.

Croydon is deeply special to me. I have lived there all my life. Generations of my family were born and have died there. Most recently, my father died on 11 June this year, three days after the general election. He lived just long enough to see his daughter fulfil her goal, and to be proved right about my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn). My father was a big fan of the Leader of the Opposition, so there is a good lesson for us all—listen to your dad.

Croydon is exceptional. The greenest and the largest of all the London boroughs, its diversity is its strength, from the woodlands of Shirley to the tower blocks of the town centre, and from the strong community of New Addington surrounded by fields to the Victorian terraces of South Norwood. Most agree that the name of our town derives from "crocus valley", where, during the Roman period, crocuses were grown to make saffron to be sold as medicine on the streets of London. In the very heart of Croydon, we are growing crocuses again to make saffron. Our great theatre, Fairfield Halls, is being reborn through a multimillion pound makeover, and our art and culture are at the cutting edge, with artists from across the world literally painting our town with new art work. Our tech scene is the fastest growing in London, and we have the highest number of young people in London with nearly 100,000 in the whole borough. We are ambitious for Croydon, and I know that we will thrive.

But there are two sides to every tale. Seven years of austerity have ripped through our community: low pay, the horror that is the implementation of universal credit, cuts to disability benefits, high housing costs, rocketing homelessness, crippling cuts to local government, increasing knife crime, cuts to school funding, and young people starting out on their lives with debt.

We are letting people down if we do not, as a House, acknowledge the reality of the lives of those we are here to serve. I think many in this House are in complete denial about the scale of the problems we face. We are letting people down still more if we do not, with the

greatest energy and hunger for change, act in every way we can to make the lives of those we represent better, richer and more secure.

The Grenfell Tower fire showed just how extraordinarily our emergency services can respond at a time of great crisis, but it also shows how badly we get things wrong. On the Saturday after this disaster, I met a Croydon fireman who had been called to fight the Grenfell blaze just days earlier. There were tears in our eyes as he told me about the terrible things he had seen. He made me promise not to rest until we saw justice done. Today, as a House, I hope we can make a reality of that promise. It is clear that we failed too many people for too long. The victims were speaking, but we were not listening. We cannot make the same mistake again.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) has suggested that we set up an advisory panel to help to build confidence and relations with local residents and survivors. That sounds very sensible. Shelter has said that it is not acceptable to expect residents to rely on written submissions only, and residents have clearly stated that the current timeline for submissions on the terms of reference is too short. That also seems sensible. But I wonder whether we also need to be brave enough to say, “We don’t have all the answers.” The whole point of listening is to listen and then to act. I would like us to be strong enough to commit to do that with the survivors and the local residents.

I am proud that Labour Croydon Council was the first council to commit to retrofitting all our high tower blocks with sprinklers. I call on the Government to clarify whether they will fund this, and all the other changes we need to make, and reverse the shocking cuts we have seen to local government. We cannot afford not to do this.

We must also view Grenfell in the wider context of a national housing crisis. Three figures tell the story. Right now, 76,000 families live in temporary accommodation—that is the best part of 120,000 children. Some 20% of our homes do not meet the Government’s decent homes standard—that includes fire safety. We also need to build 75,000 social rented homes a year; last year, we built fewer than 7,000.

I spoke to thousands of people on the doorstep in the election. Of course, there was nothing like on the scale of the horrors of Grenfell, but there were many experiences that led people to believe they had no voice. Having a voice is not about being able to speak out; it is about knowing you will be listened to and about being sure that action will be taken that makes a difference. Nowhere is that more important than in our response to the Grenfell Tower fire.

I said it was my goal to be the MP for Croydon Central. My ambition is not to be something, but to do something—to make a difference to the lives of the people I now represent. I do not underestimate the scale of that responsibility.

Many young people voted for me, just as young people voted in many other constituencies. There were many others who were voting for the very first time. They had perhaps never voted before because they felt politicians had nothing to offer. Now that they have put their faith in democracy—in us—for the first time, we must not fail them. If the election has

taught us anything, it is that we cannot take anyone for granted. As Croydon’s Stormzy put it so well in one of his songs,

“You’re never too big for the boot”.

When I am campaigning again in five years’ time—or even sooner—the true test for me will be that people tell me that I listened, I heard what they said, and I did my best to make a difference to their lives. I think that has to be the test for all of us on both sides of the House.

4.28 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is a particular honour to follow three maiden speeches, all made by three new female Members. I made my maiden speech two weeks ago, so I am now speaking as a very experienced old timer. What particularly resonated with me was what the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) said: people matter. That is very relevant to our debate today.

One month on from this tragedy, there is no less pain for the victims and their families, no less fear, and no less anger over the failings of the political system. The disaster at Grenfell Tower has left a huge scar, not just in the local community of Kensington, but across Britain. It has moved people deeply, whether they have local connections or not, and that has been reflected in the generosity shown by public donations. It has also exposed deep divisions and inequalities in our society which we have ignored for far too long. This disaster should have been avoided. How is it possible that, in a very wealthy borough like Kensington and Chelsea, dozens of people can burn to death in their own homes?

We now need to find out from the public inquiry exactly what happened and what mistakes were made, but reports that unsafe building materials were used, that the need to cut costs was put above tenants’ safety, and that concerns raised by the residents were repeatedly ignored paint a picture that goes much deeper than this disaster. It goes to the heart of our political system and its failures. Trust between our local communities and the political system has been seriously eroded, and must be restored.

Trust is a very precious thing which takes a long time to build. It is an essential part of a healthy democracy and a functioning society. It is vital that, in the work to restore lives affected by the Grenfell Tower fire, everything possible is done to rebuild that trust, which means genuinely listening to victims’ families and the local community, involving residents in the decisions that affect their lives and their future, and taking all possible action to put things right. That action must include an urgent increase in social housing provision throughout our country. The Grenfell Tower disaster was the result of a long-term failure of successive Governments to invest in social housing, in terms of both the quality and the number of homes. Leaving house building to the private sector has utterly failed. It has led to a housing crisis that has driven vast inequality and pushed many families into poverty and homelessness, and until we take radical action that crisis will continue to spiral out of control.

Furthermore, we need widespread reform of systems and structures. We need an immediate review of the building regulations to ensure that they are up to date and appropriate. We cannot wait for the results of the

[*Wera Hobhouse*]

public inquiry. We cannot have a repeat of what happened after the Lakanal House fire, when a review of regulations was promised but never delivered. This time, lessons must be learned and implemented fast.

Given that the fire started in a fridge, there must also be reform of electrical safety. My colleagues in both Houses have been fighting for a long time for the introduction of compulsory electrical safety checks in rented homes. So far the Government have seen that as an unnecessary regulation, but now it is surely inexcusable not to make a simple change that has the potential to save lives.

All residents in Britain, whatever type of housing they live in, have the right to live in homes that are safe, warm, and set in well-run, safe, green and clean neighbourhoods. This disaster has exposed huge weaknesses in the housing provision of our country, and has undermined people's trust. We all have a responsibility to rebuild trust between the public and their elected representatives, but the Government have the power to take radical steps to fix the system, and they must do that now.

4.33 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate you on your election, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I am grateful for the opportunity to make my first contribution to this honourable House by participating in today's debate, following the witty and on-point maiden speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) and the contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) and for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock). Before I do so, however, I want to speak briefly about my constituency. As anyone who has visited it could tell you, it is a place that defies easy description. Other Members have previously claimed to have the most varied constituency, but I want to stake a claim myself.

My constituency starts in inner-city Hyde Park, where we have a vibrant cultural and music scene including the legendary Brudenell Social Club, where only a few weeks ago my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) gave a speech to 5,000 people—people who climbed trees and stood on rooftops to feel part of our movement. We then move on to Headingley, with its world-renowned sporting pedigree. The legendary stadium and cricket ground, home of Yorkshire county cricket club, is to this day the most successful county championship team, and it is also a place where I have spent many happy afternoons since my days as a student.

Weetwood ward, where I make my home, has a fine literary tradition. Once the home of Tolkien—in a towered residence in West Park reminiscent of Minas Tirith—it is now home to many other creative figures, including the award-winning television writer Kay Mellor. Across the ring road, Adel is the setting for the grade I listed church of St John the Baptist, one of the best and most complete Norman churches in the country. My constituency also boasts Yorkshire's international airport in Yeadon, and Otley, with its amazing breadth of events hosting hundreds every year—from the fabulous Otley show to the authentic Victorian fayre. Between

the market towns of Yeadon and Otley lies the beautiful upland Chevin, from which the foundation stones of this very House were hewn, so Leeds North West provides the very foundation of our parliamentary democracy.

My first experience of this place was 20 years ago, when I came here as an executive officer of Leeds University union to lobby Leeds MPs about the retention of student grants and opposing the introduction of tuition fees, an issue I intend to pursue in this Parliament. I met Harold Best, the only other Labour MP to represent Leeds North West, who not only agreed with me on the issues of fees, but spent the afternoon showing me the Palace of Westminster. That reflected his great generosity of spirit, a generosity of spirit which he and his family continue to show me to this day, and one, having a family of my own, that I now wish to replicate in this place.

My immediate predecessor served in this place for 12 years. During that time, he became champion of a number of causes, not the least of which was his support for rugby league and his role as chair of the all-party rugby league group, championing a sport which is of great importance to our local area. Greg Mulholland was also a strong advocate for pubs, not just locally, but across the country, and for local breweries, serving as chair of the all-party save the pub group and as an executive member of the all-party beer group. Greg was a hard-working local MP, fulfilling the intentions made in his own maiden speech to this House.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), my namesake seat, rightfully claimed to be the first Darren in this place. I can with great certainty say I am the first Sobel to be elected to Parliament. My own parents arrived in this country in 1972, and could not imagine that their son, born at the Leeds Maternity Hospital, would one day enter the mother of Parliaments.

My own history in Leeds North West started, like that of so many of my fellow constituents, as a student in one of the city's fine universities. It was at university that my interest in fighting for justice and equality began, as staff-student representative for the School of Computing at the University of Leeds, first advocating for my fellow students, before going on to campaign on issues such as student funding and against racism on campus. I am still an elected member of Leeds City Council, and prior to my election here, I was the lead for climate change and chair of the affordable warmth partnership—two topics that are close to my heart and to which I will return shortly.

I turn now to the substantive issue of the debate. In doing so, I first want to echo the words of hon. Friends and other hon. Members who have already spoken on this devastating event in expressing my heartfelt condolences and sincere sympathies to the victims of the Grenfell fire, their families and the people of Kensington. I pay tribute to the emergency services who responded so rapidly and bravely, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) and all the volunteers who supported families in the aftermath of the fire. That so many lives should have been lost was a tragedy that defies description.

On the Sunday following the fire, I visited the only tower block in my constituency and ensured that tenants felt safe in their homes. Leeds City Council has confirmed to me that no aluminium composite material cladding

has been used on council-owned blocks of flats in Leeds. However, I have been approached by constituents who live or work in other types of clad buildings. I hope the Minister will be taking action to ensure that testing is done on all cladding in this country—working with and compelling the sector representative bodies and building owners to undertake the testing—and that the testing of cladding is fully addressed in the inquiry.

I am sure that all Members of the House agree with me on the need for urgent action on safety, but I would like to address the use of cladding as part of our wider aims to reduce carbon emissions and to reduce fuel bills, tackling fuel poverty. In my constituency, a wholesale programme of external wall insulation started, but then stalled due to cuts in energy company obligation funding, leaving one side of the road with clad buildings and the other side without. External wall insulation—whether using mineral wool, phenolic resin or other materials that meet building regulations and have a U-value of 0.3—contributes to eradicating fuel poverty and to meeting our obligations under the Paris climate change agreement. We must ensure that this work is completed, alongside other measures not just in housing but in transport, energy and manufacturing, to ensure that runaway climate change does not occur. The safety of our citizens is paramount, so we must also ensure that our standards and inspection regimes are among the best in the world.

In the words of President Obama:

“No challenge poses a greater threat to future generations than climate change.”

This Chamber is a stage where the world can hear our voice. It is incumbent on me to use that voice to ensure that while I sit on these Benches, I will speak truth to power and be an advocate for this one issue, which will define and shape our future more than any other. Action to combat climate change will give us the best possible chance to save this planet, because it is the only home that we have got. If we do not ensure that we take every step towards a carbon-free future, we will be judged as having failed future generations, and I am sure nobody came into this House to be a failure.

There will be many other local and national issues that I will raise in the House, concerning our market towns, universities, sporting and cultural institutions, transport links and technology, but for today, I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my maiden speech. I pledge to my constituents and to hon. Members to be a strong voice in this House as well as a powerful advocate for my constituency.

4.40 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, and it is delightful to follow the excellent maiden speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel). We have also heard three other superb maiden speeches today, from my hon. Friends the Members for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) and for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock). This House is renewing itself with huge talent, youth, energy and diversity on all sides, and all Members can be proud to see that.

The Grenfell Tower fire was the worst residential fire in modern history and the worst disaster of any kind in this country for 30 years. The truth is that residential

fire is not an equal opportunities killer. I know from the history in my constituency and in Kensington that we in north-west London had a spate of the worst fires in modern history before Grenfell. We had the Clanricarde Gardens fire, in which eight people died and 100 were made homeless. The year before that, in 1980, nine people died in a fire at a hostel for homeless women in Kilburn, and shortly before that, seven people died in a fire in an interconnected multiple-occupied property in Maida Vale.

All those large-scale residential fires had something in common: they affected the lowest-income people in the worst kind of housing. We cannot and should not prejudge the results of the inquiry into exactly how the Grenfell fire started and how it spread so quickly, but the conclusion that we can draw is that it is substandard housing that is at risk, and it is the poorest people who live in substandard housing. They need to be protected. There is an issue of power here, and that needs to be addressed now rather than waiting until the inquiry's findings are known. There is much that can be legislated for immediately through the issuing of building regulations and guidance, much of which we have heard about today. That includes the lessons that were learned from the Lakanal House fire, but we can also legislate immediately to redress the imbalance of power between landlord and tenant by giving tenants statutory powers of consultation on major works and hearing their voice in a way that, tragically, the voices of Grenfell Tower residents were not heard. We can strengthen the power of redress of tenants in substandard accommodation, both in social and private housing.

Reference has been made to legal aid. It is absolutely right that we should look again at tenants' capacity to draw on legal aid so that they can represent their case when they are in accommodation that is substandard or in disrepair. Will the Minister commit today to reviewing the whole scope for legislation, both through fire safety regulations and building regulations, and through residents' rights of redress and consultation? None of that would prejudge the Grenfell Tower inquiry, and progress can be made immediately on all of it.

Homelessness and housing need are also not equal-opportunities impactors; they disproportionately affect the poorest people in this country. In the last week, there have been some increasingly harsh judgments in parts of the media about what has happened to Grenfell residents and how their housing needs are being met. Their housing needs do not exist in a vacuum. They exist in the context of a London that is yet again seeing a rising homelessness crisis, where the number of families accepted as homeless has increased by more than half and where the number of children living in temporary accommodation is on a scale that has not been seen since the early part of the last decade.

I asked the housing Minister a question before and I would like to know whether he can answer it today—how many of the occupants of Grenfell Tower had already been through the homelessness system? We know that there were residents who were already living in temporary accommodation in that building; we know that many of those residents and their families will already have been through the horrific experience of homelessness; and we know that many of their relatives, friends and neighbours will also have been through it.

[Ms Karen Buck]

Those people will already know what this House needs to be reminded of, which is that Kensington already has one of the worst homelessness situations in the country, because of the pressure on local housing stock. We know that it has the worst record in the country of moving homeless households away from the borough and that families in temporary accommodation will find that the word “temporary” does not mean what we understand it to mean; instead, it means that people will live for many years, and sometimes for a decade or more, in “temporary” accommodation, often moving from one home to another. Those people will do anything to avoid that experience yet again. Families should not be expected to move more than once and they have an absolute right to know that their housing needs will be met, not only swiftly but fairly and decently.

Also, because this situation does not exist in a vacuum, their housing needs should not be met at the expense of other vulnerable homeless households. It is already the case that in neighbouring boroughs the allocations process has slowed and in some cases stopped—hopefully, only temporarily—while precedence is rightly given at the moment to Grenfell survivors. However, that cannot be allowed to stand over the medium term. We have to know—we must have a categorical assurance from the Minister—that families in other boroughs, and indeed in Kensington, who are also homeless and in housing need will not be pushed to the back of the queue and see their needs go unmet because the council and the Government are not working together to meet the needs of all local families.

We also know that the story of investment in local services is not a fair or equal-opportunities one. We know that urban authorities have been the hardest hit by the Government’s cuts in local authority expenditure since 2010. We also know that, based on present trends, by the end of this decade funding for local Government will have fallen by 70%, which must be seen in the context of the fire safety measures that local authorities want to take to reassure their residents in other high-rise blocks.

It was simply not satisfactory for the Minister to tell us in his opening remarks that only local authorities that demonstrate they cannot afford fire safety work will have the money reimbursed. What message does that send to anxious residents who want to know that their safety will be absolutely paramount? What clarity can he give about what fire brigade fire safety recommendations will meet the criteria for Government funding? Will he confirm that he understands that any expenditure that will be met by local authorities will come from tenants and leaseholders, and that such expenditure will certainly be in competition with the resources needed to fund repairs and maintenance elsewhere in the system? I have already said that expenditure on basic repair and maintenance of social housing is 9.7% lower this year than last year and 22% lower than it was in 2010.

Finally, we hear of the great work being done in the borough by health services, including mental health services. They are working with survivors and other local residents. That work is much needed. Will those services also be fully funded and reimbursed by central Government, so that the mental health services and

other healthcare services for Kensington and for surrounding boroughs will not be put at risk or compromised in any way because those crucial public services have stepped up to the plate now?

My absolutely final point is this. We also heard from the Minister in his opening remarks that there was a fundamental lack of clarity about what the taskforce being sent into Kensington was going to do and what its duties would be—that it will not be an authority with any executive function whatsoever. The Minister needs to be absolutely clear with us what this means. It means that when the Gold operation finishes, the functions of service will be handed back to the already deeply discredited Kensington and Chelsea Council, where trust has totally collapsed. Does the Minister think that is acceptable? I doubt that the people of Kensington will, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) has set out so powerfully. I do not believe they have trust in the taskforce; I think they want to see the Government demonstrating that there will be a radically different approach to meeting their needs. We have not heard that yet. The Minister has a chance to put that right later.

4.50 pm

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my maiden speech in this important debate, following my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck).

The tragedy of Grenfell was felt all over the nation. I am sure that I speak for all in my constituency, who send their thoughts and prayers to all those affected, and similarly want a swift and timely response from the investigation into the events of that terrible night. The community surrounding Grenfell wants answers, and if we have learnt anything from past tragedies, it is that the voice of the community must be given paramount attention.

I would like first to pay tribute to the people of Leigh for placing their trust in me to stand here as their first female Member of Parliament. This is all the more important as we fast approach 100 years of unbroken Labour representation for the people of Leigh. I would also like to place on record my thanks to my family for all their support—to my mother, my father and my sisters, but especially to my two children, who are the drivers of my political ambition. As a single mother from a working-class background, wanting what is best for them is wanting what is best for the future of everyone in our country. Without them, I would not be standing here today.

Leigh has always benefited from the strong Labour voices that it elects to this House. With that in mind, I would like to pay tribute to my predecessors Harold Boardman, Lawrence Cunliffe and, of course, my most recent predecessor, Andy Burnham. Andy served this House with commitment for 16 years. His work on the Hillsborough disaster and, more recently, the contaminated blood scandal, as well as his strength and passion for truth and justice, will forever be his legacy. This is something that I can only aspire to emulate.

But it was not just this House that benefited from Andy’s work. Andy was a formidable constituency MP, forging great relationships within our communities and fighting tirelessly for those who did not have a voice. He constantly pushed for the regeneration of the constituency,

driving projects such as the creation of Leigh sports village, the home of the best rugby league team in the country, Leigh Centurions. I am sure that the House will want to wish Andy Burnham every success in his role as Greater Manchester Mayor. I have no doubt that Andy will use his position to ensure that devolution enhances the lives of everyone in Greater Manchester.

Leigh and its people have always had a sense of social justice, from the towns that lie within, such as Tyldesley, Golborne and Atherton, to smaller villages such as Astley, Mosley Common, Lowton and Atherleigh, each with a historic story to tell. From our early focus on agriculture and the uncontroversial creation of the spinning jenny by Thomas Highs—I am giving him that one—Leigh, like most places in the north, gave way to the might of the industrial revolution, in particular the coal and cotton industries, all linked by its canal networks. The legacy of Leigh's industrial past can still be seen in the remaining red-brick mills and the iconic mining headgear at Astley, which is sadly the last one remaining in the whole of Lancashire. Fortunately, however, the good people of Leigh want to keep this legacy alive, and I look forward to the heritage project linking coal at Astley, via the canal, with the great cotton mill of Leigh Spinners.

Like most post-industrial areas, however, we have seen years of decline: our manufacturing industry gone and not replaced; infrastructure, such as our rail link, taken away; and town centres declining. That common story is shared by many constituencies.

Social mobility is a huge problem for young people in Leigh, with many unable to get support to go to college or university. A lack of post-16 education leaves our young people only able to access low-paid, low-skilled jobs. We must ensure that new industries and skills are at the forefront of regeneration in Leigh.

I have spent the last six years as an elected councillor in local government and watched this Government's austerity measures chip away at our essential public services. Cuts to adult social care and children's services are nothing but an attack on the most vulnerable in our society. But I have also seen our local authorities and communities fight back, supporting and empowering the very people they serve. I am proud to have been a part of the innovative way our services have dealt with such measures, helping communities to do what they have always done in times of crisis: supporting each other, just as they did in the 1980s miners' strike and just as they are doing now, in homeless shelters and food banks, as well as with countless volunteers who work to keep our heritage alive. That is what is called a social movement—communities who work tirelessly to ensure each other are supported. Today, I would like to pay tribute to those who give their time to do such work.

My own experience of education in the 1980s was not good. Of course there were many success stories in my school, but many people struggled without adequate support, and were not equipped to face the challenges of a changing economic landscape. Many left school without qualifications, ambitions and hope. Today our children and young people face the same challenges, from cuts to early years to cuts to early-intervention grants and, of course, cuts to our schools—the very resource that gives our children and young people the support that they need to do well. We cannot afford to

see our children suffer because of ignorance of the challenges faced by our more deprived communities, and I will do all that I can to ensure that all aspects of our children's lives are adequately supported.

I am proud to stand among Labour colleagues, men and women, and in particular the new intake, all sporting their individual regional accents—how refreshing! I am proud of my working-class roots and of those who built the very area I now represent. When we talk about standing on the shoulders of giants, these are the giants I wish to attribute myself to. Let us not forget that there are giants now who are also making history. I stand side by side with them: our WASPI women; our miners still fighting for their lost pensions; our veterans, who are still not receiving the support they are owed once they leave service; our disabled and sick, who are being unfairly treated by our systems; and our public services—the police, the fire service, the NHS and schools. These are the backbone of our communities, and we as representatives must continue to stand up for them.

There is no good reason for people in Leigh, or anywhere, to endure the insecurities they now face. It is a choice—a choice to defend our communities and public services that I have been sent here to fight for, on behalf of the people of Leigh.

4.58 pm

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I am not sure if this has been planned or not but, as the regional Whip for my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Jo Platt), it is nice to have this opportunity to congratulate her on a wonderful speech. She obviously has big shoes to fill, but it is clear that she will be more than able to fill them. I know that she will be a real credit to this House and the people of Leigh.

First, I want to add my thanks to the emergency services for their bravery in the Grenfell Tower fire. I also offer my sincere and heartfelt condolences to those who lost their lives, their families and their homes.

I want to focus on an issue that I firmly believe has not received enough attention in the aftermath of last month's fire. Since then, the media, we in this House and the wider public have sought answers for what caused the disaster. So far, cladding, individuals and the local authority have taken much of the blame, but I rise in today's debate to highlight the role that insulation could have played in the hope that the House and the inquiry will consider the consequences of using flammable insulation, rather than a non-flammable alternative.

For those who are not aware, Grenfell Tower was insulated with a foam product named Celotex RS5000, also known as PIR. The first issue is that PIR is flammable. In small-scale tests the material's combustibility appears to be limited, but under genuine fire conditions it is nothing short of combustible. The second issue is that when it is ignited, PIR releases toxic, deadly fumes, the most notorious of which is hydrogen cyanide, the effects of which a number of Grenfell survivors were treated for.

In the vast insulation market, there are many alternatives to PIR. The key point is that insulation has been developed that is simply not combustible. For example, the use of insulation engineered from stone wool could have saved lives in Grenfell, as it has done in previous fires. The key problems with foam insulation such as PIR are completely avoided with stone wool. It is not

[Chris Elmore]

combustible, so it does not encourage or spread fire. As a result, it does not create the problem of toxic product inhalation.

Constructors are well aware of the dangers of using foam or fibreglass, but cannot or will not find the funds to use non-combustible stone wool. I am not suggesting for a moment that private developers should be legally bound to develop private housing estates or other developments using a particular type of insulation. Those are commercial decisions for businesses and developers, but I hope that those businesses would put public safety at the heart of whatever they are constructing in the private sector. Social housing, however, is there to protect our most vulnerable, and it should be the responsibility of the Government to legislate to ensure that the insulation used in our social housing is non-combustible.

This week I have put written questions to the Department for Communities and Local Government to ask what it will do to test similar insulation for combustibility. The reply from Ministers, in short, is that they are doing nothing. They are offering no testing, and they have no plans to do so. Today I have written to Sir Martin Moore-Bick asking him to confirm the extent to which his inquiry will consider the role of insulation in the fire, given that the Government have thus far treated the matter as an afterthought.

5.3 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is almost a month since the horrific tragedy at Grenfell Tower in Kensington. I would like to take this opportunity to offer my sympathies to the individuals and families for the horrendous ordeal that they endured, and for the loss and uncertainty they have encountered since. As colleagues have said, this has had an impact far beyond Kensington and far beyond London. In my constituency of Redditch, there have been outpourings of sympathy and offers of practical help, as residents have rallied round and organised donations of much-needed items for the victims.

I welcome the actions that the Government and the local authority have taken so far, including the emergency funding that has been made available and the rehousing of surviving residents. I call on the Minister to confirm that everything is indeed being done to help those poor families who have suffered and lost so much, and that he is taking into account the needs of each family to ensure that they have a home that is right for them, so that they can rebuild their lives. I also welcome the deployment of experienced civil servants. We recognise that they are dealing with a complex situation as they support the council in its response.

I welcome the additional £1.5 million to assist in delivering mental health support to victims. We can only imagine how devastating it must be for them to endure that mental trauma and that post-traumatic stress syndrome as they seek to rebuild their lives. I also welcome the funding to ensure that residents are represented during the inquiry. Does the Minister agree that it is in the interests of Grenfell residents, their friends and families and those who died that we allow Sir Martin to start the inquiry and get on with the job of establishing the facts of the case, instead of speculating further? It is

right that an inquiry is launched, so that we may learn from this terrible incident, better understand the events that led to the disaster, and prevent a similar tragedy. Redditch Borough Council is doing that, and I congratulate it on reviewing and launching an emergency disaster response. Even though we do not have tower blocks, we recognise the impact on other public buildings, including schools and hospitals.

As the Secretary of State recognised, the national and local response was not good enough in the aftermath of the fire, and processes must be rectified to support victims better in future. What steps is the Department taking to review our emergency planning procedures to ensure that future responses are rapid, effective and give proper support to victims? I am pleased to see that precautions are being taken and checks are being made, and that the Department for Communities and Local Government, alongside the Government Property Unit, is overseeing building regulations and wider checks on public sector buildings.

I was deeply shocked and concerned by the incident at Grenfell Tower, and that led me to seek assurances from Redditch Borough Council regarding the condition and safety of council-owned housing. I know that colleagues on both sides of the House are doing the same in their constituencies. I was pleased to learn that all properties within the borough contain cladding and insulation that is certified and installed to stringent nationally recognised standards. However, I finish by calling on the Secretary of State to consider reviewing building regulations and fire safety procedures in the light of the results of the Grenfell Tower inquiry; that will help us to ensure that regulations are up to date and take into account all the learnings from this tragedy. Every effort should be made around the country to give people who live in tower blocks, or who spend their education or leisure time in public buildings such as leisure centres, community centres, hospitals and schools, confidence that they are safe.

5.7 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I am glad to be able to contribute to this debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friends who have made maiden speeches this afternoon. It has been a real pleasure to hear them, particularly that of my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Jo Platt), who is my neighbour in Greater Manchester.

Like other Members, I repeat my deep condolences to every victim of the Grenfell Tower tragedy, which is an unimaginable horror for those affected. When we first learned of it just after the general election, it seemed that everyone around the House, especially Ministers, were absolutely horrified by the scale of what had occurred. There was a real sense of determination right across the House and Government to act to ensure that nothing like this could happen ever again in our country. I do not question Ministers' continuing deep sense of responsibility and desire to make things different, but the reality is that we seem to have already lost that sense of impetus. We seem to be down in the mire of uncertainty about who is responsible, what is to be done, and when we are going to have clarity about what will keep people safe in their homes. That is playing out every day among tenants, leaseholders and homeowners in my constituency.

Of the high-rise blocks in Stretford and Urmston, eight are owned by social landlords, seven by Trafford Housing Trust, and one by Irwell Valley. The remainder are owned by a range of private companies, the names of which are meaningless to me; I have no idea who these companies are, who owns them, or who governs them. There is a major housing development in my constituency, with more in train; new privately owned high-rise blocks are being constructed. I do not believe that there is no place in our housing mix for good-quality high-rise housing, but if those new buildings are not constructed to the very highest standards, as we should expect in the light of Grenfell, and if we are not yet sure what those highest standards look like, those developments need to be paused until we can be confident about it.

The other day, when I asked one of my social landlords how things felt now, he said, “Well, it’s continuing to get worse,” by which he meant that there is increasing uncertainty, because the actions that need to be taken are becoming increasingly unclear. I recognise that there is an inordinately complex mix of factors to be considered, but that is of no use to landlords and tenants who are trying to make decisions about how to act in response to safety concerns. I urge Ministers to do everything they can to give clarity and certainty, at the highest common denominator, as soon as possible.

A small number of blocks in Trafford are partially clad, and all that cladding, as across the country, has failed the flammability tests. The intention is to remove the cladding, but the work has not yet begun because the property owners cannot be sure that, in removing the cladding, they will not make the buildings even less safe.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ogmere (Chris Elmore) rightly alluded to concerns about insulation. Our landlords intend to have that insulation tested, but can Ministers say why the testing of insulation is not being mandated and put on the same footing, with the same resources, as the testing of cladding? I find that inexplicable. Are Ministers aware of how many buildings have had their insulation tested? What has been the result of that testing?

There is a clear view on both sides of the House that sprinklers should now be retrofitted. Do Ministers have a view on whether, in some cases, it may be appropriate to install sprinkler systems on the outside of buildings, as well as the inside? As to whether sprinklers are installed in homes or only in common areas, that will vary from building to building, but an indication of Ministers’ attitudes to those questions would be helpful.

Similarly, do Ministers have a view on whether planning legislation could accommodate the possibility that additional external fire escapes may now be needed on some buildings? Will advice be given on alarm systems and on the level of safety checks that landlords should carry out? Will there be new advice on whether people should stay put in their flat or flee in the event of a reported fire? What assessment has been made of whether any remedial activity may expose new dangers, such as those relating to asbestos? Have Ministers reminded those who own high-rise buildings of their particular obligation to work safely with asbestos?

I am not clear, and landlords in my constituency are not clear, about the precise responsibilities of the fire service and landlords. Is the fire service giving advice

that landlords have to weigh up and interpret when deciding how to act, or is the advice mandatory? I hope that the Minister can give us clarity.

The assurances we have received from Ministers on who will meet the costs have been opaque. Saying that Ministers and the Government will work with landlords and councils that are not able to meet the costs tells us nothing. We cannot have tenants bearing the costs, and we cannot expect leaseholders to bear the costs, because they cannot afford them. Social landlords and councils will run out of money as they put the different rectification measures in place. Ministers need to say clearly that, at a minimum, they will underwrite the costs, and that rather than the Government working with landlords to fund the measures, the costs will be met by central Government.

I want to mention a few other risks that have been identified and the questions that landlords in particular are asking me. Cladding is beginning to be removed from properties across Greater Manchester and the rest of the country. That is happening during the summer months, when the warmth provided by the cladding, and its protective effects on the decency standards of those homes, is perhaps not a major issue. Come winter, however, if that cladding has not been replaced by new means of keeping those homes warm and dry, there will likely be a rise in cold and damp homes, respiratory illness and all the other associated problems that we always hear about in our constituency surgeries. It will also result in extra costs for householders, who will spend this winter turning up their heating. Many of them are on relatively low incomes. It would be helpful if Ministers could indicate that, where it has not been possible to make those homes warm and dry again in time for winter, there will be help for tenants in meeting heating bills. They need that assurance; otherwise the poorest and elderly tenants will simply turn off their heating, at great risk to their health and wellbeing.

That brings me to my final point: the position of vulnerable tenants in these buildings, particularly those in sheltered accommodation. In some parts of Greater Manchester—thankfully not in my constituency—there are high-rise blocks that provide sheltered housing. Moreover, even low-rise sheltered housing is, as one of my social landlords put it to me, basically a tower block turned on its side. There are many vulnerable tenants in large sheltered housing accommodation. We need the Government to work with landlords on strategies to protect vulnerable tenants in particular, whether or not they are in dedicated sheltered accommodation.

Will Ministers give particular consideration to the contentious issue of data sharing? In the immediate aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire, as my social landlords began to try to take action to make premises safe and offer assurances to tenants, I was told that they did not necessarily know who was in every flat, or the particular vulnerabilities that those tenants might have. So far as is possible, information is being shared across social services, schools, NHS commissioners and others, but obviously there are real difficulties and sensitivities. The Government envisage introducing a data protection Bill this Parliament, so that is an opportunity to think carefully and constructively about achieving a balance that respects individual privacy and data, but allows for appropriate access when that is important for health,

[Kate Green]

safety and the preservation of life. I hope that that will be fed into the proposed legislation as Ministers develop it.

There is potential for some good to come from this appalling atrocity, but only if Ministers retain the determination and resolve that we saw in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy. I tell them, for the sake of those who have died, those who have lost family members and those who live in tower blocks today and will do so in future: you must take on that responsibility.

5.18 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I congratulate hon. Members who have made such powerful maiden speeches today, including in particular my constituency neighbours, my hon. Friends the Members for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) and for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), with whom I look forward to working on the issues that affect all of our constituents in south London.

The Grenfell Tower fire was an unspeakable horror that became an unimaginable tragedy for hundreds of people who lost parents, sisters, brothers, children, friends and the fabric of their lives, the basis of their security and community. My thoughts are with everyone affected by such devastating loss. Indeed, it has often been hard to think about anything else over the past month.

The fire has had a profound impact not only on all those who were directly affected by it, but on the wider community in Kensington and London, and on the country as a whole. The first priority must of course be help and support for survivors of the fire to access new homes within their existing community that meet their needs and are genuinely affordable, and the support they need to rebuild their lives.

The Government must also recognise that for residents throughout the country one consequence of the Grenfell Tower fire has been a colossal loss of confidence and trust, because somewhere along the line the systems, regulations, standards, inspections and emergency procedures that were put in place to keep people safe failed to do so. Since the Grenfell Tower fire, there have been two fires in tower blocks in my constituency; on one of those occasions, I was on site as the fire broke out. The level of anxiety and fear that residents in tower blocks feel at the moment cannot be overstated. In working to ensure that such a tragedy can never happen again, the Government must focus on how confidence and trust can be rebuilt so that residents of tower blocks throughout the country can rest easy again, without any shadow of a doubt that the framework of governance, regulation and inspection that is supposed to keep them safe will do so.

I was elected as a councillor in the London Borough of Southwark in 2010, the year after the Lakanal House fire, as part of a new council administration picking up the pieces following that devastating tragedy in which six people lost their lives. Fire safety was the council's top priority. Every block was subject to a rigorous fire-risk assessment, starting with the tallest blocks and working down, and the council spent more than £60 million on fire safety works. Fire safety is an ongoing responsibility and must be monitored and assessed constantly, so I am not suggesting there is any room for complacency in

Southwark or that there is not more to do, but the level of commitment to ensuring that Lakanal could not happen again was crystal clear.

Lakanal House should have been the wake-up call not just for a single borough, but for the country as a whole. The fact that it was not is down to the lack of political will and commitment from a Government who are ideologically committed to deregulation at all costs and the reduction of public expenditure, and down to seven years of deep cuts to local and central Government and to our emergency services.

The obsession with deregulation was illustrated in 2014 when the then Housing Minister said, following advice from the Lakanal House coroner that the Government should consider progressing the installation of sprinkler systems in all tower blocks:

“We believe that it is the responsibility of the fire industry, rather than the Government, to market fire sprinkler systems effectively and to encourage their wider installation.”—[*Official Report*, 6 February 2014; Vol. 575, c. 188WH.]

