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19 July 2017**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 19 July 2017

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that the Queen has signified her Royal Assent to the following Act:

Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) Act 2017.

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

AVON FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY

Resolved,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, That she will be graciously pleased to give directions that there be laid before this House a Return of a Paper, entitled Statutory Inspection of Avon Fire and Rescue Authority, dated 19 July 2017.—(*Craig Whittaker.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Barnett Formula: Public Sector Pay Cap

1. **Angus Brendan MacNeil** (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the effect of the removal of the public sector pay cap in Scotland on the Barnett formula if that cap is retained in England.

[900486]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): Mr Speaker, I am sure you will join me in congratulating Jamie Murray in the mixed doubles and Gordon Reid in the wheelchair doubles for ensuring that we again had Scottish champions at Wimbledon, where your enthusiasm for tennis was in evidence once again.

The Barnett formula applies to changes in UK Government funding and will not be impacted by Scottish Government decisions on public sector pay.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The Secretary of State's constituents, and mine, have benefited from the Scottish National party Government's ending of the public sector pay cap for their public sector workers in Scotland. The SNP tried to help public sector workers in England and throughout the UK by voting to end the UK public sector pay cap too. However, Scottish Tory MPs voted against helping workers in England. With the SNP helping workers in his constituency and mine, are he

and his colleagues not ashamed of voting against removing the public sector pay cap in England to help workers there? What does he have against English workers?

David Mundell: From that question, Mr Speaker, you would not think that since 2007 the SNP Government in Scotland have been responsible for public sector pay and that a public sector pay cap has applied for most of that time. As far as I am aware, the SNP Government have not lifted the public sector pay freeze in Scotland; they have announced a consultation.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): May I put on record the fact that the Scottish women's football team will play an important European championship match tonight? I wish them all the best in their endeavours.

I do not think the Secretary of State fully appreciates the sense of grievance about the pay cap among hard-working public sector workers in Scotland. The Scottish Government have declared their intention to review and end the pay cap; will he argue in the United Kingdom Government for the same policy?

David Mundell: May I first welcome the hon. Gentleman to his new place? When the new SNP leader at Westminster said that he was reluctant, I did not realise that he was going to be reluctant to do Scottish questions, or that he was going to downgrade them.

I am clear that hard decisions have to be taken on public sector pay. If the Scottish Government, in their responsibilities, are saying that they are going to increase public sector pay, they have to identify where the funds are coming from.

Tommy Sheppard: I thank the Secretary of State for his kind words, but he and I will get on a lot better in this process if he does me the courtesy of answering the question. I asked him to state his intention to argue within Cabinet and the British Government to end the pay cap in Scotland so that workers in the public sector there will get the same rate of pay for the job, whether they work for the Scottish Government or for his Government.

David Mundell: I think I did answer the hon. Gentleman's question. The Government have struck the right balance on pay and ensuring continued employment. We see that in Scotland, where we have the lowest unemployment figures on record. It is better that more people are in work in the public sector than that we had changed the public sector pay cap in previous years.

Lesley Laird (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Lab): I, too, send my best wishes to the Scottish women's football team for tonight. I also congratulate our tennis players on a wonderful tournament.

It is a pity that the SNP has bounced Labour's proposal on lifting the public sector pay cap in November. Will the Secretary of State tell me what assessment has been made of the effect of the Government's pay cap on the living standards of public sector employees in Scotland? Does he share the view of the Chancellor, who was recently reported to have said that public sector workers are overpaid?

David Mundell: I welcome the hon. Lady to her place and congratulate her on her success in the election. I also send my best wishes to her predecessor, Dave Anderson, who was one of the Members who voluntarily left this Parliament at the last election. Of course, I pass on my best wishes to the Scottish women's football team as I should have done in answer to the question of the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard). I agree with the Chancellor that we have struck the right balance in public sector pay on the basis that we have ensured that 200,000 public sector jobs were able to be maintained during this period of difficult fiscal conditions.

Lesley Laird: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer, but it is very clear that the Government are in complete chaos on this issue, which is very much like the SNP Government, who claim that they will abandon the public sector pay cap—[*Interruption.*]—despite voting it down in a proposal in May. Is it not the case that public sector workers in Scotland are being let down by two weak and wobbly Governments who have the wrong priorities, and that only a Labour Government have the policies and the political will to lift the public sector pay cap, ban austerity, stand up for public sector workers and stand up for Scotland?

David Mundell: Although I might be tempted to agree with the hon. Lady's comments on the SNP Scottish Government, the position with Labour is absolutely clear in that no funds have been identified to increase public sector pay. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has made it very clear that, if we want to make a real difference on public sector pay, we have to do something that hits everybody—put a penny or two on the rates of income tax or VAT or something such as that. We cannot make a big difference just taxing the rich. The Labour party in Scotland and here in Westminster has the soundbites, but it does not have the policies to deliver what it is promising.

Jobcentre Closures

2. **Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the planned closure of job centres in Scotland on local communities. [900487]

4. **Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the planned closure of job centres in Scotland on local communities. [900489]

6. **Faisal Rashid** (Warrington South) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the planned closure of job centres in Scotland on local communities. [900491]

15. **Sandy Martin** (Ipswich) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the planned closure of job centres in Scotland on local communities. [900500]

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): We will continue to provide excellent support to those seeking work, or who cannot work, through a network of offices, which are modern, accessible and meet future requirements.

Bambos Charalambous: As yet, no equality impact assessment of the closures has been published. Will the Secretary of State tell this House whether the Government plan to publish such an assessment, and, if so, when?

Damian Hinds: In making these decisions, the Department has fulfilled its duties under the Equality Act 2010 and paid due regard to the impact of the proposals on the staff, and the communities and customers that they serve.

Alex Norris: Given that UK Government cuts to social security and new sanctions on low-paid workers are likely to increase demand for jobcentres, do Ministers agree that it is reckless and perverse of the Government to be closing them down, especially in our most deprived communities that have some of the highest rates of unemployment?

Damian Hinds: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that, of course, in looking forward in time to our future needs, we plan for the expected demand on jobcentres and allow for some contingency as well. I also reassure him that the rate of sanctions has been coming down. As we are in Scottish questions, it is particularly relevant to note that the rate of sanctions in Scotland is lower than it is in the rest of the UK.

Faisal Rashid: May I ask the Minister whether he and his colleagues will consider the term in which the excess fares allowance will be paid to Department for Work and Pensions staff across Scotland who are being forced to move office? The Department has refused to use its discretion to pay the EFA for five years, and will cover staff for only three years, which contrasts with previous decisions made by the Department.

Damian Hinds: We do think that we have a fair and reasonable approach to relocation. Of course we are asking some staff to move offices, and we try to do everything we can to facilitate that. Part of that is providing the excess fares policy that the hon. Gentleman mentions, which is greater in its extent than in many other organisations and we do think it is a reasonable approach.

Sandy Martin: The Minister says that there is a low level of sanctions in Scotland, but if a substantial number of jobcentres are closed will it not make journey times longer and routes more complicated, leading to an increase in missed appointments and in sanctions? What mitigating measures will he introduce to deal with an increase in sanctions?

Damian Hinds: The first thing to say is that missing or being late for an appointment does not necessarily result in a sanction. We expect people to make reasonable efforts to make it to appointments and, as I have said, the rate of sanctions has been coming down, but we expect people to have time—the entire working week—available to seek work. That involves going to job interviews and visiting the jobcentre. For an able-bodied person without children, for example, that would be up to 35 hours a week. Obviously, if a person has caring responsibilities, we expect them to have correspondingly less time available.

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Can the Minister confirm that reforms to the DWP estate will not lead to a reduction in the number of frontline jobcentre staff?

Damian Hinds: I can absolutely give my hon. Friend that assurance. In fact in every nation and region of the UK, including Scotland, we are looking to increase the number of frontline staff and work coaches helping people into work.

Mr Speaker: Mr Clark, you were standing a moment ago. Do you wish to give the House the benefit of your thoughts?

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con) *indicated dissent.*

Mr Speaker: No? Very well. We will move on.

Mr Paul J. Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is quite clear that the Minister has offered no convincing assurance about the maintenance of access to jobcentre facilities in Glasgow and across Scotland. We have seen a commitment to cut the number of jobcentres in Glasgow by six. These are areas where unemployment is twice the national average and where 35% of people cannot access IT facilities to allow them to apply online for support. There is a clear issue with the provision of a footprint and the citizens advice bureaux have offered a solution through the co-location of services in community hubs alongside citizens advice bureaux, housing associations and council services. Has the Minister given any consideration to those mitigating measures so that we can maintain the footprint or is it, as PCS has said, merely a cost-driven effort to abandon unemployed, sick and disabled people, making it harder for them to access these vital services?

Damian Hinds: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that important question. Of course we consider opportunities to co-locate our services with other public sector and third sector services, as he mentions. We continue to consider those opportunities. In the specific case of those jobcentres where we are moving operations more than 3 miles or 20 minutes away, we are considering new outreach facilities. I also want to mention that, of course, in the city of Glasgow the unemployment claimant count has come down by 43% since 2010.

Mr Speaker: I call Deirdre Brock.

Deirdre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker—but I was not actually standing at that point.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady was standing. Self-awareness is quite an important quality in the House—

Deirdre Brock: I was standing for the previous question—

Mr Speaker: If the hon. Lady does not wish to participate in the exchange, that is perfectly all right. It is not compulsory. I call Gerard Killen.

Public Sector Pay Cap

3. **Gerard Killen** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions he has had with his Cabinet colleagues on the public sector pay cap. [900488]

5. **Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with his Cabinet colleagues on the public sector pay cap. [900490]

12. **Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with his Cabinet colleagues on the public sector pay cap. [900497]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): I hold regular discussions with my Cabinet colleagues on a wide range of matters of importance to Scotland. The Scottish Government are responsible for Scottish Government pay.