What utter nonsense. It is the responsibility of the Government to keep people safe, and that requires a framework of regulation and funding, not a private marketing campaign for sprinklers. That same ideologically driven approach to deregulation has resulted in the review of building regulations that the Lakanal House coroner also called for being left in the long grass for four years.

Multiple problems with the regulatory framework need to be addressed. Fire risk assessments can be undertaken by anyone—there is no requirement for any minimum level of qualifications, expertise or registration, and no requirement for independence. There is no minimum requirement for the number of building control inspections that have to be undertaken during construction works, allowing defects to be built in and covered up between inspections. The all-party group for excellence in the built environment, of which I am vice-chair, published a report a year ago that highlighted this issue. It said:

“We are concerned that competition in building control might be fuelling a race to the bottom and we are therefore recommending there should be a defined minimum number of inspections”.

There has been no Government action on the issue.

Building control inspections can be self-procured from private providers, thereby setting up a contractual relationship between construction contractors and building control inspectors that lacks independence and can therefore be compromised. The Government cannot pretend that austerity is not part of the problem. There has been a huge loss of local authority capacity because of cuts to council budgets. Planning and building control is the second most severely cut area of expenditure across local authority services. There has also been a huge loss of capacity in the Department for Communities and Local Government and among the emergency services.

Even without the conclusions of a public inquiry, it is clear that there are actions that the Government can and must take now to rebuild the trust of residents living in tower blocks. They must act on advice that has already been received and information that is already known. There must be a complete overhaul of the fire safety inspection regime: responsibility must be restored to the fire service on a completely independent and statutory footing and cuts to the fire service must be reversed to enable it to fulfil that role. There must be a

complete overhaul of building regulations, as called for by the Lakanal House coroner four years ago, and its recommendations must apply to existing buildings as well as new builds. Residents must be given a voice in this process. The Government must provide urgent clarity on the safety of cladding products of all types, not just aluminium composite cladding and insulation, including advice on safe replacements for panels that need to be removed and specifications for new buildings. Importantly, there must be new rights for residents in high-rise blocks who have concerns about fire safety to trigger an independent inspection, the outcome of which has statutory weight.

Finally, the Government must stop playing semantic games on the funding for fire safety works arising as a consequence of the Grenfell Tower fire. In response to a written question I submitted last week on this matter, the relevant Minister wrote:

“Where work is necessary to ensure the fire safety of social housing, we will ensure that lack of financial resources will not prevent it going ahead.”

What does that mean? Does it mean that the Government will decide whether they believe that councils have the resources or not? What will be the process? Who will make the decision? The Grenfell Tower fire came out of the blue, and the steps to put it right cannot be at the expense of planned maintenance or major works, or of the delivery of urgently needed new homes. The Government must make a firm commitment to fund fire safety works, sprinkler systems and the replacement of cladding required in response to Grenfell Tower, and they must make this commitment as a matter of urgency. So I call on them to begin the process of addressing the fears that communities across the country have because of Grenfell Tower, and of restoring trust and confidence in the systems that are there to protect people. The memory of those who lost their lives must be respected and honoured by making absolutely certain that such a tragedy can never happen again.

5.26 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am pleased to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) and her typically thoughtful contribution in this important debate. I am also pleased to have had the chance to listen to maiden speeches from my hon. Friends the Members for Leigh (Jo Platt), for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) and for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves). I was trying to think what the collective noun must be for maiden speeches and I decided on this occasion that it is a feast—we had a feast of maiden speeches. Their constituents must be proud of them already, and I know that they will work very hard in the months and years ahead to repay the confidence that their constituents showed in them.

The First Secretary, in opening the debate, referred to the fire guidance and Approved Document B, which is an essential element of the building regulations. He said that the expert panel will be advising the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, and it is that issue that I wish to ask about. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), speaking for Her Majesty’s Opposition, also commented on that aspect of matters relevant to Grenfell, saying that the Government can start the overhaul of building

regulations now and feed into the public inquiry recommendations afterwards. In my view, that is the right approach to take.

I raised the issue of the terms of reference for the public inquiry in my Adjournment debate two weeks ago, when I said:

“It would be very helpful if the Minister gave the House any details of when more might be known about the inquiry, which will face many questions on many issues. They include: the source of the fire; the rapidity of the spread of the fire; the catastrophic failure of all the fire protection features that the building should have contained; the building’s refurbishment, including the original specifications and the materials actually used, as well as the quality of the work and the finish; the monitoring of building control; the inspection of the completed job by the council, the designated responsible person and the fire service”.—[*Official Report*, 30 June 2017; Vol. 626, c. 430.]

I went on to raise the question of the outstanding review of the building regulations guidance on fire, as contained in Approved Document B, and the recommendation for urgent review by the Lakanal House coroner in 2013. There is no statutory timetable laid down for a periodic review of the guidance, as I said at the time and as I mentioned in my earlier question to the First Secretary when he was opening this debate. In my Adjournment debate, I asked about the building regulations, and in response the Minister said that after Lakanal House:

“The Government took action in a number of areas following that fire. In particular, DCLG provided funding to enable the Local Government Association, in partnership with the housing sector and enforcement authorities, to publish new fire safety guidance for purpose-built flat blocks in 2011. That guidance is still current”.—[*Official Report*, 26 June 2017; Vol. 626, c. 436.]

That raises the key issue. If the guidance is still current and it failed at Grenfell, one of two things must be true: either the guidance is not up to the job and needs reviewing; or the guidance is adequate but was ignored. That is the fundamental question that should be addressed by the independent expert advisory panel, which was announced by the Secretary of State and which contains a number of distinguished members. As I understand it, it can also second additional members for specific tasks. When he responds, will the Minister tell us whether the panel has identified the guidance in Approved Document B of the fire regulations as a priority piece of work that needs addressing? As has been mentioned several times today, it was last revised in 2006, so its review is overdue.

If the Government await the outcome of the public inquiry and then start the review—given that it will then take time for any working party to do its job properly—the gap between the last revision and an updated Approved Document B will be at least 14 years and probably a lot longer. Historically, the reviews in the UK are usually about 10 years apart—in some other countries it is less. Does the Minister agree that that is too long a gap and that there should be a statutory responsibility to review the guidelines in a set period of time rather than having a periodic review? Has the expert panel commented on that? If it has not, will the Minister ask them that question?

On 3 July, in response to the above questions, the Secretary of State said to me:

“The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about building regulations and the guidance on them. It is already clear to us that there will need to be changes, and that we need to look carefully at

[*Jim Fitzpatrick*]

the causes and at the fact that so many buildings are failing the guidance test. The expert panel has a wide remit, which is broadly to recommend to the Government immediately any action it thinks we should take that will improve public safety.”—[*Official Report*, 3 July 2017; Vol. 626, c. 920.]

That validates my question about whether the expert panel has recommended an immediate urgent review. If the answer is no, will the Minister ask it why it has arrived at that conclusion?

It is not just me who is asking these questions. The all-party fire safety and rescue group has been pressing them for some time. The Royal Institute of British Architects wrote to colleagues yesterday, saying:

“Ahead of any inquiry conclusions, the RIBA has called on the Government to carry out the following:

Commence immediately the delayed formal review of Approved Document B, which was first proposed by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government in 2013 in response to the Coroner’s rule 43 letter following the inquest into the deaths resulting from the 2009 fire at Lakanal House.

The RIBA believes that the review of Approved Document B must be a comprehensive, transparent and fundamental reappraisal, rather than an amendment or clarification, and should begin without delay to remove uncertainty, provide clarity and protect public safety.”

It also goes on to raise the issues of Building Bulletin 100 and school sprinkler systems, which I also highlighted in my debate and which has been mentioned by several colleagues today.

The Fire Sector Federation president, former London Fire Commissioner Mr Brian Robinson, writes a more qualified view of Approved Document B, which none the less supports the idea of a review. He said:

“We would also part recommend and suggest increased provisions for protection, including sprinklers, in line with the latest thinking in fire safety. But an update of AD B is only one part of the greater whole. That isn’t, by any means, the complete solution to the weaknesses exposed by the Grenfell fire.”

In support of that key point, the Association of British Insurers was even more direct. It said:

“A comprehensive review is urgently needed of ‘Approved Document B’, the regulations in England covering fire safety matters within and around buildings. The ABI has been calling for a comprehensive review of Approved Document B since 2009, and most recently in May 2017 in our response to the Government’s Housing White Paper.”

My final source is the London Fire Brigade itself. In the briefing for this debate supplied by Helen Newton on behalf of the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority, it says of Approved Document B:

“This document has not been reviewed for some time, which means that it has not kept up with British standards and new and innovative methods of construction or allowed debate of the sprinklers and other suppression systems especially around specialised housing.

We have been calling for Approved Document B to be reviewed and renew that call now as a matter of urgency.”

The Lakanal coroner, the Royal Institute of British Architects, the Association of British Insurers, the Fire Sector Federation, fire authorities, the all-party group and others, including the Fire Protection Association, which I have not had time to quote, all agree on the urgency of reviewing Approved Document B. It is not the full solution, but it needs to be done, and it needs to be done now—not in three or five years’ time. If the

work does not start until after the public inquiry, it could be as long as five years before Approved Document B is renewed. The “Government building safety programme—explanatory note” says:

“We have set up an expert panel to advise us on other urgent steps we should take to improve fire safety”.

I would be grateful if the Minister addressed my specific points about the review of Approved Document B. For the avoidance of doubt, I should say that there are three questions. Has the expert panel advised on an immediate review of Approved Document B? If not, will the Secretary of State ask the panel whether it considers such an immediate review to be appropriate? Will the Secretary of State deposit the answer to those two questions in the Library?

It has been said many times today that the majority of those who die in fires are the poor, the old, the young and the sick, as well as people with substance abuse issues and the rest of it. The Grenfell Tower fire demonstrated that—writ large. We need regulations to protect people in our buildings. Approved Document B is the foundation stone on which all buildings safety is constructed. If it is not operating as it should, we are exposing people to more danger.

5.36 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick). I do not pretend to match his expertise, but I hope that the Minister has listened to his absolutely vital points about the key element of safety and the passion with which he made them.

My constituency neighbours Kensington; many of my constituents have strong community and family ties with the victims of Grenfell Tower. We are now host to between 50 and 100 of those victims in hotel accommodation in the borough. Just yesterday, I found out that Kensington Aldridge Academy, at the foot of Grenfell Tower, will now be housed for about a year in portakabins built on Wormwood Scrubs. I use that as an example of the ramifications of this terrible national disaster, which will affect many people—not just in Kensington and the rest of London, but across the country. They will last a long time.

I wish to put a number of questions to the Minister. The first is, who is in charge? We have heard statements from at least five Ministers; four were present at the beginning of this debate, but only for the opening speeches. Although I value the contribution of the Prime Minister and others and the ordering of a full public inquiry at an early stage, I am afraid to say that, since that happened, there has been confusion and a degree of inaction. I do not say that with any pleasure.

Who is the Minister at central Government level who takes overall responsibility? Should there be a specifically designated Minister to deal with this tragedy? After all, Ministers are often appointed to deal with natural disasters; this is a man-made disaster with just as many—if not more—ramifications, and over more time. If the position is confusing at national level, it is even more confusing in Kensington and Chelsea. I am afraid that what has happened in that benighted borough since these terrible events has been appalling—almost tragicomic.

First, there was the chief executive, clearly not up to the job, who was thrown under a bus to protect his political masters—he went reluctantly. Then there was a leader who should have gone as soon as it was clear that the disaster relief was a disaster in itself, but who said that he was leaving because of “purported” failures. A new leader has now been installed. From what I have seen of her, I do not think she is up to the job either. I found it highly embarrassing to hear her on the radio this morning saying that she had not been into high-rise council blocks before. She has been a cabinet member for at least five years and a councillor for the borough for at least 11. I have visited all sorts of accommodation around the borough hundreds if not thousands of times, for all sorts of reasons. In all honesty, how can someone who works for an inner London borough not have been into the flats? She later clarified by saying, “I might have been canvassing there, but I’ve never been into a flat there.” I do not want to personalise the matter, but it is clear that she is simply out of touch with the people she is trying to represent, and honestly cannot represent the people of north Kensington in particular. That is why a ready solution was available in the form of commissioners.

None of us, particularly those of us with a local government background, want to see commissioners go in, but they had been put in previously during less extreme cases. There is a suspicion that politics is preventing that from happening. An obvious course of action is to put commissioners in to manage the situation. We have London elections next May, so what is the problem? Instead, there is a hybrid solution with a taskforce, which, as the Secretary of State clarified earlier, is advisory, but which does not report to the people in charge, who are still the same old bosses in Kensington and Chelsea. How is that a recipe in any way for clarity, firm judgment and decision making in Kensington and Chelsea?

Who is on the taskforce? It was announced by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government a week ago, but we do not know who these people are or their terms of reference. We do not know whether any of them have been appointed or whether they have visited the borough over this period of time. I am afraid that this all smacks of the continuing delay and prevarication that has become the hallmark of dealing with the aftermath of Grenfell. Is the Minister able to clarify those points? If he is the Minister who is going to take responsibility, I am sure that we will all support him, but let us have that clarity.

It is true that it took about a week—too late—to realise what a disaster the Kensington management team were and to put in the new Gold team under John Barradell. Things did start to improve because there were more competent people in place, but they only started to improve and we are still not entirely there. I remember that my chief executive in Hammersmith was on the phone at 6 o’clock in the morning offering help, and that was true of many other London boroughs. Accommodation, offices and assistance were offered, but calls simply were not returned. It was not that the offers were rejected or accepted; there was simply no co-ordination of services. Even when the new Gold team came in, what appeared to be a better solution to the situation was not quite all it seemed.

Let me give an example that I mentioned in an intervention. I went to speak to a group of Grenfell survivors who are now in a hotel in Fulham, and they

told me differing stories. That is not surprising because every single family has a different story and different needs. Some had not been made housing offers and some had. Some had initially been told that they would not get a housing offer at all because they were lodgers and not tenants. That was then revised. Some were given keyworkers, albeit somewhat belatedly. Some only had keyworkers in the sense that people would occasionally ring them from hidden numbers, so they could not get back in touch and that person would not answer many of their questions. Others said they had a good relationship with the keyworkers. Some had been given money and some had not. Some had been given money on one day, but then another family member was refused money the next day.

It seemed an entirely arbitrary system, which was extraordinarily confusing to people who, let us not forget, were already living without any of their possessions, having suffered, at best, the severe trauma of the evacuation, and who were often in a state of bereavement after losing family members, neighbours and friends in the fire. They have now been stuck in hotels for four weeks or more. I am proud of the staff and management of the hotel I visited. They made people welcome and looked after them, but the truth is that people cannot live in a small room in a budget hotel. Many of these people had no change of clothes and no money when they were first sent to hotels. Whole families were put in one room, and Kensington and Chelsea Council had no further contact with them. In several cases, they were picked up by local residents in Hammersmith, who got them food, put them in touch with people and got local businesses to give them food, cleaning facilities and clothes for free. Hammersmith Council then intervened and gave them money, vouchers and things of that kind. But this was all on an ad hoc basis. How on earth can this be happening in our capital city in the 21st century? Yes, things are getting better, but they are getting better only slowly.

Let me put to bed the myth of the offers of accommodation. These offers of accommodation included people being asked to go to places substantial travelling distances from their children’s school or their place of work. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad), offers of accommodation were made to disabled people when there was no disabled access. One elderly lady I spoke to could not get into the toilet at the place she was offered. Is it reasonable to refuse an offer of accommodation like that? I think it probably is.

But it goes further than that. I ask the Minister to imagine that his house burned down, even without all the trauma associated with Grenfell Tower. I think he would expect the insurance company to put him up in like-for-like accommodation in a similar area, ensure that he could continue his life as best as he could, and then restore the property and move him back in or give him an equivalent alternative property. I do not see why the residents of Grenfell Tower should get any less, even if the assistance has to come from the state, rather than an insurance company.

So let us not pretend that we are doing people favours and offering them permanent accommodation or like-for-like accommodation. Some of the accommodation around Grenfell is excellent quality social housing, and we should be proud of the fact that it was built in the

[Andy Slaughter]

1960s and 1970s. It has good space standards, and it is light and airy, with plenty of room. Why should these people be given anything less than that as an alternative when they have suffered so much already?

That brings me to the wider issue of housing. There was an interesting piece on the “Today” programme last week looking at the options for the long-term rehousing of the people from Grenfell Tower. It went through half a dozen, and they are quite revealing. First, people could be put at the top of the housing waiting list in Kensington. The problem with that, apparently, is that only about eight units come up per week, and most of those are small, one-bedroom flats. Nobody mentioned the fact that taking that option would displace everybody who had been on the housing waiting list for years and years. However, that option was ruled out because of the small number of units.

What about the private rented sector? The Residential Landlords Association said, quite rightly, that private rented accommodation is a completely different form of tenure: there is no real security, and mortgage lenders often attach conditions that mean that tenants on benefits or tenants who want longer tenancies are not eligible to take that accommodation, so that option goes out as well.

What about redeveloping? What about estate regeneration, which councils such as Kensington often use to reduce the quantum of social housing? It was said that most estates in inner London are already at high density, and only a limited number of additional units can be put into them.

One novel suggestion was to use the big development sites at White City and Old Oak in my constituency to temporarily house people. That is an interesting development. I would absolutely welcome new social housing being built on the big development sites in my constituency, and I am sure that, as part of that, we would absolutely welcome people displaced from Grenfell, as well as our own residents. But that is not what was being offered; what was being suggested was temporary accommodation on a building site for three to five years until people could be moved on and luxury housing could be built, as originally planned.

The 68 units in Kensington Row have been mentioned a number of times. Initially, there was a rather inflammatory article in *The Guardian*, in which the other residents of this large luxury development on Kensington High Street said they did not want people like the Grenfell tenants living cheek by jowl with them. Whatever misinformation led to that story, the Kensington Row flats on offer are not luxury flats—they are not the £1 million one-bedroom flats that characterise the rest of that development. They are existing affordable housing units which would have been used for people who cannot afford market rents. In most cases, Grenfell Tower tenants will be offered existing social housing. That means that social housing tenants generally—people in existing council and housing association accommodation, and people on the waiting list, which, in west London, is a very long waiting list—will be subsidising the relief effort for Grenfell Tower.

The sixth option was this: why not buy some units of accommodation? That was ruled out, because a unit of accommodation—a two-bedroom flat in Kensington—costs

about £600,000. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington, Kensington and Chelsea has a balance of nearly £300 million which it has been stashing away. Moreover, if anyone thinks it is controversial to change units between the social and market housing sectors, let me point out that when the Conservatives were running Hammersmith Council it was selling off its social housing on the open market as it became empty, for nearly half a million pounds per unit. What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander: if you can sell it off, you can buy it.

I want the Minister to give a clear instruction to Kensington Council. I suggest that he should go away and listen to the interview with its leader, which was, I may say, a superb example of interviewing skill. At the fourth or fifth time of asking, having tried to dodge the question on every possible occasion, she said yes, the council would buy some units. I hope the Minister will listen to that interview, and I hope he will hold the council leader to her promise so that we can start to provide permanent, decent, adequate housing for the people who suffered in Grenfell Tower, and do so sooner rather than later.

This also shines a light on the wider crisis in social housing. If we cannot find social housing units for the 200 to 300 families who have been displaced from Grenfell Tower and the blocks around it, how can we come near to resolving the overall housing crisis, especially in high-value areas? The other story that has been doing the rounds in inner London concerns what is happening at Battersea power station, where there is a development consisting of 4,200 properties. The developer has persuaded Wandsworth Council to reduce the number of affordable homes by 40%, from 686 to 386, and they now represent 9% of the development. That is the truth of Conservative policy on affordable housing in London. The Minister has an opportunity to say, when he winds up the debate, that that will no longer happen, in the case of Grenfell Tower and in the wider context as well.

Let me raise one final issue. I will not speak about it for long, because others with more expertise, including my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse, have already spoken about it. The issue of safety, in the widest sense, must be resolved, and it cannot be resolved over the timescale of the public inquiry. Earlier action must be taken.

Both the chair and the secretary of the all-party parliamentary fire safety and rescue group—the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) and my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse—mentioned the group’s expert adviser and secretary, former chief fire officer Ronnie King. Has made a number of very clear points which he wishes us to put to the Minister, and we are happy to do so. The first relates to Approved Document B—it has been dealt with extensively—and the fact that it needs to be revised, and that we need clarity in relation to the whole issue of construction and external cladding.

We are not talking only about the type of cladding that has been tested; we are talking about all forms of cladding. We are talking—as other Members have said—about insulation, and about how it is fitted. In particular, we are asking, “What is the effect of fire?” We are not talking about what can be done on a desktop computer or on a small piece of cladding, but about what happens when a real building burns when it has cladding of that kind, or some similar external modification. The London

Building Acts—which, I believe, were repealed in 1986 and replaced by a much weaker form of legislation—specified an hour's retardation of fire on external structures. Why can we not go back to those standards and have that clarity? A huge amount of testing needs to be done; this is not just about testing the minority of types of cladding that the Minister has spoken about so far.

Cladding is only one issue, because there is also the issue of sprinklers. I wish the Minister and his colleagues would stop saying that they have done exactly what the Lakanal House coroner said. The coroner recommended that this matter should be looked at, and all the Government did was to pass it on to local authorities.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that this Government should seek to introduce the legislation on the installation of sprinklers that we already have in Labour-run Wales?

Andy Slaughter: I absolutely agree that we can learn from the devolved Administrations on this issue. It is weasel words for the Minister to say that the coroner did not insist that we follow that recommendation. A coroner cannot insist on such matters. The coroner gave a clear indication, and the Government dodged the issue. I think that it should be revisited.

Another issue that should be revisited is who carries out inspections of tower blocks. That is not just about cladding, but about fire alarms, means of escape, maintenance and access for emergency vehicles. In the course of the public inquiry, we may find out that all of those were factors at Grenfell Tower. We must not wait for the inquiry, because my constituents who live in tower blocks will not be able to sleep easily in their beds at night until they know that they are living, as they always thought they were, in entirely safe buildings and until they know what they are supposed to do in the case of a fire. The Minister therefore has quite a long agenda to tackle.

Let me make one final point. It is a matter for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy rather than for the Minister's Department, but I know he is taking an interest in it. The cause of the fire was once again a white good manufactured by one of the Whirlpool companies. There was an electrical fire in a fridge-freezer, just as one of the known fire risk white goods—an Indesit tumble dryer—caught fire causing a substantial tower block fire in my constituency last year. When are the Government going to start tackling these issues?

The issues involve the registration of white goods, the collection of data on which are safe and which are unsafe, the recall of products when they are shown to be dangerous and the release of the risk assessments that currently—and scandalously—are not revealed on grounds of commercial confidentiality for the companies that manufacture the goods. It is another whole area of investigation that is long overdue. Although much of the attention on Grenfell concentrates on the external spread of the fire, the fire would never have got outside the tower block had it not started in a fridge-freezer. We still do not know—because the Government have not said—whether the tests have been completed, whether it was due to a design fault or whether the construction of that model allowed the fire to take hold.

I hope that the points I have made are all relevant and are all matters for the public inquiry to consider, but some of them cannot wait until then. Certainly, the relief and rehousing of the people who have been displaced by the Grenfell fire cannot wait any longer. We are about to enter the summer recess, and I hope we do not come back in September or October to find that nothing has changed. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington, because she has been thrown in at the deep end in no uncertain fashion and she has absolutely risen to the challenge. She is a strong and powerful advocate for her community, but she cannot do it all on her own; this is a job, both locally and nationally, for the Government to take hold of. We must not forget this terrible tragedy, which has blighted our country, because if we do not learn lessons from it, it will recur again.

5.59 pm

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): May I say what an honour and pleasure it is to be back on the green Benches speaking on behalf of my constituents after a two-year enforced sabbatical? Before I speak about the subject of today's debate, I should say just a few words about my predecessor Amanda Solloway, who took my seat off me by 41 votes in 2015. She was in some ways an unusual and unlikely Conservative party candidate, coming from fairly humble origins and having herself experienced homelessness in an earlier part of her life. She made it her business to highlight the plight of homeless people and to draw attention to that really important issue, which scars our country, the fifth richest nation on the planet. Another big issue on which she fought hard was making mental health care more of a priority for the Government and ensuring that resources were made available for it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) sought a collective noun for the excellent maiden speeches that have been made today—he referred to a “feast” of maiden speeches. I agree with that description of the excellent contributions made by my hon. Friends the Members for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves), for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) and for Leigh (Jo Platt). I am sure that they will go on to make a big contribution in this place for as long as they are here.

The origins of the catastrophic fire that occurred at Grenfell can be traced back to the neoliberal doctrine that was inflicted on our country back in 1979 and has disfigured our public services over the intervening four decades. A big feature of that approach has been deregulation, privatisation and cuts, which led to combustible materials being perfectly legitimately used on Grenfell Tower and, as we know, many other tower blocks around the country. How can that possibly be? Added into the mix is the move towards compulsory competitive tendering, which was brought into the public realm almost 40 years ago and meant that the cheapest price was all that was looked at when services were externalised. How could the maintenance of our public realm and housing stock be put out to the private sector?

Of course, if the work had been done properly and there were firestops on every floor of Grenfell Tower, as there are supposed to be, even if there had been a fire, it

[Chris Williamson]

would have been contained on the floor where it started. The combination of compulsory competitive tendering and the business-friendly inspection regime has culminated in this appalling, catastrophic fire in which so many people lost their lives.

We can also look at the cuts that have been imposed and see the number of fire safety inspectors who have been taken out of the system—between 60% and 75% depending on which fire authority we are talking about. So now the fire and rescue authorities cannot undertake the safety checks that they used to be able to carry out as a matter of course. The slapdash, corner-cutting approach that we have seen over the past few decades has ultimately led to this appalling, catastrophic fire.

There was an exchange earlier in the debate about the laissez-faire approach to student accommodation. Legislation requires new residential tower blocks over 30 metres high to have sprinklers installed in them. However, nurse and student accommodation is deemed to be “other accommodation”, so there is no requirement for sprinklers to be installed there. It is as if nurses and students are expendable—that cannot be right.

I mentioned the fire safety inspectors who have been taken out of the system, and while we are talking about cuts, it is important to remember that fire station after fire station in this capital and right across the country has been closed. Since 2010, 11,000 firefighters have lost their jobs, which I think means that one in five firefighters have effectively been removed from the system since then.

That creates its own problem. I spoke to Fire Brigades Union representatives, who talked about such things as the use of breathing apparatus. The fact is that reducing the number of firefighters available to deal with emergencies means that when we have a catastrophic fire, such as the one at Grenfell Tower, firefighters repeatedly have to go into the building to rescue people. The problem with that is that when firefighters use breathing apparatus, their blood thickens, putting them at greater risk of a coronary attack. We know from eyewitness accounts that some firefighters were entering Grenfell Tower to rescue people up to three times each. They should not have been in that situation.

When the Prime Minister was interviewed about that, she said that London fire brigade had the resources it needed and implied that the fact that it was able to respond to the fire was proof of that. But the truth is that London fire brigade did not have the resources it needed, because if it did have them, individual firefighters would not have had to enter Grenfell Tower time after time to rescue people, as there would have been enough firefighters to ensure that they each had to enter the building only once.

If we are seriously going to learn any lesson—we hear rhetoric about the importance of learning lessons from catastrophic events, but often it is just for the birds—from this dreadful fire that should never, ever have happened, surely it must be that we need a different approach to the neoliberal agenda that has influenced and informed the way in which public services have been delivered in our country. Surely we have to reverse the deregulation agenda to which we have been subjected and abandon the privatisation of our public services.

We have heard from hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber about the importance of installing sprinklers. It is an unanswerable argument. If Grenfell Tower had been fitted with sprinklers, we might have lost the building, but we would not have lost human life. I do not think that there is a building anywhere in the world that has been fitted with sprinklers in which people have died in a fire—there have been very few deaths, if any. Surely we must learn that lesson.

We should also listen very carefully to the survivors, the community and the residents who have been so affected by this appalling episode. When I spoke to somebody from the Justice4Grenfell group just yesterday, she said that they had a number of demands, including two that I hope the Minister will agree with and deliver. First, the survivors want to ensure that everybody affected is housed within the borough in decent, good-quality accommodation. My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) made the point that there is empty accommodation in the borough that could be acquired. The local authority in Kensington has the resources within its reserves to acquire those properties, but it seems to me that the Government are responsible and they should ensure that those resources are available.

The second thing that the survivors want is help in their present situation. The person from the Justice4Grenfell group said that she had spoken to one survivor who had been put into a hotel and just left to fend for themselves. They did not know where to go to get food or a change of clothes, so more needs to be done. There needs to be more immediate help for the survivors and, in what should be the shorter term, we should make accommodation available. I hope that the Minister will make it clear that that will happen.

When I attended a meeting of the Local Government Association Labour group fire services commission earlier this week, I was shown a paper that had been put to the fire services management committee, which included a number of recommendations. I would be interested in the Minister’s response to them. The paper said:

“Government should agree to have Sprinkler Systems fitted in All High Rise Flats in the Country”,

and that

“Any Cladding fitted to High Rise Flats should be of high quality Fire Resistant Material approved by the Fire Service to a Uniformed National Standard.”

The paper also proposes:

“The Fire Service should have overall responsibility for Fire Safety for High Rise Flats, which includes the Flats, corridors, public spaces, fire alarms, safety advice to tenants, and the Fire Service should provide Fire Safety Assurance for Residential High Rise Flats. All High Rise Blocks should be inspected by the Fire Service once every 2 years, and inspected after a major refurbishment.”

The paper goes on to say:

“New High Rise Flats should be regulated to ensure they are built to include all of the above, and in addition they should be built with two Stair Wells within the building”,

and that

“Government urgently review the fire regulation order and fully fund the Fire Service to re-enable planning and building control applications to be review by Fire Safety issues on a risk assessed basis.”

Finally, the paper says:

“Government will need to recognise that extra Government financial resources will need to be made available to Fire and Rescue Services to enable them to provide for the necessary workload that this will require.”

That seems to me to be a list of common-sense requests. We should remember that it came from a cross-party group, so there are people from the Conservative party, the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats in the Local Government Association saying this, as well as independents. I therefore hope that the Minister will take into account what that cross-party group has said, take into account the very sensible suggestions made on both sides of the House today and, most importantly, listen to the survivors and the community and respond appropriately, because this is a stain on the very character of Great Britain. We need to learn lessons to make sure that we mean it when we say that this will never, ever happen again.

6.13 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to have sat through the whole of this debate and listened to the excellent maiden speeches of my hon. Friends the Members for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) and for Leigh (Jo Platt)—I hope I have got them all. This has been an excellent debate, with very many important points raised and questions asked of Ministers on issues that the Government must address. I will not take up Members' time by repeating many of them.

The Grenfell fire was an appalling and, very likely, preventable tragedy, exacerbated by what seemed to me, as somebody with a bit of experience of this, the frankly dysfunctional response from Kensington and Chelsea Council in the hours, days and weeks following that terrible fire—and even now. I share all Members' concerns for the families of those who lost their lives, and those who lost their homes. I share the concerns of the emergency and frontline service workers who have had to deal with the trauma. I hope that there will be adequate long-term post-trauma support for them all, of the kind that the Government put in place immediately after the 7/7 bombings; somebody I know well is benefiting now from the support he received immediately after that.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: London fire brigade has reduced the number of its counsellors from over 10 to under five in the last seven years. Does my hon. Friend agree that that should immediately be addressed, so that we offer adequate support and counselling to our service personnel?

Ruth Cadbury: That is an excellent point. Clearly fire service officers and other workers are on the frontline when it comes to experiencing trauma; we heard about that in many reports on the Lakanal fire. For such an essential service, which employs people who will experience that trauma, to be cutting specialist counselling services by half is yet another example of the impact of cuts and austerity on public services that are there for us all. Everybody should have a right to post-trauma counselling and support, whether we are talking about an employer providing it to frontline workers, or whether we are talking about members of the public who are nearby or just passing, charity workers helping out at a rescue station, or those who live in similar blocks, because as my friend has told me, it makes a real difference to people's long-term ability to function.

I have constituents, as I am sure many other Members do, who live in older council-owned tower blocks, such as Brentford Towers and the Ivybridge estate. Many have contacted me because they are frightened. They and their children cannot sleep at night. They do not want to carry on living there. They need reassurance. For some of them, the trauma is so bad that they are asking to be rehoused. This is a major issue.

I had the benefit of being briefed by London Borough of Hounslow officers and council members in the week immediately after the Grenfell fire. I have been reassured that none of the blocks in my constituency have cladding that fails the Government tests. I was also pleased to hear that on the day after the Grenfell fire, the council's programme to re-clad the six towers of Brentford Towers, which people can see from the elevated section of the M4, has been put on hold while it reviews the specifics of the programme. That cladding programme is urgently needed for reasons relating to the safety of the existing external cladding and for thermal insulation, but given what has happened, it is absolutely right that the specifics of that programme be reviewed.

The leader and councillors of the London Borough of Hounslow are meeting all residents of tower blocks to hear their concerns—to listen and to respond. That is the right thing to do. The London Borough of Hounslow is also responding to requests and offering help to Kensington and Chelsea on a range of services. The council is preparing estate fire safety and improvement plans, to ensure that issues such as prevention and tackling fire safety inside and outside all tower blocks are addressed. It is also reviewing all the fire risk assessments in all blocks.

I have considerable experience as a councillor: I was lead member for housing and had lead responsibility for contingency planning. I have seen at first hand how proper fire safety mechanisms and management by residents and landlord alike can work. There was a fire at Fraser House, and sadly a resident died, but the fire did not spread through the block because the appropriate fire doors were shut and the appropriate venting was open. The fire was therefore drawn away from the other flats and out of the vents on that floor.

I understand how buildings are designed for fire safety, and how we must be careful when revising the structure, cladding and other aspects of buildings. I also understand why working with the management and the residents is so important. The reason why the fire doors at Fraser House were shut was that residents and the council worked together after the Lakanal House report was published to learn the lessons from that fire. I am regularly in and out of the Brentford Towers blocks—talking to residents, canvassing at elections and so on—and I know that on hot summer days it is tempting to prop open the fire doors. That stopped happening after the Lakanal report, however. The fire doors were regularly closed. Good management and good communication will work.

I have been the lead member for contingency planning, but thankfully I never had to deal with an emergency. I was, however, briefed to know what an emergency looked and felt like, what my role and that of senior officers would be, and how the communications links with other authorities would work, up and down the line. The way of managing in a crisis is completely different from day-to-day managing.

[Ruth Cadbury]

When I woke up that morning and started following the Twitter feed and listening to and watching the news, I was shocked at the poverty of the response from Kensington and Chelsea. To me, it smacked of inadequate preparation for an emergency. I accept that the Grenfell fire was of a different order; as others have said, it was the biggest fire in this country since wartime. Nevertheless, one of the things I would look for as an outsider is a person who is regularly in front of the cameras, listening and speaking. I would expect to see that person meeting the affected residents, the frontline workers and the charity workers. I would expect the charities and others to be responding to requests for help from the local authority, rather than having to be the sole providers of support in the hours and days after the event. But what did we see? Community centres, mosques and churches dealing with things on their own, and receiving massive amounts of good will and items that they perhaps did not need at that time; for example, there was an over-supply of blankets. They were working on their own, and they did not know what to say to all those offers of help.

I was also concerned to hear that when other local authorities, particularly those close to Kensington and Chelsea, offered that week's allocation of social rented housing to Kensington and Chelsea to use as temporary or permanent homes for those affected, there was no adequate response. Other local authorities also offered specialised, experienced trauma counsellors to Kensington and Chelsea, but there was no response. At a time when people were willing and able to go the extra mile to share with colleagues in an extreme crisis, there was nowhere for people to turn. I hope that the inquiry will look at the response of the local authority and at what it should have been. We have already heard how this can work, following reports of what happened after the terrorist attack at the Manchester concert hall. Members from Manchester have said that there was a good response from the local authority there.

The residents of Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk and their families deserve justice. All residents of tower blocks deserve reassurance, so that they can live and sleep in peace. Poor communities and those in housing need require a Government who no longer ignore them, cut vital services, and ignore the conclusions of public inquiries, and a Government who invest in adequate, good-quality, truly affordable housing.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Before I call the Front-Bench spokesmen, I ask them to split the remaining time.

6.24 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The Opposition welcome today's debate, and I begin by thanking colleagues who have contributed, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), for Eltham (Clive Efford), for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad), who speaks with so much knowledge and first-hand experience of the dreadful tragedy and its aftermath, for Norwich South (Clive Lewis), for Westminster North (Ms Buck), for Ogmore (Chris Elmore), for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), for Derby North (Chris Williamson), and for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury).

We heard brilliant and powerful maiden speeches from my hon. Friends the Members for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves), for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), and for Leigh (Jo Platt). All of them showed passion and dedication. They will be doughty champions for their constituents and their constituencies in this place, and I welcome each and every one of them.

From other parts of the House, we heard from the right hon. and learned Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) and the hon. Members for Southend West (Sir David Amess), for Southampton, Itchen (Royston Smith), for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), and for Redditch (Rachel Maclean).

There can be little dispute that the shock that we all felt following this tragedy has not subsided in the weeks that followed it. While the need for immediate answers is clear, we welcome the Grenfell inquiry's decision yesterday to extend the consultation period by two weeks to provide those affected with more time to respond. It is understandable that the immediate focus of the response to this tragedy has been on meeting the needs of the bereaved and the survivors, but may I urge the Government for action with regard to the neighbours and community members around Grenfell tower? We have been speaking to some of the volunteers, and they have expressed concern at the lack of access to support for the many nearby residents. These people saw the disaster develop close at hand, but some have not accessed support, either because they have not been directly approached, or because of a reluctance to do so when local services are so overwhelmed.

I pay tribute to the fire service, the police, and the community, who pulled together to assist when statutory authorities frankly failed. That is why I ask the Government to ensure that support is available to those who are volunteering after this disaster. Some volunteers are now doing a job as part of the disaster victim identification team that many of us could not imagine.

As the tragedy unfolded on 14 June, I watched an interview on one of the news channels with a resident whose property overlooked the tower. He spoke about seeing the building on fire from his kitchen, and seeing children calling for help from the windows. So many have been affected by this tragedy. We need to make sure that adequate support is in place for residents, those living in the area, those dealing with the aftermath, and the children who survived and saw things that no child should ever have to see. I want an assurance from the Government that they will ensure that those people are given every support that they need.

Similarly, residents in tower blocks throughout the UK need assurances that their homes are safe. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) was clear about where the Government need to improve. Four weeks on from this tragedy, we still need the Government to show some leadership, because concerns run deep, and run beyond the neighbourhood surrounding Grenfell. We heard today that Members across this House have been contacted by concerned constituents living in the 4,000 other tower blocks across the country. Ministers still cannot say how many of these tower blocks they consider to be

safe. In the last update given by Ministers, of the 530 tower blocks covered in aluminium composite material that have been the focus of the testing process, only 200 had actually had material tested.

We have heard that housing associations whose residents have sought assurances that their non-ACM clad buildings are safe—I have three such buildings in my constituency—have been told that the Government are refusing to check their cladding due to the current narrow focus of the testing. That is just not good enough.

Where buildings have failed safety tests, including in Salford, local authorities are unclear on how to proceed, because guidance issued by the Department for Communities and Local Government is unclear on whether cladding that fails combustibility tests requires removal, and on whether, if it does fail those tests, leaving a building unclad and open to the elements is actually a worse fire situation than leaving the cladding on.

On 3 July, the Secretary of State told the House that the panels that failed recent testing

“are ‘unlikely to be compliant’ with the limited combustibility requirement of the building regulations”.—[*Official Report*, 3 July 2017; Vol. 626, c. 913.]

However, as per the explanatory note referenced by the Secretary of State, it may be possible for individual materials that do not meet limited combustibility definitions to be used where they form part of a system that does meet the requirements.

There are two ways to meet that requirement. One is to ensure that each individual component of a wall meets the criteria for limited combustibility, which is the test currently used by the Department, and the other is to ensure that the façade system meets the acceptance criteria of BR 135, following the method in BS 8414. But under the current regulatory system, even cladding that fails tests for limited combustibility can be used in developments as long as the criteria in BR 135 are met. Despite the Chancellor’s misinformed comments, the cladding used in the project at Grenfell Tower was not banned in the UK. If we are to prevent such a tragedy from happening again, it is important that we get these things right.

The fire service was among the first at the scene at Grenfell. The least we can do is ensure that it plays an important role in the forthcoming inquiry, and that its expertise is not just valued but taken on board and acted on. Following the Grenfell Tower fire, many local authorities have been undertaking safety checks and installing fire prevention systems. Many councils have gone beyond just the tower blocks by looking at public buildings such as schools and hospitals.

Some local authorities began removing cladding from their buildings after it failed the recent tests, but as I have explained, the building regulations do not necessarily reflect the documentation issued by the Department. Some housing providers have since stopped removing cladding because of that lack of direction; they do not know how, and with what materials, the cladding should be replaced. Residents are worried that inaction is leaving them vulnerable, yet without guidance, local authorities are unsure how best to act. Leadership on this issue has not been forthcoming from the Secretary of State, who has instead passed the buck to landlords, in conjunction with fire services, so that they take decisions on building safety.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne, the shadow Secretary of State for Housing, noted in his opening remarks, this is not the first time that the Government have failed to take responsibility for safety. He referred to the words of the former Housing Minister, the right hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), who said it was the responsibility of the fire industry, rather than the Government, to encourage the installation of sprinkler systems.

Members on both sides of the House, including the right hon. and learned Member for North East Hertfordshire and the hon. Member for Southend West, have called for the retrofitting of sprinklers. I urge the Minister to consult the all-party parliamentary fire safety rescue group on that, because there is an urgent need to ensure that all buildings—public buildings and housing—are fire-safe.

I commend Labour-led Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council, one of two councils covering my constituency, on agreeing to retrofit sprinklers in all Stockport Homes tower blocks. That is down to the work of Councillor Sheila Bailey in particular. Similar commitments have been made by other local authorities of all political persuasions.

Ministers need to clarify an important matter. They have not given any real commitment to local authorities. The First Secretary of State has announced that the Government are prepared to fund these measures only in certain circumstances. That basically means that already cash-strapped local authorities will have to either find more money that they just do not have or cut services elsewhere. Unless the Government explain how they will make resources available to local authorities to do those works, and what “stepping in” means in practical terms, that is a bit of an empty promise.

Mr Betts: I raised that issue in the debate. I asked the Secretary of State in a written question to set out the criteria against which applications for additional funding will be assessed. The answer I got was “that it will not be possible to answer this question within the usual time period.”

That is a rather empty answer, is it not, to a very pressing problem?

Andrew Gwynne: Absolutely, and I am afraid it speaks volumes. Unless the Minister, in summing up, can explain how local authorities are going to get that resource, the fact is that councils in my hon. Friend’s constituency and many others across this country will not have the financial means to address the issue. They need certainty that they will receive some recompense from central Government.

I want to turn quickly to governance. We heard today that the taskforce sent in to advise Kensington and Chelsea Council lacked the powers necessary to co-ordinate what needed to be done following this disaster, and about the deficit in local leadership. As the First Secretary of State has said, the taskforce can advise, but it cannot act. Surely that is an issue of real concern, because Kensington and Chelsea Council just was not up to the job of dealing with a disaster of this magnitude. The way in which it responded was, quite frankly, not acceptable in any sense of the term. There is very real concern about not only how the local authority handled the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, but its shortcomings over the following days and weeks.

[Andrew Gwynne]

Having spoken to those offering support to survivors, I understand that there are very real concerns that the uptake of financial support is still not what it should be. I appreciate that Ministers have given assurances that benefits will not be affected, but the lack of trust that some continue to have in their elected representatives locally has led to a number refusing support. That needs to be addressed at a local level.

On the council's ability to deal with this type of emergency, it has emerged that there are serious shortcomings in its contingency planning and management, yet the Government have not been good enough at the job of intervening. People are still in need of support services and rehousing. It appears that the Government have acknowledged the council's serious failings, because they sent in a taskforce, but at this crucial time, they have left in charge those who failed the residents in the first place. Today, we heard the new leader of the council state that she has never before been inside a high-rise council block. What a farce!

On 1 July, Labour called for commissioners to be sent in to take control of the situation, warning that trust among the local community will not be rebuilt by a leader, deputy leader or other politicians unless there is a major shake-up in governance. I repeat the call that we made on 1 July: local people want to know that the Government are taking control; that there will be a shake-up in the management and governance of Kensington and Chelsea Council; and that the situation will be closely monitored and managed directly by commissioners who are answerable to the Secretary of State and to Parliament, until the local authority has the necessary capacity, is fit for purpose, and is fit to govern in the interests of all the residents of Kensington and Chelsea.

Until we can guarantee that all those who lost their homes are in secure accommodation, until support is available for all who need it, and until the public are again able to trust the elected representatives in Kensington and Chelsea Council, we will repeat our call for commissioners to take over the running of the council. Changes need to be made to laws, to regulations and in the governance of the council, and they must be made based on the evidence we have now, as well as on the additional evidence from the inquiry. We urge the Government to make this happen swiftly; if they do, they will have our support.

6.41 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government (Alok Sharma): We have had a detailed and wide-ranging debate on the Grenfell Tower public inquiry, but I start by congratulating all the Members who made their maiden speeches today: the hon. Members for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves), for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), for Leigh (Jo Platt) and for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones).

We heard some incredibly powerful speeches from my hon. Friends the Members for Southampton, Itchen (Royston Smith), for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) and for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), and we of course heard from the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad), who

has been very involved in dealing with the residents and has been part of the response.

We also heard from various members of the all-party group on fire safety: my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) and the hon. Members for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) and for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). I can tell the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), that I met them recently to hear their views. They will be writing to me in some detail to set out what they want to see happen in the inquiry.

Colleagues have had an opportunity to express a range of views—some obviously different from others—but the House is today united in the view that ultimately the people who matter the most are those who have been affected directly by this terrible tragedy. They must have their questions answered, and that is precisely what the inquiry will do.

In his opening remarks, the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), said that he will not rest until the residents have the help they need, until we get to the bottom of what happened, and until we make sure that this never happens again. I assure him that I, too, will not rest until all three of those conditions are met, and nor will the Secretary of State or, indeed, any colleague in this House.

I again put on record my deepest condolences to all those who have suffered such great loss as a result of this fire, which we all agree should never have happened. Colleagues from all parties have paid tribute to the victims, their families and the heroism of the emergency services, and I know that such heart-felt views will be heard and echoed throughout the country. This debate has provided an opportunity to reflect on the scale and human cost of this tragedy, but it has also given us a valuable chance to start to look ahead to what comes next—principally, the public inquiry that will establish precisely what went wrong, why and who is responsible.

Colleagues have raised a range of issues, and before I continue with my speech I shall take a few minutes to respond to some of them. On the help available to those who are directly affected, Members will know that we have made first offers to all those who are ready to have such offers made to them. A large number of second offers have been made, and 19 of the families have now accepted an offer. I just point out that, as I know Opposition Members have acknowledged, we need to go at the pace that the families want us to go at. That is incredibly important. I know that some of them will want to move into permanent homes rather than into temporary homes, and we accept that. We have had a discussion about Kensington Row, and I hope we will soon be in a position where we can start viewings of the flats there. We are also looking to secure similar accommodation so that we have net additions to the social housing, rather than take up homes that others might have occupied. The key thing is that nobody is going to be forced into a home that they do not want to go to.

On funding, I can report that 120 of the households have received a grant of £5,000, and many others have also received the £500 cash payment. In total, almost £4 million has been paid out from the discretionary fund. Colleagues have raised issues relating to trauma support, which of course is being made available to those who need it. Given the exceptional nature of the

incident, we have agreed that MOPAC—Mayor’s Office for Policing And Crime—funding will be used for this, even though no crime as such has been committed that we are aware of.

We heard a discussion on the Government’s response and the testing regime that we have put in place. The Secretary of State has led right from the start on that. I have been by his side, so I can tell Members that he has led on it. I ask hon. Members to look on the Government website because it will tell them about all the letters we have written to local authorities and housing associations, and all the tests that we have suggested are done. Yes, 211 tests have come back as positive—or negative; it depends on how one looks at it—but I just say that we are working with the Local Government Association and others to encourage housing associations, local councils and private landlords to send in the cladding for testing. What I say to every Member here, as they can help with this, is that I know they will be in touch with their local authorities and housing associations, so please help us. They should ask their local—

Ms Buck: For clarity, will the Minister confirm that half or more of all the high-rise towers identified at the earlier point in this discussion have not submitted materials to be tested? That is the clear implication of what he was saying.

Alok Sharma: I am saying that we want to get this testing done as quickly as possible. We have the resources available for that. Let me just say that there are some cases where local authorities will have sent in one piece of cladding for testing from a building and may have had a number of buildings that were re-clad at a similar time, so we are hoping to establish whether that is the case or not. An awful lot of work is going on, and I just recommend to right hon. and hon. Members that they look on the website as it will tell them, in great detail, what the expert advisory panel is doing and it will tell them about all the tests that have been carried out.

Members have also talked about insulation, and of course when we wrote to local authorities on 22 June we asked them also to look at that. On 6 July, the independent expert panel announced that it would be recommending wider systems checks of cladding, and that it would be testing a combination of ACM panels with two of the most commonly used insulation materials as well.

We had a discussion about building regulations, and I respectfully point out that they were put together in 2006, not when the current Government were in place, so this idea that somehow deregulation has played a part is unfair. Let me also make reference to the Lakanal House fire and what the coroner wanted to happen. The coroner recommended simplifying the fire safety guidance under the building regulations, not a change in the standards. I accept that that has not happened as yet, but clearly in the light of this tragedy we need to reflect on the previous plans for consulting. Clearly, if anything emerges from the investigation where we need to take immediate action, we will do that.

The expert advisory panel, which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has appointed, is considering a range of matters, particularly whether there are any immediate additional actions that need to be taken to ensure the safety of existing high-rise buildings.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I am very grateful to the Minister for his comments about high-rise buildings. Will he clarify whether the testing and the regulation-reviewing that the Government are undertaking also extend to other buildings that may be affected, such as schools and hospitals?

Alok Sharma: Yes, I can. That work is ongoing.

There was a discussion about the independent recovery taskforce, which was appointed by the Secretary of State. Let me point out that if we had gone down the road of appointing commissioners, that would have been a statutory intervention, which would have taken longer. Our view is that we need to get people in there now and to focus particularly on housing regeneration and community engagement. People from that taskforce will report directly to the Secretary of State.

Andy Slaughter: Will the Minister enlighten us on who they are and where they are?

Alok Sharma: That information will be published very shortly.

The hon. Member for Hammersmith talked about product safety. The Government have a working group on product recalls and safety, which has been asked, as a matter of urgency, to review its final report in the light of the Grenfell Tower tragedy.

Finally, on social housing, I know that we will have opportunities to debate these matters in the months and possibly years ahead, but may I just point out to the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne, that, during the period of 1997 to 2010, the number of social rented homes fell by 420,000. Since 2010, we have delivered 333,000 new affordable homes. *[Interruption.]* That is a debate for another day. May I just return to the public inquiry?

Mr Betts: The Minister did say “finally”, but he has not yet come back to the issue of what funding will be available to other local authorities carrying out this essential work and what criteria will be used to assess any funding applications.

Alok Sharma: The Secretary of State and other Ministers have been absolutely clear: we do not want local authorities and housing associations to stop doing anything that is necessary to keep people safe. If they do not have the funding, we will work with them on the funding process.

Clive Efford rose—

Alok Sharma: No, I will not give way as I really must get on.

A range of views have been expressed about the cause of the Grenfell Tower tragedy. What is vital is that we have a full independent public inquiry with a remit that goes way beyond the design, construction and modification of the building itself. An effective and prompt inquiry will necessarily have to follow defined terms of reference, and setting those is obviously crucial. The terms will be set formally by the Prime Minister, but she will do so following recommendations from the chair of the public inquiry, Sir Martin Moore-Bick. Sir Martin was appointed to head up the inquiry on 29 June and on that very day he visited the site and spoke with some of those who had been affected by the tragedy. Sir Martin has been absolutely clear in his desire to consult the affected

[Alok Sharma]

residents about what the terms of the reference should be. I know that he has been meeting them to hear their views. He has also said that he welcomes the views from the wider community. Those are the actions of a person who wants proactively to engage with those directly affected right from the start. I urge hon. Members who have concerns or ideas about the terms of the inquiry to raise them with the team. The details are available on the inquiry website: grenfelltowerinquiry.org.uk.

During today's debate, some concern has been expressed about Sir Martin's suitability for the role, but as the First Secretary of State has said, he is independently appointed, extremely well qualified and totally impartial. Sir Martin is a hugely experienced former Court of Appeal judge. Judges decide cases solely on the evidence presented in court and in accordance with the law. As a senior judge, Sir Martin has worked across a range of cases. There have been cases where Sir Martin has been praised by civil liberties lawyers and cases where he has found in favour of housing association tenants, but in each case he will have made decisions based on the law and the evidence—nothing more, and nothing less.

Opposition Members may be aware that from December 2005 to December 2009, Sir Martin was chair of the legal services consultative panel, which advises successive Lord Chancellors on the regulation and training of lawyers, legal services and other related matters. The Lord Chancellors whom he served were Lord Falconer and Jack Straw. I have previously noted in this House that it is vital for Government, central and local, to work hard to win the trust of those people directly affected by this tragedy. I have no doubt that Sir Martin is similarly aware that he needs to foster that trust. I am sure that, as his dialogue with the local community continues, they will note that his only motivation is to get to the bottom of what happened.

I assure hon. Members that the Government will co-operate fully with the inquiry, and I hope that the same will be true of the local authority and any other individual or body whose work falls within the inquiry's remit. It is absolutely vital that no stone is left unturned and that anyone who has done wrong has nowhere to hide. To help get to the truth, survivors of the fire and the families of the victims will receive funding for legal representation at the inquiry. Details of how they access that legal funding will follow once the inquiry is up and running.

Some concern has been raised about the lack of a coroner's inquest into the deaths at Grenfell. Let me assure colleagues that there will be an inquest. The coroner is already investigating the deaths; that is a statutory duty. The police-led investigation is already under way in conjunction with the London Fire Brigade and the Health and Safety Executive. The police investigation will consider potential criminal liability. The police have been very clear: arrests will follow if any evidence of criminal wrongdoing is found. Unlike a coroner's inquest, a full, judge-led public inquiry will allow us to look at the broader circumstances leading up to and surrounding the tragic fire at Grenfell Tower.

It will also allow us to take any action necessary as quickly as possible to prevent a similar tragedy from happening again.

A number of colleagues have expressed concerns about timing. Of course, we want the inquiry to be completed as quickly as possible and the main priority will be to establish the facts of what action is needed to prevent such a tragedy from happening again. It will be for Sir Martin to determine the timescale for the inquiry, but I am certain that he will be aware of the universal desire for an interim report to be published at the earliest opportunity.

In cases of some past disasters, such as Hillsborough and the sinking of the *Marchioness*, it took far too long for the whole story of what happened to emerge. We do not want that to be the case with Grenfell Tower. That was why the Prime Minister ordered a full public inquiry as soon as the scale of the tragedy became apparent. Regardless of politics or ideology and of what we think is the best course of action, all of us here want one thing: the truth. It might prove uncomfortable for some and it might not fit the preconception of others, but the truth must come out. I am confident that Sir Martin Moore-Bick will see that the truth does come out. The survivors of the Grenfell fire and the families of those who were lost deserve no less.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Grenfell Tower fire inquiry.

Mr Speaker: We will soon come to the matter for which a good many Members are probably waiting—I rather imagine they are; if they are not, they should be. They could be awaiting the Adjournment debate with eager anticipation, bated breath and beads of sweat upon their brows, but quite a lot are probably waiting for the announcement of the results of the elections for Chairs of Select Committees. Before we come to those, I will take a point of order from Jenny Chapman.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The House is aware that the repeal Bill is to be published tomorrow morning. Disconcertingly, the Labour party has received reports that the press is to be briefed on its contents this evening. Mr Speaker, have you received any notice from the Government that a Minister intends to come to this House at the earliest opportunity to make a statement as to the contents of the Bill? If not, could you please advise me on how we might be able to bring the contents of the Bill to the attention of the House before 21 July?

Mr Speaker: The short answer is that I have received no indication of any intention on the part of a Minister to make a statement on the matter tomorrow. However, it is perfectly open to the hon. Lady and her colleagues to ensure that they have a default position so that if no ministerial statement is proffered, they could at least give themselves the chance of an urgent question. I cannot offer any guarantee as to whether such a question would be selected, but it can be selected, by definition, only if it is submitted. In so far as the hon. Lady seeks my advice, that is my advice without prejudice.

Speaker's Statement: Select Committee Chairs

7 pm

Mr Speaker: We come now to the announcement of the results for the election of Chairs of Select Committees. Nominations for the 27 elected Select Committee Chairs and the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee closed on Friday 7 July, and elections were held by secret ballot today. No ballot was necessary for 17 Committees for which a single nomination had been received, as follows:

<i>Committee</i>	<i>Elected</i>
Culture, Media and Sport	Damian Collins
Environmental Audit	Mary Creagh
Exiting the European Union	Hilary Benn
Health	Dr Sarah Wollaston
Home Affairs	Yvette Cooper
International Development	Stephen Twigg
International Trade	Angus Brendan MacNeil
Justice	Robert Neill
Petitions	Helen Jones
Procedure	Mr Charles Walker
Public Accounts	Meg Hillier
Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs	Mr Bernard Jenkin
Scottish Affairs	Pete Wishart
Standards	Sir Kevin Barron
Welsh Affairs	David T.C. Davies
Women and Equalities	Mrs Maria Miller
Work and Pensions	Frank Field

I say what I am about to say principally for the benefit of people attending to our proceedings outwith

the Chamber. What I have just said means that those named individuals have been elected or—I think in every case—re-elected as Chairs of those Select Committees. In the contested elections, a total of 587 ballot papers were submitted, the ballots being counted under the alternative vote system. The following candidates were elected:

<i>Committee</i>	<i>Elected</i>
Backbench Business	Ian Mearns
Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy	Rachel Reeves
Communities and Local Government	Clive Betts
Defence	Dr Julian Lewis
Education	Robert Halfon
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	Neil Parish
Foreign Affairs	Tom Tugendhat
Northern Ireland Affairs	Dr Andrew Murrison
Science and Technology	Norman Lamb
Transport	Lilian Greenwood
Treasury	Nicky Morgan

The full breakdown of voting in each contest, indicating the votes attributable to each candidate after each redistribution of the votes of eliminated candidates is set out in a paper, shortly available on the Parliament website, and from the Vote Office. The Members so elected take up their positions formally when their Committee has been nominated by the House. I congratulate all right hon. and hon. Members concerned. May I, with the concurrence of the House, thank all those candidates who took part in the elections? If I may say so, this is the somewhat more democratic House of Commons in 2017 by comparison with an earlier era.

Redundancy Modification Orders

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

7.4 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) rose—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I am saddened by the speedy exit—

The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Damian Green): But not surprised.

Mr Speaker: But not surprised, says the First Secretary of State. I am saddened by the speedy exit of large numbers of Members. If there are so many Members who wish to leave and who do not wish to hear the oration of the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) on the subject of redundancy modification orders—a quite unaccountable departure on their part—I hope that they will leave the Chamber quickly and quietly so that the rest of us can listen to the oration of the hon. Gentleman.

Martyn Day: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am grateful to you for allowing me this opportunity to raise the issue of redundancy modification orders—or, to use the full Sunday name, the Redundancy Payments (Continuity of Employment in Local Government, etc.) (Modification) Order 1999.

As the name implies, the order acts to preserve continuity of employment where an employee moves between certain local government, and indeed some other identified, positions. Pretty much every type of job that once belonged to the local government family is covered by the RMO, with a wide range of bodies listed. To illustrate that, the list already includes bodies in my constituency, such as West Lothian Leisure Ltd, and others including the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, Scottish Water, the Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care and the Scottish Social Services Council, to name just a few.

I refer Members to the order's explanatory notes, which describe its effect quite clearly:

“The Order modifies certain provisions of the Employment Rights Act 1996 concerning redundancy payments, in their application to persons employed by certain local government employers or other employers in related sectors. The modifications have the effect that the employment of such a person by more than one such employer may be treated as if it were continuous for the purposes of those provisions; and re-engagement of such a person, or an offer of re-engagement made to such a person, by any such employer is treated as if it were re-engagement, or as if the offer had been made, by that person's employer.”

In ordinary language, that means that the order deems certain successive employments as continuous, and the provisions of the Employment Rights Act 1996 would apply as if the individual had been employed by the same employer throughout the entire period.

If an employee under notice of redundancy receives a job offer from another listed body on the modification order and starts the new role within four weeks of the end of their old job, they are considered to have continuity of employment. If an employee decides during the first four weeks not to continue with the new job, they will be able to terminate the contract, and they would be

entitled to receive any redundancy payments from the old employer. However, no continuous service accrued under the redundancy modification order applies to anything other than the redundancy payment. Such continuous service fails to entitle employees to any additional annual leave or other benefit over and above that of their contractual entitlements.

While the order treats certain types of successive employments as continuous, it does not preserve continuity if there is a break in service. The order has been amended a number of times to include new employments, with the last amendment being in 2015.

The crux of the issue, and the reason for this debate, is the lack of progress made on updating the order, and the impacts of this on employees' rights and continuous service benefits—benefits such as pension and annual leave entitlement, as well as the calculation of redundancy payments. Many terms and conditions of local government employment are linked to continuous service, so the impact of changing employers extends far beyond redundancy rights, affecting other entitlements, such as sickness allowance and maternity pay.

The lack of an update to the order means that a number of organisations across the UK have yet to be included in the order, despite applying for inclusion—in some cases, several years ago. One such organisation is the Falkirk Community Trust, which applied for inclusion shortly after its establishment in 2011. Its application has been considered, and the trust has been approved for inclusion in the schedule of bodies in the order. To date, this inclusion has not taken place and has been beset with delays.

The Government stated in 2015 that the order would be updated in due course. As the House will be aware, the Department for Communities and Local Government administers the local government redundancy modification order on behalf of the UK Government and the devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales. I have been told in answer to parliamentary questions that the Department is

“actively looking at options on taking forward the Redundancy Modification Order and will update relevant organisations in due course.”

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech about this important issue for employees. Has he had any indication from the Government of why this is taking so long and when it will be resolved?

Martyn Day: That is indeed a question that I shall be coming to, and one that I have asked by way of written questions and in letters to Ministers. I hope that this Minister will answer it tonight.

In November last year, I wrote to Ministers in the Department for Communities and Local Government asking them to set a firm timescale for updating the order. The response that I received was completely unsatisfactory: it gave no explanation for the delays, and made no firm commitment to updating the order within any definitive timescale. It is now 2017 and no updates have been made, which leaves many employees throughout the country in a kind of limbo, not knowing whether their continuous service will be recognised. Indeed, literally thousands of local government workers may be unaware that they could be affected by this lack of action if they were to move posts.

One such person is my constituent Jill Kernan, who first made me aware of this issue—and I am grateful to her for doing so. Jill has worked in local government for more than 20 years, and because she has transferred between employers on occasion, her case very much highlights the problem. In 2013 her employer at the time, North Lanarkshire Council, formed an arm's-length company called North Lanarkshire Properties LLP. The small number of staff, and Unison, which was representing staff in the TUPE process, were assured that addition to the order was a formality, and would happen imminently. Given how relatively straightforward the process should be, that assurance did not seem unreasonable. Life, however, is seldom as straightforward as we would expect, and when Jill took up a new post with Falkirk Council early last year, she discovered that the arm's-length company—and, indeed, many others—had still not been informed of the decision on addition to the order. Consequently, Jill has lost continuation of service. She and others like her need to know when a decision will be made, and whether it will be retrospective.

The right not to be unfairly dismissed and the right to a redundancy payment require two years' continuous service, and workers affected by these delays in updating the order clearly risk losing those rights. While I hope that the situation can be resolved retrospectively, I am left wondering what happens to anyone who is made redundant during this limbo period. The redundancy modification order has undoubtedly had a huge impact on Jill's continuous-service benefits, including pension and annual leave entitlement as well as other service-related conditions. Quite simply, that is not good enough: our public sector staff deserve to be treated better. There are more than enough challenges in the local government and public sector environment without managers and staff having to investigate and try to sort out staff conditions and benefits when people are changing jobs in such circumstances.

In recent years, local government has had to come up with many innovative and effective ways of making efficiency savings and streamlining the delivery of public services, and the creation of arm's-length companies has been a regular feature of that process the length and breadth of the UK. Many Members will have, for example, culture or leisure trusts in their constituencies which have been set up in the last few years. I wonder how many of those are included in the current RMO, and how many are—as in my own local experience—still awaiting inclusion. The number of new companies of that kind, and consequently the number of affected workers, are likely to continue to increase.

The frequency of updates of the order to include new employments is simply not keeping pace with the reality of life in the public sector, and those affected are very frustrated by that. I share their frustration with the Government in this regard, and I have a number of questions to ask. Why is the process taking so long? When will it be resolved? What will be done to sort the problem out retrospectively so that hard-working constituents who have been affected by the delays do not potentially lose out? In particular, how can we ensure that those affected can reclaim any lost benefits when the RMO finally catches up with the new employments?

The redundancy modification order is a key instrument in protecting the terms and conditions of local government workers, and its timeous updating should be given a

higher priority than it has been given by this Government. I also think that Ministers should consider the preservation of other length-of-service benefits such as annual leave and sick pay entitlements, and not just that of redundancy pay.

As I mentioned earlier, the Department for Communities and Local Government administers the order on behalf of the devolved Administrations. I therefore suggest that, given that legislative competency over local government is devolved to the Scottish Parliament, it might make sense to devolve the administration of the redundancy modification order to Scotland as well. I should like to hear the Minister's opinion of that suggestion.

I look forward to the Minister's response, and to his answers to my questions.

7.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): I thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for raising this issue and for giving me the opportunity to respond. The redundancy modification order for local government is a statutory instrument that allows local government employees to carry over their employment service when they move between employers within the local government family. The order covers England, Scotland and Wales.

The redundancy modification order lists those bodies that provide local authority functions as associated employers for the purposes of statutory redundancy payments. For an individual working in local government, this means that their employment service with any body listed in the order can be used to calculate their redundancy payment, if the individual is made redundant. The order brings local government in line with arrangements for other associated employers under the Employment Rights Act 1996—for example the civil service, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned in his speech.

Employment matters under the Employment Rights Act would usually be administered by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. However, given that the redundancy modification order's focus is on local government, it was decided in 2009 that the Department for Communities and Local Government would be best placed to take the lead on this matter. That is why I am responding to the House this evening.

The redundancy modification order generally enjoys broad support in the local government sector. It is part of the local government employment rights framework, and when seeking to outsource services and other operations, local authorities will often apply for the new body to be covered by the order.

The redundancy modification order has been in place since 1983, and it was last consolidated into one piece of legislation in 1999. Since then, a number of separate orders have added new bodies to the list of associated bodies. It is fair to say that over that time the order has become a rather untidy piece of legislation. It is unwieldy, and it is often difficult for people both in local and central Government to navigate or administer.

It is also clear that more could be done to ensure that the current criteria and processes used by the Government to add new bodies to the redundancy modification order are far more open and transparent. For those reasons, the order is under review. Any review must ensure that the redundancy modification order is not

[Mr Marcus Jones]

over-burdensome in processes or future costs. I would like to ensure that the order is focused on core local government services and functions, and that it delivers good value for money for taxpayers.

There are a number of outstanding applications for bodies that are waiting to be added to the redundancy modification order, including several Scottish bodies, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned. Many of those bodies have been waiting some time to know whether they will be added and therefore become an associated employer. I offer my apologies to those bodies for the delay in providing them with an answer. As I have already stated, however, the redundancy modification order is currently under review.

The hon. Gentleman described the effect on his constituent of the redundancy modification order and the review that is currently taking place. I would be grateful if he would write to me with more information about that case as I am very interested to hear more about it.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether the Government intend to devolve some of the redundancy modification order's functions to the Scottish Government. As I am sure he will know, the Scottish Government have approached DCLG Ministers with a proposal that the functions be transferred under section 63 of the Scotland Act 1998. That would effectively remove the need for my Department's officials to consider applications for inclusion in the order and also remove Ministers in my Department from the decision making.

I am alert to the fact that the Scottish Government have good reasons for proposing that change, and I understand that a number of other wide-ranging public sector reforms have been made in Scotland recently, such as the introduction of integrated health and social care partnership arrangements across Scotland. That is one of the Scottish Government's flagship public sector reform policies, so I am sure they are keen to ensure that the transition to the new arrangements is implemented as smoothly as possible. However, Her Majesty's Government have a clear position on employment matters—they are reserved. As such, the DCLG has no plans to devolve any functions of the redundancy modification order to the Scottish Government. That decision was communicated to the Secretary of State

for Scotland just before the general election, and I am happy to write directly to Scottish Government Ministers to confirm it.

Martyn Day: I thank the Minister for those answers, although obviously I am disappointed with the position on devolution. Will he address my point about how timeously the order can be updated? A wait of more than six years for some Scottish organisations is utterly unacceptable.

Mr Jones: I will respond to the hon. Gentleman's point in a moment, but first I would like to finish my point about the Scottish Government's request for the matter to be devolved. I am keen to work with them to explore the matter further, and particularly to identify whether any other options are available to achieve a successful outcome for all parties. I therefore propose that, in the first instance, my officials and their counterparts from the Scotland Office and the Scottish Government meet as soon as possible so that officials can better understand the Scottish Government's concerns.

Finally, I will respond to a couple of the hon. Gentleman's points about the review. As I said, the order is still under review. I understand his frustration with that, but it is important that we get it right. He is right that the matter could have come before the House sooner, but we have just had a general election, and as a consequence my Department is dealing with a number of policies. In particular, we heard in the previous debate about some of the challenges that it has had as a consequence of the awful Grenfell fire. We are in the process of looking at the order, but we have to prioritise certain things.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether the updating of the redundancy modification order could be retrospective. That question will have to be answered through the review.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for taking the time to raise this important matter, and I would be grateful if he provided me with further details of the constituent he mentioned. As I have said, we will take forward the review in due course.

Question put and agreed to.

7.24 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 12 July 2017

[JAMES GRAY *in the Chair*]

Euratom Membership

9.30 am

James Gray (in the Chair): Members will have noticed that there are a large number of people here, and a large number of them have put in to speak. I do not feel inclined to apply a formal time limit yet, but roughly speaking there will be two or three minutes per Back Bencher. It would help if Members kept themselves to that limit; I reserve the option of bringing in a formal time limit later if they do not.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered negotiations on future Euratom membership.

I declare an interest as a vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on nuclear energy. I want to make it clear from the outset that this debate is not a rerun of the EU referendum debate or of the article 50 debate. This debate is about getting it right and ensuring that the UK remains a world leader in civil nuclear and in research and development.

We achieved world leader status by co-operating with others across the world under the umbrella of Euratom—or, to give it its full name, the European Atomic Energy Community. Euratom was established in the 1950s as part of the creation of the European Community. It provides the basis for the regulation of civil nuclear safeguards and control and supply of fissile material, and funds international research. The Culham Centre for Fusion Energy is one of the leading research centres in the world. The Government have indicated that Euratom and the EU are legally joined. Some say that we have to give the same notice to exit Euratom as we did to exit the EU through article 50. I disagree.

I was a member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, which held a comprehensive inquiry into how Brexit will affect energy. We looked at the single internal energy market, Euratom and meeting our climate change commitments. We heard evidence from across the board. Euratom was raised by many experts who work in the civil nuclear field and in research and development, as well as by academics. We received hard evidence that there is contradictory legal advice on the matter. In fact, the advice is diametrically opposed. Many believe that just because we are a member of the same institution, we must have the same jurisdiction. That is in dispute, and I put it to the Government that there are ways forward that would mean there did not have to be a cliff edge when the article 50 negotiations are complete. I sought this debate to ensure that we get the best deal possible, that we get some transitional arrangements, and that the industry is happy.

In the light of the new consensual politics that the Prime Minister has announced, will the Minister—I ask him to make a note of this—set up a working group with industry and academics, and consult Parliament,

to ensure that we have the appropriate arrangements in place so that the nuclear industry and those involved in research and development can plan for the future?

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I understand that this debate will focus largely on the nuclear industry, but I am concerned about the impact on medicine. Is the hon. Gentleman aware of the concern of the Royal College of Radiologists that an inability easily to bring isotopes into the country could affect half a million scans and 10,000 cancer treatments? Isotopes cannot be stored, because they have a short half-life, so we need Euratom.

Albert Owen: I absolutely agree. I have had a lot of correspondence from experts across the field, including the Royal Marsden Hospital, where cancer research is vital. As the hon. Lady says, it is absolutely essential that we get that right. This is not about the dogma that we must leave an institution; it is about ensuring that medical research continues, that we maintain high standards, and that we have the framework to move isotopes and do the things that she mentions.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I commend the hon. Gentleman not just on obtaining the debate but on his constructive tone, but why should the case for staying in Euratom not apply to every other agency that we will leave when we leave the European Union? As we leave those other agencies and regulatory bodies, we will set up our own, under international standards. Why can that not also be done with Euratom? Who would want to frustrate that?

Albert Owen: No one wants to frustrate anything—quite the contrary. I am trying to set the tone by saying that we need a long-term plan. I am worried that there will be a cliff edge, and that we will have to leave an organisation that has served us and the whole global community well for many years just because we leave the European Union. I repeat that experts have said that we can legally decouple Euratom and the EU. I think that doing so would improve our chances of getting a better agreement. I disagree with the hon. Gentleman that we would have to deal with every other agency. In a sense, Euratom is pretty unique, and the industry and experts—not politicians, but people who understand the industry—are worried about it.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Since the problem is that Euratom is legally joined to the European Union, can the hon. Gentleman tell us how many European Court of Justice cases Euratom, in its long history, has been involved in?