Gerard Killen: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer and I want to give him another opportunity to clarify his view on the reported comments of the Chancellor of the Exchequer at the weekend. Does he agree that public sector workers are overpaid?

David Mundell: The hon. Gentleman will have seen what the Chancellor said on Sunday: he said that there are areas in the public service where recruitment and retention are becoming an issue and areas of the country where public sector wages and private sector wages are getting out of kilter in the other direction. It is important that we have a discussion on those issues.

Liz McInnes: Yesterday, in this Chamber, a Treasury Minister declined to answer a question on the grounds that it was way above his pay grade. Should not we be grateful to our public sector workers for not taking that attitude, and is it not high time that they got the pay rise they deserve?

David Mundell: I fully acknowledge the contribution that public sector workers make across the UK, and particularly in Scotland. Of course we will listen carefully when the pay boards make their recommendations.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Sixty-six per cent. of public sector workers in Wales, another devolved country, are women, and I suspect that the figure is a lot higher in Scotland. In the light of that, does the Secretary of State not agree that the public sector pay gap is now fundamentally unsustainable and is not only eroding the living standards of women and families but damaging the economy?

David Mundell: We are all concerned about the gender pay gap. Some figures released within the last hour by a public sector organisation suggest that there are significant gender pay gap issues at the BBC. I set out my position in my previous answer: it is for the Scottish Government to determine pay for Scottish Government employees, and the Government's position has also been set out.

Leaving the EU: Fishing Policy

7. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What discussions he has had with representatives of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation on the Government's policy on fishing after the UK leaves the EU. [900492]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): It is perhaps remiss of me not to welcome new Members from Scotland and elsewhere to this House, in particular when I am answering a question from one of the potential Scottish Fathers of the House.

Since the vote to leave the EU last year, I have spoken regularly with the Scottish Fishermen's Federation, which I most recently met in Peterhead on 16 June. In our discussions I emphasised that we will take Scotland out of the failed common fisheries policy and extend control of our waters up to 200 nautical miles or the median line with nearby coastal states.

Mr Carmichael: I hope the Secretary of State will join me in welcoming the news today that the Marine Stewardship Council has again accredited North sea cod as a sustainable species. The cod recovery programme saw some of the best and worst examples of fisheries management. The best were the measures that came from the industry and had credibility with the industry. Will the Government look at the lessons of the cod recovery programme and take the best examples of fishery management to inform future policy?

David Mundell: I, too, absolutely welcome today's announcement on cod. I confirm that we will look to the industry to help shape its future. One thing is clear: this Government will take Scotland and the UK out of the hated common fisheries policy, but the SNP Scottish Government would take us right back in.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Will the whole Scottish fishing industry, including processors and catchers, have the opportunity to be represented in consultations on the design of the new fisheries policy?

David Mundell: I very much welcome my hon. Friend to this House as the MP for one of the most important fishing constituencies in the United Kingdom, for which he will be a strong advocate. As he knows, when I visited Peterhead I had the opportunity to meet processors, and I take on board fully their importance in shaping the future of the industry after the CFP.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): News has reached Westminster that the Secretary of State has a new deputy in the House of Lords. Will he therefore instruct his deputy to procure a copy of the "Brexit: devolution" report that the House of Lords published yesterday, which states

"that, in the event that the UK Government does not secure a UK-wide agreement that adequately reflects Scotland's specific needs"—

that includes fishing—

"there is a strong political and economic case for making differentiated arrangements for Scotland"?

David Mundell: I hope you, Mr Speaker, will forgive me for laughing when I hear the SNP extol the House of Lords, which on every other occasion it condemns. The reference—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Docherty-Hughes, despite the fact that your shiny pate is secreted behind the face of Mr Cowan, I can tell what you are up to. You are behaving in your usual outlandish manner, from which I hope you will now desist.

David Mundell: There will in any event be no need for the provision to which the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) refers—this

United Kingdom Government will deliver a good deal on Brexit for Scotland and the whole of the United Kingdom.

Jobcentres: Glasgow

8. **Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP):** What recent discussions he has had with Glasgow City Council on the future of job centres in Glasgow. [900493]

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): DWP officials engage regularly with local authorities, which can of course include exploring opportunities to share accommodation. We are introducing 40 new such arrangements, three in Scotland. These arrangements bring benefits for colleagues, customers and the taxpayer. I am keen that we continue to explore more opportunities into the future.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Given that the hon. Gentleman is going to close quite a number of jobcentres in the city, does he not think he should at least sit down with Glasgow City Council, which is concerned that organisations such as the Scottish Association for Mental Health, the Prince's Trust and others are going to have to pick up the slack of his closure in supporting people into work? He needs to have a discussion about how that will work and what financial support he will give them.

Damian Hinds: We will continue to work with local authorities and third sector organisations, but I must remind the hon. Gentleman that before these changes the city of Glasgow had the greatest coverage of jobcentres per head of population of any large city in the UK. After these changes, it will still have the greatest coverage of jobcentres of any large city in the UK.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): While the hon. Gentleman is having discussions with Glasgow City Council, will he pick up the phone to the City of Edinburgh Council and explain why he can find £1.5 billion for the Democratic Unionist party, but cannot find a solitary pen to sign the Edinburgh city region deal?

Damian Hinds: I am told by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State that he may have excitement coming soon.

Agreement with the DUP: Funding for Scotland

9. **Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP):** Whether the additional funding provided to Northern Ireland announced in the Government's agreement with the Democratic Unionist Party will have consequences on funding for Scotland. [900494]

11. **Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP):** Whether the additional funding provided to Northern Ireland announced in the Government's agreement with the Democratic Unionist Party will have consequences on funding for Scotland. [900496]

14. **Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP):** Whether the additional funding provided to Northern Ireland announced in the Government's agreement with the Democratic Unionist Party will have consequences on funding for Scotland. [900499]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell):

Like previous Northern Ireland support packages and city deals in Scotland and Wales, this funding is a targeted intervention to address a specific set of unique challenges. As with those previous interventions, this exceptional funding will be made outside the normal, ongoing Barnett funding system. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. There is excessive noise in the Chamber. To my certain knowledge, at least one retired teacher is in the precincts of the Palace observing our proceedings; she would want there to be a seemly atmosphere.

Alison Thewliss: The running total given by the UK Government to city deals in Scotland since 2014 is already dwarfed by the sums given by local government and the Scottish Government. If £1.5 billion can be found overnight for the DUP deal to hold up this Tory Government, when will the Government find the money for the Tay cities deal, the Ayrshire growth deal and the Perth deal?

David Mundell: I am surprised at the hon. Lady's tone because the Government have committed to delivering city deals across Scotland. There will imminently be some exciting news about Edinburgh. I would have thought she would welcome that, rather than simply politicking.

Hannah Bardell: I would like to put on the record the best wishes of everyone on the Scottish National party Benches to the Scottish football team. I am wearing their colours; I hope they do not mind. I used to play alongside two of Scotland's national players at university—their football careers have obviously been better than mine.

Livingston and West Lothian already have a low proportion of public sector jobs in Scotland; the local authority ranks 20 out of 32. The private sector is strong, but with the loss of HMRC jobs, the percentage of public sector jobs is going to fall. Will the right hon. Gentleman come to my constituency and face up to the reality of those job closures and at least receive a delegation, as is his duty as Secretary of State?

David Mundell: I would be very happy to meet the hon. Lady.

Martyn Day: May I remind the Secretary of State of his own words? He said that he would not

“agree to anything that could be construed as back-door funding to Northern Ireland.”

We expect him, as Scotland's representative in the Cabinet, to fight for fiscal fairness for Scotland and not to be short-changed by £3 billion. Did he make any representations to the Prime Minister before or after the deal was signed?

David Mundell: I take my responsibility to fight for Scotland's fiscal priorities very seriously. That is why, two years ago when the hon. Gentleman was walking through the Lobby to deliver full fiscal freedom and a £9 billion black hole to Scotland, I voted to keep the Barnett formula.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend update the House on the benefits to the north-east of Scotland brought about by the UK Government's Aberdeen city region deal? Does he share my concern at the dither and delay of the SNP Government in improving the rail journey times between Aberdeen and the central belt, which may take until the 2020s? We need urgency from the Scottish Government.

David Mundell: I welcome my hon. Friend to his place. As a noted councillor in Aberdeen, he played a significant role in bringing together the Aberdeen city region deal, which has been such a boost to the north-east of Scotland. I am disappointed to hear what he says about the actions of the SNP Government, but, sadly, I am not surprised.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): The Secretary of State could not be clearer:

“I'm not going to agree to anything that could be construed as back-door funding to Northern Ireland.”

This is not just back door; it is locked away in secure accommodation. Will he therefore detail in full what representations he made to the Prime Minister and what he did at any time to offer any objections on behalf of Scotland?

David Mundell: On 8 June, the people of Scotland delivered their verdict on which party in this House stands up for Scotland and Scotland's financial arrangements. Scottish Conservatives—12 additional MPs. The Scottish National party—21 less.

Mr Speaker: Yes, or even “fewer”.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [900571] **Mr Geoffrey Robinson** (Coventry North West) (Lab): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 19 July.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): As we approach recess, I am sure that Members from all parties wish to thank the staff of the House for their dedication to our work here in what has been a particularly challenging year. We saw terrorists attack our democracy and our way of life—not just in the Westminster attack, but in the attacks at Manchester, Finsbury Park and London Bridge. It is thanks to the professionalism and bravery of people such as Elizabeth Bryan, an off-duty A&E nurse from Cambridgeshire who ran to help at the scene of the Borough Market attack and who is with us in the Gallery today—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”]—that these attacks will never succeed. We are united in defending the values that define our nation.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others, and in addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Mr Robinson: Of course the whole House associates itself with the Prime Minister's words about defending our values. Her schedule does not seem so busy, so could she find time to visit Coventry? I can assure her of

a warm welcome from the city's three Labour MPs, who all doubled their majorities in the recent general election that she called; we were very grateful for that.