Albert Owen: The honest answer is very few. I do not know the exact figure—I am sure that the Minister, whose civil servants are here, has it at his fingertips—but there have been very few. My point, with which I think the right hon. Gentleman agrees, is that it is not legally essential for us to leave Euratom just because we leave the European Union. I am not a lawyer, and others argue that it is, but when I was on the Select Committee I heard contradictory evidence from the experts. I do not want this uncertainty to continue; I want to create certainty for future investment in civil nuclear and in research and development.

[Albert Owen]

Let us be frank: as I think the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) alluded to, our reason for leaving Euratom is that No. 10 has red lines, one of which is ending the jurisdiction of the ECJ. That is one of the reasons—it is a political reason, not a legal reason, and it was made almost as an excuse—that was given for us leaving the EU and Euratom together. That is the argument that the Select Committee heard in evidence.

Politically, we need to move forward, and we must have frameworks in place for doing so. Three options have been put to us: just remaining in Euratom, extending our period of membership and getting a transitional arrangement; having associate membership; or having third-country membership. If people read the detailed Library note, they will see that those options are very doable. I am trying to base this debate on actual facts that the Committee heard in evidence, rather than emotional arguments about whether we should leave or remain a member of Euratom.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): As the hon. Gentleman knows, I represent the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority's Culham establishment. He mentions associate membership, which is considered a valid compromise by the management of Euratom, but there are two models: the Swiss model and the Ukrainian model. Does he have a feeling about which way the decision will go? Will he join me in encouraging the Minister to make a decision pretty quickly?

Albert Owen: What is important for future investment is not what I think but what the industry thinks and what the experts have told me. I am looking forward to the Minister's reply, but I will outline in detail those three options: remaining in Euratom, associate membership, and third-country membership. The hon. Gentleman's description of the Swiss and Ukrainian models is a bit crude, because different countries are involved. The Swiss enjoy associate membership, but other countries, such as Japan, the United States and Canada, have a different relationship. I want the best relationship for the United Kingdom. If it ain't broke, why start fixing it? That is where I start from.

Those options do exist. Alternative membership under article 206 of the European treaty allows the UK to leave but to continue co-operation, as the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) argued, and establish an association involving reciprocal rights and obligations, common actions and special procedures. However, that will take time, and I do not think that the timeframe set out by triggering article 50 is helpful; it will hinder rather than help, and put at risk many new build projects.

James Heapey (Wells) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is being generous with his time. Does he agree that exactly because of the exposure that the French Government have to our new nuclear programme, and indeed to EDF's business in the UK generally, we have an excellent ally in Paris in trying to ensure that whatever our new arrangement with Euratom is, it comes about quickly, because that is in the French interest as much as in ours?

Albert Owen: It is in everybody's interest because this is a global industry, but we must put the UK interest first and argue from a UK perspective, because we are

making the decision to leave and we do not expect everyone else to do our bargaining for us. We need to have a strong position, which is why I am arguing today that we need transitional arrangements in place that suit us. We cannot rely on French investment going forward, but we can create and maintain the high levels of skills that we have in this country, and the high level of investment.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab) *rose*—

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con) *rose*—

Albert Owen: I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) and then to the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill). However, I am conscious of time.

Rachel Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate. I think he is about to touch on the heart of the issue. If we leave Euratom—and the uncertainty about that in the meantime—that risks high-paid, high-skilled jobs going overseas, which we cannot afford right now. Our membership of Euratom is key for the future of our civil nuclear defence industry.

Albert Owen: I totally agree. That argument was made to the Select Committee by a representative of workers, because they are concerned about training, skilling and upskilling.

Robert Neill: I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the need for us not to have a cliff edge to preserve the benefits of membership. The associate membership he mentions might be one such way, and France might be a supporter of that. Is he aware that Austria has objected specifically to the support that the Government have given to Hinkley Point on state aid grounds and has generally been hostile to powers in the EU with nuclear programmes? Would an associate arrangement require unanimity among the EU 27, or a qualified majority?

Albert Owen: Alternative membership under article 206 is important. The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about Austria, which is hostile to nuclear per se and will be taking over the presidency of the European Union. That could put other things in jeopardy as well as these arrangements. That is all the more reason to have a long-term plan, rather than exiting in two years and linking ourselves to article 50. I think he strengthened my case in many ways.

I am talking about the alternative arrangements for membership, enjoyed by Switzerland and others, which importantly would allow access to moneys to fund nuclear research to be maintained. However, I want the whole package: I want research and civil nuclear to have certainty going forward. The other option I talked about was third-country membership under article 101 of the Euratom treaty. That is more limiting in scope, with regard to power and jurisdiction, than the alternative memberships. However, it does allow agreements and contracts with international organisations and states. Those with third-country membership include, as I mentioned, Japan, the United States and Canada—big players in the nuclear world. However, we would need bilateral agreements with them, which again will take time to negotiate. Many people have raised with me

concern about the timeframe. Of course, third-country membership would not automatically give us the right for international contracts for research under the international thermonuclear experimental reactor project. That is therefore probably more risky than alternative membership. It is an option, but it brings risks with it.

Those options are better than the cliff edge. It is not politicians who are raising that; it is a broad section of the nuclear industry and a broad section of cancer research and development as well as various other issues, such as those raised by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) and mentioned by me. This is not just about new nuclear, existing nuclear and the movement of nuclear materials; it is far more wide-ranging than that.

The three options are: remaining in Euratom, associate membership, and third-country membership. However, whatever the model and the negotiations of the Minister and his team, we need proper transitional arrangements to be in place. That is the crux of my argument, and I feel that the Members who have intervened share my anxiety that we must have a proper framework.

The Minister is new to his job, and I welcome him to it, but he and his Department have yet to allay the fears of industry or of those in research and development. He has a job of work to do, and I am trying to help him to become firmer in saying that he will work in partnership with industry. A working group is the right way forward, because that would allow for consultation with the experts and for the industry to look seriously at the pitfalls and advantages to allow us to have a world-class leading industry going forward.

I am sure that the Minister will grasp this new consensual politics and listen to me and to hon. Members across the House. We want to help him get it right. We are not here just to criticise; we are here to assist. The industry is waiting to assist as well, so that we get a full and comprehensive consultation and timescales that suit the industry in the UK and UK plc. In the nuclear industry we are about all the research and development that has been talked about, but we are also about producing low-carbon energy and high-quality jobs.

Very few industries have jobs for life like the nuclear industry does. Many people go to the industry and are there for life and get that continuity and those high-skilled jobs. We need to maintain that if we are to meet the criteria that the Department set out in its industrial strategy on nuclear and how those link to a broader industrial strategy. We need to improve and upscale jobs. The nuclear industry is one such area, and if we are not careful we could take a step that takes us backwards, not forwards.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend—Mr Energy Island—on securing the debate. Will he comment on how many jobs in the nuclear industry are distributed around the periphery of the country and how important those jobs are to areas such as the north of Scotland, the north-west, north Wales and the south-west? There are concerns from across the United Kingdom on this issue.

Albert Owen: I agree that many of the existing and potential new nuclear sites are on the periphery, but we also have in Oxfordshire and many other counties of the United Kingdom huge investment that we need to

improve and move forward. I also mentioned the Royal Marsden, which has given me a briefing on nuclear's importance to the city of London. It is the whole United Kingdom. The industrial strategy talks about spreading wealth across the whole United Kingdom, and here is a good example of where that works, so we should continue that and not take risks.

I mentioned nuclear's importance to low-carbon and to skills, but we are also at the forefront of research and development. We need to maintain that, but I believe that we could hinder that if we were to have a cliff edge or to exit Euratom just because of a timetable and legal reasons.

James Heapey: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Albert Owen: Yes, but this will be the last intervention I will take.

James Heapey: The hon. Gentleman has been generous, especially in indulging me twice. He mentions our technical edge. Before he sits down, can I encourage him to mention our position as a world leader in fusion power generation? That is the Elysian fields of future low-carbon generation. I know that he will want to remind the Minister of just how successful we have been in leading that research and how important it is that we remain in the vanguard.

Albert Owen: I know that other right hon. and hon. Members want to make their pitch, so I will not repeat my opening remarks, but the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right and has made the point for me, and the Minister has heard it.

I have based my speech on evidence that I heard as a member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, and I pay tribute to its previous Chair. I am making a bid for that position today, so I may as well take advantage of being on my feet for 20 minutes in this debate. The Committee did a serious piece of work on the pros and cons of exiting the European Union, whether for internal markets or supply.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Albert Owen: Yes I will, because I am standing for election.

Antoinette Sandbach: I am grateful. The UK has been awarded £500 million of contracts in the nuclear fusion supply chain. Is not all of that put at risk if we leave Euratom?

Albert Owen: Absolutely. The hon. Lady was also a member of the Committee, and she knows the written and oral evidence we received that highlighted that point. It is important for a Select Committee to hold the Government to account, but it is also important to shape the framework and work with the Government. I urge the Minister to work with Parliament, the industry and all relevant sectors, so that we can go forwards, not backwards, and maintain the status of which we are all proud. The UK is a world leader. Let us put politics to

[Albert Owen]

one side and get the transitional arrangements right. Let us work together to ensure that the UK stays at the top.

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. My suggestion of self-restraint to two or three minutes per speech, until 10.30, when I intend to call the speakers who will wind up, starts now.

9.51 pm

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): I commend the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) on securing this important debate.

The nuclear industry is important to the north Wales region, as it is to the whole country. However, I take issue with the hon. Gentleman because he said that the decision to leave the Euratom treaty was taken on political rather than legal grounds. He will know from the helpful briefing note supplied by the Nuclear Industry Association that that is disputed. The view I take is that the Government had no option but to leave the treaty.

It is worth analysing the way in which the relevant treaties have moved. The Euratom treaty was extensively amended by the treaty of Lisbon, although it continues to have a separate existence from the EU treaties. Most significantly for the purpose of this debate, article 106a of the Euratom treaty, as amended, now provides that article 50 of the treaty on European Union, which of course provides for the departure of a member state from the EU,

“shall apply to this Treaty.”

Article 106a also provides:

“Within the framework of this Treaty, the references to the Union...or to the ‘Treaties’...shall be taken, respectively, as references to the European Atomic Energy Community and to this Treaty”—that is the Euratom treaty. Thus the Euratom Community and the European Union share a common institutional framework, including the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, a role for the Commission, and decision-making in the Council.

That common framework is acknowledged not only in the treaties but in domestic British legislation. Section 3(2) of the European Union (Amendment) Act 2008 provides that any Act that refers to the European Union

“includes... a reference to the European Atomic Energy Community.”

The position, therefore, is that article 50 notice of withdrawal from the European Union would automatically have operated as a notice of withdrawal from the Euratom treaty. That is acknowledged by the British Government, and, just as importantly, it is the position of the European Community.

I must therefore take issue with the hon. Member for Ynys Môn. I acknowledge the importance of the industry, but we need to look at the legalities, which appear, on balance, to have been accepted by the British Government and the European Union. Although I fully agree about the need to avoid the cliff edge, I think that the Government are fully aware of the matter and will address it. The hon. Gentleman’s suggestion, which has been made repeatedly recently, that the decision was political, was ill founded.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): When my right hon. Friend talks about avoiding the cliff edge, does that mean he would support a transition period while we remain members of Euratom?

Mr Jones: The Government’s position has always been that there should be an implementation period, and I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister will acknowledge that and outline what the Government will do. My purpose in speaking in the debate is simply to point out that the suggestion that the prime considerations are political is essentially unfounded.

9.55 am

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Gray. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) on securing the debate.

I shall speak briefly, as you stipulated, Mr Gray, and will focus specifically on the future of Moorside and NuGen. I welcome the Minister to his post. He will no doubt have spent a substantial part of his time so far in the Department trying to save the NuGen deal and find a new investor—almost certainly backed by a foreign Government and foreign capital—to save a development that will create 21,000 jobs in Cumbria and potentially contribute up to 8% of the UK’s energy.

I hope for a frank assessment of how the Minister feels about the cloud of uncertainty over the industry, which has been created by the Government’s until now steadfast refusal to countenance remaining within a treaty that is working well, or to consider something sensible such as associate membership, and a seamless transition to that. What effect does he feel the situation is having on the dash to find a new investor to save the deal? We know the difficulty behind the scenes in trying to get some countries, which I will not name, to consider rescuing the deal. Aside from any damage to UK energy security, the collapse in job prospects would be a calamity for the region. We need the Government to take an approach that gives the best chance of securing the investment at a difficult time. We have a new Minister and the Government apparently want to consider sensible clarifications and improvements to legislation: now is the time to change course.

9.58 am

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): I commend the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) on securing this incredibly important debate, and the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) on his comments about Moorside, which is of course in my constituency, as is Sellafield, the world’s first nuclear reactor. My constituency is home to some 67 NIA members and I must declare an interest as my husband, father and brother work in three of those businesses, along with 14,000 other people in my constituency. It has been said that 76% of the working people in Copeland borough work directly or indirectly for Sellafield.

Our nuclear expertise is internationally renowned and our safety record is exceptional. Ensuring continued membership of Euratom, or swiftly acting to develop an alternative, to be in place upon leaving the European Union or as part of a planned transition period, is vital. Because of the nature of the Sellafield site, Euratom safeguards are of key importance to its functioning. Every day, Euratom officials monitor activity on site

and ensure that fissile nuclear material at Sellafield is in the right place and is being used for its intended purpose. Euratom owns cameras and other equipment and of course has the skills to carry out the work. If we leave, the ownership of that material and the skills will need to be replaced.

The Nuclear Safeguards Bill should provide clear answers, but they would answer only one of many problems that withdrawal from Euratom may cause. Sellafield's reprocessing facility has reprocessed fuel from several countries across the EU and further afield, including the United States and Japan. The ownership of that material needs to be determined during the negotiation, and new nuclear co-operation agreements to move materials overseas post-Brexit will need to be agreed and ratified.

Whatever the decision taken, and whether we are in or out of Euratom in March 2019, safeguarding has to continue under international law. What cannot happen is a scenario in which new safeguarding measures and new co-operation agreements are not in place. Safeguarding is critical for the nuclear industry, and particularly for Sellafield. Without an approved safeguards regime, as well as new bilateral co-operation agreements, nuclear trade to and from the UK would stop, or at least slow down, which would be economically crushing for my constituency—a community that is home to thousands of nuclear workers and, indeed, the centre of nuclear excellence.

I thank you for allowing me the time to speak in this crucial debate, Mr Gray, and I urge the Minister to give this consideration. I also welcome the excellent suggestion of a working group from the hon. Member for Ynys Môn, which I would be very pleased to be a part of.

10 am

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr, Mr Gray. I thank the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) for securing this important debate. I, too, have to declare an interest: my husband's brother works at Trawsfynydd power station in my constituency. I add my voice to those warning the Government about what a Euratom exit means for safeguarding. Please bear in mind that livestock movements in my constituency were held back for 26 years following the Chernobyl disaster; we have experience of the effect of nuclear safeguarding issues, if you like.

Since 1957, Euratom has underpinned our nuclear safety and security, and our nuclear industry has benefited from well-established regulations that enable us to be a trusted partner of our European counterparts. Leaving Euratom would mean creating our own safeguarding regime—something the UK's Office for Nuclear Regulation has already confirmed as impossible by the nominal EU withdrawal date in 2019. Furthermore, it would mean renegotiating every bilateral agreement Euratom has managed on behalf of the UK. Those are incredibly complex agreements, called NCAs—nuclear co-operation agreements. Each NCA can take three years to agree, and without them, the UK will be isolated from the legitimate international nuclear community.

That takes me to my second point: the economic consequences of withdrawal on the development of Trawsfynydd and the nuclear industry, and low-carbon energy security as a whole. Euratom ensures the safe

and unimpaired cross-border movement of nuclear materials, technology and even expertise. As already noted, withdrawing from Euratom would mean lengthy renegotiations to allow that trade to continue. Without Euratom, ventures such as the development of SMRs—small modular reactors—at Trawsfynydd look less attractive, meaning a worse deal for local communities, the UK and its position in the international nuclear community.

My third point is on the cost of withdrawal on our scientific research communities. On Monday, the Prime Minister blithely stated that the UK would be able to access Euratom research and funding as a third-party state. However, she failed to mention that the relationships between Euratom and its third-party states vary widely, and therefore VIP access is not at all guaranteed and would require lengthy negotiations. In the meantime, our existing plans for world-leading projects, such as at Trawsfynydd, would be disrupted.

I therefore join in the cross-party calls for the Government to reconsider withdrawal and the models put forward today, and I welcome the suggestion of a working group that works closely with the industry.

10.3 am

John Howell (Henley) (Con): As I mentioned in my intervention, I represent the Culham UKAEA establishment. The urgency to resolve this issue is that Euratom's work programme runs out in December 2018. The European Commission is pushing hard to negotiate terms for the 2019-20 programme, but the fly in the ointment is Austria's taking over the EU presidency in June 2019. Of course, as has already been mentioned, Austria is notoriously anti-nuclear, and it is therefore urgent that an agreement should be in place by June 2018.

Ministers have apparently written to the Commission to continue with the JET—Joint European Torus—project, and to commit the UK's share, which has gone down very well. Everything has been delayed to accommodate Brexit, and willingly so, but there is a need to get a move on with this. Staying a full member of Euratom provides the best continuity to that programme.

I do not believe that the legal issues are as black and white as has been set out. However, associate membership with bespoke terms is a perfectly acceptable compromise. That would mean that there would be a transition period that would leave us as full members of Euratom until 2020. There are two principal models of associate membership: the Swiss model, which includes freedom of movement for nuclear scientists and the use of the European Court of Justice, and the Ukrainian model, in which there is no free movement of nuclear scientists and for which the Ukrainian courts decide disputes. The Government need to make their mind up quickly on that in order to provide the certainty that the industry needs.

There is a lot at stake. UKAEA is targeting £1 billion-worth of work on ITER—the JET project's replacement in the south of France. That is £1 billion of work against the UK's £85 million investment. It is important to bear those sort of figures in mind when we come to look at the future of Euratom and the sort of relationship that we have with it.

10.6 am

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert

[Daniel Zeichner]

Owen), who I thought spoke with a great depth of knowledge about this subject. For those of us who are not so close to the industry, I will talk about the scientific and some of the legal issues, some of which have already been raised, but there is an elephant in the room: to many of us, it seems as though the debate is being driven by what many of us see as the Prime Minister's longstanding antipathy towards the European Court of Justice. It seems to me almost like a fetish in some ways, because there has to be some way to resolve disputes. I often look to football for inspiration; most things can be related to football in my view. It needs a referee; people may sometimes feel hard done by, but when there are disputes, there has to be an arbitrator. The Government seem intent on bringing their own referee to the table, instead of playing by the rules. We have to have some way of resolving these issues.

One issue we have already heard about is the possibility of associate membership of Euratom, and we all want to hear much more from the Minister about that. However, if we are going to talk about associate membership, we also need to hear something about whether the Government can provide the same assurances for other areas of crucial scientific research, such as our relationship with the European Research Council, the European Research Area and the Horizon 2020 programme.

Just last week, the Government made an extraordinary policy announcement in the pages of the *Financial Times*, in which two Secretaries of State recognised the need for us to stay close to European Union regulatory systems in the life sciences sector—an announcement that some of us feel might have been more appropriately made in Parliament first. It is true to say, however, that a direction of travel is emerging on all of these issues, even if the proper destination has not yet been arrived at.

10.7 am

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Very simply, I congratulate the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) on introducing the debate, because his attitude was extremely constructive. There are a lot of issues associated with matters of this kind, and it is important for us both to be practical and to stick to the legal position. I very much agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr. Jones) about the legal position; in fact, it is endorsed exclusively by the European Commission. After the BEIS Committee report, which was published on 2 May, the Commission published a position paper on 22 June stating:

“On the date of withdrawal, the Treaties, including the Treaty establishing the European Atomic Energy Community...cease to apply to the United Kingdom.”

I think that is definitive; the Commission takes that view.

However, the other aspect to this is that we have to find an answer to these questions, and we have to be constructive about it at the same time. The legal position is clear, but the question is where we go from there. We are bound by international conventions to our membership of the International Atomic Energy Agency, and it is my belief that the same applies to the EU. I therefore suspect that there is common ground here, in which all the rules are effectively already converging. If that is the

case, as I think it probably is, there is a basis on which we can move forwards to some form of co-operation. I very much take up the view of the hon. Member for Ynys Môn regarding a working group. That is an interesting idea, and I think it would be consistent with working towards something like associate membership.

I would like to say much more, but in a nutshell the question of jurisdiction is cropping up the whole time in respect of citizens' rights, our trade arrangements and so on. There is a consistent pattern in how we resolve these questions as we move into negotiations. As I have said in the House several times, I believe that there is a means whereby, without prejudicing or rejecting our judicial sovereignty and Westminster sovereignty, we can take a common-sense approach, by adopting a tribunal. The tribunal could have on it, for example, a retired European Court judge, a retired Supreme Court judge and an independent judge. In other words, through such a tribunal we could try to find a constructive answer through some form of international agreement whereby we can all be satisfied, instead of shouting at one another. The law is clear, but we need to look for constructive solutions.

10.10 am

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I commend the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) for securing this very important debate.

I have an interest in this subject because of my constituency. In Abingdon, many of the workers at the Joint European Torus facility are very worried about what is going on and feel they have been forgotten in the last few months. I am delighted that today, they get a chance to be heard.

My former profession was physics teaching, so if I may be indulged, I would like to explain why nuclear fusion is so important. While fission is the splitting up of large isotopes to create smaller ones, releasing energy, fusion is the joining up of smaller ones to create large ones, also creating energy—and what is amazing is that the base material is water. When we are done with it, the end products have barely any decay half-lives. It is an extraordinary technology, and—make no mistake—if we get it right, it is as scientifically significant as sending a man to the moon. It could solve climate change completely, because water is essentially an inexhaustible material. I would like to make the case for that, because I think it has been forgotten. Humanity needs that technology—I do not think I am overstating it—and it is vital we get it going.

It is covered under the treaty, not only because of the work programme, to which the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) referred, but also because afterwards we have ITER. If we are going to access that supply chain and not lose the expertise of those scientists, the best thing we can do is give them certainty. I have visited the site several times and been told that there is already movement among the scientists to leave. They need to know now what is going on, because it will soon be the summer holidays, and they are deciding what to do for their families. If their jobs are not secure, they will leave. Compounded with the issues around which EU citizens get to stay here, that means literally hundreds of jobs are on the line.

I would like to ask the Minister, on behalf of my constituents, what he is doing to ensure we do not have any of these cliff edges. Will he assure us that if he cannot negotiate the replacement treaties in time, he will extend our membership of Euratom until such time that we do? Is the plan right now to have associate membership? Surely he can tell us what the Government are looking at. Will he also confirm that the reason we are in this mess is the Prime Minister's obsession with the European Court of Justice? I applaud the constructive nature of this debate, and the fact is that if we just decided to get over that, we would avoid this mess entirely.

If I may, I would like to explain why the radioisotopes issue is such a big one. The Minister and the Government keep saying that it is not covered by the treaty, but I refer them to page 66 of the Euratom treaty. Line 2 clearly states that the very same radioisotopes, technetium-99m and molybdenum-99, are covered by the treaty. We cannot make those in the UK, so if we are to import them—that is the only way we can get them—they are covered by the treaty. Will the Minister agree with the industry that that is at risk and also reassure cancer patients that diagnostics and treatments will not cease?

10.14 am

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I am very pleased indeed that Euratom is now getting the attention it deserves, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) on securing this debate.

It is wonderful to see the support that Euratom is getting outside the Chamber—for example, from former Conservative party leader William Hague, writing in *The Telegraph* yesterday. It has also been on the front page of the *Evening Standard*; *The Times* today came out in favour of Euratom; and no less a luminary than Dominic Cummings, the man who ran the leave campaign so effectively, has used quite strong language—he nevertheless makes his point effectively—to argue that we should not leave Euratom. The reason, of course, he shares that view is that Euratom has nothing to do with our leaving the European Union.

This is a debate not about stopping Brexit but saving our membership of Euratom. Indeed, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones), the former Brexit Minister, pointed out, we served our intention to leave Euratom on a technicality. It was quite clear that the Government had received legal advice that put it into their mind that it might be an ineffective serving of the article 50 notice if we did not serve notice that we were also leaving Euratom. The trouble that those of us who support our membership of Euratom have is that none of us has seen that legal advice. It is obviously unprecedented for the Government to publish legal advice, but it would be very useful at the first meeting of the working group, which no doubt the Minister will announce in his remarks, to have some distilled version of the legal advice that the Government received on the link with Euratom.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Without wishing to go over old scores, the right hon. Gentleman will no doubt remember that the Government were also given legal advice that there was absolutely no need whatsoever to have a parliamentary vote on triggering article 50.

Does that make him wonder whether the Government's legal advice on this should be subject to some scrutiny before it is implemented?

Mr Vaizey: That is a very effective point. It is certainly the case that those of us who wish to remain in Euratom will now seek our own legal advice, but it would be nice to know where the Government stand on this. The other point that has emerged is that no assessment has been made of the impact of leaving Euratom or, rather, of the Government's current position, which is to leave Euratom and then rejoin it. The Government are being offered a time-saving opportunity.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that continued membership of Euratom would not in any way preclude the striking of free trade deals or controlling our borders, which are the stated aims of Brexit?

Mr Vaizey: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. One Member asked earlier why we are singling out Euratom from other European institutions that we will leave as part of the process of leaving the European Union. The key point is that our membership of Euratom is under a treaty separate from our membership of the European Union.

Sir William Cash: I just want to reaffirm something. The Commission's position paper, dated 27 June, is quite unequivocal about the fact that when notice is given, we cease to be members of Euratom and also the EU under article 50. That is quite clearly set out in the Commission's position paper.

Mr Vaizey: We remain members of Euratom, as we remain members of the European Union. We served our intention to leave, but there is many a slip between cup and lip. I hate to mention this name in august company, in case it sets off an argument, but it was interesting to see Juncker's chief of staff today pointing out that he has never made a comment about our membership of Euratom. In terms of his general approach to Brexit and our not having our cake and eating it, he specifically said on Twitter today that that does not include Euratom. There are huge opportunities here, and we all stand ready to help the Minister.

10.18 am

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. It is quite clear that the legal position is not clear. That stems from the fact that the Euratom treaty is not the same treaty signed in 1957 as the EU treaty. Leaving Euratom would involve separate negotiation of the arrangements for co-operative or associated status alongside any other negotiations in the EU. That is fairly clear.

In that context, I want to raise a concern that I hope the Government have considered, but I suspect they have not, about leaving Euratom under those circumstances and the status of the Hinkley C nuclear power station programme. In autumn 2016, the Secretary of State signed an investment agreement—charmingly known as a SoSIA—concerning Hinkley C with EDF, the French Government and the Chinese Government that contains a number of issues relating to what a qualifying shutdown

[*Dr Alan Whitehead*]

occurrence would consist of as far as the progress of Hinkley C power station is concerned. That investment agreement defined that a qualifying shutdown occurrence would consist of a Government intervention in the working of Hinkley Point C power station, or its construction, or if the EU were to do that, or if there were a change in treaty arrangements relating to the construction or operation of the power station. If we left Euratom unilaterally, as is proposed, with no alternative position in place, it is likely that that would mean a qualifying shutdown. The effect would be a possibility of the other contracting parties to the arrangement—EDF and others concerned with the power station—walking away from the deal and claiming up to £20 billion compensation for so doing. That seems to be an important consideration that we might think about. I would be interested to hear from the Minister whether the Government have considered the risk of that occurrence.

That concern is not just mine; it was raised by the National Audit Office in its June 2017 report on Hinkley C. It indicated that it thought that the Government had not undertaken any risk assessment relating to the Secretary of State's investment agreement and that perhaps they should do so. I would be interested to hear from the Minister whether that risk assessment has been undertaken and whether the Minister considers that the Secretary of State's investment agreement on Hinkley C would be at risk as a result of what has been decided so far about leaving Euratom.

10.22 am

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) on securing this important and valuable debate. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) and my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) that Euratom brings great benefits to this country.

We should do all that is legally possible to maintain those benefits by whatever means it takes. We should not allow any thoughts of ideological purity to get in the way of achieving that. My judgment is that if we can legally remain within Euratom, we should do so. I understand the points that were well and eloquently made by my right hon. and hon. Friends who have suggested that legal advice goes against that, but it would not be the first time that Government legal advisers have been shown to be wrong and it would not be the first time that the Commission's legal advice has been proved wrong.

Alex Chalk: If there is political will, any legal obstacle can be easily overcome.

Robert Neill: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is my next point.

Unless the Government seek clarity—there is a dispute among lawyers about the matter—the likelihood is that an interested party may itself seek to litigate and it would be much better if the Government seized the initiative and said that politically they wanted to stay in and would do whatever is necessary legally to achieve that objective. That would be altogether better. If they cannot achieve that, certainly an association agreement

would be the next best thing and I suggest it should be the Swiss model because the small amount of jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice is a minor price to pay for the benefits. I cannot believe that anyone would object to the very modest movement of skilled nuclear scientists who only benefit this country. Otherwise, we would be cutting off our economic and scientific nose to spite our political face and we should not do such a thing. That would be a good compromise, but we should stay in until such time as that is in place because we cannot have any risks in the interim.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): If the Minister is unable today to give the legal certainty of being able to stay in Euratom, which is what my hon. Friend is looking for, does he agree that we need a commitment today from the Minister that the Government will pursue a solution that replicates the benefits of Euratom membership as closely as possible?

Robert Neill: We must certainly do that and we must be flexible about the means by which we achieve it. There may be ways forward and my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) made a constructive point about a tribunal being one way forward. I take that in the spirit intended. Equally, the jurisprudence of the ECJ on Euratom matters is so discrete and so technical that it should give no offence to anyone, unless they are a complete purist about maintaining that jurisdiction.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman is making an important point about a discrete and specific area. Does he agree that when people voted in the referendum last year, they voted on particular issues? I do not know of one moment on any doorstep when Euratom came up and people said they were voting for Britain to leave. They put their trust in the Government and Parliament to make sure that as we go through the process we do not do anything to jeopardise our interest for the future economy.

Robert Neill: I am sure that is the case; it did not come up on the doorstep for me. I spoke to a biochemist in the health service over the weekend who voted to leave, but said he certainly did not think we would go about leaving in such a rigid fashion that we would run into difficulties like this. The Government should change our approach to leaving in this and other matters.

I hope the position is clear. We all want the best possible outcome on this. The Government should seize the political initiative and seek to stay in if possible. If not, it is clear that we must go forward, but there must be no gap. It is more important that the Government deliver on that political objective than worry too much about some of the niceties.

10.26 am

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The sentence that I think sums up how we got into this mess came from the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), who said that we have to start getting answers to some of these questions. How about getting answers to the questions before we had the referendum, or how about Members asking those questions before they trooped through the

Lobby to vote for the shortest and most destructive Act that this Parliament will ever pass, and possibly the only Act of Parliament for which the explanatory notes were half a page longer than the Bill? The fact is that the first full day of debate on the triggering of article 50 lasted almost 11 hours, and Euratom was mentioned once by a Conservative Back Bencher—hats off to the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey). His mention of it came nine hours into the debate.

The Government's entire White Paper on leaving the European Union devoted only eight sentences to Euratom. It is described as an important priority for the Government—so important that it is mentioned on page 44, paragraph 831. Even then, there is no recognition whatsoever of the need for life-saving medical isotopes, which were mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), who is no longer in her place. She has had an illustrious career saving lives in the NHS using radioisotopes. Without the Euratom treaty, the United Kingdom will have no—I repeat “no”—reliable source of those radioisotopes.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that plenty of countries outside Euratom have easy access to medical isotopes and that there is no reason why, if we leave, we will suddenly become an international pariah and be denied those treatments?

Peter Grant: I accept that membership is not essential, but this is not the only item on which we need negotiations finalised and ready to implement within a ridiculously short and entirely self-inflicted timetable. If Euratom were the only thing the Government had to negotiate between now and March 2019, there would be no problem. But there are areas that will have an essential long-term impact that the Government will not have time to negotiate properly in order to get the best possible deal. With a bit more candour from the Government about how difficult that process will be, we might all be better off.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government need to be candid about all the costs of the various options being explored—associate membership, third-country membership and remaining in Euratom—and about the difference in costs? We know that during the referendum campaign a lot of inaccurate information was circulated about the cost of remaining and the associated benefits of leaving. We need some frank information about the costs associated with retaining membership of Euratom or leaving.

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. Interventions must be brief.

Peter Grant: I fully agree with the hon. Lady. The figure of £357 million comes to mind for some reason—it must be because I got the bus to work this morning. There has not been the necessary degree of openness and detailed debate on any of this. That is why one of the biggest mistakes was to call the referendum and then have the vote in such short order. We were told repeatedly by the Conservatives that we had been talking about this for years, but we have not been talking about the detail in relation to important agencies such as Euratom, the European Medicines Agency and many others.

It is good to see, albeit belatedly, so many Government Back Benchers now demanding that the Government do what some of us were asking them to do beforehand. All I can say to them is this: “The next time you want to demand that the Government do something different, please do so before voting for the Bill that makes it impossible for the Government now to listen to what you are asking for.” I say that because the Government are now claiming that we are in this situation because their Back Benchers, some of whom are here today, voted obediently for the article 50 Bill, without any queries about the implications for Euratom and other important institutions. Members here who are bemoaning the impact of that Act need to go home, look the mirror and ask themselves what responsibility they have.

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Grant: I am about to finish and cannot give way again.

Those hon. Members need to ask themselves, “What responsibility did I have for this mess, and what can I do to ensure that I don't allow obedience to the Whips to make me vote for such a disaster in future?”

Several hon. Members *rose*—

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. I congratulate most hon. Members on keeping to time, but I do apologise to the four hon. Members whom I cannot call because of lack of time. We now move on to the first of the three winding-up speeches.

10.31 am

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) on securing this important debate. He made a clear case for the importance of remaining either a full or an associate member of Euratom. Many hon. Members spoke about their own constituency interests, and I will mention a couple of those. One of the most telling comments came from the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), who said, “If you ask people on the doorstep why they voted leave, would it be because of Euratom?” Of course people are unaware of what Euratom does; they are probably unaware even of its existence. However, it is fundamental to our everyday lives.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Is the hon. Lady really saying that we can develop a list of all the organisations that were not mentioned in great detail during the referendum campaign, and that we must remain part of them just because we have not had that full and open debate? Actually, we voted to leave the European Union; that is what the British people voted for. We have to do that, and if it entails leaving Euratom, so be it, but we will do it on the best possible grounds, with a transitional period.

Carol Monaghan: The hon. Gentleman's first point is the correct one: yes, give us a list of everything that we have agreed to leave, and let us start working out the mess that we have created.

Suella Fernandes: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way again; I know that she wants to continue with her comments. It is clear that the British people did vote last year to take back control over our laws and for freedom from the European Court of Justice, the Commission and the Council; and of course the EU and Euratom share an institutional framework through the ECJ, the Commission and the Council. Does she not think that by remaining a member of Euratom we would be going against what the British people voted for?

Carol Monaghan: Absolutely not. In the Scottish National party we do not share the love of nuclear fission that those on the Government Benches seem to have, but it is a fact that we have nuclear facilities in Scotland. Scotland's future lies in renewables—last year, 59% of our energy needs were met from that source. However, although we are moving towards a target of 100% renewables, we still have nuclear facilities and they still need regulation and materials. Although nuclear safety is a reserved matter, regulation of waste and emissions from nuclear sites is devolved, but it appears that, once again without any consultation with the Scottish Government on the implications for future regulation, we are being dragged out of Euratom as well as the EU.

Antoinette Sandbach: Does the hon. Lady agree that not a single European Court judgment has compromised any British interests relating to Euratom, because they have all related to technical aspects and details of the treaty?

Carol Monaghan: Absolutely. I do not know about all the European Court judgments, but that certainly is not something that many of us have heard anything about. Euratom has operated very successfully for 60 years, but now we seem to be taking ourselves out of the regulatory framework.

Kit Malthouse: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Carol Monaghan: No, I am going to make some progress.

Any future negotiations on whatever membership of Euratom we might have—I hope that it is full membership, but there could be associate membership—must include the Scottish Government, as they are dealing with the regulation of nuclear facilities in Scotland. Some people have talked about putting our own regulatory framework in place. Of course, we could get our own regulations in place, but the problem is that the clock is ticking, we do not have a lot of time and producing these frameworks takes many years, not 20 months. That is a real issue.

A number of hon. Members have mentioned medical isotopes. The Euratom Supply Agency ensures the security of supply of medical isotopes for all members of Euratom. My hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) gave us some statistics. She said that 500,000 diagnostic scans and 10,000 cancer treatments are carried out annually as a result of those isotopes. However, we cannot produce our own medical isotopes and must therefore import them. Medical isotopes have very short half-lives, which means they need to be transported quickly, and there are only a few facilities in

the world that produce them. A number of the reactors that produce medical isotopes are coming to the end of their useful lifespan, which means that in future there could be real problems with their supply worldwide anyway. This is not the time to take ourselves out of the agency that ensures that we have a supply.

Layla Moran: Does the hon. Lady agree that the real issue with these radioisotopes is that their half-lives are so short that any delay in getting them to the UK—even hours—means that they will have expired?

Carol Monaghan: As a fellow physics teacher, the hon. Lady will know that something such as technetium-99, which is used in medical diagnostics, has a half-life of six hours, which means that after 24 hours it is pretty much useless, or its activity has dropped to a level that makes it inert. These isotopes must be transported and used very quickly after they are produced.

The hon. Lady has already given us a physics lesson on fusion, so I will not do that, but fusion is a field in which we are world leaders in the UK. The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) talked about JET in his constituency. It is one of the world's most important facilities and one of Euratom's main facilities, so we need to ensure that funding continues. JET currently receives about £48 million annually. The contract runs to the end of 2018, so we must ensure that pulling out of Euratom does not affect future funding.

We must ensure that transitional arrangements for nuclear safeguarding, trade and funding are in place until the EU-UK negotiations are complete, and that should be done with the full consultation of the nuclear industry and community. We need to retain our membership of the European observatory on the supply of medical radioisotopes and continue to work with Euratom and global partners to mitigate any shortages of medical isotopes. We need to ensure that Euratom funding for our nuclear research projects continues. Finally, the UK Government must involve the Scottish Government at every stage of the negotiation process, to ensure that the deal reached works for Scotland's nuclear industry as well.

10.39 am

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Gray, for your rigorous chairing of this debate.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) on securing the debate and on the knowledge of and commitment to this vital sector that he demonstrated in his opening remarks. Those have been reflected by many of the Members who have spoken, from both sides of the House. They demonstrated the strength of concern that exists about this issue across party lines. The Prime Minister has called for some level of cross-party co-operation on Brexit, and in many ways today's debate has taken her up on that. Her response will show whether she is serious.

Many Members have spoken knowledgeably about Euratom's importance to the UK, and the worrying implications of a cliff-edge departure. Euratom has enabled the UK to become a world leader in nuclear research and development. The fact that the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has decided to continue funding the JET facility in

Culham demonstrates that he recognises that too. That point was made very forcefully by the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran).

Annaliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I was not given the chance to speak on this issue, so I want to ask my hon. Friend whether he is aware of the need for certainty about Culham's status to be provided within the year, given the need to avoid the Austrian presidency. We need answers very quickly on its continuation. Further, is he aware of the enormous expense that will be incurred if the Culham centre has to be decommissioned, rather than allowed to develop the practical technology of which it was, of course, a global pioneer?

Paul Blomfield: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, which demonstrates her commitment to the Culham facility not only in her current role but in her previous job. She is right on both points. The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon made this point forcefully: we need certainty now—not at some stage in the future, but now—because otherwise the facility is at risk.

Kit Malthouse: Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that actually the biggest threat to fusion research in Europe generally is the stance of the European Union itself? Given that Germany has decided to phase out nuclear power, the hostility of the Austrians and the fact that the anti-science Greens now pepper the European Parliament and parliaments across the EU, the likelihood of Horizon 2020 funding continuing to go into nuclear research at the same level is very low, and likely to reduce.

Paul Blomfield: Those thoughts are contradicted by the enormous investment that the European Union has put into the Culham facility and is committing to.

Moving back to the benefits of Euratom, it oversees the transport of nuclear fuel across the EU and enables vital co-operation on information, infrastructure and the funding of nuclear energy. It provides safeguarding inspections for all civilian nuclear facilities in the UK—a point made well by the hon. Members for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) and for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), who was right to say that if we get this wrong, it will have an economically crushing impact on the UK. Euratom is the legal owner of all nuclear material, and is the legal purchaser, certifier and guarantor of nuclear materials and technologies that the UK purchases. That includes our nuclear trade with the United States.

As has been highlighted this week and by other Members, including the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), Euratom also plays an important role in our NHS. A Conservative Member questioned that point, but I take the judgment of the Royal College of Radiologists, which has expressed genuine concern that cancer patients will face delays in treatments if supply is threatened. My hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) highlighted the National Audit Office report on the risks to Hinkley Point. In all areas, our membership of Euratom is vital.

Indeed, the Government stated that they want to replicate the arrangements we have with Euratom. They have talked about probably the exact same benefits, in

the way that they have about the trade deal they want in place of single market membership and customs union membership. It is an ambition that they have yet to demonstrate how they will achieve.

Outside Euratom, the Government would have to negotiate individual nuclear co-operation agreements with every single country outside the EU with which we currently co-operate on these matters. Those would be complex, lengthy negotiations within a 20-month framework. I am interested to hear from the Minister how far they have progressed on those. The Nuclear Industry Association has been clear that if we left without them in place, it would be a disaster—a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), who is a strong champion of these issues.

All this prompts the question: why add this whole other burden to run alongside the negotiations for our withdrawal from the European Union? The bigger issue at play here was summed up very well—I loved the football analogy—by my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner): the Prime Minister's obsession with the European Court of Justice. In that context, it is deeply unfortunate that Ministers from the Department for Exiting the European Union have dodged today's debate. It is becoming something of a habit. We have had three debates in this and the main Chamber on exiting the European Union since the election. DExEU Ministers have dodged every one. That is an unfortunate habit, because both sides of this House demand a level of accountability that they are not demonstrating they are up for.

Back in February, I challenged the then Minister of State at DExEU, the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones), about allegations that it was the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice that had led the Government to issue a notice to withdraw from Euratom alongside the notice to withdraw from the EU. In response he told the House, along much the same lines that he has repeated this morning, that this was not the case. He said:

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

The right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) and the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) have expressed the view, which many of us share, that legal opinions are never that straightforward. The hon. Member for Henley made that very explicit.

Mr David Jones: The hon. Gentleman mentioned me. He has heard what I have to say. I repeat that the advice that DExEU received was as I have outlined this morning. Does he accept that?

Paul Blomfield: I think that there are probably enough lawyers in this place to know that legal advice can go in many ways. It may well be that that advice was received by the Department, but other Conservative Members have made it clear that if the political will exists, a solution can be found.

Mr Vaizey: I do not mean to doubt the assertion by my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) that that was the advice his Department received, but it would of course help the hon. Gentleman

[Mr Vaizey]

to agree with him if the Department published the advice that my right hon. Friend saw when he was a Minister.

Paul Blomfield: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. I hope the Department will respond by publishing that advice.

Sir William Cash: This is not just a question of legal opinion; it is actually stated in the treaty itself. Article 106a of the Euratom treaty, as amended by the Lisbon treaty, unequivocally says that article 50 of the treaty on European Union—the article that sets out the procedure for EU withdrawal—

“shall apply to this Treaty.”

It is there in black and white. It is not a matter of legal opinion—it is just there.

Paul Blomfield: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. On the issue of cross-party consensus, I have to say that I was interested in his earlier contribution about looking for some sort of associate membership of Euratom, which might well involve the jurisdiction of the ECJ. We are making some progress, aren't we?

Let me come to those in the Government who have contradicted the comments by the right hon. Member for Clwyd West in February. Comments by James Chapman, the former chief of staff to the Brexit Secretary, contradict that statement, and his comments were confirmed by the former Chancellor. They suggest that the nuclear industry, jobs and cancer treatments are being put at risk by the Prime Minister's reckless and irresponsible decision to make the future of the ECJ a red line in all matters to do with Brexit.

Mr David Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Paul Blomfield: No, because I am conscious of time.

All this goes well beyond the issue of Euratom. As the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin), who is no longer in his place, pointed out, it will affect our future in other agencies that we would also wish to be members of, such as the European Medicines Agency. We should start with the presumption that if these agencies are in our interests as a country, we would want to continue to maintain that membership.

We have already seen the obsession with the ECJ undermining discussions on the rights of EU citizens in the UK, and therefore those of UK citizens in the EU27. That obsession will also affect our ability to secure the objective that the Government have set themselves: the “exact same benefits”—I quote the Brexit Secretary—that we currently enjoy in the single market and the customs union.

I hope the Minister will agree to take back to his Secretary of State the clear consensus in this Chamber, and I hope the Secretary of State takes it to the Prime Minister. As James Chapman said, if the Prime Minister does not shift her position on Euratom,

“parliament will shift it for her.”

10.50 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): My apprehension before this debate was not about the content of it, which has been first class and very constructive, but about having to pronounce in front of you, Mr Gray, the constituency of the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), who introduced it. I thank him and other right hon. and hon. Members from both sides of the House for their constructive comments.

The hon. Gentleman said that he wants constructive comments and debate, he wants certainty and he wants world-class arrangements for the future of the nuclear industry in the UK and our relationship with other countries. I absolutely agree. His suggestion for a working group was very interesting. My door is certainly always open to right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House, either collectively or individually. I have taken that approach in every job I have had and I will be pleased to continue with it—particularly in this case, since you have had to curtail Members' contributions today because of time, Mr Gray. You did it very well, but I will not have as much time to answer them as I would have liked.

Liz Saville Roberts: Will the Minister give way?

Richard Harrington: I will, but it will cut my comments down.

Liz Saville Roberts: It is good to hear that the Minister's door is always open. I have already contacted him on matters relating to Trawsfynydd and have been refused a meeting. Would it be possible to arrange a meeting now?

Richard Harrington: I have never refused a meeting with anybody on any subject that I have ever been involved in, and I certainly have no intention of doing so to the hon. Lady. I really must make progress, but I am happy to arrange that meeting as soon as I possibly can.

The Government are determined that the nuclear industry in this country should continue to flourish in trade, regulation and innovative nuclear research. We are determined to have a constructive, collaborative relationship with Euratom. The UK is a great supporter of it and will continue to be so. There have recently been some alarmist stories in the press about what leaving Euratom might mean for safety and for health, but I must make it clear that we remain committed to the highest standards of nuclear safety and support for the industry. We will continue to apply international standards on nuclear safeguards.

We do not believe that leaving Euratom will have any adverse effect on the supply of medical radioisotopes. Contrary to what has been in the press, they are not classed as special fissile material and are not subject to nuclear safeguards, so they are not part of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, which is the driver of our nuclear safeguards regime. They are covered by the Euratom treaty, as the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) said, but Euratom places no restriction on the export of medical isotopes outside the EU. After leaving Euratom, our ability to access medical isotopes produced in Europe will not be affected.

Since time is pressing, I will say just a little more about safeguards, a subject that hon. Members are rightly concerned about. It is clear that we need continuity; we must avoid any break in our safeguards regime. We currently meet our safeguards standards through our membership of Euratom. The Government's aim is clear: we want to maintain our mutually successful civil nuclear co-operation with Euratom. We can do so while establishing our own nuclear safeguards regime, using the body that already regulates nuclear security and safety: the Office for Nuclear Regulation. In order to do so, we need legislation, which is why the Queen's Speech on 21 June outlined our intention to take powers to set up a domestic nuclear safeguards regime in partnership with the ONR to enable us to meet international standards and nuclear non-proliferation obligations. Regardless of where hon. Members stand on the question of membership, associate membership, transition or departure from Euratom, I hope we can all agree that it is sensible and prudent to take such powers. I do not think anyone could disagree with that.

John Woodcock: Will the Minister give way?

Richard Harrington: I really cannot, but only because of time; I normally would. Instead, let me say a little about what my Department has been doing to advance the UK's interests.

We are pleased that engagement with the EU is about to begin in earnest. EU directives note that a suitable agreement will need to be reached in relation to the ownership of special fissile materials and safeguards equipment in the UK that are currently Euratom's property—I note the contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) on that issue. The outcome of such an agreement, like the rest of the UK's future relationship with Euratom, will be subject to negotiations with the EU and Euratom, throughout which our primary aim will be to maintain our mutually successful civil nuclear co-operation with Euratom and the rest of the world. I reiterate that we are strong supporters of Euratom, and that is not going to change. The first phase of negotiations will commence next week, on 17 July, following the publication of the European Commission's position paper on Euratom. Our own position paper will be published imminently.

Albert Owen: Will that be before the recess? Will it be a written statement, or will it come to the House?

Richard Harrington: Imminently means imminently. [*Interruption.*]

That was quite a good line, actually.

We are ready and confident that we can find common ground as officials enter the first phase of negotiations, because there is a clear mutual interest in maintaining close and effective co-operation.

We are also keen to ensure minimal disruption to civil nuclear trade and co-operation with non-European partners. To that end, we are negotiating with the US, Canada, Australia and Japan so that we have the appropriate co-operation agreements in place. I reinforce that point because hon. Members may have read or heard that everything has to be done in a painfully long sequence that takes years and years. I can tell them not only that it is possible to do these things in parallel, but that we are doing so.

We will avoid the cliff edge feared by the hon. Member for Ynys Môn. We are preparing the domestic Nuclear Safeguards Bill, we are opening negotiations with the EU, we are talking to third countries about bilateral agreements, and we are talking to the International Atomic Energy Agency. Nobody doubts the UK's credentials as a responsible nuclear state, and everyone in the UK and elsewhere is keen to see that continue. The UK has been in the forefront of nuclear non-proliferation for 60 years. I have no doubt that we can bring these discussions to a satisfactory conclusion.

I am sure hon. Members will be quick to remind me that I have not yet mentioned nuclear research and development. I will have to cover this quickly, but I want them to know that it is another strand of work that we are taking seriously and acting on swiftly. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced on 27 June that we would underwrite the UK's share of the EU joint European torus fusion project. We are totally committed to R and D collaboration, in particular to Oxfordshire's world-leading Culham Centre for Fusion Energy, which my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) mentioned. The Secretary of State described JET in his announcement as a "prized facility". I assure all hon. Members that this is a top priority for us.

There is no question of lack of support for Euratom. There has been discussion today of whether we need to leave it at all. There was clear advice at the time about the unique nature of the legal relationship between the separate treaties and about their inseparability. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State was asked by the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee whether it would be possible to leave the EU but remain in Euratom. He said:

"Essentially, the interleaving of various aspects of the treaties in practice could have meant that it was defective. The article 50 notification would have been defective had we not served it for Euratom as well. Therefore, we served it, but at the outset we said that we want to have continuity of co-operation and collaboration, and that is what we intend to achieve."

10.58 am

Albert Owen: Thank you for chairing the debate in such a splendid fashion, Mr Gray. I thank each of the 15 Members who participated.

I set out in this debate to create consensus so that we can get the best deal for Britain. The Minister has been slightly helpful, but only slightly. He would have done better to have said that before the recess we would have a debate on the Floor of the House on how we can move this matter forward. We need to hold the Government to account—not with a statement just before recess, but with a proper and open debate like this one, so that we can be constructive and move forward together as one. That is what I set out to do today, and that is what we have done.

The Government's rhetoric needs to turn into action. Demanding that has been the responsibility of Back Benchers in this debate, and it will be the responsibility of the Opposition and the Government, working together, to get the best deal for the United Kingdom.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered negotiations on future Euratom membership.

Schools: Nottingham

11 am

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered support for Nottingham schools.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. Today's motion is very deliberate; I want to talk about the support that Nottingham schools need, not just the funding they receive. Too often Ministers have talked our city down. We must be frank about the challenges we face in raising educational attainment, especially at key stage 4, but we must also recognise progress, innovation and success. Failing to do so is demoralising and counterproductive.

I hope the Minister will welcome the fact that 83% of children in Nottingham are now taught in good and outstanding schools, up from 61% just three years ago. Some 22% of our schools are now rated outstanding—that is the second highest local authority level in the east midlands, and above the national average. I hope he will also welcome the improvement in key stage 2 results. The progress made by children in Nottingham's primary schools last year matched the national average in reading and outstripped national averages in writing and maths. Children come to those primaries with low levels of school readiness and low speech and communication levels. Many require additional language support and pupil mobility is very high.

Nottingham is rightly proud of its "Maths Mastery" programme, developed in collaboration with the two regional maths hubs. Drawing on learning from Singapore and other leading international practice, Nottingham is developing a maths teaching culture that is already delivering enhanced outcomes, with the approach now being rolled out from the early years through to KS4.

The city's five special schools are all rated good or outstanding, and Oak Field School is recognised internationally as a model of excellence in working with children and young people with profound and multiple disabilities. We also have an outstanding hospital school at the Queen's Medical Centre.

More than 8,000 Nottingham children are learning a musical instrument in school, up an incredible 1,652% in the past 12 years. In 78% of Nottingham primary schools, every child is learning an instrument, compared with a figure of 58% nationally. Some 48% of pupils continue with instrumental teaching after the first year, compared with 27% nationally. There has been a 385% increase in the numbers of pupils gaining a nationally recognised music qualification in the past three years alone.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful that my hon. Friend has secured this debate. She will know my constituent, Sheku Kanneh-Mason, who last year won the BBC young musician of the year contest, as he went to Trinity School, a secondary school in her constituency. He is a great example of the sort of specialism and expertise that young people in our city can achieve. My concern more broadly is that all those specialisms may be sacrificed if the speculated cuts to the funding formula and the changes hit Nottingham schools particularly hard. Can my hon. Friend say a

word about why some of those specialist skills among the teaching staff and beyond are so important in our city?

Lilian Greenwood: Sheku Kanneh-Mason is indeed an acclaimed cellist, and Trinity School and all of us are rightly very proud of him. I will say more about the importance of music and other enrichment activities and why they are under threat.

Students from across the city not only enjoy playing or singing in an ensemble, but are equipping themselves with perseverance, self-belief and a lifelong love of music. It is particularly pleasing to note that Nottingham is in the top quintile for those on pupil premium learning a musical instrument. However, while the Nottingham Music Hub is always exploring new ways to generate income, I am concerned that the local authority and individual schools may find it more difficult to fund the service in the future.

Schools provide other opportunities. The number of children able to swim 25 metres at the end of key stage 2 has more than doubled to 45% in the past four years. Some 6,000 primary and 5,300 secondary students are involved in competitive school games and sports.

I began the debate by saying that I wanted the Minister to recognise that there is much to be proud of in Nottingham schools, but I would be failing my constituents if I did not also acknowledge that we need to do much better in ensuring that every child leaves school with the skills and knowledge they need to lead successful adult lives. Formal qualifications are an important measure, but they are not the only one. I hope the Minister will recognise that good schools also ensure that students are resilient, kind, reflective, motivated, confident, and have respect for themselves and others. Character development is vital and should be valued.

Many Nottingham families live in poverty and some have low aspirations. Too many live in inadequate or overcrowded housing and have very low incomes and poor health, both mental and physical. Some children face additional challenges because English is not their first language, and we know that white working-class children, especially boys, are often the hardest to reach. Even where children are making good progress at primary school and are achieving at the end of year 6, that is too often not maintained to GCSE level. We clearly need to improve the transition from primary to secondary education, but there is concern that the Government's emphasis on a limited range of academic subjects up to age 16 is off-putting to those pupils, including the academically able, who would be enthused by a more vocational route. That view is expressed not only by teachers and heads, but by the former Conservative Education Secretary, Lord Baker, who has championed high-quality technical education for more than two decades.

Nottingham is working hard to provide sufficient primary school places by expanding existing good schools. We know that the bulge in pupil numbers will mean a shortfall in secondary school places if action is not taken now. A reliance on the emergence of new free schools is not enough. Nottingham needs extra capital resources to expand existing schools or to open new ones. The high level of in-year admissions is a further challenge, particularly for our maintained schools. The current system is not transparent and there is concern

that some academies are reluctant to admit pupils with additional needs, placing some of the most vulnerable children at risk of missing time in school. The White Paper, "Educational Excellence Everywhere", called for local authorities to have a co-ordinating role in dealing with such admissions. Will the Minister say whether he will be returning to that proposal?

A further concern is the high level of permanent exclusions at key stages 3 and 4. Last year, 108 city children were permanently excluded, and this year the number is set to be even higher. It is deeply concerning that a high proportion of those students have special educational needs. The pupil referral unit now has more than 300 students on its books, and those young people are placed with a number of alternative providers across the city, but the cost is very high and outcomes are poor. Funding for such provision falls on the local authority and diverts resources away from other high-needs children. What action will the Government take to incentivise schools to tackle poor behaviour, rather than using exclusion too widely to shift responsibility?

As the Minister is well aware, school funding—already a hot topic—rightly became the focus of debate during the general election. I have listened carefully to the Minister's responses since then, and I do not believe he has adequately addressed my voters' concerns. He says that the schools budget has been protected in real terms since 2010, but he knows that pupil numbers are rising. The cake may be bigger, but it has to be shared between more people. Will he come clean and admit that the increase in the budget has not been sufficient to protect per pupil funding in real terms? He knows that all schools face higher national insurance contributions, pension contributions, unfunded national pay rises and now the apprenticeship levy.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies reported that spending per pupil would fall in real terms by 8% and the National Audit Office confirmed that,

"funding per pupil will, on average, rise only from £5,447 in 2015-16 to £5,519 in 2019-20, a real-terms reduction once inflation is taken into account."

The Minister says he will support schools to offset these pressures, but I can find little evidence of such support in delivering the savings required. One head at a primary academy told me:

"We have already renegotiated every single contract both as one school and as part of a Multi-Academy Trust. We have lost and not replaced three teaching assistants, a sports coach, a music teacher and an art teacher. Our pupils walk to their Swimming lessons for 12 sessions rather than travelling by bus for 36. If a teacher is ill, we don't use qualified teachers to stand in front of classes until day four of their absence because insurance for teacher absence that starts after the third day is considerably cheaper than insurance that starts on the first day."

It really is that bleak. Schools in Nottingham are making cuts that have a direct and damaging impact on the quality of education.

The head of an outstanding primary school told me that they had cut the number of teaching assistants, teachers and learning mentors, increasing pressure on remaining staff and providing less support for children with additional needs. As he said:

"All of this is also taking place within the context of an increase in the numbers of families who need extra support, due to benefit changes, higher levels of domestic violence, more families being evicted...and the rise of the number of families seeking support from food banks."

Secondary schools paint a similar picture: fewer teachers, larger classes, less subject choice, and cuts to after-school activities.

I note that the Minister has sometimes resorted to blaming his Government's choices on the budget deficit in 2010. That is simply not good enough. His party has been in power for seven years. They promised that as a result of their austerity plans, the deficit would be eliminated by 2015. Any shred of economic credibility is long gone and their decision to spend £1 billion on buying a parliamentary majority underlines that point.

A head told me what inadequate funding means to his school: "Am I able to replace the 18 failing interactive whiteboards in our classrooms? No. Am I able to purchase library books to inspire a love for reading in the next generation? No. Can the disabled child's carer have overtime to accompany her for a full day's educational visit? Of course, yes. As a result of that carer's overtime, can the five-year-olds have another set of glue sticks for the summer term? No." He said:

"As the Headteacher I am not bemoaning the lack of capacity for investing in education at a level that will make a significant difference to the life chances of my pupils; I am genuinely struggling to see how I can squeeze basic school provisions out of the funding available."

On top of the existing level of real terms cuts we also face the prospect of a new national funding formula that will take money away from every single school in my constituency. I welcome the Minister's promise that, "there will be no cut in per pupil funding as a consequence of moving to the national fair funding formula",

but, as he knows, protecting a budget in cash terms is no protection at all. With rising inflation and increasing demands—for example, the introduction of much needed mental health support—school leaders simply feel unable to deliver what is asked of them. I could fill hours with the testimony of dedicated school staff who feel that the Government are not giving them the support they need. Adequate funding, especially for schools serving areas of high deprivation, is essential. Schools cannot keep doing more with less. They are at breaking point.

I hope the Minister will not simply dismiss my concerns and those of my hon. Friends, including my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), who will speak shortly. I want the Minister to commit to, at the very least, maintaining school funding in real terms for Nottingham schools. If he cannot, I will not stop asking. I also want him to come and see why I am asking.

Last Friday I visited the city schools exhibition at Nottingham Contemporary. The gallery's head of learning told me,

"what we are hearing from teachers again and again is that coming to a gallery, working with artists, really helps their children think differently, think creatively, question, be critical and reflective...particularly it builds confidence in those children who are told too often they are wrong, to keep quiet and not question. The gallery offers those children a place to thrive."

While I was there, students from Southwold Primary enjoyed telling me about their work. Southwold is a good school, but it serves one of the most disadvantaged parts of my constituency: 46.1% of pupils have English as an additional language and 47.6% are eligible for free school meals. I have seen for myself the creative ways in which the school works to give their children a great start in life.

[Lilian Greenwood]

The head said,

“we are giving our city children the experiences that more affluent counterparts can afford. Our pupils find it hard to make connections due to limited experiences and we need to provide these experiences so they can better access the curriculum and understand contexts for learning.”

She explained that in last year’s SATs reading test, one text was about a safari park; some children did not know what a safari park was, let alone visited one. As she says:

“All this needs funding and at the moment we are trying to do it on a shoestring.”

Nottingham’s schools need our support. They need the resources to do their vital job of investing in the next generation. I hope the Minister will come and see our schools for himself and commit to supporting them, enabling every Nottingham child to thrive.

James Gray (in the Chair): Unusually, and for good constituency reasons, I call the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) for no more than four or five minutes.

11.15 am

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): I will start by declaring an interest as chair of governors at Rosslyn Park Primary School. I shall not impose on the Minister’s time for more than four or five minutes; I am enormously grateful to him for giving me the opportunity to speak. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) on securing the debate. She, like me, made school cuts the focus of her terrific re-election campaign, and she and I vowed to use all the devices of this place to raise the issue loudly and assertively. We have both spent a lot of time meeting parents at school gates; it is impossible to overstate the strength of feeling on this topic.

Getting a good start in life in order to thrive should be something we aspire to for every child. Regrettably, in my constituency too often that is not the case. That is both the cause of and caused by cyclical poverty in my community. That was the theme of my maiden speech, and it will be the golden thread running through all my work in this place. It is critical that our schools are sufficiently supported to make sure we can close the gap, or too many of our children will start behind and simply never catch up. That is a shame. It is not a fact of life and people rightly look to this place and to the Government in the expectation that there will be action to tackle it. It explains the dismay at the idea that schools in Nottingham might receive real terms budget cuts. Left wing or right wing, whatever their politics, people do not see that as a sensible idea. It is a false economy for the state and will lead to greater dependence in the future. None of us will win. I can understand that there may be historic inequities that need to be ironed out, but I urge Ministers to think creatively and to level up, or they will take from those with the least in order to give it often to those with the least need. I defy anybody to join me at the school gates in Bilborough and explain that to parents.

School improvement is an imprecise art. As I declared, I am the chair of governors at one of Nottingham’s biggest primary schools. We have been on a journey

with Ofsted and have got to the point where we are very excited and cannot wait for Ofsted to come and see how well we are doing. Our results last week put us virtually at the national average for attainment and above that for progress. In future years I have no doubt we will go even further. That is all built on current levels of investment and on having outstanding leadership that works outside the classroom, meaning that each leader can make half a dozen or more staff better, leading to better teaching on a daily basis in each class. It means never needing supply and always delivering quality, but that is at risk from real-terms school cuts—nearly £2 million-worth across the constituency.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South mentioned, there are only so many physical budgets that the cuts can come from. In the end, they will come from staff. The public will watch us discuss cuts and talk about real terms and cash terms. That is a political argument for now, but it will mean naught in future. When P45s go out to teachers and teaching assistants, that is what parents will understand and they will not see that as a good thing. It is not helpful for Nottingham and we ask Ministers to revisit those plans and come up with something that works.

11.18 am

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I congratulate the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) on securing this important debate, and I congratulate her and the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) on their contributions to it. I acknowledge the successes in school improvement in Nottingham that the hon. Lady highlighted. If we look at the data, we see that there have clearly been improvements in phonics results, EBacc results and in key stage 2 results.

The Government want to ensure that every pupil receives a world-class education, regardless of their background or where they live. We have made significant progress. England outperformed the rest of the United Kingdom in the OECD’s most recent PISA science assessments. The attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their more affluent peers has shrunk by 7% at key stage 4 and by 9.3% at key stage 2 since 2011. There are now 1.8 million more children in schools that are rated good or outstanding than there were in 2010. In Nottingham, that translates into nearly 8,000 more children in good or outstanding schools than in 2010.

However, the pace of improvement in some parts of the country, including Nottingham, is still not good enough. Only 80% of schools in Nottingham are rated as good or outstanding, compared with the national position of 89%. There is still underperformance in some schools in Nottingham compared with the rest of the country.

For example, in 2016, 75% of Nottingham’s pupils reached the expected standard in phonics, compared with 81% nationally and 87% in Newham—one of the most deprived parts of the country—but I am pleased that the phonics results in Nottingham have increased year on year, with 48% passing that check in 2012. In Nottingham, 50% of primary school children in key stage 2 achieved the expected level in reading, writing and mathematics, compared with 53% nationally and 62% in Newham. At key stage 4, 16.8% of secondary

school pupils in Nottingham achieved the EBacc combination of GCSEs, compared with 24.7% nationally and 31% in Newham.

I remain as concerned about school standards in Nottingham as I was when I met the directors of education for Nottingham City Council and the regional schools commissioner in November 2015 to discuss how they intended to raise standards. Our ambition is for a school system that prevents underperformance, helps all schools to improve and extends the reach of high-performing schools and headteachers. That is the key to delivering more high-quality school places across the country and accelerating the pace of improvements throughout the country, including in Nottingham.

To succeed in that, we have targeted investment in the school system to support those schools most in need, and to support the development of teachers and school leaders, particularly in the most challenging parts of the country. For example, we have established a new fund, the strategic school improvement fund, which provides £280 million over two years to target resources at those schools most in need of support. That will help those schools that are struggling to improve to drive up standards and improve pupil attainment. Working at a local level, key partners will bring together local intelligence to help inform applications and ensure that funds are directed at identified improvement priorities that meet local needs.

Working with schools at a local level is also an important part of our strategy to deliver more good and outstanding school places. Our eight regional schools commissioners are pivotal to driving up standards locally, brokering schools into strong multi-academy trusts, and challenging and supporting those trusts to raise standards where they are not performing effectively.

Multi-academy trusts play a key role in harnessing the support of our system leaders and are helping to turn around some of the more challenging schools right across the country. Bluecoat Beechdale Academy, which serves a deprived community in the Bilborough part of Nottingham, was judged good by Ofsted in February this year. Ofsted noted that pupil progress is now improving rapidly. Djanogly Strelley Academy in Nottingham was also judged good by Ofsted in February this year, which is a significant turnaround from 2013, when its predecessor school was judged inadequate.

When we are not satisfied that the progress an academy is making is good enough, we will take decisive action, including re-brokering it to a new sponsor.

Lilian Greenwood: One of the things that causes me great concern is the time that it can take to re-broker a school and the difficulties that then creates when a new academy comes into place. That was certainly the experience at Victoria Primary School. It has now been re-brokered, and I am very supportive of the headteacher and the multi-academy trust, but the truth is that for a long time—I discussed this with the previous regional schools commissioner—that school was left without good leadership. That is not good enough. I know that in some cases there is a struggle to find academy chains to take on schools in order for them to make that sort of progress.

Nick Gibb: I share the hon. Lady's impatience. We need to find more good school sponsors to take on underperforming schools. It is an iterative process; we

are seeing more and more academy chains being formed and more stand-alone academies taking on underperforming schools and helping them to improve. For example, Riverside Primary School in Nottingham was not performing well. In 2016, it was transferred to the NOVA academy trust, which is a strong sponsor operating in the city. We need more strong sponsors in Nottingham and throughout the country to drive up standards. We are seeing that the system of using leaders in the education system—a school-led system—is driving up standards. It has resulted in 1.8 million more pupils in good and outstanding schools than there were seven years ago.

The local examples I have cited demonstrate that the combined effects of targeted funding to the system to drive school improvement and action taken at a local level are continuing to deliver more good and outstanding places for children. However, underpinning all the support we are putting in to the system to help drive school improvement is the need to ensure that we have fair distribution of funding to schools, which properly reflects need.

I listened to the contributions from the hon. Members for Nottingham South and for Nottingham North, as well as the intervention from the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie), on school funding. I have spent a lot of time in the past few months, during the election and during the extensive consultation, meeting schoolteachers, parents and governors from across the country. From those conversations, I have never been more convinced that our current funding system is broken.

The data that we use to allocate funding to local authorities are more than a decade out of date. For example, over that period the free school meals rate has almost halved in Southwark and more than doubled in Dorset, but the funding each local authority receives has not responded to that change. It is not right that local authorities with similar needs and characteristics receive very different levels of funding from central Government. That unfairness is exacerbated at individual school level, because local authorities make very different decisions in designing their local formulae. For example, a school in Barnsley would have 50% more funding if there were no other change to its circumstances but that it was situated in Hackney instead. The system by which we distribute money to schools is unfair and anachronistic.

That is why the Government have gone further than previous Governments in reforming school funding. Our manifesto committed to making funding fairer and we will do that by introducing a single national funding formula, so that all schools in England are funded on a consistent and transparent basis that properly reflects needs. In March 2016 we launched our first stage of consultation on the formula. We asked for views on the principles that should underpin it and its overall design. The principles included using robust data to ensure that funding is matched to pupil characteristics, such as deprivation, and the importance of transparency in the formula. More than 6,000 people responded and there was widespread support for our proposals.

In December last year we launched the second stage of our consultation on the detailed design of the formula. As part of that consultation, and to ensure maximum transparency, we published detailed illustrative impact data for all schools and local authorities, which enabled us to hold a truly national debate for more than three

[Nick Gibb]

months. The Government response will address all the issues and concerns raised throughout the consultation and by hon. Members in debates such as this—we have had several over the past few weeks and months. We will respond to the consultation in due course.

Not only do we want the system for distribution to be fair; we also want to ensure that every school has the resources it needs to deliver a world-class education for every child. In order to achieve that, we have protected the schools budget in real terms since 2010, and the Government have committed to increase the school budget further, as well as to continue to protect the pupil premium to support those who need it. The Queen's Speech was clear that the Government are determined to introduce a fairer distribution of funding for schools. We will set out our plans shortly and, as outlined in our manifesto,

“we will make sure that no school has its budget cut as a result of the new formula.”

We know that how schools use their money is also important in delivering the best outcomes for pupils, so we will continue to provide support to help them use their funding cost-effectively. The Government have produced tools, information and guidance to support improved financial health and efficiency in schools, which is available in one collection on the gov.uk website.

Lilian Greenwood: Will the Minister confirm whether he is saying that no school will lose, in real terms, per-pupil funding? That is a really important point. Protection of cash is not a protection given the current level of inflation and the cost pressures. Will he protect per-pupil funding for schools in Nottingham?

Nick Gibb: What I have said is that no school will lose per-pupil funding under that new national funding formula. The issue is that once the money has been allocated to the local authority, what the local formula can do—as advised by the school forum—is to redistribute that money in a different way. What I can say is that the commitment in our manifesto was that no school will lose money as a consequence of moving to a national funding formula.

I conclude by thanking the hon. Member for Nottingham South on securing this important debate. Accelerating the pace of school improvement across the country is a shared priority and we are committed to ensuring that, regardless of where they live, all young people have equal access to a high-quality education. Targeted support at a local level, as I have outlined, will help us to deliver that, and a national funding formula also underpins it. For the first time we would have a clear, simple and transparent system that matches funding to children's needs and the schools they attend. It will enable all schools to provide a high-quality, knowledge-rich education for their pupils.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

New Towns

[MR ADRIAN BAILEY *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered challenges facing new towns.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Bailey, and to see so many colleagues from across the House here to discuss this incredibly important issue. At a time when the Government are embarking on an ambitious house building programme, it is particularly important that we consider the experiences of new towns—the successes and, in some cases, the challenges and the things that have gone less well in their history. New towns are an experiment that should inform housing policy in this country. There is much that we can learn from our different experiences in our constituencies. Although there are many issues that we share concerns about, we also have common successes that we can bring to the House.

This is a wonderful opportunity to get colleagues to think about working together collaboratively on this issue. We often hear about our coastal town colleagues, who band together successfully, our rural colleagues, who also band together successfully to lobby for some of the things they want, and our urban colleagues, but there is something very distinctive about a new town. Very often we are by nature isolated within a rural environment. New towns were created outside cities as part of a vision for fresh, clean air and to tackle overcrowding. That isolation means that we are not always welcomed by the rural communities that surround us.

Connectivity and transport issues sometimes create urban isolation both within the new town and in connection with the rest of the country. We certainly have that issue in Telford: we are isolated in many ways. People sometimes say, “Where is your constituency? Is it somewhere on the way to Wales?” No, it is not. It is a vibrant, thriving new town set in the heart of rural Shropshire, not too far from Birmingham and now easily connectible to London. I want people to think about the ways our new towns interact with the hubs across the country.

Many new towns are marking their anniversaries. Harlow celebrated 70 years this year, and Milton Keynes has had its 50th anniversary.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. This year Crawley celebrates the 70th anniversary of its designation as a new town, and it has certainly been a very successful community. One of its problems, which she touched on and no doubt will expound further, is that it was designed for about half its current population, so we must address issues such as access to health services, parking and housing as we go forward for the next 70 years.

Lucy Allan: I thank my hon. Friend for that very helpful intervention. He is absolutely right that our respective constituencies share many features.

One of the other reasons for calling this debate is that I want new towns to be recognised as distinctive areas with specific needs.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. I represent about two thirds of Cwmbran new town, in the southern part of my constituency. Unfortunately, the Government are proposing to relocate jobs away from the Cwmbran pension centre and out of the new town. Although we can certainly have policies in favour of new towns, I suggest that the Government need a coherent approach and should not be withdrawing jobs from new towns at the same time.