On a serious note, is the Prime Minister aware that Coventry is the designated national research and development centre for the controls of driverless vehicles? Would she not consider it an appropriate location to relocate her whole Government to? Then she could see the controls of driverless vehicles in practice.

The Prime Minister: Well, I am always happy to visit the west midlands. I am particularly pleased to visit the west midlands under its new Mayor, Andy Street, who is doing a very good job. The hon. Gentleman mentioned automated vehicles. This country is a leader in automated vehicles. That is part of building a strong economy and that is what this Government are doing.

Q4. [900574] **Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Our national health service was last week judged the best, safest and most affordable healthcare system—better than that of France, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, Australia and New Zealand. Too often in this House, we focus on the negatives. I have heard the Labour party attempt to weaponise the NHS. Will my right hon. Friend—and, I hope, the Leader of the Opposition when he stands—congratulate NHS staff on their skills and dedication, and on the hard work they have put in to achieve these high standards?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to stand here and congratulate all NHS staff, who are delivering such a fantastic service and who have made the NHS, once again—this is not the first time—the No. 1 health system in the world. We are determined to continue to enable that high level of service to be provided, which is why we will be investing more than half a trillion pounds in our NHS between 2015 and 2020.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister in thanking all the staff of this House for all the work they do all the year round. They are fantastic, supportive and inclusive, and they are great with the public who come here. I want to thank them for everything they do.

I also join the Prime Minister in thanking all our emergency services for the way they coped with all the terrible emergencies we have had over the past few months in this country, and I thank those communities, such as my own in Finsbury Park, that have come together to oppose those who try to divide us as a community and as a people. The emergency services were in action again yesterday, protecting the people of Coverack from the flood they suffered. We should always remember that we rely on those services.

The Chancellor said this week that some public servants are “overpaid”. Given that the Prime Minister has had to administer a slapdown to her squabbling Cabinet, does she think the Chancellor was actually talking about her own Ministers?

The Prime Minister: First, I join the right hon. Gentleman not only in praising the work of our emergency services, but in recognising the way in which after the terrible terrorist attacks, and of course the appalling tragedy of the Grenfell Tower fire, we have seen communities come

together and support those who have been victims of those terrible incidents. I was very pleased, as he knows, to be able to visit Finsbury Park after the attack there and see for myself the work that had been done in that community and the work that he had done that night in working among his constituents to ensure that the community came together after that terrible attack.

On public sector pay, I simply say this to the right hon. Gentleman: I recognise, as I said when I stood on the steps of Downing Street a year ago, that some people in our country are just about managing—they find life a struggle. That covers people who are working in the public sector and some who are working in the private sector, which is why it is important that the Government are taking steps to, for example, help those on the lowest incomes through the national living wage. It is why we have taken millions of people out of paying income tax altogether; and it is why under this Government basic rate taxpayers have seen a tax cut of the equivalent of £1,000. But you only get that with a strong economy, and you only get that with a Conservative Government.

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank the Prime Minister for what she said about my own community; I am obliged to her for that. However, my question was about whether the Chancellor had said that public service workers are overpaid or not. The reality in this country is simply this: a nurse on a median salary starts on £23,000; police officers start on £22,800; and jobcentre clerks start on £15,000. I had a letter from Sarah who wrote to me this week about her sister-in-law, who is a nurse. Sarah said:

“she has sacrificed her health for the caring of others. She has had a pay freeze for the last five years. Only her dedication and passion for her vocation keeps her going. Why is this happening”.

What does the Prime Minister say to Sarah and those others working in our NHS?

The Prime Minister: What I say to Sarah and to those working in the national health service is that we recognise the excellent work they are doing. We recognise the sacrifice that they and others have made over the past seven years. That sacrifice has been made because we had to deal with the biggest deficit in our peacetime history—left by a Labour Government. As we look at public sector pay, we balance being fair to public sector workers, protecting jobs and being fair to those who pay for them. The right hon. Gentleman seems to think it is possible to go around promising people more money and promising that nobody is ever going to have to pay for it. He and I both value public sector workers. We both value our public sector services. The difference is that on this side of the House we know that you have to pay for them.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister does not seem to have had any problem finding money to pay for the Democratic Unionist party's support. The Conservatives have been in office for 84 months, and 52 of those months have seen a real fall in wages and income in our country. In the last Prime Minister's Question Time before the general election, the Prime Minister said:

“every vote for me is a vote for a strong economy with the benefits felt by everyone across the country.”—[*Official Report*, 26 April 2017; Vol. 624, c. 1104.]

Does she agree you cannot have a strong economy when 6 million people are earning less than the living wage?

The Prime Minister: I will tell the right hon. Gentleman when you cannot have a strong economy: it is when you adopt Labour party policies of half a trillion pounds of extra borrowing, which will mean more spending, more borrowing, higher prices, higher taxes and fewer jobs. The Labour Government crashed the economy; the Conservative Government have come in—more people in work, more people in jobs, more investment.

Jeremy Corbyn: May I invite the Prime Minister to take a check with reality on this? One in eight workers in the United Kingdom—that is 3.8 million people in work—are now living in poverty. Some 55% of people in poverty are in working households. The Prime Minister's lack of touch with reality goes like this. Low pay in Britain is holding people back at a time of rising housing costs, rising food prices and rising transport costs; it threatens people's living standards, and rising consumer debt and falling savings threaten our economic stability. Why does the Prime Minister not understand that low pay is a threat to an already weakening economy?

The Prime Minister: The best route out of poverty is through work, and what we now see is hundreds—*[Interruption.]* Yes, it is.

Mr Speaker: Order. The question has been asked. The Prime Minister's answer must—and however long it takes, it will—be heard.

The Prime Minister: The best route out of poverty is through work. That is why it is so important that, over the last seven years, we have seen 3 million more jobs created in our economy. It is why we now see so many thousands of people in households with work, rather than in workless households, and hundreds of thousands more children being brought up in a household where there is work rather than a failure to have work. That is what is important. But what is important for Government as well is to ensure that we provide support to people. That is why we created the national living wage. That was the biggest pay increase ever for people on the lowest incomes. When did the Labour party ever introduce the national living wage? Never! That was a Conservative Government and a Conservative record.

Jeremy Corbyn: It was Labour that first introduced the minimum wage—with opposition from the Conservative party.

Wages are lower than they were 10 years ago. The Prime Minister has been in office for just one year, and during that time disposable income has fallen by 2%. The economic consequences of austerity are very clear, and so are the social consequences: life expectancy stalling for the first time in 100 years. Today, the Institute for Fiscal Studies forecasts that income inequality is going to get worse and that child poverty will rise to 5 million by 2022. Does the Prime Minister—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Members are shouting, and shouting excessively. They must calm themselves. Take some sort of soothing medicament.

Jeremy Corbyn: I will try to help hon. Members, Mr Speaker. Does the Prime Minister not realise that her talk of a strong economy does not remotely match the reality that millions of people face, with low wages and poverty at home?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is, of course, wrong in some of the facts that he is putting forward. In fact, inequality is down. Life expectancy is continuing to rise. What we know is that what will not deliver a strong economy for this country is Labour's policies of more borrowing, more spending, higher taxes and fewer jobs. What the right hon. Gentleman wants is a country that is living beyond its means. That means making future generations pay for his mistakes. That is Labour's way, and the Conservatives will never do that.

Jeremy Corbyn: What we want is a country where there are not 4 million children living in poverty and where homelessness does not rise every year. I look along the Front Bench opposite and I see a Cabinet bickering and backbiting while the economy gets weaker and people are pushed further into debt. *[Interruption.]* Well, they can try talking to each other. The economy is—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi) is gesticulating in a distinctly eccentric manner and he must stop doing so. Shakespeare's county deserves better.

Jeremy Corbyn: The reality is that wages are falling, the economy is slowing, the construction sector is in recession, the trade deficit is widening, and we face crucial Brexit negotiations. Is not the truth that this divided Government are unable to give this country the leadership it so desperately needs now to deal with these issues?

The Prime Minister: I will tell the right hon. Gentleman the reality. The reality is that he is always talking Britain down and we are leading Britain forward. Let us look at the record of the Conservatives in government: 3 million more jobs, 4 million people out of paying income tax altogether, over 30 million with a cut in their income tax, record levels of people in employment, record numbers of women in work, the deficit cut by three quarters, inequality down, and record levels of foreign direct investment. That is a record to be proud of, and you only get it with a Conservative Government. [HON. MEMBERS: "More!"]

Mr Speaker: I call Mike Wood. I do not think the hon. Gentleman knew how popular he was.

Q5. [900575] **Mike Wood** (Dudley South) (Con): The black country flag has come under attack from Labour Members in recent days. Will the Prime Minister join me in again congratulating Gracie Sheppard, who designed the flag, reflecting our industrial heritage, when she was just 12 years old? Does the Prime Minister agree that the latest figures showing the west midlands as the fastest-growing part of this country show once again that the black country remains a great place to do business?