Lucy Allan: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's contribution. I completely agree that a successful new town must have inward investment and jobs. It is about not just housing, but the whole community. We must look at new towns from that perspective.

Some years ago the Communities and Local Government Committee did some excellent work on new towns. It first looked at them in 2002, and it revisited them in the 2007-08 Session, but the Government of the day were reluctant to take on board its recommendations. The Committee visited Harlow, Corby and Telford, and did a significant amount of research. Disappointingly, there was the sense that new towns should be normalised and treated just like any other town. There was no recognition of their distinctive and specific needs, which is partly why I wanted to hold this debate.

Fortunately, the Town and Country Planning Association revisited those reports and produced some excellent work on how to use the experiences of the past to inform what we do for the future. It set up the new towns network to work with local authorities in new towns across the country and try to bring together some of these common themes. I only discovered that wonderful organisation while researching for this debate, which was fortunate, because had I come to this place without that knowledge, I would probably have been reinventing the wheel. I am grateful to it for its excellent publications, which I will happily send to any hon. Members who would like to see them. They contain a thorough analysis of the challenges. I am delighted to see that the Minister has a copy of one of them with him, and I hope that he has read it.

I have the great honour and privilege of representing the fastest growing new town in the country. Telford is a unique town. It has a specific identity and a proud industrial heritage as the birthplace of the industrial revolution. It is a collection of former mining villages on the east Shropshire coalfield. It has an enviable rural-urban mix and a fantastic quality of life, which we should seek to emulate in the house building drive that the Government are committed to. Despite the many hurdles that Telford has experienced along the way, and rural Shropshire's considerable resistance to its development—for example, there was resistance to the building of the M54, the main link road to Birmingham, and it took many years of persistence to get that connection—it is now a dynamic, thriving centre of gravity for the entire surrounding area. Some of that was brought about by welcome Government investment in Telford. We should not ignore the part that the Government have played in their commitment to Telford, for which I am very grateful. I very much hope that, as the MP for Telford, I will be able to continue to secure such investment.

Telford is now a huge population centre and a huge business centre. It has inward investment, commerce and advanced manufacturing, and all sorts of high-tech

and new economy businesses are coming to Telford, but it has never had it easy. Its success is all about its innovation and willingness to embrace change. All new towns have had to have exactly that spirit: they have had to have determination, optimism and hope to make the towns what they are today. The new town movement was conceived with the vision of hope, opportunity for all, clean air, green spaces and better living conditions, but in some cases that vision did not come to full fruition.

Telford has overcome those obstacles and is a shining example of what a successful new town can be. That is why I wanted to share its example today. It is now where all the houses are planned and all the jobs are going, so it needs to be where the schools and hospitals are built and where the infrastructure is located. I say that because we still have many battles with the surrounding rural Shropshire about what investment should come to Telford.

As I said, all new towns were based on a premise of optimism and a vision for a better future. The lessons we can learn from the past will play a fundamental part in tackling this country's housing shortage.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, who is generous in giving way to me again. I entirely agree about the vision for new towns. When they were conceived by the post-war Labour Government in the late 1940s, it was not only with a vision of hope and optimism, but with the idea that things could be planned in advance, rather than only as a response to past problems. The new towns were settlements where we could plan for the future. That could be used again as a strategy for future new towns.

Lucy Allan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that important point. The long-term stewardship of the assets of new towns is fundamental to their future success. It is all too easy to say, "We have a local authority that is thinking only about the needs of today and is neglecting to look at the long-term vision." We want the stewardship concept.

Henry Smith: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her generosity and forbearance in giving way to me a second time. Yes, it was under a Labour Government that new towns were created, but it was also under a Labour Government that, sadly, Crawley lost its hospital's maternity and accident and emergency services in 2001 and 2005. It is therefore pertinent that we concentrate on the importance of long-term, sustainable planning.

Lucy Allan: I entirely agree.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) on the importance of health services in future plans for any new town. In Redditch we have seen the unfortunate removal of A&E and children's A&E services from the Alexandra Hospital—a temporary closure has now become permanent—and they have moved to Worcester. I will not go into the details, but they highlight the need to plan holistically for health services, and that is in addition to all the other issues that my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) is discussing.

Lucy Allan: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. In Telford we, too, have had some debate about the future of our health services. I am

[Lucy Allan]

delighted to report that we will not lose the A&E or the women and children's unit, as was widely touted during the election campaign. One reason is that Telford has a rapidly growing population, so the need is self-evident. However, she makes an important point.

I have talked about some of the positives and good lessons that we can learn from new towns, but this debate is about the challenges, so I will move on quickly. Colleagues will face many of the same challenges in their constituencies, such as the new build challenges. New build brings its own huge range of different complications and problems experienced by residents, including pressure on infrastructure, school places, doctors' waiting lists and little things such as postcodes or polling stations, which we do not have in new build areas, as well as street names and bus stops. Those are some of the things that are so important to quality of life.

People move to a new town because they are buying the dream—they are buying their own home, their future and their children's future—but some of them will end up living in part-finished estates, paying exorbitant fees to management companies that do not discharge their obligations—that is probably a matter for another day, as we cannot address it in detail in this debate, but I wish to revisit it on another occasion.

Another common challenge we face is transport connectivity. Infrastructure investment often lags behind population growth. In addition, many new towns are designed around the car, but in Telford we have low car ownership and poor public transport, because of the low density of population. Low density is a good thing and part of what new towns are all about, but there are knock-on consequences for everyday life. As for digital connectivity, I will not talk much about it because only yesterday in the main Chamber we had a very full discussion about digital shortcomings with regard to broadband. People spoke at great length about new build and deficiencies in broadband.

Low-density population also makes bus routes unprofitable, which is a difficult problem to address. Road layouts even make walking difficult and—perhaps other Members share this view—we have many roundabouts bristling with traffic lights, which hold up traffic flow completely unnecessarily. That will definitely be the subject of another debate, such is the volume of constituency letters I receive on the subject, and the frustration it causes many people in Telford.

Some hon. Members present will share some of those concerns, but all new towns share the major challenge of a maturing new town, which is renewal and regeneration. As our new towns come of age, whether they are 50 or 70, we have to look at how we deal with fading infrastructure and faded housing estates that are sometimes not fit for occupation. As has already been mentioned, the failure to plan for the long term has caused some of those difficulties.

We all have decaying housing estates in our constituencies, built 50 years ago with poor design and poor materials. Whole estates are now in need of renewal, because they have been left behind. Every time I go to one of those estates, I ask where they will be in 10 years' time, never mind 50 years' time, and where the plan is to make the homes fit for the next generation. Such homes are often part of the private rented sector, so I feel that no one is

looking after them—the council will often wash its hands of the responsibility. Yes, selective licensing might be introduced to try to make the landlords responsible, but the issue is much bigger than that, because often whole estates are in need of renewal and regeneration.

Infrastructure, too, from local centres to bridges that have outlived their intended lifespan, affects the perception of what was once an ambitious and modern project, but which is now looking faded and tired. That can affect the whole ambience of a town. An essential part of the success of a new town is not only to keep replacing the old, but the need for a vision and that concept of long-term stewardship, as we have discussed.

I am delighted that last week the Department for Communities and Local Government announced a £2.3 billion housing infrastructure fund as part of the Government's commitment to their ambitious house building programme. It is very welcome. Telford has 17,000 new homes planned for the next 14 years, and I very much hope that it will be able to take advantage of the infrastructure fund. When the Minister responds to the debate, will he give us some steer as to whether new towns will be able to make bids to that fund in order to solve some of the problems of renewal and regeneration?

Will the Minister also recognise the fact that new towns are special? They have specific qualities and challenges. A cross-departmental approach is needed to support them. We are talking about housing, transport, business and the digital economy, so I would like to see Departments across Government focusing on the issue as a whole. We want to see the investment that we have had in Telford replicated in other new towns, which have not always benefited to the extent that we have done. Some challenges are specific to new towns, but previously Governments have wanted to normalise new towns, as if they were just like any other town. That was a mistake, so I reiterate how distinctive and special they are. Colleagues in all parts of the Chamber will agree with that.

In such a short debate we can barely scratch the surface of these issues. I would very much like to set up an all-party parliamentary group to take forward this initiative—I will definitely be knocking on the doors of those Members who are present. There are 32 new towns throughout the UK, and I will talk to the representatives of all of them to ask whether they wish to be part of an APPG.

We need to challenge the stereotype of new towns. Too often they are seen as substandard, but they are not; they are fantastically inspiring places to live, work and raise families. I could not recommend Telford more highly to anyone who wants to live the dream. Yes, there are problems and things that need to be ironed out, but Telford is definitely the place to do that. In fact, we have been very lucky; the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government has been to Telford on many occasions, and I think he fully understands the issues I have raised today. I am grateful to him for his support.

Telford is special. In 2018 we will mark our 50th anniversary. Although there may be lots of events and celebrations, we must not lose sight of the need for a vision for the next 50 years. The Government may be able to help local authorities with that. The nature of the election cycle means that local authorities are not always preoccupied in the way they ought to be with long-term thinking about infrastructure needs. I want

to hear from the Minister that there is cross-departmental recognition of the specific needs of new towns, that new towns can access the housing infrastructure fund, and that they will receive help to plan ahead for future challenges.

I make a final plea. We have had a housing White Paper and there is a New Towns Act, but that was passed in 1981, so there may be scope to modernise it and make it fit for purpose for the present day. The key point that I would like everyone to take away is the need for long-term stewardship to secure the future of our fantastic towns, which we are all privileged to represent.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Order. Seven Back Benchers have indicated that they wish to speak. I hope to get everyone in. As a rough guideline, if Back Benchers confine their remarks to about five minutes, that will help me achieve that.

2.51 pm

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) on securing the debate. Building new towns was a good idea—it was a necessity of the time, in both economic and population terms—but they failed to deliver their promise, which leaves my constituents in despair even today. We need to find a way to deliver that promise in a manner that befits the 21st century.

The new town of Skelmersdale was designated in 1961, with a target population of 80,000. Some 60 years on, it has a population of almost half that and little or no local facilities, amenities, transport links or adequate housing. It is a town built around the car, where people are driven underground and forced to use underpasses. The roads mostly have no pavements, but cars move about freely. It is a town famous for its roundabouts, like that mentioned by the hon. Lady.

Skelmersdale residents are proud of their town and work hard to put the best of themselves in the shop window. Only last year, local football coach Carl Eaton was nominated for a BBC sports personality award for his work with Skem Men-Aces, a football team that he founded for people with learning disabilities. The club has won countless trophies, and some of its players represent us at international level. There are many such impressive stories, and they are all the more impressive given that the town is deprived of an adequate town centre, a railway station, sports facilities, education opportunities and so much more. We have a shopping centre that pretends to be the town centre, but it is just a building. When the local council attempted to build a genuine town centre and a modern high street, the owners of the Concourse took out High Court injunctions and made appeals to block it. Skelmersdale is a town failed by narrow commercial interests. People are forced to spend their money elsewhere.

Although Skelmersdale became a designated new town in 1961 and a bright new future was projected, its tracks were pulled up and its train line was shut two years later. It is a town failed by a lack of foresight and that is desperately fighting to get a railway station. It is a town that has low car ownership—I concur with the hon. Lady on that point—but promises are still being broken. The Secretary of State for Transport visited

during the general election campaign and told my constituents that bringing back the Burscough curves would be a quick win. I am still waiting for that announcement. Skelmersdale is so poorly served by bus services that, were it not for a planned rescue by the county council, an area of Ashurst would be without any bus service whatsoever.

All those things absolutely impact on the town's economic prospects. It is a town where, rather than fixing the roof of a local sports centre, which was well used and generated an income, the council shut it down and it eventually burned down. It is a town failed by the council. The promised local hospital never materialised, and even education did not fare well—one high school was forced to close and its students had to relocate elsewhere in the borough. The recently built college withdrew its offer of A-level studies, forcing any student with an aspiration to progress at that level or further to study outside the town. That is an obvious difficulty considering what I said about rail connectivity and the lack of buses. It is a town failed by the education authorities. What can I say about housing? After 60 years, thousands of people still live in what was referred to as “temporary” housing. The planned development of 20,000 houses still has not happened. It is a town failed by planning authorities and developers.

I have fought really hard for Skelmersdale, which I have represented for the past 12 years, and I share local residents' frustration. We still have not seen improvements and investments that were promised more than half a century ago. All the infrastructure has decayed at the same time and needs massive investment, of which we see little or nothing.

Before we move forward and build new towns and villages, we must ensure that we leave no one behind and we must invest in the towns that we have. We must keep our promises—promises that were made a long time ago—to people, update these towns and make them fit for the 21st century. We must help people like my constituents, who moved to our older new towns based on promises that they were given that even today we have not fulfilled. Yes, we need more new build housing, but as we look forward, we must ensure that we do not leave people like my constituents behind. If there is no future for them, what future can we tell other people that they will have in their new towns?

2.57 pm

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I add my thanks and congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) on securing this important debate. She hit many nails on the head, particularly about the need for the Government to work on a cross-departmental basis and have a long-term strategy for new towns over the next few decades.

I should put the record straight: Milton Keynes is actually a new city, not a new town. As my hon. Friend correctly said, we celebrated our 50th birthday earlier this year. I should also say for the record that Milton Keynes has more than 900 roundabouts, which I think is more than anywhere else in the country.

Lucy Allan: Does my hon. Friend have bristling traffic lights all over his roundabouts, or are they left unfettered to let the traffic flow?

Iain Stewart: We have a mixture. Most do not have traffic lights, but a few in the centre do.

As it turns 50, Milton Keynes is at a crossroads for future development. We have reached the size envisaged when Milton Keynes was designated as a new city in the 1960s in terms of both our physical footprint and our planned population of around a quarter of a million. The issue is not whether Milton Keynes should grow at all—there is consensus that it will continue to grow—but in what way, in what direction and over what timescale it will do so.

In 2013, the council passed a core strategy that provided for more than 20,000 new homes over the following decade and a half, and we are currently meeting our five-year land and housing supply target. The difficulty is that while that core strategy bought us time—it more than meets our need for the next period—it did not set a long-term vision for the future of Milton Keynes.

After the 2015 election, I successfully argued that Milton Keynes should have that long-term future strategy. I was delighted when Milton Keynes Council took up the idea and set up a futures group, ably chaired by Sir Peter Gregson, the vice-chancellor of Cranfield University. That painted a positive, dynamic vision for the next few decades of what Milton Keynes should be, looking at having, for example, not just a standard university but one focused on the STEM subjects—science, technology, engineering and maths—that our economy needs, loosely based on the Massachusetts Institute of Technology model in the States. The plan was originally called MKIT, but it has morphed into Milton Keynes University. That would help not just to generate economic needs but to provide the social community buzz that a place needs to thrive.

We are looking at growth not just in ourselves but as part of the wider Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge corridor that the National Infrastructure Commission is developing. We had the interim report a few months ago and should have the final report by the time of the autumn Budget. That is critical in looking at not just the area's housing needs but the whole economic construct, from hard infrastructure such as the east-west railway line and the Oxford to Cambridge expressway to 5G broadband provision and all the critical infrastructure needed to support growth.

My concern is that Milton Keynes Council is now pushing ahead with what is called “Plan:MK”, its vision for the next stage of Milton Keynes's future development. That is not in itself a problem, but my real worry is the timing. The consultation document recently put out explicitly rejected that the council could have waited until the infrastructure commission reported and until the futures commission projects were more developed. The council thinks that would result in an unacceptable delay, but I fundamentally disagree. We have the time now to pause—not to pause house building, because the core strategy provides for our needs at the immediate time—and to look ahead at the smart cities technology and all the other developments that could usefully shape vibrant new communities that are not just urban sprawl.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Telford said, neighbouring counties are fearful of ever-expansion. However, they have their needs too, and by doing this in the right way, planning small villages that are smartly connected, we could create new communities that

people want, not the urban sprawl that people fear. My plea to central Government is to help give us the space to develop that long-term strategy, which will be one of the major providers of the housing supply and economic growth that the country desperately needs. We have a homeless problem in Milton Keynes and we want to build new houses, but let us do that in a properly planned way. We also need to think about the delivery mechanism. A metro-style devolution arrangement will not work in the Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge corridor, but perhaps we should look at reconvening the old Milton Keynes Development Corporation, which could be jointly owned by the authorities along that route, as an effective delivery mechanism.

Our city motto is:

“By knowledge, design and understanding.”

We could get a vibrant, new expansion for Milton Keynes and the surrounding areas. That is my plea and my hope. I support my hon. Friend's plan to create an all-party group to help look at our shared interest and I very much look forward to being part of that.

3.4 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I, too, am grateful to the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) for securing the debate, which provides a genuinely interesting opportunity to think not only about our own new towns, but about the problems faced by new towns holistically. Like her, I hope that this is the start of the conversation rather than the end.

Aside from the cult film “Gregory's Girl”, the new town I represent was probably most famous for a simple but effective advertising slogan from the 1980s. If I were to ask, “What's it called?”—

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Cumbernauld!

Stuart C. McDonald: Exactly—it is Cumbernauld. I even had a student activist at one point suggest “Who's he called? Stuart McDonald” as a possible campaign slogan, but thankfully that was ruled out of hand. That was testament at least to the fact that that slogan had imprinted itself into public consciousness so much that someone born after it was created was still very much aware of it.

The new towns were an incredible achievement in planning and building, born of an urgent need for housing after war and a baby boom, and Cumbernauld is no exception to that. Though it was designed as part of Robert Matthew's Clyde valley regional plan to move population out of Glasgow, it has a slightly different history, being the only one of the mark 1 new towns designated during the period of the Conservative Government of the 1950s. One consequence of that is that it has a slightly different design plan. Unlike other new towns, it does not share the concept of different neighbourhoods but aimed instead for a higher density design with a single town centre accessible by foot from all other parts of the town.

In many ways, Cumbernauld remains a great place to live. It has the same sense of civic pride that other hon. Members have described as present in their new towns. It is also an extraordinarily green town, with an amazing percentage of the town's area comprising woods and

parks. It enjoys a wonderful range of local organisations and community groups, with many taking a great interest in preserving that green space and maintaining it for all to enjoy.

However, as others have said, new towns face significant challenges as well. I could mention transport and one or two others, but in the time left I will focus on two or three at most. As has already been said, all new towns will face a huge challenge because a massive part of their housing stock and infrastructure will be exactly the same age, therefore requiring significant sums of investment in renewal over a short period of time. Some of those problems of regeneration and renewal are made even more challenging by the way in which stock was transferred first from development corporation to council, and then from council to private owners. Therefore, in some parts of Cumbernauld, it is almost impossible to get agreement between all the different owners of flats in order to take action to regenerate, which is required by the title deeds.

Another challenge is jobs. I will not go on about that for too long, but one of the key challenges we face is the possible loss of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs office in Cumbernauld—I think my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) will have something to say about that as well—which we will return to in the months ahead.

If I were to survey my constituents, I think the No. 1 new town issue they would highlight would be the town centre. It is built over the dual carriageway that goes through the town and, because the bus station is also located in the structure, for many that will be their one and only recollection of Cumbernauld. It was envisaged as a solitary megastructure designed to accommodate all the retail, municipal and leisure needs of the whole population of 50,000. Originally, it also included penthouse executive apartments. At first, it was remarkable. On completion, I think it was Britain's first indoor shopping mall, but I do not think my constituents would disagree when I say it has not stood the test of time well; in fact, it has dated badly. The building's concrete structure makes its exterior appear unattractive, and it has been a challenge to attract major retailers, with giant superstores locating instead on nearby sites.

There are plenty of ideas on how to improve the situation. The local council has a strategy in place after public consultation. My MSP colleague Jamie Hepburn and I also did a public consultation and arranged a roundtable of local organisations and community groups in autumn last year. There is enthusiasm for improving the town centre and making it a better fit for the town in which it is based. One key challenge is the co-ordination and co-operation required to make that happen. As well as the practical challenge of dealing with a giant monolithic structure, there are problems with the fact that bits of the town centre are owned by different private companies. Even the streets and public spaces are owned by private companies. In the past year we have been trying to kick-start some action in one part of the town centre that has changed ownership, so we almost have to start again.

What should we take from all this? The new towns were a bold and necessary experiment. When I was preparing for this debate I was interested to read that some of them ended up as a revenue-generating experiment for the Treasury. However, when they were built, there was no planning for the challenges that almost certainly

lay ahead. No sinking fund was put aside for a time when renewal and regeneration would become urgent. Instead, development corporations have handed over more liabilities than assets.

Perhaps in the era of city deals we should campaign for new town deals in recognition of their unique challenges and opportunities. Perhaps we need to look at a role for a more modern and accountable version of the old development corporations that existed previously. In Cumbernauld there is a sort of successor organisation, but I am not convinced it is in the right form or has the resources and powers that it needs. Perhaps that is one thing to look at. I do not know the answer to these problems. There might be completely new solutions.

The hon. Member for Telford mentioned an APPG in her opening speech. That has to be the start of the conversation. I am absolutely up for joining an APPG and I hope we can take forward our discussions and our ideas to overcome the challenges.

3.11 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I give my huge congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan), who initiated this debate. She is a real champion for Telford and has done much to help to improve her town since she was elected.

As has been said, Harlow is 70 this year. Our town was built as a place of aspiration, opportunity and achievement for people, mainly from east London, who lived in poor accommodation. They moved to Harlow for the chance to make their lives better. We are now a sculpture town. Harlow is the birthplace of fibre optic communications. Hon. Members may be pleased to learn we even invented the formula for Bailey's Irish Cream in Harlow.

We have a bright future ahead of us: £400 million is being invested by the Government in Public Health England. We have an enterprise zone. We have one of the best colleges in England, which has led the way in apprenticeships and in helping to deal with the problems of youth unemployment.

I think this is common among new towns, but certainly in Harlow: although we have lower levels of economic capital, we are not as prosperous as we would like to be, and there is significant deprivation, we have incredibly high levels of social capital and community spirit. We have organisations of people looking after one another, including faith groups; charities; neighbourhood associations; residents' groups; housing groups; and many clubs and societies. There is an extraordinary level of social capital that brings people together and makes our town more prosperous.

However, we face three challenges, and my hon. Friend the Member for Telford touched on one of them. The first is reputation. She rightly said that there is a stereotype of new towns. Whenever we have a tragedy or something terrible happens, stereotypical journalism paints Harlow and new towns in a certain way. Journalists go to the worst part of the town and say, "This is what it's like: a place full of anti-social behaviour." They do not go to see the art, the sculptures, or the beautiful new housing estates and the regeneration that is going on. It is incredibly frustrating because it is very damaging. Such reports are damaging because they stop aspirational people coming into new towns. Much of it, of course, involves a huge amount of snobbery.

[Robert Halfon]

The second problem, which has been touched on by all hon. Members who have spoken thus far, relates to infrastructure. We were built all at once and we are breaking all at the same time. A lot of money is being invested in our roads, but we do not have enough housing. We are lucky to have huge amounts of green space. Harlow is a beautiful green town, but we do not have enough housing. I am glad new council houses have been built, partly thanks to the new homes bonus from the Government, but housing remains a significant problem. It comes up again and again in my constituency. People are not able to get a house or they live in overcrowded accommodation.

Although we have a lot of investment in infrastructure and roads, there are problems. When the town was built it was imagined that everyone would have one small car with one small garage, so we do not have enough spaces for parking. People now have two cars and there is simply no room to park them, so people park on the grass verges. I hope the Government will use some of the £23 billion infrastructure fund to help new towns. The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) said there should be a new towns fund, and he is right. If we have a northern powerhouse, we should have a new towns powerhouse.

Many good things are happening in Harlow. We are becoming a scientific, technological and vocational education powerhouse of the east of England. We are becoming a cultural powerhouse, too, with our sculptures and our beautiful Gibberd Gallery, but there has to be a focus on the problems that all the new towns have in common. The regeneration issue is important. Although part of our town centre is beautiful—the water gardens particularly—the other part badly needs regeneration and new builds. However, the money cannot come unless we have more housing. By the time we get more housing, it will have been a long time coming. The Government must look at where town centres badly need funding and support.

Our hospital was built a while ago and we desperately need a new one. The Health Secretary has visited Princess Alexandra Hospital three times. Its brilliant staff provide a wonderful service, even though we have had difficulties. The hospital is literally not fit for purpose—sewage gets into the operating theatres—so I urge the Minister to lobby the Health Secretary for a new hospital. He has said that if capital funding is available, Harlow will be considered as a top priority for a new hospital.

I will conclude because I know other Members wish to speak. As I have said, Harlow is very much an apprenticeship and vocational town. The Government's investment in skills and apprenticeships is important. Anglia Ruskin University is introducing degree apprenticeships for our residents. Our schools are greatly improving, but we need to do more to make sure our children are educated even better and to ensure schools improve across the board.

I said that Harlow is a place of aspiration, opportunity and achievement. If we get continued investment from the Government, if there is a focus on new towns, and if we can use part of that £23 billion infrastructure fund to focus on the desperate needs that new towns have and to deal with the deprivation and infrastructure problems that we have, not only can we celebrate our 70th birthday, but we will easily be fit for another 70 years.

3.19 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) on securing this excellent and timely debate and on speaking so comprehensively about the importance of new towns. I welcome the debate and our focus on the challenges that new towns face. I want first to examine how we got here and why wonderful new towns such as East Kilbride in my constituency came into existence.

Housing conditions in Scotland were a major concern after the second world war. There were overcrowded tenement dwellings in Scotland's cities. Between the two world wars there had been some tenement clearance and new building programmes, but in many cases what was built was just as inadequate as the housing it had replaced. Decentralisation would be achieved by expanding existing towns in the region, encouraging industrial growth in other parts of Scotland and building new towns. In response to the plan, the new town of East Kilbride was designated just one year later, in 1947.

As many hon. Members will be aware, I grew up in the Westwood area of East Kilbride. Aztec Camera went "from Westwood to Hollywood"; I have managed only to go from Westwood to Westminster, but it is certainly a first for my family. It is an honour to represent my new town—a town that filled my family, moving from Glasgow, with hope and provided job opportunities, new green living spaces and somewhere to bring up a family where there were education, health and other resources that we could only have dreamed of. It is amazing to think that we are now celebrating East Kilbride's 70th anniversary. I pay tribute to all those involved in the anniversary celebrations and in making sure the new town continues to thrive.

The emphasis on foreign direct investment and trade was part of the work associated with East Kilbride Development Corporation decades ago. That, alongside housing, was very successful. It was a programme of continued development, and one that is now sadly missed by most of my constituents. It is important to recognise the success that the development corporation had. The approach adopted for areas of housing in the Stewartfield and Lindsayfield areas embraced urban green spaces, at James Hamilton heritage park. As in many other new towns, there was a focus on creating a pleasant living environment, and Calderglen country park and the National Museum of Rural Life are perfect examples of our many visitor attractions.

Today's debate is about challenges. Over the decades East Kilbride has experienced the loss of key industries. Rolls-Royce moved out of our town just the other year, as did Motorola before that; we were previously thought of as a great semiconductor town in Scottish industry. Now, under the UK Government's plans, we face the challenge of losing the office of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. We must invest in our new towns, create jobs there and maintain those that keep them thriving. I urge the Minister to do all he can to ensure that happens, including revisiting the plans for HMRC. An impact assessment would show that the plans could decimate the new town, and surely he does not want that to happen within his remit.

The focus of the debate is on challenges, but I believe that East Kilbride has a vibrant future, entailing, for example, a modern shopping centre complete with a new leisure hub. I would like to see a new designer outlet mall, although my husband clearly does not want such a development. The town centre needs a bit of a facelift; we are very proud of our town, so we want to make sure that happens. We also need manufacturing, jobs and livelihoods to be brought into the 21st century, so during the summer recess I shall host my day of international trade and development for East Kilbride. I hope that the new Chair—elected today—of the International Trade Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), will open the event, and that we will have representatives from many of the great trading centres of the world, including China, Hong Kong and Japan. I hope that they will speak about why it is so important to invest in our new town, and that we can continue to build such links.

In future it will be important for me to maintain my role on the newly developed East Kilbride taskforce. My key focus is on jobs, livelihood and trade. We need to focus on the town's unique selling point, and give that the priority it deserves, across Scotland and the United Kingdom: we have excellent low-carbon ideas and aspirations, and we want to become the UK's low-carbon town. We want new town development plans; they should be ongoing and ours should not die with the sad demise of the East Kilbride Development Corporation. The taskforce and key stakeholders across the town, including our MSP, are working hard to make sure that we regenerate and continue to build. It is important for us to retain the jobs at HMRC. The impact assessment indicates that that will be vital.

I call on the UK Government to invest in new towns, not just in new city deals. We are connected in our new town, with its multitude of roundabouts. Indeed, I will check the figures to see whether the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) is ahead of us on roundabouts—East Kilbride is widely known and loved as Polo mint city, so I need to check the veracity of that nickname.

East Kilbride is a shining example of a wonderful new town. I want to work with all key stakeholders at council, Scottish Government and UK Government level, to ensure that it will continue to shine. I will do all I can to push for investment and trade. I would like to attend the all-party group described by the hon. Member for Telford, which is a wonderful idea. There is much to be done, but we will make it our priority across the House. I could not recommend East Kilbride more highly to people throughout the UK and beyond. Come to work, live in and visit East Kilbride.

3.26 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) on securing it. I am also proud to represent the new town of Redditch. Something that we have in common with other hon. Members present is the fact that famous or notable people came from our town, including a gentleman who has just been commemorated by a blue plaque—John Bonham, the Led Zeppelin guitarist. Hon. Members may know the song “Stairway to Heaven”; I sometimes think of its lovely lines when I am climbing one of the stairways in this place.

Redditch was built as a new town in the 1960s, to accommodate people from a rapidly expanding Birmingham. Somewhat similarly to what my hon. Friend the Member for Telford described, we are a centre of gravity for Birmingham, but in the other direction. To this day, Redditch is a desirable commuter town and there is significant demand for housing, because of natural growth and migration. The concern that Redditch residents raise with me is land availability, and the need for developers to find a balance that protects and sustains the green spaces and environments that are such a distinctive feature of the town.

The purpose of creating the local plan is to locate growth, limit commuting out of Redditch, make the best use of existing highway infrastructure, and promote sustainable transport options, while also creating a place where businesses can thrive. What conversations has my hon. Friend the Minister had with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on ensuring that businesses are attracted to new towns as well as to urban centres? We in Redditch want that idea to be promoted.

There are parts of the town centre in need of regeneration, because of neglect over a period of years—something my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) raised about his constituency as well. People in our town also have a perception that there are safety issues, because of antisocial behaviour and crime. I welcome the fact that all local plans must be accompanied by sustainability appraisals. Redditch Borough Council has undertaken discussions about that, but residents are still understandably concerned about the effect, particularly on surrounding services and transport systems, of expanding developments in the area. What regular discussions has the Department had with the Department for Transport and rail operating companies to ensure that new towns such as Redditch have transport links to connect them to major urban centres such as Birmingham, so that residents who work there can get to work easily?

Webheath is a beautiful rural area of Redditch. A problem for my constituents is the fact that land there has been identified for expanding development. It is on the south-west boundary of Redditch's urban centre, and between 400 and 600 dwellings are proposed. It is a difficult issue for residents. I welcome housing and accept the need to provide it, but residents feel that developing the land in that way will be intrusive. The development is likely to proceed, but there is a risk of flooding, and the roads are inadequate—there are lanes, not roads, and we do not have pavements. A great deal of investment is required to make the development safe.

Also, the services of Diamond Buses are inadequate; people are being let down on their daily journeys to work, and left stranded in outlying areas. Redditch has one of the lowest levels of car ownership in the country, and one in five households have no access to a vehicle, which shows how important the bus services are in people's daily lives. I regularly meet councillors in those areas to raise constituents' concerns, because many rely on public transport to get around.

I therefore ask the Minister to consider the overall redesign and expansion of Redditch, and to work with borough councils and neighbouring local authorities, because development is often driven by neighbouring local authorities and impinges on Redditch, which is in

[Rachel Maclean]

a different council area. We need to make sure that councils work together across the piece to mitigate the impact of those decisions strategically.

I support providing for the increasing population of Redditch, but I feel that further consideration must be given to the impact it has on services and infrastructure. I have already mentioned our hospital, and I make no apologies for mentioning it again—it is the No. 1 issue we face in Redditch. People are rightly worried that their town will grow, because it is a growing town with a young population. We want to see long-term, sustainable plans for health, not the sudden removal of services that then becomes permanent, because that has a negative effect on peoples' perception of how they are being treated. Redditch residents feel that they deserve services in their town just as much as neighbouring Worcester does. I share those concerns, and I do not want my residents to feel that they are being unfairly overlooked in that regard. I welcome the APPG initiative and will give it my full support.

3.31 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to sum up the debate on behalf of the Scottish National party. As I explained in my maiden speech—it seems a long time ago now—although my constituency is called Glenrothes, slightly more than 50% of my constituents do not live in the town of Glenrothes. I think it is disrespectful for the name of the constituency to ignore that fact. As a lot of hon. Members alluded to, many new towns were planted in the middle of established communities, which are sometimes very concerned about maintaining their own identities. I will continue to ensure that officialdom recognises the identities of the many disparate communities in the Glenrothes constituency that are not in Glenrothes.

As a long-term resident of the town itself, I will make some comments on what a wonderful place it is to live. However, let me first commend the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) for securing the debate and all hon. Members who have spoken for the clear passion they have demonstrated for the new towns they represent and their pride in the people in those towns. Although we have heard a lot about roads and roundabouts, and schools and roundabouts, and houses and roundabouts, and shopping centres and roundabouts, this is about people. All of those things were supposed to have been built for people, and with hindsight I sometimes wonder what the architects and town planners thought the people were supposed to do.

A large part of the problem, certainly in Glenrothes, is legacy; the well-intentioned people who planned the town all those years ago had no idea what kind of town they needed to produce for the 21st century. I think that one difficulty is that society was a lot more paternalistic then. Glenrothes was built on precincts with a typical population of 2,000, although some were quite a bit smaller. Those precincts would often have a primary school and what was charmingly described as a tenants' meeting room that typically held about 50 or 60 people. There was nowhere within the precincts where the community could meet. A lot of the communities did not have a polling station big enough for everybody to go and vote at on the same day. The vast majority of

amenities were to be in the town centre, as I think my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) mentioned.

Another big difficulty became relevant shortly after I was first elected as a councillor in the town in 1992, because the new town development corporation was wound up in 1995-96. We expected all of its functions to be taken over by the new unitary Fife Council, but the Government of the day—as represented by Michael Forsyth, the Scotland Office Minister for everything—were keen to sell off as much as possible in order to keep it out of the hands of the elected council.

Our town centre was sold off, as were a lot of the industrial estates, such as the Whitehill industrial estate on the western edge of the town, with disastrous results. The neighbourhood shopping centres were sold off, and the Glenwood centre in Glenrothes has been in the ownership of, I think, three different bankrupt or liquidated companies. All of those facilities, which should have been maintained for the benefit of local people, have been allowed to run down because they were sold off for short-term gain, often to people with neither the capacity nor even the will to make them succeed in the longer term. I thought it interesting that the hon. Member for Telford referred to that.

Having said that, there have been several successes in the town, a lot of which are down to the people—sometimes for taking things on board for themselves, sometimes for forcing the council, the Scottish Government, the UK Government and everybody else to deliver what was needed. During my time as a councillor, we saw a new dental centre and a new health centre built at Glenwood in west Glenrothes, a new secondary school built to replace the former Auchmuty High School, the new Michael Woods sports and leisure centre built to replace the aging and almost literally collapsing 1970s sport centre.

We are also in the process of seeing a new residential care home at South Parks to replace two older homes—I give credit to the former Labour Administration in Fife Council for delivering that. We have also seen a lot of investment in a sports hub for the community at Gilvenbank in the north of the town, and there has been an excellent community initiative at Over Stenton playing fields in the south of the town to provide a home for the Glenrothes Strollers, who have previously been awarded community club of the year by the Scottish Football Association.

What is remarkable about all of that to some Members here, but is just accepted by those of us on the Scottish National party Benches, is that the total private finance initiative liability for all of those community facilities is nil. If the political will is there, all of that can be done without mortgaging future generations to the mercies of international financial conglomerates. I hope the UK Government listen to this, because there is a better way to finance large-scale public investment.

I mentioned the people of the town I am so fortunate to represent. Since the start of the general election campaign, the people have run very successful large and small community events in Macedonia, at St Ninian's Church in Tanshall, in Collydean, Gilvanbank, Collydean again, at Over Stenton and at Woodside. All of that happened in a town that a lot of people said did not have any community spirit. It was felt that, being a new town, people tended to live their own lives and never really interact with one another. I think a lot of the

credit for that community spirit belongs particularly to our primary schools, because they tend to bring families together in a way that few institutions can.

A big fillip to the town over the past 10 or 15 years has been the influx of young families from central Europe. Because Glenrothes was designated as a new town 59 years ago, the population has tended to age with the town, and a lot of our communities were in danger of growing too old. The influx of younger families from other parts of Europe has been of huge benefit, and I hope it will be allowed to continue.

If I had one ask, what my town needs, as I suspect do a lot of towns represented here, is significant public sector investment. The private sector will simply not fix this problem on its own. If the political will is there, the money can be found, and all of the towns represented here can be turned into towns that their residents desire and deserve.

3.38 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) on securing the debate, and I wish her town and the respective constituency towns of the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) and the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) a happy birthday. I also welcome the Minister to his new post in what I believe is his first outing. Is he the Minister for pubs? For the northern powerhouse? For devolution? Yes? All of the above, but not for parks, apparently, which I think his predecessor was. I think he should fight for that, given the comments today on green spaces in new towns.

Nobody listening to the debate can have failed to hear the passion and pride that all hon. Members have in their new towns—or cities, as in the case of Milton Keynes. The hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) certainly demonstrated a “Whole Lotta Love” for her town—as well as for Led Zeppelin—while recognising the challenges faced by new towns.

As the anniversaries show, many new towns no longer consider themselves new and, as hon. Members have outlined, there is now a need to look to renewal and investment. I am afraid that some of the issues raised today have only been exacerbated since 2010. As the hon. Members for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) and for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) said, many town centres across the UK have been starved of investment and are in desperate need of regeneration. The Government will surely have to look at the complications mentioned of dealing with multiple private companies in town centres when trying to address this. I have been looking closely at regeneration with my local authority and Departments to try to improve the situation in my constituency of Great Grimsby, so I am well aware of the difficulties and challenges that people face.

The Government, of course, commissioned Mary Portas to write a review of the future of high streets in 2011, but she slammed them just three years later for making only “token gestures” in response. Many of the things we have heard today reflect a frustration that, on the one hand, the Government say they want to support towns, new towns and house building, but on the other, as two hon. Members mentioned, there is a loss of

Government jobs in these towns. Those jobs are critical for not only the local economy but individuals. The loss of HMRC jobs—really good, secure jobs—is having an impact in my constituency as well.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) and the hon. Members for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) and for Redditch mentioned transport infrastructure. There was quite a strong emphasis on rail, but I was pleased also to hear a reference to buses. There is a significant issue around bus transportation, particularly for those on lower incomes. Buses are essential, but unfortunately since 2010 funding for buses across England and Wales has been cut by a third, with thousands of routes cut or downgraded as a result. Ensuring that there are good bus routes is essential for people’s ability to move around their local areas.

Robert Halfon: I thank the hon. Lady for her kind birthday wishes to Harlow on its 70th anniversary. She mentioned Government jobs, but would it be fair to say that that does not reflect the whole picture? I mentioned that the Government invested £400 million to bring Public Health England to Harlow, to make us, except for Atlanta in the United States, the public health science capital of the world. That will bring thousands of jobs, including skilled scientific jobs, to our town.

Melanie Onn: I am delighted that the right hon. Gentleman’s constituency is benefiting from that investment. I am sure that lots of Members around the room will be hoping for something similar or the same; I certainly would not be disappointed if the Minister came to me and offered something similar.

Broadband, which I thought might come up, has not been touched on today. In 2015 we were promised ultrafast broadband to nearly all homes in the country. Maybe someone will leap from their seat and say, “It’s all absolutely fine; we’ve got ultrafast broadband,” but I know that across the board, only a handful of constituencies have more than 1% of connections receiving ultrafast broadband speeds. To make all our towns across the country successful, the Government must take that seriously and press forward on it.

Iain Stewart: I should point out that the National Infrastructure Commission, which is looking at the Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge corridor, is not just considering hard infrastructure such as roads, railways and the rest; broadband provision is very much part of its work.

Melanie Onn: Excellent. I could not agree more that soft infrastructure is an essential part of connectivity in new towns.

Dr Cameron: I would also like to comment on broadband. It came to my attention at a constituency surgery recently that there is real concern about new housing estates. If the number of homes being built does not reach a certain number, broadband does not necessarily have to be provided for residents. Residents are buying new houses, expecting broadband to be a feature of what they are buying, but there does not seem to be any legal requirement for it. Will the hon. Lady comment on that?

Melanie Onn: I certainly urge the Minister to consider that. When people purchase new build properties on those estates, modern facilities fit for the 21st century must be part and parcel of them.

[Melanie Onn]

Renewal and expansion of the housing stock are clearly issues that face new towns, as the right hon. Member for Harlow in particular highlighted. Under the Conservatives, we have seen the lowest level of house building since the 1920s and the lowest level of affordable house building for a quarter of a century. As rent and house prices have hugely outstripped rises in people's incomes, we now have a generation of young people who cannot afford to buy a home—and not just in London, but right across the country, with the result being 200,000 fewer homeowners today than in 2010.

The hon. Member for Telford spoke of the specific problems for those who buy leasehold properties. Increases in ground rent charges are a particular issue that sees leaseholders being ripped off by developers or management companies and can make it impossible for individuals to sell their property. An APPG on the specific issue raised that in the previous Parliament, but perhaps her new all-party group will consider it as well.

Peter Grant: In Scotland, we have dealt with the problem of extortionate ground rents by abolishing the feudal property system lock, stock and barrel. Might that be worth examining for other parts of the UK?

Melanie Onn: When we are considering these issues, nothing should be off the table. It has to be something workable and reasonable that protects leaseholders. That option will not necessarily be the right solution, but it certainly should be available for consideration.

Labour has proposed capping some of the charges and, in the longer term, ending the routine use of leasehold ownership in developments of new houses entirely. That is an alternative, perhaps, to the suggestion from the hon. Member for Glenrothes. The 2017 housing White Paper pledged 17 new garden towns and villages, but it came five years after the former Prime Minister announced a consultation on new garden cities in his speech to the Institution of Civil Engineers. That delay does not exactly instil confidence that the Government recognise the scale of the housing crisis facing the country today, or the importance of new towns and garden cities to tackling the crisis.

Let us compare and contrast with the Labour Government of 1945. It took the Attlee Government just one year to enact legislation for new towns and to designate Stevenage the first. A new planning system was introduced the next year. Within five years, 10 new towns had been started, with social housing for rent making up the overwhelming majority of new homes built. That shows what Government can achieve if the desire is truly there, which is exactly what the hon. Member for Glenrothes was talking about earlier. Will the Minister update us on the progress of the new garden towns and villages?

The viability of new towns and garden cities relies on the agreement of the local population. They have to be developed in a way that genuinely improves the local area by bringing the jobs and services needed for a real community. When the latest tranche of garden towns and villages was announced in January, the former

Housing Minister, the right hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps), said:

“What worries me about all of these announcements...is perhaps it is just a good name to tag on to more housing development rather than somewhere...you'd really want to live, bring up children, work and play.”

He went on:

“And if it is not all of those things then we will have failed to actually create new garden cities; we would have just tried to make housing sound more popular.”

Will the Minister reassure us today that these proposals are not simply spin on new housing developments but will genuinely reflect the ethos of garden cities?

We have heard today about the higher infrastructure costs faced by new towns. Labour has suggested that in future, new garden cities or towns should retain 100% of the business rates locally, to provide an income stream for those higher costs. Business rate retention was one of a large number of policies dropped in the Queen's Speech, but perhaps the Minister will consider reviving it for new garden cities.

I also want to ask about the need to provide greater protection for those purchasing new build homes, which is of course a particular issue in new towns and villages. I spoke about the Bovis Homes scandal in my previous role as a member of the Communities and Local Government Committee. When I challenged the former housing Minister, now chief of staff to the Prime Minister, on what the Government are doing to safeguard new homeowners from this in future, he told me that a planned announcement had been put on hold when the Prime Minister called the general election. Nothing was brought forward to address the issue in the Conservative manifesto and there was nothing in the Queen's Speech. Perhaps the Minister here today can say what this previously imminent announcement was and when we can expect it.

3.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): It is a pleasure to have my first outing under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey.

I start by saying happy 70th birthday to Harlow and happy birthday to Telford, Milton Keynes, Stevenage, Crawley and all the other new towns that have an approaching big birthday with a zero in it. I have a birthday with a zero approaching in a couple of years.

It is because we are at such an important crossroads for new towns that I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) for this debate today. It gives me an opportunity to pay tribute to new towns and recognise their continuing role in delivering the Government's house building agenda. It is important to look at the lessons to be learned from the new towns programme so that, as we move forward and build garden towns, villages and cities, we do not make the same mistakes.

I welcome the way in which new towns can now work together, and not just at local authority level. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's idea of an all-party parliamentary group, which will start an important conversation here in Parliament. The Town and Country Planning Association's new town network is doing great work and I have a copy of its report here.

I will focus initially on the new town in my hon. Friend's constituency, which in many ways is leading the Government's thinking on new towns. Like all new towns, Telford is testament to the fact that place making never ends. The town has grown to be a success story as the commercial gateway to Shropshire over many years, but it faces some challenges. Parts of Telford have ageing infrastructure. The problem is not restricted to Telford and today we have heard many colleagues talking about that. The contemporaneous obsolescence test in new towns is that if everything is built at the same time, everything wears out at the same time, which poses real challenges.

In addition, the development style of many new towns, which during the '60s and '70s was the height of modernity, especially in our town centres, can look outdated and often does not provide the modern shopping experience that consumers demand today. Telford and other new towns have risen to the challenge and in 2016 the Government signed a unique land deal with Telford in which they committed £44.5 million from land sales to reinvest in Telford's infrastructure. At the same time, we will deliver 2,800 new homes and create 8,500 jobs. Telford has been successful in several rounds of growth deal funding to improve its infrastructure, to build a new bus station—linking to the comments on buses—and to invest in skills. The growth deal for Telford is precisely the sort of forward-looking approach that we would welcome from all new towns up and down the country and could be progressed through the housing deal flagged in the recent White Paper.

My hon. Friend asked what we will do about the new towns legislation, which is hugely important for all our new towns. We have legislated through the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017 to enable the creation of locally accountable new town development corporations to provide powerful and effective delivery options for garden towns, so that updating has already taken place.

Telford, like so many of our new towns, is a dynamic and exciting place to live. We have heard from representatives of all new towns that they all seem to be dynamic and exciting. Telford has halved its unemployment since 2010 and doubled its apprenticeships. Its business start-ups are up, its housing starts are up and even my hon. Friend's share of the vote at the recent general election was up, which I welcome. It shows, as we have heard today, what a difference a fantastically hard-working MP, on whatever side of House they sit, can make for their town. Telford is one of the most economically successful towns in the midlands and its gross value added and employment are on a par with many areas of the south.

We have also heard from colleagues from across the Chamber. The hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) talked well about Skem. I am from the area and I know that it is not universally known as Skelmersdale; we call it Skem. Lancashire County Council and the local enterprise partnership are working on a plan for Skelmersdale railway station and I hope the hon. Lady will come forward with bids to the housing infrastructure fund. She spoke very well about some of the challenges of the infrastructure in Skelmersdale. I am pleased there is good news locally with major employers such as Flavourfresh and Huntapac reflecting the growing economy around Skelmersdale.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) spoke about the challenges, but it is clear she has real pride in her town and I know that she will be a powerhouse on the APPG. The idea of an international trade exhibition promoting a new town is excellent.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) is supporting local proposals for high-quality transformation and growth for Harlow through the Harlow and Gilston garden town proposal that he supports. New new towns, as I think we will now have to call them, must learn lessons from old new towns like Harlow. We welcome bids from Harlow and all the new towns to the infrastructure fund that he spoke so well about.

The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) spoke about his town centre, which faces challenges like many other new towns.

My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) spoke about smart cities and the Opposition spokesman also spoke about the importance of embedding infrastructure, including digital infrastructure, in our new towns for their plan for the future.

On a recent visit to the new Metro Mayor of Manchester, Andy Burnham, I was particularly interested that he is talking about a digital domesday book held locally to put on record the infrastructure as it is today. By mapping the existing infrastructure it is hoped that we can future-proof the expansion of towns to ensure that we are not repeatedly digging up our roads. I welcome his enthusiasm for the National Infrastructure Commission and agree that this is an exciting opportunity for local growth.

My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) spoke about her town. I know that she welcomed the North Worcester Engineering Centre, which was opened by the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Margot James), showing that Ministers of that Department are constantly in contact with her and her town. I note that the local enterprise partnership has plans to create 2,300 new jobs in the area.

Turning to the Opposition spokesman's comments, I will not take lectures from anyone in the Labour party about the rate of house building. The lowest house building rate anywhere in the country was in John Prescott's proposed eco towns. The problem with them, unlike our garden city proposals, was that their direction was top down, forcing housing, often in the wrong place where people did not want it, on communities. What is so exciting about our proposals for garden towns and cities is that they are locally led. We all know from our constituency role that development is often opposed, but when there is buy-in from the community from the first day, it makes it much easier to deliver.

In Bicester, we have already had 1,000 starts. In Ebbsfleet, 350 properties have been completed. In Northants garden community, Kettering, Corby and Wellingborough, 650 homes have been built and in Aylesbury Vale there are 2,500 starts, showing that this Government are absolutely determined to deliver our promise to build more than 23,000 homes in new towns.

[Jake Berry]

There is still a problem with new towns and people's perception of them, and the APPG could work on that to ensure that towns that may previously have been associated with roundabouts, with or without traffic lights, and with decay and ageing town centres start to be the leading lights of our country. I hope and believe that, when the APPG is formed, it will invite me to address it and that I can talk about our progress under the recent housing White Paper to ensure that we build a record number of homes in this Parliament, and emphasise that new towns and new new towns continue to be a focus for this Government and a fantastic place for people to live, work, raise a family, own a car, drive round roundabouts and live their lives as happily and freely as they can.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered challenges facing new towns.

Ambulance Services (Devon)

[GERAINT DAVIES *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered ambulance services in Devon.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. Let me say at the outset that we all pay tribute to our blue light services and that this debate is not in any way intended to criticise them. The intention is to set out the challenges that they confront and to celebrate their professionalism and the work that they do, but also to ask my hon. Friend the Minister to address some key issues that they face in Devon and, in particular, in my constituency.

The debate has been triggered by a number of incidents. People have contacted me either directly or indirectly to raise concerns about long waiting times faced by my constituents; an incident that typifies the situation happened last month. An elderly lady was left for two hours at the roadside, on a baking hot day, waiting for a paramedic crew to arrive. She had serious neck injuries and was in some distress. Were it not for the kindness of passing strangers, things might have been even worse, but a consultant anaesthetist happened to be passing and was able to provide critical assistance at the scene, and the lady also had assistance from the police and from staff from South Hams Community Hospital. As a result, the outcome has been good, but it could have been very different. That has caused a great deal of concern, because it is not an isolated incident. Although much of the focus of my speech will understandably be on the critical, type 1 cases, which require a response within eight minutes—everyone understands that—I would like the Minister also to think about those other cases that we are all coming across in our constituencies which are not immediately life threatening but are nevertheless very serious and where the outcome can be very different unless we see a timely response from our ambulance services.

First, I would like to address demand, which is rising at an extraordinary rate. During the five years to 2016-17, over the area of the South Western Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust we have seen a considerable rise in demand, but there has been a 19.2% increase in the Totnes constituency alone, a 29% increase in Plymouth and a 23.7% increase in Torbay. The challenge is far greater in a rural setting, for obvious reasons. The SWASFT area is the most rural area in England; and if we look at the activity for Devon, we see that 23.5% of SWASFT's activity is in that county, but that is matched by only 22.2% of its funding.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I very much appreciate the debate that my hon. Friend has introduced in the Chamber today. She is making a very good point about the rurality of Devon, which is one of the largest counties in the country. Of course, the issue is not just its size. If one starts going north-south, there are no really fast roads—we need much more done to the north Devon link road. Apart from the scale of the county, however, the issue is about getting an ambulance to an incident in time and our very scattered population. My hon. Friend makes a very good point. I am sure that

Ministers are aware of the size of Devon, but there is also the question of the time it takes to get from A to B if one is not going on major roads.

Dr Wollaston: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. Of course, as we know, demand can escalate considerably during the peak summer times, but many of our roads are single-track ones with passing spaces, and it can be very difficult to get an ambulance resource to the scene in a timely manner.

My first point to the Minister is that there are no concessions for rurality; there is no funding premium to allow SWASFT to meet the extra demands that it faces. In fact, overall, its funding has fallen by 2.46% per incident in 2017-18, compared with 2014-15. It has to meet the huge increase in demand with shrinking resource, in what is one of the most challenged areas in England because of rurality. I would like the Minister to acknowledge that key point and the impact of rurality on response times.

My second point to the Minister is that although overall SWASFT is doing a good job in meeting the performance target of 75% of category 1 calls receiving a response within eight minutes, that does rather mask the picture in the most rural parts of the area. Let us take the South Devon and Torbay clinical commissioning group area as a whole, for which we have some data that show that it just meets the target, with the figure of 75.65% of calls. If we look at the breakdown for the Totnes constituency, we see that during the past three months the figure has been 61%, so my point to my hon. Friend is that, when considering a county such as Devon, he should look not just at the overall, top-line figure, but at the impact in the most rural parts of the constituencies. I hope that he will ask for that as an ongoing measure, as a response to this debate.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): There is a specific example of exactly what is being described by my hon. Friend in my constituency of North Devon—the situation in Lynton and Lynmouth, the twin villages right on the north coast. At the beginning of last week, the South Western ambulance trust withdrew what was in effect a rapid-response paramedic vehicle that was traditionally stationed in Lynton and Lynmouth, specifically because of the rurality and the distance from anywhere else of those two villages. There is a lot of concern in the community because that service has been withdrawn. I pay tribute to the CCG, which is looking for an alternative arrangement, but the fear is that there is still a gap, and the response time, because of the distance of Lynton and Lynmouth from everywhere else, is key. May I ask my hon. Friend the Minister, through my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), to consider that particular example?

Dr Wollaston: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Likewise, very considerable concerns have been raised in my constituency about the withdrawal this month of rapid-response vehicles from Dartmouth and Kingsbridge and in Totnes. I understand the reasoning that double-crewed ambulances can provide the conveyance that people need to hospital and that utilisation of the single vehicles is less—about 24%. I understand the rationale behind it, but equally I ask the Minister to respond to precisely the concerns that my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) has

raised, because the worry in communities such as mine is that once the double-crewed ambulances are conveying a casualty to an urban centre, they tend not to come back again, whereas the rapid-response vehicles did. There is a genuine concern about how we will ensure that the double-crewed ambulances come back.

As I have said, I welcome the increase in the double-crewed ambulance resource as the rapid-response vehicles come away, and I am aware of the data whereby efforts are being made to provide a reassuring response that actually the number of hours in total will increase. However, that change is just coming in this month, and I would like the Minister to assure the House today that he will look very closely at the data as they emerge over the next few months, to ensure that those vehicles are returning to the rural areas, because I fear that otherwise we will again see that SWASFT is meeting the overall, top-line target for the entire patch, but that will be at the expense of rural constituencies such as my own, where there will simply be a worsening of the response. We need to look at that very closely, and I would like the Minister to assure me that, following this debate, he will specifically ask SWASFT to ensure that there is a response available and it does not worsen in the rural parts of Devon.

I would also like to address the matter of the workforce, which is an issue across the NHS as the Minister knows. Within our paramedic resource there is actually an 11% turnover of paramedic staff, in part because they are such a skilled and valued workforce, which means in many cases they are being attracted into other parts of the NHS, for example to work in casualty departments and minor injuries units. Everyone can understand that, but we need to make sure that we are recruiting and retaining within our blue light response services as well. For example, there are currently about 100 vacancies over the whole of the SWASFT area, and 16 whole time equivalent vacancies in Devon alone. What is the Minister doing to work alongside Health Education England to address the workforce issues? I will again make the point I have done in previous debates about the impact of the pay cap on the recruitment, retention and morale of the workforce. Again, I call on Ministers to consider giving the pay review bodies greater flexibility to be able to increase the rates of pay.

We know that there are pressures on our ambulance services, but we cannot view them in isolation. I would like the Minister to consider the impact that this is having on our other blue light services, particularly the police. They have raised some worrying concerns with me about not only the amount of time that they are having to spend on scene—as they did the other day in the incident that I described—while they wait for an ambulance resource to arrive, but the fact that on occasion they themselves have to take people to hospital who should really be conveyed by an ambulance resource. To clarify, in May this year there were 226 incidents where an ambulance was requested but no ambulances were available to be assigned in the Devon and Cornwall police area, and in June there were 158. These long waits are having a knock-on on the police's ability to carry out their other duties, and that should concern us all.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for giving way and congratulate her on securing this much needed debate. As she will be aware,

[Kevin Foster]

it is not only the police who are experiencing long waits. One of my constituents, Susannah Tandy, has got in touch about an incident a week ago when her 12-year-old son fell 11 foot from a tree. An ambulance was called at 1 pm but did not arrive until about quarter to 4. These sorts of waits not only build up anxiety but could see situations get much worse. Thankfully Murphy appears to be making a recovery, but it could have been a lot worse.

Dr Wollaston: I think we are all glad to hear that Murphy is making a good recovery. As my hon. Friend says, we must focus not just on the immediately life-threatening incidents but on the kinds of incidents that he described, where an ambulance is very important and somebody's condition could deteriorate because of a long wait. For SWASFT we must keep an eye on not just the category 1 incidents, but the others as well, and I hope the Minister will do so.

In this debate we should also celebrate the successes, because there are undoubtedly those as well. We have seen examples of very good co-working between our blue light services. For example, in the "collapsed behind closed doors" scheme fire services co-operate with the ambulance service where there are concerns that somebody might be collapsed in a residence. In the past the police may have responded, but now the fire service can also provide that assistance, and I pay tribute to those co-responders in the fire service. From my time as a rural GP in Chagford, I remember the number of occasions when people phoned me in surprise because the fire service had arrived instead of the ambulance service, but it is actually providing a fantastic resource. On occasions when it is absolutely critical that somebody has a defibrillator on site as soon as possible, the fire service can and does perform an amazing job. We have got further to go, particularly in remote rural communities where a fire resource might be closer to hand. I hope the Minister will look at how we can go further to make sure that we develop a multi-skilled workforce who are properly rewarded for the expertise and skills that they develop across the fire service.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): The ambulance crews across Devon do a fantastic job. I represent an urban seat in Plymouth, but the demand that is placed on both urban and rural ambulance services has a knock-on effect, because there is no wall that divides Plymouth from the rest of Devon. Demand needs to be understood between both urban and rural areas. Will the hon. Lady comment on what happens in the summer months when the south-west becomes an even more popular tourist destination and additional demand is placed on not only the ambulance services but our wider emergency services? That moves the ambulance resources out of their normal patterns. Ambulances are increasingly moved to further away places with longer response times than their normal patterns might take them.

Dr Wollaston: The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely important point. He will know that for both our ambulance services and our police services those kinds of influxes from outside are not adequately reflected in the funding formula. That is in addition to the rurality that he referred to. In fact, the key point remains that the

greater danger is to people living in rural areas where, for example, a resource might take somebody to Derriford Hospital but not return, and then when the ambulance service dispatches the nearest ambulance it will be in Derriford. That is why ambulance services tend to get tied up.

I would briefly like to mention the impact of the 111 service. SWASFT is doing extremely well—it is, in fact, the best-performing in the country—at treating patients at home rather than conveying them to hospital. That is the so-called "see and treat" model, and they are also doing well with "hear and treat". However, there is a concern about the increase in calls, because there has been an overall increase in calls of 24% for the whole of the SWASFT area over five years, with 470 more calls per day, although only an additional 81 people per day are having to go to hospital. While that may reflect the great success of paramedics' expertise in seeing and treating at home, will the Minister consider whether it also reflects unnecessary calls and the impact of 111, which has been raised many times in this House? Are too many people still having an ambulance called on their behalf when it could have been avoided?

Finally, I would like to end on a positive note in thanking all our volunteers who do so much to save lives across Devon, working alongside our blue light services. I would like to praise all those who support our Devon air ambulance service, all the volunteer community first responders and those who support, fund and supply defibrillators in our communities. On behalf of all in this House, we thank them and our wonderful paramedics and ambulance service crews.

4.17 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I wish you every success in your endeavours elsewhere today. On that note, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) on securing not only this debate but unopposed re-election to the Chair of the Select Committee on Health, which role I am delighted to see her continue in.

By happy coincidence, I had the pleasure of visiting the South Western Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust only last week. Having visited the chief executive in his office, and seen for myself some of the challenges presented by the rurality and the distances—as mentioned by hon. Members in this debate—I feel slightly better briefed than I would otherwise have been. I drove from Exeter to Barnstaple to Plymouth on the same day, in the height of summer, on a Friday, when the roads were, it is fair to say, not at their least busy. I do absolutely appreciate some of the challenges reflected in this debate that are imposed on the ambulance service's ability to deliver the service to residents in this large, very rural and very beautiful county. It is particularly appropriate therefore that we have the chance to discuss this briefly this afternoon.

I thank my hon. Friend for the characteristically considerate and appropriate way she posed challenges to me and thanked people employed in the ambulance service, and those who support it as volunteers, for the magnificent work that they do. She began her speech by recognising that the ambulance service in the south-west, like all other ambulance services in the country, is busier than ever. Demand has been rising significantly.

Across the country, there were some 7 million face-to-face responses from the ambulance service in the year ending 31 March—a 14% increase over the last five years. In the south-west of England, demand has increased even more sharply, with a 29% increase over five years; I think she mentioned a 19% increase in her area of south Devon.

The trust is challenged by the geography of the area it serves, with its greater distances and slower transport routes. Nevertheless, it is doing well, not just in meeting national targets but in comparison with other trusts. We should congratulate all those involved, but that does not mean that there are not a number of challenges. My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes mentioned a particularly difficult case in which an elderly lady was left waiting for some time, and my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) raised a case from his constituency in which a child had to wait some time for an ambulance.

This is clearly an operational issue. I strongly encourage hon. Members who are concerned about individual cases to bring them to the attention of the chief executive of the relevant trust, and to continue to represent to their constituents that even if the overall number of such incidents is not great, the ambulance service is required to provide an appropriate response through the disposition of its resources. From experience in my own area, I know that MPs are listened to by chief executives of ambulance trusts and can make a difference in securing deployment of resource to meet the particular demands and concerns of their constituents. It is well worth pursuing that approach.

Let me touch on some of the initiatives under way to meet the challenges that we all recognise and that have been referred to in the debate. Sir Bruce Keogh undertook a review of the NHS urgent and emergency care system, which is trying to cope with the root causes of demand. Following the review's recommendations, ambulance services will increasingly be transformed into mobile treatment centres, with greater use of "hear and treat", in which telephone calls are closed with advice, and "see and treat", in which paramedics are equipped to treat patients on the scene without a conveyance. There will also be greater integration with the rest of the health system. Some 2,600 more paramedics are now operating within our ambulance services across the country than in 2010, and in the past year 1,400 trainees have started on paramedic courses. There has been a big shift towards training more ambulance staff to undertake treatment on the ground.

The Care Quality Commission has recognised that SWASFT is one of the highest-performing trusts in England, particularly in its "hear and treat" service, which enables clinicians to assess and triage patients over the phone and close the call without the need to send an ambulance. In April, 49.1% of calls to SWASFT were resolved without transportation to A&E—the highest percentage of any trust in England. That allows more patients to be treated in their own home or in the community without needing to be taken to hospital, helping not only the patient, but the system.

Another way in which SWASFT is addressing the growing demand for services and the need to better manage peaks of activity is through reviewing how emergency vehicles and staff are rostered. Its review has

moved ambulance resources closer to areas of high public demand. Instead of a paramedic crew logging on for a shift at a rural station and then getting pulled into an urban area—an issue highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes as a particular challenge in her constituency—resources should now be positioned in the right places and should stay more local, more of the time. She expressed a degree of scepticism about whether that is actually happening. I can confirm that in my area in the west midlands, we have worked with the ambulance service to ensure that ambulance stations are not necessarily kept in the same physical location, but are placed in parts of the country where demand is highest. This can now be well mapped by ambulance systems to ensure that service is provided as close to areas of demand as possible.

Evidence from the trust's rota review shows that the patients with the most serious, time-critical and life-threatening injuries have experienced improvements in response times, and that ambulance resources stay local more of the time. My hon. Friend makes a perfectly reasonable challenge for that to be proven—for the facts that demonstrate it to be provided to Members of Parliament and the public—and I will encourage the trust to provide that information.

My hon. Friend and other hon. Members referred to the trust's fleet. It is being reviewed to enable the right resource to be sent the first time. The trust has invested £3.6 million, which has allowed an additional 61 double-crewed ambulances—an increase of 20%—across the operational area, meaning that in South Devon four more double-crewed ambulances will be available this year than last year. This approach has allowed a reduction in rapid response vehicles, which—as my hon. Friend said—are not being utilised as fully as the ambulance crews themselves and are therefore not always the best resource to send.

There are now some 57 fewer rapid response vehicles. My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) highlighted some areas in which that has caused local concern. I would say to him that the ambulance service needs to demonstrate to local people that fully crewed paramedic-staffed ambulances are now more readily available to serve communities, so that the people in most need of conveyance to hospital are more likely to get there more quickly. The trust needs to demonstrate that as it moves its resources to this new pattern.

My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes is aware of the ongoing review of the way in which ambulance services respond to calls through the ambulance response programme. SWASFT has been involved in piloting new operating models. The new programme seeks to deliver clinically appropriate responses to all patients and is part of ensuring that the ambulance service in England remains sustainable. The evidence behind the ARP is extensive, covering data collected from more than 14 million emergency 999 calls. The review has looked at a number of key issues for the south-west, including the provision of ambulance services in rural areas and putting an end to unacceptably long waits by removing the long tail of ambulance response times.

A revised operating model is crucial to achieving sustainability in the ambulance service, given the growing demand that we have all described. Trials have been independently evaluated, and the Secretary of State has

[*Mr Philip Dunne*]

recently received recommendations from NHS England. I hope to report to the House the ARP's findings and NHS England's recommendations shortly.

In addition, SWASFT has adopted a number of recommendations to improve response times, particularly in rural areas. One such initiative, which my hon. Friend referred to, is the increasing use of community first responder groups across the south-west. Totnes is one of the focuses for the next phase of recruitment in South Devon, which will start later this month. There are some 458 community first responders and a further 110 fire co-responders across the county, alongside the network of public access defibrillators that she mentioned. SWASFT is in discussions with three of its local fire services about introducing a conveyance and support service by fire crews, which would help to supplement conveyance when ambulances are not available. These initiatives do not change the priority or category of a 999 call, but they help to ensure that a patient with a life-threatening emergency can begin to receive the required care as soon as possible.

My hon. Friend rightly raised staffing. I understand that the clinical vacancy rate at the trust is currently 7.7%. The trust has undertaken a very successful graduate recruitment campaign, which has resulted in 130 graduates accepting offers to join it. They are expected to start in September, including 31 who will start in the west division, which covers Devon.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

UK Elections: Abuse and Intimidation

[*DAVID HANSON in the Chair*]

4.30 pm

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered abuse and intimidation of candidates and the public in UK elections.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I should start by saying that since the election the Conservative Whips Office has been dealing with at least three credible threats to colleagues every week, including death threats, criminal damage, sexism, racism, homophobia, anti-Semitism and general thuggishness around and after the election. For all I know, other parties' Whips Offices may be having similar experiences, and I look forward to hearing cross-party contributions on that score. It is for that reason, and a few others, that I thought it was appropriate to call this debate now.

When I first entered the House seven years ago, it never crossed my mind for one minute that I would end up making a speech like this. As far as I was concerned, elections were four or five weeks of robust banter followed by a shake of the hand and a pint in the pub, yet now it all seems so different, with swastikas on election boards and offensive slogans and language on posters.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this important debate. I have been an MP for just over two years, and I cannot remember a single day that has gone by without me receiving some sort of abuse, whether that is death threats or a picture of me mocked up as a used sanitary towel and various other things. The last election was the most brutal I can imagine. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we have to look at this issue with a non-partisan view and accept that in all our parties, as much as it hurts us, there are people who do not represent our values? For some to suggest that it is only one party doing it is wrong.

Simon Hart: I absolutely recognise that point, and I will come to it later in my speech. There will be individual contributions from Members who might have had particular experiences that defy that challenge, but I agree with the hon. Lady, and I am grateful to her for making that point so early in proceedings.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way so early in his speech, and I congratulate him on securing the debate. While I understand why he has brought forward a debate with particular regard to general elections, does he not agree with me that the recent research done by BBC Radio 5 Live—it found that half of British female MPs have been threatened with physical abuse, nine out of 10 have been abused online and 80% have been verbally abused—shows that the issue is not restricted to election time?

Simon Hart: I thank my right hon. Friend for her timely contribution. One thing that has struck me—I know it has struck people in our Whips Office, too—is that when I started uncovering this topic, I found out

about stuff that I simply did not think existed. I have been astonished by the quantity of evidence I have received from all sides. As she said, I had assumed that the issue might just be around election times, when we are perhaps a higher profile community, but it is not. Actually, it seems to be going on all the time, and a number of colleagues are suffering in silence. I hope that they do not have to suffer in silence.

I mentioned swastikas on election boards, offensive slogans and language on posters, but there have also been scratched cars, broken windows and posters of the bleeding heads of some of our political leaders on stakes at marches and demos. There has even been the occasional police officer or teacher joining the overall fray. That is not the rule, but it is occasionally the exception.

Retailers and hoteliers have felt that they cannot support a candidate publicly or make a donation to the party or candidate of their choice, because they are worried that they might be attacked on online review sites or, even worse, in person. There are elderly voters who will not put up a sign in their windows. There are volunteers who worry about handing out leaflets and having abuse hurled at them. There are colleagues whose sexuality or religion has resulted in them being spat at—not once, but regularly. We will hear more on that later in the debate. These people form the core of democracy and our election effort, yet they are being steadily put off getting involved in politics at a time when their contribution has never been more important.

Of course, the abuse is online, too, and we will probably spend quite a bit of the debate talking about that. For Government Members—I am sure it is similar for colleagues in other parties—#toryscum is a regular feature of our lives, and that is just the bit I can repeat in the Chamber. I chose my words carefully. I do not know how many colleagues have read the report from BCS—the Chartered Institute for IT—and Demos. It contained a survey showing that over a three-month period MPs received 188,000 abusive tweets. That is one in 20 tweets received by MPs.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman will be aware that legislation already exists to protect those who are abused online, but that legislation is often ignored or not enforced. Will he join me in putting pressure on the Government to launch a review to see why that is the case?

Simon Hart: The hon. Lady is psychic, among many other things. What she said was going to be my next comment. I absolutely agree with her. There is another element with the existing laws, which is how few people know that they exist. Indeed, some law enforcement agencies do not know that they exist. The questions I will be putting to the Minister in a few minutes are partly intended to get a greater understanding of what legislation is there, where the gaps are and what we can do to fill them.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): My hon. Friend might be aware of the Home Affairs Committee's report from last year that looked at the online abuse MPs have to suffer. There was an issue about the threshold we have to endure as Members of Parliament, which is different from that of members of the public. If abuse is

persistent and falls over into real-life activities, surely social media companies have to be held accountable, too.

Simon Hart: I am sure that a number of colleagues would agree with that contribution; I certainly do. I will be coming to some proposals and thoughts on social media in just a moment.

I want to take a moment to describe the example of our former colleague Byron Davies, who until recently was the MP for Gower. During the election campaign he was subjected to a sustained attack on Twitter that contained absolutely unfounded allegations about a criminal investigation for electoral fraud. That was not an embellishment or exaggeration of a story; it was simply made up. Whether Members supported him or not, he was a colleague defending a majority of 27, and he had to do that against a constant drip-feed on social media of people simply making things up as they went along. Could it have contributed to the loss of his seat? I do not know. It was certainly blatant defamation—that much we do know. The Electoral Commission could not help, social media platforms would not help, and the police investigation, like all police investigations, will take time. It is grinding slowly on, but our former colleague Mr Davies is having to do all that himself, and he is bearing the cost. When that inquiry eventually reaches its conclusion, what remedy will he really have?

I could mention my hon. Friends the Members for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray), for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans), for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), and for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy), the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) and the many others who have suffered similar or vaguely intimidatory experiences during the election campaign. Almost more worrying than that is the number of colleagues I have spoken to in the past few days who do not even want to come to this Chamber to make a contribution, lest it compound the intimidation and abuse they have been receiving in recent weeks. I hope that we are all in a sense making our contributions not to ease our bruised egos, but on behalf of colleagues who have put up with a lot of this nonsense over quite a long time, and are looking, as the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) said, for a lead from the Government.

Having said all that, I want to make the point that this debate is not about thin-skinned politicians having had a bit of a bruising time and feeling rather sorry for ourselves. Nor is it, as the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) mentioned, about left versus right or right versus left, or whatever it might be—the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) made an interesting contribution on that particular score in her speech to the Fabian Society at the weekend. It is actually about families, staff, helpers and volunteers. For those of us who have teenage children who might follow us on Twitter and Facebook, it is about being able to say to them, “Don't worry about the death threat; don't worry about the abuse and the false accusations.” It is also for them that we speak.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I have had death threats for a number of years—I now have panic buttons and a restraining order against somebody. What is different about what happened at this election—in

[Andrew Percy]

which I was subjected to anti-Semitic abuse, my staff were spat at and my boards and property were attacked—is that the abuse has been politically motivated. The elephant in the room is that it has been motivated by the language of some of our political leaders, when they accuse people of one political side of murder, and when they dehumanise them in the way that is happening at the moment. There is something more sinister to this. Yes, it affects left and right, but we have to deal with the issue of what is happening on our side of politics.