The Prime Minister: As my hon. Friend says—he is absolutely right—the black country remains a great place to do business. I would like to congratulate Gracie on designing that flag at the age of only 12. I am sure that she and others, including the *Express & Star*, have been surprised at the attitude from the Labour Benches

on this particular issue. I commend my hon. Friend and my other hon. Friends in the black country, and indeed the *Express & Star*, for the work that they are doing to promote the black country as that great place to do business, to live, and to bring up children like Gracie.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Does the Prime Minister believe that her Government have delivered pension fairness for women who, like her, were born in the 1950s?

The Prime Minister: What the Government are delivering for women is a better state pension for women so that women in future will be better off under the state pension than they have been in the past. We are equalising the state pension age, and I think that everybody across the whole House will recognise that that is the right thing to do.

Ian Blackford: The Prime Minister has found up to £35 billion for Hinkley Point C nuclear power station, up to £200 billion to replace the Trident missile system, and £1 billion for a deal with the DUP just so she can keep her own job. She seems to be able to shake the magic money tree when she wants to. Will she now end the injustice for those women who are missing out on their pensions before she herself thinks about retiring?

The Prime Minister: I am a little surprised, given the hon. Gentleman's background, that he said what he did about Hinkley Point. Hinkley Point is actually privately funded—this is not money that is coming from the Government to develop Hinkley Point—so I find that a little strange. We have put £1 billion extra into the question of the change in the state pension age to ensure that nobody sees their state pension age increase by more than 18 months from that which was previously expected. I must also say to the hon. Gentleman that the Scottish Government of course now have extra powers in the area of welfare. Perhaps it is about time that the Scottish Government got on with the day job and stopped talking endlessly about independence.

Q8. [900578] **Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): Businesses in Stafford and other constituencies need as much certainty as possible now about what will happen after we leave the EU in March 2019 for investment decisions they are making in the coming weeks and months. As the Government work on the comprehensive future relationship with our European neighbours, will they also negotiate time-bound transitional arrangements that prioritise the jobs of our constituents and the health of our economy?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I have said in this Chamber and elsewhere, we want to avoid a cliff edge for businesses, because people want to know where they stand, and to be able to carry on investing in the UK and creating the jobs that we have seen being created. As I have also said before, once we know—once we have negotiated through this two-year period—what the end-state relationship for the UK and the European Union will be in the future, it will then be necessary to have an implementation period when people can adjust to that new end state that is coming in. There will be some very practical things that need to be done during that period. As part of the negotiations, it will

be important for us to agree what that implementation period, or periods, is, and what the arrangements will be during that.

Q2. [900572] **Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Since Winnie Ewing's maiden speech 50 years ago this year, SNP MPs and MSPs have been arguing for the voting age to be lowered. In recent elections, young people have proven themselves to be the most knowledgeable and most engaged that they have ever been. I believe there is a majority in this House in favour of lowering the voting age. Will the Prime Minister support giving votes to 16 and 17-year-olds?

The Prime Minister: I would say to the hon. Lady that this is one of those issues on which people will obviously have different views. My view has always been and continues to be that 18 is the right age. We expect people to continue in education or training until the age of 18, and I think that is the right point for the voting age.

Q9. [900579] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): In Harrow and up and down the country, young people will be eagerly anticipating their A-level results to see whether they qualify for a university education. Will my right hon. Friend confirm the dramatic increase in the number of people from disadvantaged backgrounds going to university, and can she think of anyone who should apologise for misleading the British public?

The Prime Minister: I think it is very important, as people are thinking about going to university, that they are not misled in any way. It is the case that more disadvantaged 18-year-olds are now applying to university than ever before. I believe the Leader of the Opposition said exactly the opposite, and I think he should apologise for that. I think the Labour party should actually go further. At the election, the Leader of the Opposition vowed to deal with student debt, and Labour were going to abolish student debt; now they say it was not a promise at all. Students know Labour cannot be trusted on student fees.

Q3. [900573] **Mr Paul J. Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister will now know what it is like to have a job but to lack job security. Sometimes it can even bring a tear to the eye. Given her new-found empathy for millions of workers in insecure work, why is she now cutting six Department for Work and Pensions jobcentres in Glasgow and also back-office staff at Springburn in my constituency, where unemployment is twice the national average?

The Prime Minister: May I start by welcoming the hon. Gentleman to his new job in this House? What is happening in relation to jobcentres in Scotland is that the DWP is ensuring it is using the estate properly and to the best advantage. As a result of what is happening, no services are going to be cut. In fact, services to people using jobcentres will be enhanced in future. I think what matters is actually the service that is provided to people attending those jobcentres.

Q11. [900581] **Richard Drax** (South Dorset) (Con): The brave men and women of our armed forces put themselves in extremely challenging situations in their efforts to keep us all safe. We therefore owe it to them to do all we can to support them and their families when they have

completed their service. I warmly welcome the launch of the “Defence people mental health and wellbeing strategy” yesterday, but will my right hon. Friend tell the House how we can co-ordinate this excellent programme with our international allies? May I also wish her a very well deserved break when she finally decides to take it in the recess?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important issue. Members across the House recognise the importance of ensuring that we provide that support to those who are in our services and our veterans. The issue of mental health and wellbeing is very important, and I welcome the new strategy for mental health and wellbeing in the armed forces. I also pay tribute to the tireless work of my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), particularly on mental health, since he came to the House.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) raises an issue that is important not just for us in the UK; we need to see how we can work internationally on it. That is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence launched the strategy at an international conference yesterday, with counterparts from the United States, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. We will all campaign against the stigmas around mental health so that members of our armed forces and our veterans can get the help they need.

Q6. [900576] **Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): In my constituency of Liverpool, Walton, almost 40% of children are growing up in poverty. With schools closing this week and local support services cut to the bone, austerity bites and kids do not get fed. The Prime Minister says that her mission is to make Britain “a country that works for everyone”.

What is she doing now to stop kids going hungry this summer in Liverpool, Walton?

The Prime Minister: May I first of all welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place in this House? He is right to say that it is important that we look at the provision made in school for children and at the issue of households and poverty, but as I said to his right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition, the best way we can deal with poverty—the best route out of poverty—is for people to get into the workplace and then for us to ensure that other, better-paid jobs are provided for people in the workplace in the future.

Q12. [900582] **Lucy Allan** (Telford) (Con): A young woman in Telford who gave evidence in a horrific child sexual exploitation case five years ago is living in fear. The perpetrator, who received a 22-year sentence, is about to be released early. CSE victims are too often overlooked and ignored. Does the Prime Minister agree that CSE victims should be properly consulted on the release of perpetrators and that in this case the perpetrator should not be returned to Telford?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important issue. We all know that child sexual exploitation is an absolutely horrific crime. It is absolutely right that if victims are going to come forward to report this abuse, they need to know that they will be supported so that they can have the confidence to do so and be

confident in their future security and safety. The victim contact scheme is supposed to treat victims properly and ensure that consideration is given to victim-related conditions when looking at an offender’s licence on release. If my hon. Friend would like to write with the details of the case to my right hon. Friend the Justice Secretary, he will look at it very carefully.

Q7. [900577] **Ian Murray** (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The interim Prime Minister has repeatedly refused to answer the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition, so may I try again? It was reported over the weekend, by the temporary Chancellor’s own Cabinet colleagues, that he had said that some public sector workers are “overpaid”. Will the Prime Minister tell the House, the country and those public sector workers which ones she thinks are overpaid, which ones she thinks are underpaid and what she is going to do about it?

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier, I recognise that there will be people working in the public sector who do find life a struggle and are just about managing, and there will be people in the private sector who are in the same place. I also say to the hon. Gentleman that, as we have seen in the figures released today, there are some people working in the public sector who are very well paid. We need to ensure that, when we look at public sector pay, we balance being fair to workers, protecting jobs and being fair to those who pay for the public sector, and that we also support people by ensuring that they can keep more of the money they earn. That is why we believe in cutting taxes.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): The Government are under predictable pressure on public sector pay and public sector spending, which we would all like to respond to if there were some sensible demands. However, does my right hon. Friend agree that the only way in which a responsible Government can increase public sector pay is if we restore to this country strong economic growth and a sensible Government fiscal balance sheet, and that the biggest threats to our achieving either of those things over the next two years are a bad Brexit deal that puts up barriers to trade and investment, or the return of a hard-left, old-fashioned socialist Government?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right. As a very successful former Chancellor of the Exchequer, he speaks with expertise on this issue. He is right that we need to get a good Brexit deal, but he is also right that the policies of the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Chancellor, were they ever to get the opportunity to put them into practice, would not lead to more money for nurses, our national health service or our public sector; they would lead, through higher spending and higher borrowing, to jobs going, higher prices, higher taxes for people, less money available for our health service and less money available for our nurses.

Q10. [900580] **Gordon Marsden** (Blackpool South) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister know that her universal credit process is failing my constituents? The Salvation Army and Streetlife report that vulnerable Blackpool people are juggling a month’s money without help, that there

are unfair sanctions for people with mental health issues, that a six-week wait for money is causing more stress, and that there is a phone helpline that Citizens Advice says can cost claimants 55p a minute and take 39 minutes to answer. Can she start by getting them a freephone number?

The Prime Minister: The importance of the universal credit scheme is that it is ensuring that being in work always pays. With the universal credit scheme, we are seeing more people getting into the workplace. The DWP is constantly looking at the scheme and how it is operating around the country to ensure that any problems that people raise are addressed.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Thousands of my constituents and millions of consumers in this country have to pay surcharges when they use their credit or debit card—a highly unfair practice. Will my right hon. Friend outline the impact of lifting surcharges on consumers in this country?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is very important that this issue is being addressed. We believe that rip-off charges have no place in modern Britain. That is why card charging abuse is going to come to an end. This is about fairness and transparency. We do not want people to be surprised, when they come to pay for something, that an extra surcharge is suddenly added because they have used a particular card. The total value of such fees in 2010 was estimated to be £473 million. That money will be put back in the hands of shoppers across the country, so that they have more cash to spend on the things that matter to them.

Q13. [900583] **Mr Pat McFadden** (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): In her Lancaster House speech, the Prime Minister said that the UK would be leaving the single market. Will she tell the House whether that red line on the single market also applies to any transitional agreement or implementation period that might be agreed for the period after March 2019?

The Prime Minister: We said that we would no longer be a member of the single market because we will no longer be a member of the European Union and, as the European Union says consistently, its four pillars are indivisible. Therefore, the fact that we do not wish to be subject to other issues, like the European Court of Justice and free movement requirements, means that we will no longer be a member of the single market. At the end of the two years, when we have negotiated the end state deal, there will be an implementation period for that deal, but we are very clear that at the point at which we reach the end of the negotiations, we will be out of the European Union.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I welcome the Institute for Fiscal Studies report this week on income inequality in the UK. It clearly shows that, contrary to Labour propaganda that was often repeated during the general election, the income gap between rich and poor in our country has reduced every year since 2010. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that clearly shows that those with the broadest shoulders are bearing the heaviest burden in dealing with the debt we inherited from the last Labour Government?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The IFS report clearly shows what he has said today. As we know, the top 1% of taxpayers are bearing 27% of the tax burden. That is a higher burden than in any year under the Labour Government.

Q14. [900584] **Louise Haigh** (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): NHS England commissions child and adolescent mental health beds at a private hospital in my constituency, which recently received a damning Care Quality Commission report. The CQC found that the hospital was unsafe not least because, on inspection, it found a young woman with MRSA with open wounds on a ward. Does the Prime Minister share my concern that a shortage of mental health beds risks the NHS placing vulnerable young people in unsafe environments, and will she consider giving NHS England the responsibility for, and the resources to investigate, the quality of care before it commissions?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady has raised a very significant point. On mental health, of course we are boosting the funding that is going into mental health in the national health service and across the picture, across Government, in terms of dealing with mental health. We are taking a number of steps to improve mental health. She has raised a very particular case, which I am sure everyone in the House will have been concerned to hear, and I will ensure that the Secretary of State looks into the case she has raised.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Daesh's atrocities have failed to deliver a caliph or a fictional caliphate. Does my right hon. Friend agree that our international partners must provide resources and commitment to apply international law and bring prosecutions against Daesh fighters and those who choose to partner with them, making it clear that wherever a death-cult terrorist hides, we will find them and hold them accountable for their barbaric crimes?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about this. It is important that those who have committed these horrific crimes are brought to justice. We have done good work as a United Kingdom in helping those in these theatres to see how they can collect evidence that can then be used in prosecutions. We want to do this work internationally through the United Nations and it is an issue that I spoke about to Prime Minister al-Abadi of Iraq yesterday. We want to work with them and others to ensure that we can send the very clear message that my hon. Friend identifies.

Q15. [900585] **Sarah Jones** (Croydon Central) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister agree that the huge increase in knife crime has tragic consequences for families in constituencies such as mine? What will she do to work with me and other Members on both sides of the House to find solutions to this blight on young lives, including looking again at the budget for policing?

The Prime Minister: I welcome the hon. Lady to her place in the House. Her presence has enabled me to appoint a very good chief of staff to my office at No. 10. She raises the very serious issue of knife crime. The Government have been taking a tougher stance on knife crime. We do think this is an issue and we have done this in a variety of ways. Now, if people carry a knife in public they are much more likely to go to

prison. But we do recognise that there is more to do in this area. That is why yesterday my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced plans to consult on new offences to toughen up knife crime laws, including restricting the online sale of knives—we have done some of that already, but we think there is more for us to do—and banning possession of dangerous or offensive weapons on private property. The hon. Lady has raised an important issue and the Government have been addressing it. We recognise that we need to do more, and that is what my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is doing.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Before the election, the Government committed to removing the faith-based cap for free schools and even included that promise in our election manifesto. Catholic dioceses up and down the country are anxious to open free schools and some have even purchased sites. Will the Prime Minister commit her Government to honouring that solemn pledge in our manifesto?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend will recognise that the reason we put that in our manifesto, and the reason it was in the schools Green Paper that we published before the election, is that we do believe it is important to enable more faith schools to be set up and more faith schools to expand. This is an issue that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education is considering and she will publish further details on our overall view in terms of improving school diversity and encouraging the creation of more good school places in the near future.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Last week the Prime Minister refused to make public a report on the foreign funding of extremists in the United Kingdom, despite pressure from Members in all parts of the House and beyond. Last night, survivors of 9/11 also urged her to make the report available. Has she refused to do so simply because the content of the report will embarrass the Government's friends in Saudi Arabia, or because Ministers care rather more about arms sales to Riyadh than they do about public safety in Britain?

The Prime Minister: It is absolutely nothing to do with that. There is certain confidential information in the report that means that it would not be appropriate to publish it, but my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has made it available, on a Privy Council basis, to Opposition parties.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): For signs of the strong economy that the Prime Minister has so eloquently outlined this morning, we need look no further than Taunton Deane. It is a microcosm of the national picture, with record house building, record employment, and record Government investment in road schemes such as the A358 upgrade and the expansion of junction 25. Does the Prime Minister agree that to build on the economic success that this Government have overseen, those key road projects should not just speed up traffic and ease congestion but unlock more jobs, thus further fuelling the rise in productivity?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to recognise Taunton Deane as a microcosm of the excellent economy that we see across the country. My hon. Friend has

made an important point about the need to invest in infrastructure in order to boost our economy. It is a point that the Government readily understand and accept, which is why, in last year's autumn statement, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer was able to announce a £23 billion national productivity investment fund, a considerable portion of which will go into infrastructure. We fully recognise not just the importance of large-scale transport projects such as Crossrail, HS2 and the expansion of Heathrow, but the importance of investing in projects at a more local level if we are to unlock further economic growth in areas like Taunton Deane.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): With no legal powers, funds or criteria, and with schools and Parliament not open, Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals NHS Trust is once again consulting on the closure of the hospital and the building of a new £400 million hospital in Belmont. There have been five consultations over 18 years, wasting £40 million of taxpayers' money. Is it not time for the Prime Minister to step in and put a stop to it, and allow this important hospital to get on with the day job?

The Prime Minister: I understand that Epsom and St Helier Trust is indeed seeking views on future specialist care at the trust, and on how the existing buildings can be improved. I also understand that the discussions are at an early stage, that no final decisions have been made, and that any proposals for major service change will be subject to a full public consultation.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Not only has the Institute for Fiscal Studies said that we have the narrowest income gaps for a decade, but the Office for National Statistics has said that Britain has some of the lowest levels of persistent poverty in Europe. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is right that this country is governed by the true facts and not by fake news, and that this Government are committed to building a strong economy for all?

The Prime Minister: Let me start by welcoming my hon. Friend to the Chamber. She is absolutely right: we owe it to our constituents—we owe it to the public—to ensure that when we debate these issues we debate them on the basis of the facts, and not on the basis of the sort of fake news that we hear all too often in the Chamber.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Lakeside children's centre is a lifeline for often struggling kids and their parents in one of the poorest wards in Britain, giving them the best possible start in life, yet it is one of 26 children's centres that face closure in Birmingham. Does the Prime Minister understand the consequences of her actions? Does she understand that £700 million of cuts in the city council's budget are having a devastating impact on the provision of children's centres? Will she act properly to fund those centres, and to reverse a tidal wave of closures that will otherwise have a devastating impact on the life chances of a whole generation of children?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, decisions on this issue are being taken by the Birmingham local authority, but it ill behoves any Member of the Labour party to

stand up in this House and complain about the issues with public spending that we have had to address, because they are the direct result of the failure of a Labour Government to manage our economy.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP) *rose—*

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady is signalling that she wishes to raise a point of order, but customarily points of order come after urgent questions and statements. If the hon. Lady can hold herself until that point, we look forward with eager anticipation to hearing of what she wishes to unburden herself then.

Prison and Youth Custody Centre Safety

12.46 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Justice if he will make a statement on safety in prisons and the findings of Her Majesty's chief inspector's annual report.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee): Independent scrutiny is an essential part of our prison system, and I thank the chief inspector of prisons and his team for the work they do in delivering this, including through his annual report. His report raises important issues in relation to safety and security in prisons and youth custody. We have been clear that a calm and ordered environment needs to be created to ensure effective rehabilitation, and that achieving this is our priority.

The current levels of violence, self-harm and self-inflicted deaths in the adult estate are unacceptable. The issues in our prisons have deep roots and, while they will not be addressed overnight, we are combining immediate action to stabilise the estate with significant additional investment. For example, we are investing £100 million a year to bring in an additional 2,500 prison officers by the end of 2018. We are already making significant progress, with a net increase of 515 prison officers in post at the end of March compared with the previous quarter.

Turning to youth justice, the annual report highlights particular issues regarding the youth estate. I reassure the hon. Lady that the safety and welfare of every young person in custody is of paramount importance to me and we are clear that more needs to be done to achieve this.

In response to Charlie Taylor's review of the youth justice system last December, the Government acknowledged the serious issues the youth justice system faces, and that is why we are reforming the system. Let me give three examples of the progress we are making. First, we have created a new youth custody service, with an executive director, for the first time in the Department's history. Secondly, the development of a new youth justice specialist officer role is ensuring that more staff can be specifically trained to work with young people, boosting the numbers on the operational frontline in youth offender institutions by 20%, and recruiting workers specifically trained to work within the youth sector. Thirdly, there is the introduction of a more individualised approach for young people focused on education and health, enhancing the workforce, improving governance, and developing the secure estate.