Simon Hart: One of my most important recommendations is about the role of political leadership and what political leaders need to do, rather than what they need to say.

I wanted to mention the example of our former colleague Charlotte Leslie in Bristol, whose parents became victims of abuse. Their entire oil heating supply was drained into their garden by somebody who had an objection to Charlotte's position on fracking—a slightly ironic way of dealing with an environmental consideration, but none the less one that caused enormous distress, as did the scratching of "Tory scum" into her elderly parents' car. That is not something that anybody in this House should condone. As my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) has just pointed out, when it comes to leadership, it is exactly such an example that should trigger a robust response from everybody who has the benefit of a high profile in politics.

It is about religion, sexuality, social background—it is about people who might have been to public school and sound a bit posh. It is about anybody who might have a political leaning one way or the other, and who might be thinking of becoming a local councillor, or of a career at some future stage in some branch of politics, not even necessarily as an MP, an Assembly Member or a Member of the Scottish Parliament—whatever it might be. We have to ask ourselves: why would they want to take that step when they see what Members of this House have to put up with and, worse still, what Members' families, friends, relations, campaigners and donors also have to subject themselves to?

To the social media platforms, to the left, to the right, and to groups such as Momentum, which has been mentioned, rather than taking the lazy way out and saying that they are responsible for this, I say, "Help us. If you are on the left, help us. If you are on the right, help us. If you are a social media platform, help us. Help us identify what has triggered the increase in abuse, the smear campaigns, the intimidation, the harassment, the thuggish behaviour on and offline, and the general criticism of people simply because of an inability to match or contest their arguments."

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is quite right: this behaviour is reprehensible. He is right to identify social media. Does he also think that the traditional print media, particularly newspapers such as *The Sun*, has had a role in creating a climate in which it is okay to abuse politicians? Perhaps we need to look at the traditional print media as well.

Simon Hart: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. Of course, print media is governed by a rather different and more visible level of regulation. There is a

line between robust challenge, the cut and thrust of politics and the sort of stuff that we know we are letting ourselves in for when we take on this job—some papers would argue that they are on the right side of that line—which is a mile away from the stuff we are talking about. People being made to feel a little shamefaced or guilty because they have cocked up—if I can use that expression—their particular contribution to politics is one thing. If there is an example of a newspaper inciting racial hatred, anti-Semitism and that sort of thing, the regulators ought to be looking at that, without impinging on the free press.

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend is making a strong case. I am a little concerned that this debate might blur the lines between criticism of the performance of a Member of Parliament or a stance they take and actual abuse. My concern is that the abuse particularly stops women entering politics. I will give the example of a candidate who stood in Ealing and was unfortunately not elected. Candidates have to declare their addresses when they stand for Parliament. She said that she started becoming nervous during the election campaign when opponents started standing outside her door, spitting in her face and following her. That is the threatening behaviour that she wants to highlight. This is not about criticism in the press.

Simon Hart: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that contribution. Legislation of course already exists to deal with such incidents but, as we touched on before, it is not always easily accessible. It is not always entirely advantageous to be distracted by that during an election campaign.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman and I have been sparring partners on many occasions, but on this one I congratulate him on raising this issue. I agree that all it takes for evil to prosper is for good people to do nothing. On the other hand, it is very easy for us in this place to make the case and put the arguments down—we are protected by privilege and have the means of putting our views on the record—but there are councillors and ordinary people out there volunteering for political parties and charities up and down the country who are not protected in anything like the same way as we are in Parliament.

Simon Hart: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that contribution, which touches on the reason we are here: the degree of collateral impact from which we may fairly visibly suffer, and the knock-on effect on people who want to do good things for their community, charity or cause, but who are beginning to ask themselves whether it is worth the effort. What plans do the Government have to assess the extent of the issue, because I do not think that any of us here know what it is?

It almost seems that the age of reasoned argument in elections is under threat. All of us, in our own particular way, have experienced situations in which we mention immigration and are instantly labelled a racist, or we mention welfare and are instantly labelled as having some extraordinary dislike of the disabled, or we want to talk about complicated and sensitive issues around the economy, which is interpreted as simply wanting to starve the poor. Absurd, extreme, ridiculous, lazy and

trite comments are assigned to Members who simply want to tackle a complicated social problem in the way we were sent here to do. The fact that there is no room for reasoned argument any more is a cause of this debate. It seems that it is not really about winning votes or arguments anymore.

The manner in which some of those campaigns are conducted—I am obviously trying to steer a careful, non-partisan line here—is about driving people out of politics altogether. It is not about votes and arguments; it is about the single-minded determination to do away with anybody who happens to hold a contrary view. That is a big difference between 2015 and 2017, and it is an unattractive development that will simply reduce the gene pool from which we recruit our politicians and volunteers. I cannot believe that any member of the public, however vociferous they might be online, actually thinks that reducing the number of people from which we choose our representatives is a good thing.

What is all this doing to society? How is it impacting on candidate recruitment? What is it doing to the retention of good people in the House? Have we reviewed the recommendations that the Law Commission made 18 months ago? I am hopeful that the Minister has views on that. Are we doing enough to bring the existing provisions to the knowledge of the enforcement agencies and, indeed, to candidates? I hope that when the Minister gets to his feet in a few minutes he will be able to give us some indication of the Government's view on an independent assessment of the extent of the problem—what is going on out there, what is the cause and what is the remedy.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): Four years ago the all-party parliamentary group against anti-Semitism produced a detailed set of recommendations on an all-party basis about conduct in elections and asked every political leader to endorse it. To date, none has. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that if the political leaders themselves drew up a code of conduct and a way of addressing behaviour during elections, that would go a considerable way towards dealing with the most difficult period? If there is a transgression by a candidate or their supporters, they face the issue of votes at that time, and therefore there is a tendency to try to dampen it down or ignore it during elections. That is precisely why we produced that report.

Simon Hart: I could not have put it better myself. In fact, I would expand it to outside election times, too. As we have heard today, this problem is not limited to that four or five-week period every three or four years.

My second question to the Minister is about reviewing existing laws and seeing which work and which should work but are not being enforced. Where there are gaps, we should recommend how to fill them. Then, as the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) said, we should ensure that there is cross-party support for legislation to achieve that aim.

We need to look at the responsibilities of the social media platforms, which, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and I discovered not long ago, all too often wring their hands and say, "It's all too difficult." Actually, it is not all too difficult. It is all too important that they now adopt the same responsible attitude to what they publish in their name—

although they deny they are publishers—which is, on occasion, the sort of material that is completely unacceptable. Earlier I raised the example of Byron Davies and the Gower, who asked a social media platform—I think it was Twitter—to remove an outright lie that was possibly going to affect the outcome of the election. It refused and said that what was going on was within the guidelines. It cannot be with the guidelines simply to sit back and allow people to publish utter nonsense with the aim of artificially disrupting the outcome of an election. I suspect that everybody in this Chamber is of that view.

When the then Minister responded to a debate on online bullying last year, he said:

"There needs to be partnership, and I do not rule out regulation...We need to work with the companies, and we need clear guidelines on, and definitions of, online abuse. Even more importantly, we need very quick reactions, so that all of us as constituency MPs do not have to sit in surgeries with people who are clearly utterly distressed because of online material".—[*Official Report*, 7 July 2016; Vol. 612, c. 1107.]

That applies just as much to electoral behaviour as to behaviour outside that time.

Finally—thank you for your patience, Mr Hanson—we need a political lead, as other colleagues have said. That means that the leaders of all parties and groups need to stand up and not just send out warmly worded tweets about bad behaviour or transmit mealy-mouthed messages of condemnation, but take a "not in my name" approach. All of the groups we have talked about overtly and by insinuation need to say, "Not in my name. Nobody who is a member of this party or this group should engage in online or offline abuse, either during an election or at any other time." The leadership of those organisations have the opportunity today to stand up and say that they will deal with this robustly. If they do not, they are complicit in the problem. That is why there have been rumours and this whole thing has gathered momentum—with a small "m"—over the past few months and years.

Thirteen months ago our colleague Jo Cox paid the ultimate price for this kind of stuff. It shook the nation and sent a message that I hoped people would listen to, whether they are in a position of political leadership or just able to vote at elections. One year on, the problem seems every bit as bad as it was back then. Unless we have joined-up, co-operative leadership from the Government—I hope we will hear about that now—and from all the Opposition parties and the groups that support them, all of the extraordinary work that has been done in Jo Cox's memory will have been wasted.

Several hon. Members rose—

David Hanson (in the Chair): Order. I intend to call the Front-Bench spokesperson for the Scottish National party at 5.10 pm, so there is very limited time for right hon. and hon. Members' contributions. I hope that Members bear in mind that I will not be able to get everybody in.

4.55 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): This is a very important debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) on securing it. We have to be clear that we are talking not about robust debate,

[*Ms Diane Abbott*]

however robust it is, but about mindless abuse. In my case, the mindless abuse has been characteristically racist and sexist. I have had death threats, and people tweeting that I should be hanged

“if they could find a tree big enough to take the fat bitch’s weight”.

There was an English Defence League-affiliated Twitter account—#burnDianeAbbot. I have had rape threats, and been described as a

“Pathetic useless fat black piece of shit”,

an “ugly, fat black bitch”, and a “nigger”—over and over again. One of my members of staff said that the most surprising thing about coming to work for me is how often she has to read the word “nigger”. It comes in through emails, Twitter and Facebook.

Where I disagree with the hon. Gentleman is that he seems to suggest that this is all a relatively recent occurrence in this election. That is not my experience. It is certainly true that the online abuse that I and others experience has got worse in recent years, and that it gets worse at election time, but I do not put it down to a particular election. I think the rise in the use of online media has turbocharged abuse. Thirty years ago, when I first became an MP, if someone wanted to attack an MP, they had to write a letter—usually in green ink—put it in an envelope, put a stamp on it and walk to the post box. Now, they press a button and we read vile abuse that, 30 years ago, people would have been frightened even to write down.

I accept that male politicians get abuse, too, but I hope the one thing we can agree on in this Chamber is that it is much worse for women. As well as the rise of online media, it is helped by anonymity. People would not come up to me and attack me for being a nigger in public, but they do it online. It is not once a week or during an election; it is every day. My staff switch on the computer and go on to Facebook and Twitter, and they see this stuff.

Andrew Percy: I agree with everything the right hon. Lady is saying, but I do not think my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) was saying that this is a new thing. We have all had it for years on social media, and the right hon. Lady has had it in a particularly terrible way. What is different now is that some of this is being driven by political leaders’ language. When someone addresses a rally where there are posters of the severed head of the Prime Minister and they do not do anything about it, and when leaders say “ditch the bitch” in relation to the Prime Minister, that is the problem we have at the moment: it is the dehumanisation of each other in politics.

Ms Abbott: We will have to agree to disagree.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Ms Abbott: I am afraid I cannot give way, because I am mindful of the time.

The type of racist and sexist abuse I get is not tied to any events in this particular election campaign. This is not about just politicians or even women politicians. Any woman who goes into the public space can expect

that type of abuse. People will remember how Mary Beard, the historian, received horrible abuse online because she was on “Question Time”.

David Hanson (in the Chair): Order. The right hon. Lady is making a powerful speech, but I am conscious that we have only 11 minutes to get other Members in, so I hope she will draw her remarks to a conclusion.

Ms Abbott: In closing, I want to make a couple of points, the first of which is that there is a relationship between online abuse and mainstream media commentary; in my office, we always see, at the very least, a spike in abuse after there has been a lot of negative stuff in the media. Online abuse and abuse generally are not the preserve of any one party or any one party faction, and to pretend that is to devalue a very important argument. I am glad we have had the debate—it gives me no pleasure to talk about my experience not only in the last election, but for years—but let us get this debate straight: it is not about a particular party or a particular faction, but about the degradation of public discourse online.

5 pm

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) on securing this debate.

I have stood in six general elections and I can say that, frankly, this was by a long chalk the most unpleasant one in which I have ever participated. I have no doubt at all that much of the behaviour that my hon. Friend outlined was co-ordinated, because the patterns of behaviour that I witnessed in my constituency have been repeated across the country and have been reported to me by a number of colleagues.

One issue that I want to raise, to echo what the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) said, is that of social media. Frankly, if ever there were a misnomer, “social media” is it; it is deeply antisocial media. Twitter, in particular, has a lot to answer for. The anonymity in which a lot of participants on Twitter clothe themselves encourages the sort of behaviour that we have heard about today. Logging on to Twitter nowadays is much like wading through sewage; it is a deeply unpleasant experience. The sort of commentary, abuse and language that one sees on it, which is regularly used against everyone but in particular candidates for election, is the sort of thing that no one would dream of saying to another person face to face.

That is the nub of the issue. We now have this new phenomenon of social media and it has not been adequately addressed. It is certainly not being addressed by the social media companies. My hon. Friend is right: someone who makes a complaint to Twitter gets completely ignored. Twitter, in fact, has a huge amount to answer for, so in the brief time available to me I ask the Minister whether he will please give consideration to the impact that social media have had on the behaviour of many people during the election campaign. What proposals do the Government have to address that, because at the moment anarchic media are causing misery to untold numbers of people, not least colleagues here in this House?

5.2 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I thank the hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) for securing this extremely important debate.

I am very sorry that we are having to have the debate, but it is necessary, and I have been appalled at the severity and scale of the abuse experienced by hon. Members and that has been described today. In our democracy, to be able to stand for Parliament free from abuse, threats, degradation and defamatory remarks is essential. I have always thought that we should encourage non-career politicians into politics—career politicians are also good, but we need the diversity—but it is difficult to encourage them into a world of negativity, put-downs, vilification and abuse, so Parliament will lose good people. All parties have such issues, and I reiterate that it is incumbent on party leaders to act where abuse occurs. We cannot ignore it, because ignoring abuse ultimately condones it.

In my own experience, I have had very personal attacks, including anti-Semitic comments because I have friends and family who are Jewish. I have also met constituents who have been told that I was not a real doctor, but masquerading as a doctor; that I did not live with my husband; and all sorts of false allegations, such as ones about business contracts that I was supposed to have with the NHS, but which I have never had. That was all aimed at undermining my personal and professional credibility.

I will end now to give others the opportunity to contribute. Where abuse occurs, it is incumbent on candidates, parties and party leaders to act; such abuse does not benefit politics, society or diversity. I look forward to the Minister's response, and I hope that we have cross-party consensus on the issue.

5.4 pm

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I will try to be brief, and I have already made a couple of interventions.

I am a Tory in Humberside, which is not an easy place to be a Tory. I was a councillor for 10 years—one of two Tories on Hull City Council—and have been through four council elections and four general elections. I am not afraid of abuse and insults, something I am pretty used to, but what is happening now is on a different scale.

I have been called “Tory scum” for years and had insults in the streets, and I am pretty used to that. It is part of the process, and although we might say that it should not happen, it does. What happened at this election, however, was different. I never thought that in my own constituency someone would come up to me and shout the name of the Leader of the Opposition, then describe me as, “Israeli and Zionist scum.” I never thought that my posters would be ripped down and posted on social media under the phrase, “Fuck the Tories #CorbynIn”. I never thought that my staff would be spat at in the street by activists, by people naming the Leader of the Opposition as their motivation for calling my staff “Tory fucking scum.” That is what is happening in our democracy.

It is true that there is abuse on all sides, on the left and on the right. I condemn it absolutely. What is different about what is happening now is that there is an

assault on our democracy and on one particular political party. This dehumanisation of my side of politics is being motivated and encouraged by the language of some of the leaders of the Labour party. There are very decent Labour members—the vast mass of them—and Members of Parliament, but the abuse has been happening to some of them as well.

To have leaders addressing rallies where there were images of the severed head of the Prime Minister, but that not being called out, and to have leaders accusing people of murder or saying, “Ditch the bitch!”, but that not being called out, is an assault on our democratic values and our processes. It has to stop. It is the worst I have encountered in any election and it is not acceptable. In this particular regard, it is coming from one particular faction. We should be honest about that.

David Hanson (in the Chair): Luke Pollard and Rehman Chishti have literally three minutes between them. Luke Pollard, you have a minute and a half, maximum.

5.7 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Abuse aimed at candidates and volunteers is not endured by only one party; it is endured by all parties. There are people right across our political spectrum, from left to right and in the middle, who suffer needless abuse for trying to make the world a better place. Politics is our way of doing that. It is a difficult and contested environment, and at elections we want our debates to be robust but, speaking as a gay man and as a proud Janner from Plymouth, I want to speak up not only for Members of Parliament, but for the volunteers and for those cautious about getting involved in politics for the first time.

During the election, I spoke to a young LGBT person who said, “I get abuse online; I am scared to go online. If Members of Parliament aren't getting justice for the abuse they get, what chance do I have?” The message that this House and the Government must send to young people from the LGBT community and every community who want to make the world a better place is that abuse will be taken seriously, wherever it comes from, whoever says it and whatever form it is done in, whether that is in the mainstream print media, slipped into broadcast, on social media or as abuse on posters, or—this happened to Jemima, one of the people I represent in Plymouth—in an anonymous note put through her door simply because she had put up a Labour poster. We have to send the message that abuse, wherever it comes from, is not acceptable.

5.8 pm

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) on securing the debate.

I have colleagues in all parts of the House. In my seven years here, I have built some wonderful friendships with them and gone on some wonderful trips abroad on delegations and on work we have carried out together. However, I will never accept something that is unacceptable to happen to any Member of Parliament from any political party. Let me give two examples.

[*Rehman Chishti*]

When I stood up to make my acceptance speech and to thank all the electorate after a very difficult election—the culture in the election campaign was one of the most difficult that I have experienced—I had an activist say in public, “Fuck off back to country X”. The matter has been referred to the Kent police. They are investigating it under public order and racism, so let them do their job. But a Labour party activist, who happens to be a former assistant to the Medway Labour group, said that in public as I made my acceptance speech. I ask each and every Member here: if you experienced that, how would you feel?

Two days before the election, a video went online of a conversation between a third party and a Labour councillor, who happens to be the former chairman of the Gillingham and Rainham association. Malicious, grossly offensive remarks and a threat to me were made—

David Hanson (in the Chair): Order. I apologise to the hon. Gentleman, but I have to call the Front Benchers, so will he resume his seat? I call Tommy Sheppard.

5.10 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I appreciate that we are short of time and I know that we will discuss this issue again in the main Chamber next week, so I will try to keep my remarks brief. I congratulate the hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) on securing this important debate, and I associate my party with the sentiments that he expressed.

I and many of my colleagues have been subjected to exactly the type of activity that the hon. Gentleman described. Indeed, someone was recently convicted for making a threat against me. Like others, I am extremely concerned that it seems that the majority of the perpetrators of such abuse are male and the majority of the targets are female Members—or at least the greatest intensity of threats is directed towards them. That should be a cause for extreme concern for everyone.

We should be absolutely clear that we are not talking about a bit of political banter. We are not talking about the rough and tumble of political debate, or even about satirising or caricaturing another person’s point of view; we are talking about vile abuse—dehumanising people and sometimes inciting violence against them. That sort of activity should not be deemed acceptable in any democratic society.

We are also, I hope, not suggesting that there is anything special that needs to be protected about Members of Parliament; we are arguing about abuse that should be tackled no matter who in society suffers from it. In that sense, I agree with the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott). This issue cannot be taken in isolation from general debates in society, or from the general portrayals in the media of certain people in society. I will not say exactly what the link is, but to say that there is not an association or a link would be extremely problematic.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tommy Sheppard: We are very short of time, but I will if the hon. Gentleman is quick.

Martin Whitfield: Does the hon. Gentleman agree with a senior Scottish National party politician that now is the time for people to sign up to a code of conduct, and now is the time to ban anonymous social media accounts?

Tommy Sheppard: Yes. I think the hon. Gentleman is talking about my colleague Alyn Smith MEP—a member of the SNP national executive—who called for that. I was going to deal with that point at the end of my remarks.

We need to consider the wider political factors at play and whether there is anything we can do to try to change the political discourse in our country through the way we operate politics. As elected Members of Parliament, we have a special responsibility to take a lead on that. There are undoubtedly a lot of people with a legitimate sense of grievance about the lot that they have received in society, for one reason or another. They feel alienated from the political process and unable to express their point of view.

Of course, that has always been the case; the difference is that, whereas those people had to go to extreme lengths to vent their anger before, it is now remarkably easy. All they need to do is switch on their phone and they can instantly and anonymously direct the most vile abuse to whomever they want. But that does not mean that we should not look at the underlying reasons for that alienation and disaffection and see whether there is stuff that we can do, through our education system or by improving political discourse generally, to try to minimise that. I do not say that to excuse people’s behaviour in any way; I am simply trying to find some explanation for it, so that we might begin the long-term process of trying to prevent it.

I caution colleagues very much against trying to make this a party political matter. Every Member of this House—albeit some much more than others—has been subjected to some sort of abuse. It crosses all political parties, and it is not a matter that one political party experiences more than any other. I understand that sometimes, people who offer such abuse identify themselves as a political opponent, or a supporter of a political opponent, of the person to whom the abuse is directed, but that does not mean that the abuse is sanctioned by a political party or that such people speak for a political party. Therefore, if we are to tackle this issue properly, we must do so on a cross-party basis, and we certainly could agree a voluntary code of conduct among the political parties that states what is acceptable and what is not.

5.15 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I thank the hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) for bringing this important debate to the House. It is clearly one in which every Member has some interest, because I doubt that any Member or anyone who stood for election to the House has not faced some level of abuse. I also thank the other Members who took part in the debate. I am keen to hear more detail about the examples they raised of abuse that was done in the name of my party, and I am happy to take up those cases.

I am aware that many Members did not take part in the debate because they do not want to give oxygen or attention to the people who abuse them. For the same reason, I do not want to go into the details of the abuse that I have received while I have been in the public eye over the past couple of years, but I stress that such abuse has no place in our democracy. If we are truly to be a country with free and fair elections, everyone must feel able to stand as a candidate, or to support a candidate or a political party, without fear.

A lot has been said about us as politicians, but I stress that this issue is also about people who purport to support a political party. My hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) told me that supporters of his who put “Vote Labour” posters in their windows were subjected to hate mail, which, owing to its content, is currently being investigated seriously by the police. That is alarming.

This is of course not just an issue for one political party; it happens across the political spectrum. I think that this issue was first brought before the House at the first Prime Minister’s Question Time of this Session, when the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) spoke about the abuse that she had received during the election. That, too, is abhorrent. This is an issue for all political parties.

Abuse is also an issue both during and outside election campaigns. While we serve as Members in this House, we are afforded some level of security. Since the murder of Jo Cox, the importance of that security has been brought very much to our attention. That incident reminds us how serious this issue can be. Online abuse does not happen in a vacuum; when someone can go online and tweet abuse or put up a Facebook message saying that they want to “put a bullet between his ears”—that is a comment that I reported to Facebook, which said it did not breach its terms and conditions—and get away with it, it gives them the confidence to do so offline, on the streets.

I am obviously very hurt when I am the victim of abuse, but I am hurt far more when members of my staff are abused in the street. Occasionally, they are even mistaken for me, which makes me feel terribly guilty. This issue is about the protection not just of politicians but of their families and colleagues.

Mrs Miller: I am sorry for interrupting the hon. Lady, but does she not think that the leadership of our parties must set the right tone? If they do not, people will follow that example. Surely she agrees.

Cat Smith: The right hon. Lady pre-empts the movement of my speech towards exactly that point. It is important that political parties and political leaders have a way in which they can address this issue. The Labour party has a social media policy and a code of conduct, which we expect our members to abide by. Where we find examples of members not doing so, we do not hesitate to remove them as members. When they join the party, our members pledge that they will not use any form of abuse; if they do, they risk losing their membership. In fact, in 2016, the Leader of the Opposition, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), tweeted to say that such abuse was not acceptable, and he reiterated that in the “Question Time” debates during the general election campaign.

Simon Hart: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Cat Smith: I cannot—I am really short of time.

I want to stress the responsibility for social media as well. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) said on “Daily Politics” yesterday, it is not right that Facebook can remove a picture of a woman breastfeeding within minutes, but it takes it two weeks to remove a fake social media profile.

I see you urging me to draw my remarks to a close, Mr Hanson.

Simon Hart *rose*—

Cat Smith: I therefore urge the Minister to work on a cross-party basis. We would like to see a code of conduct by way of which we can work together to ensure that this abuse is not accepted.

David Hanson (in the Chair): The hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) will get a chance to wind up at the end for one minute.

Simon Hart: I’m already wound up! [*Laughter.*]

David Hanson (in the Chair): I call Chris Skidmore.

5.20 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) on securing this important debate. I welcome the opportunity to address some of the issues that he and other hon. Members from both sides of the House have raised. My hon. Friend put his points across in powerful terms, as have others today, and this is clearly an extremely serious matter that Members feel strongly about. As he said in his opening remarks, this is not just about ourselves as Members as Parliament; it is about all those close to us—our family, our friends and our supporters.

The Prime Minister has been very clear that there is no place in our democracy for the harassment of parliamentary candidates and that abuse will not be tolerated. That is why today she has asked the non-partisan Committee on Standards in Public Life to carry out a review of the intimidation experienced by parliamentary candidates, including those who stood to become Members of Parliament at the 2017 general election. The review will gather evidence of harassment and consider what action needs to be taken to ensure the integrity of the future of our democratic process.

This is clearly an issue that has the potential to impact on people’s wish to stand for office and therefore has a negative impact on standards in public life more broadly. It is also about protecting the integrity of public service itself and that of the offices that we hold. The independent, non-partisan Committee on Standards in Public Life is well respected and, I believe, well placed to lead that work. It has conducted many detailed reviews on conduct and ethics and operates independently from Government, regulators and politicians.

Rehman Chishti: The Minister refers to responsibility in relation to conduct. Does he therefore agree with my earlier point that if a third party makes to someone in office a threat of violence directed towards another

[*Rehman Chishti*]

person running for office—myself in this case—and makes points that are grossly offensive, anti-Semitic and homophobic, the individual to whom that is reported has a responsibility to notify the authorities? To do nothing, as the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) said, is completely unacceptable.

Chris Skidmore: I entirely agree that we, like all legislators, cannot be silent on this issue. I hope that, as the committee begins to set up its review, all Members will wish to partake some of the evidence they have given today and do so confidentially, without risk of somehow glorifying the perpetrators. It will be for the committee to determine the exact parameters of the review, but we anticipate that it will want to examine the nature of the problem and the protections and measures currently in place, and whether those need to change.

The committee may also consider the broader implication of other office holders—the role of councillors was mentioned. Foremost, the review will look at intimidation experienced by anyone who has stood as a parliamentary candidate. I am sure the committee will want to progress that work as quickly as possible. It will produce a report for the Prime Minister with specific recommendations for actions, and we look forward to its findings.

On the issue of abuse and the current parameters of legislation, as was pointed out legislation is in place to deal with internet trolls, cyber-stalking and harassment and with perpetrators of grossly offensive, obscene or menacing behaviour. As a Government, we are making changes where necessary to ensure that the legislation we have is as effective as possible. For example, in the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015 we made changes to relevant offences to help ensure that people who commit them are prosecuted and properly punished.

The 2015 Act amended section 1 of the Malicious Communications Act 1988, which makes it an offence to send certain articles with intent to cause distress or anxiety. The amendment allows prosecutions to be dealt with in either the magistrates court or the Crown court, with the maximum penalty in the magistrates court for the offence being 12 months' imprisonment and two years in the Crown court. The amendment also removed the previous requirement that prosecution be brought within six months, extending the time within which prosecutions for offences under section 127 of the Communications Act 2003 can be made to up to three years after the offence. As has been said, the key point is that legislation is in place; it is a question of communicating the fact that our legislation now needs to be used by the police when offences are committed and claims and accusations about those offences are brought to them.

The law is clear that what is illegal offline is also illegal online. Robust legislation is in place to deal with internet trolls, cyber-stalking and harassment and the perpetrators of grossly offensive, obscene or menacing behaviour. Section 127 of the 2003 Act created an offence of sending or causing to be sent by means of a public electronic communications network

“a message or other matter that is grossly offensive or of an indecent, obscene or menacing character”.

The Crown Prosecution Service also recently revised its guidelines on social media to incorporate new and

emerging crimes being committed online and to provide clear advice, to help the prosecution of cyber-enabled crime.

The recently enacted Digital Economy Act 2017 will also help to ensure that online abuse is more effectively tackled by requiring a code of practice to be established. The code will set out guidance about what social media providers should do in relation to conduct on their platforms that involves bullying or insulting an individual or other behaviour likely to intimidate or humiliate them. The Government are considering how to take forward the social media code of practice as part of the newly established digital charter, and we will provide more details shortly about when the consultation with social media will take place.

Hate crime of any kind, directed against any community or any person, has absolutely no place in our society; I am sure we all agree on that. As a Government, we are utterly committed to tackling hate crime. The Prime Minister has made it very clear that hate crime of any kind is completely unacceptable. It divides communities, destroys lives and makes us weaker. Britain is thriving precisely because we welcome people from all backgrounds, faiths and ethnicities, and that is something we must strive to protect.

The fact that one of the first actions the Home Secretary took in her new role last summer was to launch the hate crime action plan shows how important tackling hate crime is for the Government. The Home Secretary has also asked Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary to carry out an inspection of all five monitored strands of hate crime, to build up a national picture of how effectively and efficiently police forces are dealing with it. The inspection will take place during 2017-18, and the Government will be keen to see the findings and then consider how they should be taken forward.

The Government are determined that no candidate—regardless of their party, background, race, ethnicity or sexuality—should be forced to tolerate abuse, online or offline, whether it is physical abuse or the threat of violence or intimidation. It is utterly unacceptable in our modern democracy, which we believe is an inclusive and tolerant one, for the incidents of abuse discussed today to be allowed to go on unchallenged. I met the Law Commission this week and the Electoral Commission last week to raise the issue of candidate abuse. I look forward to the Committee on Standards in Public Life's review of intimidation experienced by parliamentary candidates and the eventual conclusions of its report.

We, as Members of Parliament and as a Government, cannot be silent on this matter. The law exists to protect candidates, and I urge anyone who has evidence of abuse to present it to the committee as part of its review, to the Electoral Commission as part of its review of the general election and, above all, to their local police force, which must take this issue very seriously.

I thank Members on both sides for contributing to this important debate, which I hope will mark a turning point, not only assisting increased detection of intolerance and abuse in all forms, but marking a cultural shift, whereby we, across all parties, work together to stamp out these vile forms of abuse and tackle the fundamental point that this is not acceptable or permissible. We owe it to our democracy to make clear that intimidation and abuse have no part in our society, not only for candidates

who stood at the recent general election but for future generations of men and women who are considering entering public life and standing for election. No one must be deterred from playing their part in our democracy, which is why we must seek to end the corrosive effect that abuse and intimidation has of actively discouraging future generations from standing as our representatives.

5.29 pm

Simon Hart: Thank you very much, Mr Hanson, for your role this afternoon. I also thank colleagues from both sides of the House for such useful contributions and the Government for taking such immediate action on this. We even got a letter from the Prime Minister before the Minister had got to his feet, so things are working well.

I apologise for going on too long at the beginning, particularly to my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti), who was making a really moving speech. I hope he will have an opportunity to complete those comments, perhaps in the other Chamber. If I had had a chance to intervene on the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), I would have asked how many people the Labour party has already sanctioned for offences in this area. Perhaps she could write to me with that information.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered abuse and intimidation of candidates and the public in UK elections.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 12 July 2017

TREASURY

NHS Technology

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Lord O'Shaughnessy) has made the following written statement in the House of Lords:

I am today publishing the Government response to the public consultation on the National Data Guardian for Health and Care's (NDG) and Care Quality Commission's (CQC) data security reviews. A copy of the response is available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/new-data-security-standards-for-health-and-social-care>

Boosting cyber resilience, improving the response to data and cyber incidents and providing clarity on the handling of personal data remain an urgent priority for the health and care sector.

Following consultation which closed on 7 July 2016, the Government accept the recommendations from the two independent data security reviews published in 2016.

Through the consultation, we heard broad support for Dame Fiona Caldicott's recommended data security standards and opt-out model, alongside a clear message that we need to carefully think through and approach all elements of implementation. Other key themes in the responses to the consultation related to the need to build public trust through providing clarity and communicating clearly with the public and professionals.

The global WannaCry ransomware attack in May 2017, which affected many other countries' services as well as our own health and care system, has reaffirmed the potential for data and cyber incidents to impact directly on patient care, as well as the need for our health and care system to act decisively to minimise the impact on essential frontline services.

The Government response includes wide-ranging plans to strengthen organisations across the NHS and social care against the threat of global cyber-attacks.

The immediate and longer-term actions are centred on ensuring local organisations are implementing the 10 data security standards proposed in the NDG review, supported by the national cyber support services provided by NHS Digital, backed up by clear contractual obligations, and by assurance and regulatory action.

Investment in data and cyber security will be boosted above £50 million and will include a new £21 million capital fund which will increase the cyber resilience of major trauma sites.

NHS Digital is already supporting local organisations by broadcasting alerts about cyber threats, providing a hotline for dealing with incidents, sharing best practice across the health and care system and carrying out on-site assessments to mitigate against cyber-attacks.

The NHS contract now requires NHS organisations to implement and adopt data security standards as recommended by the independent NDG for Health and Care.

Chief executives will also be held to account for standards that are being implemented and maintained and this will be assessed during inspections by the Care Quality Commission from September this year.

The Government's response also includes steps to give patients and the public more access to, and control over, their personal data while building confidence in the importance of secure data to provide better individual care and treatment, as well as supporting research and planning across the health system.

As the chief medical officer's recent report on genomics showed, better use of data and technology has the power to improve health outcomes, deliver better patient experience, transform the quality of care patients receive and support improvements across the health and social care system—now and in the future. Staff and patients will benefit from reduced bureaucracy, freeing up more time for patient care, and leading to more accurate diagnoses and more personalised treatment.

I want to thank Dame Fiona Caldicott, her team and the Care Quality Commission for their important and considered reviews and recommendations, which can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-data-security-consent-and-opt-outs>

<http://www.cqc.org.uk/publications/themed-work/safe-data-safe-care>

Attachments can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-07-12/HCWS40/>

[HCWS40]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Extremism

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): I am today announcing the main findings of the Home Office's internal review into the nature, scale and origin of the funding of Islamist extremist activity in the UK, including any overseas sources. The review was commissioned by the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, on 30 November 2015. It gives us the best picture we have ever had of how extremists operating in the UK sustain their activities. The review did not include either the funding of terrorism, which is a better understood area, or the funding of extremism overseas from UK sources.

Having taken advice, I have decided against publishing the classified report produced during the review in full. This is because of the volume of personal information it contains and for national security reasons. We will be inviting Privy Counsellors from the Opposition parties to the Home Office to have access to classified report on Privy Council terms.

The main finding of the review is as follows:

The most common source of support for Islamist extremist organisations in the UK is from small, anonymous public donations, with the majority of these donations most likely coming from UK-based individuals. In some cases these organisations receive hundreds of thousands of pounds a year. This is the main source of their income. Those giving may not know or support the organisations' full agenda.

The review also made the following findings:

Some Islamic organisations of extremist concern portray themselves as charities to increase their credibility and to take advantage of Islam's emphasis on charity. Some are purposefully vague about their activities and their charitable status.

Regulation can be effective in improving transparency. There is some evidence of organisations of extremist concern seeking to avoid regulatory oversight.

For a small number of organisations with which there are extremism concerns, overseas funding is a significant source of income. However, for the vast majority of extremist groups in the UK, overseas funding is not a significant source.

Overseas support has allowed individuals to study at institutions that teach deeply conservative forms of Islam and provide highly socially conservative literature and preachers to the UK's Islamic institutions. Some of these individuals have since become of extremist concern.

Fundamentally, no single measure will tackle all the issues of concern raised in the review. A comprehensive approach focused particularly on domestic sources of support for all forms of extremism is needed. The Government have looked carefully at the review's findings and will build on existing work by:

Continuing to deliver public awareness campaigns to encourage people to understand the full aims of the organisations that they give to, reducing the amount of funding organisations of extremist concern are able to raise from the public in the UK.

Raising awareness across the financial services sector and grant making trusts and foundations of extremism

concerns. These organisations have an interest in ensuring they are not inadvertently supporting extremist individuals or organisations.

Reducing the ability of organisations of extremist concern to avoid official scrutiny by increasing the proportion of organisations subject to regulatory oversight. We are strengthening our work with the Charity Commission, which includes addressing the abuse of charities for terrorist or extremist purposes as one of its strategic priorities.

The Charity Commission will be introducing a requirement on charities to declare overseas funding sources. The Commission has been discussing this issue with charities over recent months.

Directly raising issues of concern, supported by evidence, with specific countries as part of our wider international engagement on countering extremism and violent extremism.

[HCWS39]

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