Finally, in his report the chief inspector expressed disappointment about the implementation rate of his recommendations. I recognise this concern, and to address this, we have created a new unit within Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service to help ensure that recommendations are taken forward in a timely manner and to track how they are being implemented by prisons.

The issues within our prisons will not be resolved overnight, but we are determined to make progress as quickly as possible, and I hope that hon. Members on both sides of the House will support our plans for reform.

Seema Malhotra: Last year, the chief inspector reported that too many of our prisons had become unacceptably violent and dangerous. This year, he reports that the situation has not improved, and that it has got worse. Staff assaults increased by 38% in the 12 months to December 2016. Of the 29 local prisons and training institutes inspected last year, 21 were judged to be poor, or not sufficiently good, in the area of safety.

Only two weeks ago, here in the Chamber, I raised the issues at Feltham young offenders institution, but this devastating report is a cause for even greater concern. The jump in violence in our prisons is a crisis of the Government's own making. The warning signs have been there. The Government have been warned by MPs, by the staff in our prisons and by charities. Now they are being condemned by this damning report. The budget for prisons has been cut by more than a fifth over the past six years, and those cuts have now been proved to be a false economy. Prison staff numbers have been cut by a quarter and those who remain are being put at risk. The human impact of Tory austerity is now being laid bare in our prison system. Effective prisons should be about rehabilitation, so that people come out less likely to reoffend. Drugs, debt and bullying are contributing to the violence, but this has been found to be compounded by staffing levels described as being simply too low to keep order and run a decent regime.

In the last Parliament, the Government introduced a Bill to address some of these safety concerns. However, the Bill was lost on Dissolution. Despite recognition of prison safety being in the Tory manifesto, no prisons legislation was announced in the 2017 Queen's Speech. Will the Minister tell the House whether there is any intention of bringing back that legislation? Will he also tell us why a third of prisons have been found not to have implemented the prisons and probation ombudsman's recommendations on reducing the risk of self-inflicted death? What action is being taken to address governance concerns and the extensive use of force and segregation? Will the Minister also update the House on the implementation of progress on recruitment and the action being taken to keep experienced staff and retain new staff? Our prison system is no longer fit for purpose and the Government must take urgent action.

Dr Lee: We fully recognise that there are difficulties in the prison system—we have been honest about that ever since I have been in the Department—and yes, the staffing issue has been indicated as a problem. It has been addressed in the last year and, as I have said, we have appointed more than 500 to March and we are on course to fulfil our target of 2,500 extra prison officers by the end of 2018. I would argue, however, that the unforeseen exacerbant in prisons has been the use of Spice and other drugs. This was not anticipated by any previous Government and it is undeniably causing difficulties in terms of the behaviour of prisoners and the corruption of prisoners and some staff with regard to the trade in those substances.

I also take seriously the issue of mental health in prisons. Only yesterday I had further meetings with the Department of Health, which carries responsibility for that. We recognise that we need to improve mental health services for offenders, including the services relating to substance misuse, both in custody and in the community.

[Dr Phillip Lee]

We are working hard to make those improvements because we know that those issues are contributing to the problems that the hon. Lady has raised.

In relation to the youth estate, and particularly to Feltham, which is in the hon. Lady's constituency, the use of segregation is an issue. It has been an issue recently in the case that has been raised, but I cannot comment on that case because there is an appeal. This indicates how difficult it can be to manage young people. Over the past 10 years, the number of young people being held in custody has fallen from 3,000 to 1,000. That is something to celebrate. What we cannot celebrate, however, is the fact that when that target was set, before 2010, no plan was in place to change the infrastructure to meet the demands of dealing with and managing 1,000 extremely difficult young people at any one time. We are seeing problems not just at Feltham but across the youth justice system. I am fully aware of those problems, and that is why we are bringing forward two new secure schools over the next two years.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The Minister is right to be frank, as he always has been, about the dire state of affairs in our prisons, which the Select Committee highlighted in a number of reports during the last Parliament. On a constructive note, does he recognise that although the Queen's Speech contained no prisons legislation for the current Session, it would none the less be appropriate for the Government to take forward much of the prison reform agenda that does not require legislation? In particular, will he commit to ensuring that data and updates are provided to the House—through the Select Committee or otherwise—on the progress of the implementation of Her Majesty's inspectorate's recommendations? We do not need legislation for the Government to be transparent about that, and we need to track the progress that is being made.

Dr Lee: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his reappointment as Chair of the Justice Committee. We are committed to transparency on this. We recognise that there is a series of challenges and problems within the system, and I would be more than happy to come before his Committee to discuss this further. In regard to legislation, we have not ruled out future legislation on prisons, but I would argue that there is quite a lot we can be getting on with that does not require legislation. We are eager, keen and determined to reform our prison system.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Yesterday's scathing report by the chief inspector of prisons in England and Wales represents a watershed moment in the national debate on our prisons. Prisons should be places not only of punishment but of rehabilitation. They should be making us all safer in the short run and in the longer term. I believe that the whole House will be alarmed by the chief inspector's view that

"too many of our prisons had become unacceptably violent and dangerous places."

Members on both sides of the House are all too well aware that there is a crisis in our prisons, and yesterday's report revealed that, despite the Government's warm words, the situation is not under control, and it is getting worse.

In the light of that, I believe that the Minister has some serious questions to answer. Does he agree with the remarks by his former colleague, the former Chancellor of the Exchequer and former next Prime Minister, that prisons are approaching an "emergency"? What role does he think the substantial cuts to the prisons budget since 2010 have played in this, and what measures will he undertake to address the situation? The chief inspector of prisons in England and Wales has warned that this crisis

"has all been compounded by staffing levels in many jails that are simply too low".

Does the Minister agree that prison officers deserve a pay rise, and that that will be necessary if we are going to increase numbers and improve retention?

The chief inspector has also said that he is "appalled by the conditions in which we hold many prisoners".

What measures is the Minister taking to address this and to reform our prisons so that prisoners leave prison as less, rather than more, of a danger to society? Most shockingly, the number of self-inflicted deaths has more than doubled since 2013. What strategy will he adopt, and what specific resources will he allocate, to reduce that number? The chief inspector said that he had

"reached the conclusion that there was not a single establishment that we inspected in England and Wales in which it was safe to hold children and young people."

He added that the speed of decline had been staggering, given that in 2013-14, nine out of 12 institutions were graded as good or reasonably good for safety. What explanation does this Minister have for this? Everyone knows that the Government have created a crisis in our prisons. What yesterday's report shows is that they are failing to take action to solve it.

Dr Lee: I do not accept that the Department has lost control of the prison system. That is nonsense. We have a full grip on the issues that we need to face. I would like to talk about the £1.3 billion that we have invested to transform the estate. By transforming it, we are going to improve the quality of the accommodation for prisoners, which will have a direct impact on the problems that we are encountering among the small volume of people who have mental health and suicide issues. We recognise that parts of our estate are antiquated, and that is why we are investing the money.

As I have already said, we know that there are many difficulties in the youth justice system, where the violence rate is 10 times higher than in the adult prison estate. I give my full support to the staff who continue to work in the youth estate because I have seen it with my own eyes: I have visited the majority of the youth estate and it is extremely difficult. I would argue that the genesis of the problem goes back many years. As I alluded to earlier, the admirable intention to reduce the number of people being locked up in the youth estate has brought us to a point at which we have a very challenging population that is particularly violent and difficult to manage. That is why we have the problems we have.

We are bringing forward plans on secure schools—there are two in the pipeline—and we intend to make them a completely different regime with a completely different curriculum balance, including getting people outside more because I am particularly passionate about the use of sport, so that we can deal with the issues we are

confronting. I am under no illusions about how difficult this issue is, but we have a plan and we are going to implement it.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I know the Minister appreciates the fact that people with autism are disproportionately represented in the custodial system. Notwithstanding the issues at YOI Feltham, it was in fact the first prison to receive autism-friendly accreditation, and the governor and staff there report that that contributed to a diminishment in violence levels across the whole estate. Some 20 prisons have indicated interest in such accreditation. Will the Minister look into the programme and consider making its roll-out compulsory throughout the entire prison estate? It would be of benefit to prisoners and prison staff alike.

Dr Lee: Yes, I am more than happy to consider rolling out that programme. There are positive schemes, and not only with regard to the diagnosis, treatment and management of autism; various sports clubs, rugby clubs and football clubs are also involved, such as Saracens at Feltham. The work they are doing and the evidence of its outcomes are all positive. That is why I am passionate about this: if we can get the management of autism and mental health right and broaden the curriculum so that more time is spent outside cells, I am convinced that we can change the behaviour and atmosphere in each prison and institution so that staff can feel safe while they are at work.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The combination of rising prisoner numbers and shrinking budgets is a major factor that affects the welfare of prison officers and prisoners. In that context, it is regrettable that the UK Government dropped prison reform from the Queen's Speech and continue to cut budgets and staff numbers. In contrast, the Scottish National party Government in Scotland have continued to invest in modernising and improving the prison estate. They have also committed to significant penal reform, aimed at reducing reoffending by moving away from custodial sentences in favour of community sentences, which have been proven to be better for rehabilitation. Does the Minister agree that he should follow the Scottish Government's example and concentrate his efforts on schemes that will reduce prison numbers and overcrowding, thereby reducing pressure on prison officers and prisoners?

Dr Lee: Yes, intellectually I agree with the hon. and learned Lady that it would make life a lot easier if we could reduce the prison population, and I know that the Secretary of State agrees with that position. The difficulty is the constant balance with the justice issue: if people have committed crimes, they have to serve the time. The question is where they serve that time. I am responsible for women's justice, on which a strategy is coming out by the end of the year. I very much want that strategy to concentrate on the provision of community sentences and for us to move to that model of prison—in future years it could be rolled out to the adult male estate, but I am just looking at the female estate. I think that we can learn a lot from where we hold people when they are serving their time. I am going to Scotland in the autumn and am looking forward to seeing a few programmes up there, because I gather that some good work is being done.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Is the Minister satisfied that sufficient remedies are available to deal with violent offenders?

Dr Lee: Yes, I am.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The Minister is right to say that legislation will not solve this crisis by itself—many other measures are necessary—but will he tell the House why the Prisons and Courts Bill, which was drafted and had made some progress in the previous Parliament, has been dropped? If the Government are committed to prison reform, why have they dropped a piece of legislation that was ready to be considered by the House?

Dr Lee: We can deliver our reform package without any further legislation. We will not rule out further legislation if there is a requirement for it in future, but the right hon. Gentleman will recognise that there are pressures on parliamentary time and this is something we are having to accommodate. Nevertheless, there is absolutely no reason why we cannot continue with the reform programme we have planned.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Does the Minister agree that although there are challenges, dedicated officers are doing much positive and transformative work in prisons on issues such as mental health, as well as through chaplaincy services and restorative justice programmes? An example is the work I have seen being done at Thorn Cross Prison over many years by Shawn Verhey and Lorraine Turner. Will he join me in thanking them, and the many dedicated officers like them who do such a tremendous job?

Dr Lee: Yes. That is another example of how, throughout the system, positive schemes are being followed. People who work in a variety of areas, particularly mental health, are delivering care to the prisoners who need it, so that they can rehabilitate properly before they return to society.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): The Minister referred to the advent of drugs such as Spice as an unknown quantity for the Prison Service to have to deal with, but the fact that there are a quarter fewer prison officers than in 2010 hardly helps to address new challenges. Assaults on staff are up by 70% since 2009, and in 2016 alone one in five justice staff members left the sector. Will the Minister confirm that there is a retention crisis, which is being fuelled by the disgraceful rise in the number of assaults on Prison Service staff?

Dr Lee: As I hope the right hon. Lady would acknowledge, I am trying to be as candid as possible about the difficulties we face. A year ago, we acknowledged that there was a need for more staff, and we are delivering on that. I must stress, though, that there was no expectation that the drug would cause this problem. There is yet to be proper documentation on how it affects the prisoners who take it and their behaviour, and on the long-term impact that that will have on the prison population. We acknowledge that we need more staff, and that those staff need better training. In the youth justice system, we are introducing a new youth custody role, because we recognise that additional skills are needed. We recognise the problems, and we are working to solve them.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The Minister will share my concern about the impact of contraband, and particularly new psychoactive substances, on prisoners and the violence that it can cause, so will he say what measures the Department is taking to prevent such materials from getting into prisons?

Dr Lee: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. We have improved the seizure of drugs; the figure for the past 12 months is about 225 kg, which is up on the previous year. We have employed dogs to detect psychoactive substances, and we were the first jurisdiction in the world to introduce drug testing for psychoactive substances. We continue to develop that service as the substances evolve.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I hope that the planned new youth custody service works, but will the Minister say how many new prison officers will join the existing service this year?

Dr Lee: No, I cannot give the hon. Gentleman an exact figure, but I will write to him with it. We are actively seeking to recruit in every single institution area, particularly in south-east England, where there are always challenges in recruiting prison staff. Perhaps more importantly, we are trying to recruit people who have a history of working with young people. Working with troubled young individuals is a difficult business, and we recognise that there may have been recruitment errors in the past. We want to recruit people who have the proper experience.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): The Minister will know that I have previously questioned his Department about rehabilitation. As a result of the report, will he prioritise rehabilitation plans for offenders and employment opportunities for ex-offenders?

Dr Lee: Yes, that is very much our intention. There are several schemes throughout the country that involve employers. I visited Drake Hall, a women's prison, where Halfords has a bicycle repair unit, and met an offender who was leaving prison a week or so later to work for Halfords. Such schemes up and down the country are fantastic and we need more of them. We are working hard on getting more.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): This is surely an issue of safeguarding. The chief inspector of prisons says that there is not a single establishment that is currently safe to hold children and young people. The Minister did not answer the specific question put to him by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) about why there has been such a staggering decline in safety over the past year and, as the chief inspector said, such a "slump in standards". Can the Minister explain what a "slump in standards" means, and what he is doing to address it?

Dr Lee: I do not accept that all institutions fit that description. YOI Werrington received a positive report last week. I would argue that the slump has not happened over the past year. As I keep saying, the problem came about over a number of years. With some institutions, we are wrestling with a legacy of issues. At one institution, for example, a contract that was signed in 2004 is

preventing us from making necessary changes. The idea that this problem was created by this Government is simplistic and just not accurate.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): This Government are building new prison capacity, including at Wellingborough in north Northamptonshire. What difference does my hon. Friend believe that that will make in terms of improving safety?

Dr Lee: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. As I said earlier, some of our prisons are Victorian. They are antiquated, and the quality of the cells is substandard, which is why we are building new prisons. Cells in which prisoners find it much harder to commit suicide are what is needed, which is why I am pleased that we are investing £1.3 billion in the system.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): Let me declare an interest as an outgoing police and crime commissioner. This report is devastating and the Minister must act on it. One way of acting very quickly would be to invest in things such as non-custodial programmes for women offenders and intensive community orders, which have better returns in terms of reoffending rates. Will the Minister commit this Government to putting money where it will make a real difference?

Dr Lee: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and I welcome him back to the House. It is good to see him here, having had a good relationship with him before. Yes, the women's justice system is a classic example of where there is scope to devolve responsibility and indeed funds. North-west England, a part of which he used to represent, has had a whole-system approach to funding over the past year or two, so that we can try to build a system in which women can be treated holistically and in which the team understands each woman's home, situation, partners and relationships, so that it can bear down on the number of people who are locked up. In the strategy that will be delivered before the end of the year, I hope to outline in more detail what I want to do in north-west England.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Last November, the Department outlined in its White Paper probably the most comprehensive plan for improving our prisons for a generation. Some items—a minority of them—require primary legislation. I would like to see that brought forward in due course, particularly with regard to changing the statutory definition of the purpose of a prison to include rehabilitation and reform. However, the vast majority of items do not require such legislation, so will the Minister confirm that his Department will continue to implement the White Paper in full?

Dr Lee: My hon. Friend is very informed on this matter. Yes, he is right: the great majority of the reform package that was announced last year can be delivered without any further legislation. As I have said three times, we have not ruled out primary legislation in this area in the near future.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): By what date does the Minister expect the first people to enter the new units that he has announced for the north and the south? Will he update the Justice Committee on the objectives that

he has set for improving the situation, and will he agree to look again at the recommendations of Lord Toby Harris, to which the Government did not agree when they were produced early last year?

Dr Lee: I think the right hon. Gentleman is referring to the secure schools. We are committed to opening one in September 2019. There is a possibility that it could be earlier, but it depends on finding the appropriate site; as Members can imagine, these sites have to be secure. We are working extremely hard and are in negotiations with various agencies. The Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime is particularly interested in assisting us on this. When we know about the locations, we can be a bit clearer about the delivery date.

On the wider question, which I think is about the state of the youth justice system, he can probably tell that I think we need to move towards a different system of how we lock up young people. Sadly, we recognise that some young people will need to be locked up—we have a very small uptick in some serious sexual crimes at the moment—but the environment, the staffing and the manner in which we do so must change. This report confirms what we already knew, and my intention is to work hard to bring forward a plan so that in the future—in the next 10 years—we can get to a situation in which our young people are not only safe and secure, but properly rehabilitated.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I welcome the additional £2 million that this Government have invested in providing handheld mobile detectors and portable detection poles to every prison to root out the mobile phones that facilitate so many problems. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to continue monitoring this issue and to consider what more can be done in this area?

Dr Lee: Yes. We have made some real progress; we are stopping thousands of mobile phones getting into our prisons. We are working extremely hard to stop the use of drones and to block the use of mobile phone signals over prisons. Things are not perfect; we have not finished this work, but we are continuing to press hard, because it would be fantastic to have a mobile phone and drone-free prison network.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I look forward to the strategy for women offenders that the Minister said he would introduce later this year. He will know that last year, 30% of women in custody self-harmed, and 12 women killed themselves in prison—the highest level since 2004. In reviewing the estate for women, will he take the opportunity, once and for all, to take on board the recommendations of Baroness Jean Corston? Women who need to be in custody should be placed not in prisons far from their families, but in small, secure community units. There is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to do this. Please will the Minister take it?

Dr Lee: The Corston report was one of the first things I read when I was appointed to this role in July 2016, and it makes a persuasive case. There is an issue about where some women should be held. I am not completely convinced that we can go down the path of all women being held in community provision, in residential women's centres. However, I am persuaded that we can

reduce the number of women we are locking up. This will be based primarily on the way that we deliver community provision, and on mental health care before, during and after prison.

I have met a number of women in prison, the majority of whom have displayed scars of self-harm. As the hon. Lady might know, I am a doctor and I observe these things, and it is quite distressing to see this. To deal with the problem, we need to change the environment in which these women are held and to get their mental health services improved. Those are my two priorities, and I hope that the hon. Lady will be reassured that the strategy, which will be delivered by the end of this year, will get things right.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Listening to parents of young offenders in my constituency surgeries has been eye-opening, as is listening to those working in Winchester Prison, who have seen what happens to people who have never got out of the prison system. I welcome the focus on dealing with the growing level of violence and youth justice. It is vital that we look at those issues individually and at the outcomes. How will this new unit help to ensure that the recommendations are followed?

Dr Lee: The unit to which my hon. Friend refers has been set up by the Department to ensure that the recommendations are followed. I gather that this is the first time that such a unit has been created. With regard to youth justice and to women's justice, the key is to build a network over time—it will take a long time—that allows people to be held closer to home, so that families, and mothers in particular, can stay in contact with their children. That is our intention. I have mapped out the country with regard to women's justice and youth justice to ensure that what we bring forward fits the framework, so that we can deliver time in prison closer to home for women and young people.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): There is a grave situation in our prisons, and the Minister is being typically frank in acknowledging that. One problem is the large cohort of prisoners languishing on indeterminate sentences for public protection. Will the Minister confirm that the Government are committed to getting that number down as quickly as possible?

Dr Lee: That has been a long-running issue in the prison system, and the answer to my hon. Friend's question is yes.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Reoffending rates remain stubbornly high, especially for young offenders, with nearly seven out of 10 who are sent to prison going on to reoffend on release. We know that that is to do with the conditions and the environment in our prisons and young offender institutions, but what more can be done to ensure effective rehabilitation, especially for our young people?

Dr Lee: The recidivism rate in the youth estate is not acceptable, nor is the environment in which young people are being held. In some institutions, they are being locked up for too long, which is primarily to do with the safety and security of the institution. That needs to change. There are programmes in place—I

[Dr Phillip Lee]

have mentioned one already, with Saracens and other sports teams—that are showing evidence of reducing recidivism rates. I am determined to change the curriculum being delivered in the youth estate. People need to spend more time outside, on sport, for example. If we do that, we will achieve what my hon. Friend wants us to achieve. By early next year, I plan on bringing out a review of the criminal justice system and sport, particularly in the youth justice system. Its recommendations will be interesting to see.

Immigration Act 2016: Section 67

1.21 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if she will update the House on the implementation of section 67 of the Immigration Act 2016.

The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis): The Government are fully committed to helping and supporting the most vulnerable children, and we are contributing significantly to hosting, supporting and protecting vulnerable children affected by the migration crisis. This is part of our wider response of taking 23,000 people from the region. We have already granted asylum or another form of leave to more than 8,000 children and local authorities across the country are supporting more than 4,000 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

Children transferred under section 67 are being cared for by local authorities across the country and we and they take our responsibility to those children very seriously. Safeguarding those children is paramount. Following consultation with local authorities, the Government have set the number of children who will be transferred under the scheme at 480. We have invited referrals of eligible children from France, Greece and Italy and our officials at the Home Office have visited those countries in recent months to put in place processes further to identify and transfer eligible children. In the past week I have spoken to my counterparts in Greece and Italy specifically on this issue, and I shall follow that up with face-to-face meetings in both countries next week.

It is important to remember that the processes for transferring children must be implemented in line with each member state's national laws and all transfers of children to the UK must be carried out safely and with the best interests of the children at the centre of all decisions. The ongoing work to transfer children under section 67 is in addition to our other commitments and we continue to work closely with member states and relevant partners to ensure that children with family in the UK can be transferred quickly and safely.

Our approach continues to be to take refugees directly from conflict regions, providing refugees with a more direct and safe route to our country rather than risking hazardous journeys to Europe. We are committed to resettling 23,000 people from the region and our resettlement schemes are some of the largest and longest-running in the EU. So far, we have resettled more than 7,000 people under the Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme and the vulnerable children resettlement scheme. Our schemes allow children to be resettled with their family members, thereby discouraging them from making perilous journeys to Europe alone.

It is worth noting that families continue to arrive from the region. Just yesterday, 199 individuals arrived and another 80 are due to arrive next week. That is all part of the Government's approach to helping the most vulnerable.

Tim Farron: I thank the Minister for his response, but it seems in the light of fact that those are somewhat hollow words. Before the election, the Government promised they would transfer 480 refugee children from Europe to the UK, but in the other place the Government

recently admitted that so far only 200 unaccompanied children have been given sanctuary here. When do the Government expect to fulfil this measly commitment, and will the Minister give us a date today?

I say that it is a measly commitment because the UK should do so much more. Freedom of Information Act requests show that local councils have voluntarily offered to accept 1,572 more children in addition to those they already support. Does the Minister know this? In light of this information, will the Government reopen Dubs and take their fair share?

As summer approaches, more are taking the dangerous crossings across the Mediterranean to reach the safety of European shores. More desperate, refugee children—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Stop the clock. I apologise to the hon. Gentleman but we cannot have two sets of exchanges taking place. There is a rather unseemly exchange between the hon. Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) and the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), who are gesticulating at each other and in obvious dispute. They must calm themselves and listen to the Demosthenian eloquence of the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), whose question this is.

Tim Farron: That is understandable, Mr Speaker; this subject raises passions, and rightly so.

Summer approaches and more are taking the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean to reach European shores. More desperate refugee children without anyone looking after them will arrive in Europe, yet the Government have said that they will not consider taking any child under Dubs who arrived after their arbitrary cut-off date of 20 March 2016. In the light of the delays, which are the Government's fault, will they extend that cut-off date, which is as heartless as it is pointless?

Finally, I have visited the camps in Greece and elsewhere, which neither the Home Secretary nor the Prime Minister, who is, of course, the previous Home Secretary, have. I cannot forget what I have seen. I have met those children who, through no fault of their own, find their lives on pause as Ministers here choose to ignore them. How many children have been taken from Greece under the Dubs amendment to date? Have the UK Government even signed a memorandum of understanding with Greece to get these transfers under way? I know of two young people who signed a consent form to be transferred under Dubs more than a year ago. They are still stuck in Greece.

The horrific truth is that the longer this goes on the more likely it is that these children will go missing and fall into the evil hands of traffickers. According to Oxfam, 28 children every single day are going missing in Italy alone. Will the Government step up, or continue to ignore the plight of these desperate children?

Brandon Lewis: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman's comments are based on pretty much a series of false premises. I remind him that, as I have said, we have a range of schemes out there and are working to bring 23,000 people over. While he bandies around numbers I politely ask him to bear in mind that behind every number he talks about—some of which were wrong—there

is a child. It is important for us to ensure that those children get the care and support they need in the right time and the right place.

The hon. Gentleman talks about timelines, and he seems to forget that Italy and Greece are nation states, as is France. We must work around the timelines for them, too. He mentioned the FOI request concerning local authorities, which I am afraid is simply wrong. We consulted local authorities, which is what we said we would do when the legislation was in front of the House. That is what has led to the figure of 480, and the FOI request he is talking about does not consider what local authorities can provide. It is about the 0.7%¹ threshold, which is an entirely different calculation, so perhaps he should go away and look further at that.

We are very clear that we must ensure that we do not create a pull factor while at the same time doing the right thing, as we have done with the £2.46 billion of support that makes us one of the biggest contributors and covers the biggest humanitarian aid project this country has ever conducted, to look after the people who need our care the most. Instead of playing politics with children's lives, we should get on with looking after them and I wish the hon. Gentleman would join us in that.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I urge the Minister to keep the deadline in place. It is incredibly important that we do not encourage any more families to send their children on dangerous journeys. We should continue to take children directly from the region—directly from the camps—so that we can ensure they arrive safely. Encouraging the thought that if children get to Europe they will be able to stay is exactly what encourages the dangerous journeys that lead to their dying. I urge the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) to think carefully before he presses that course on the Government.

Brandon Lewis: My right hon. Friend, with his experience, is absolutely right: we must ensure that we do not create a pull factor. It must be remembered that under our schemes we have already brought over some 7,000² children from the region. I remind the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) that the scheme is not closed. We are still working, and next week I shall go to Italy and Greece to talk to Ministers. The most vulnerable people are those who cannot afford to pay human traffickers—the children in the region, in Lebanon and in Jordan. They should be our focus, to ensure we do not, as my right hon. Friend said, create a pull factor.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): The House understands the Government's preference to take unaccompanied children directly from the region. I have visited the camps in France and Greece. The Minister needs to be reminded that the children are already there, often living in horrible conditions and at the mercy of traffickers and sexual exploitation. How many children in 2017-18 will come into this country under section 67? How many children will come in under Dublin? How long, on average, has each case taken? What is the future of close family reunion once we leave the European Union? Will the Government consider expanding UK immigration rights so that a

1. *[Official Report, 5 September 2017, Vol. 628, c. 1MC.]*

2. *[Official Report, 5 September 2017, Vol. 628, c. 1MC.]*

[Ms Diane Abbott]

child's right to family reunion in the broad sense is in no way diminished, or will the Government simply walk away from their moral obligations?

Brandon Lewis: The right hon. Lady's final point does not do her, this House or this country justice. We—councils, charity groups and individuals—should be proud of the phenomenal work being done across the country, including the £1 million community sponsorship scheme that the Home Secretary announced last night, to welcome the most vulnerable people. It is right that we look to see who are the most vulnerable—who cannot afford to pay human traffickers, and who need our support in the region—rather than those who are in European countries. We are still bringing people over under the agreements with European countries, but I remind the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) and the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale that we must work according to the rules and laws in these countries—they are nation states. Our position on what will happen once we leave the European Union has been clear. The fact that we are running the biggest humanitarian project this country has seen highlights the Government's determination to do the right thing. We will continue to seek to do so and to fulfil our moral duty to those who need our help most.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The protestations of Opposition Members would have more credibility if they acknowledged the huge effort and huge resources that the Government have put in to date. I too have been to Athens to see the camps and the fantastic work being done there, but there is a criticism: it is taking too long to process and assess children who have a right to be here. Will the Minister acknowledge that post-Brexit, when presumably we will come out of the Dublin III scheme, there will be a problem with children under the family reunion scheme? Can we ensure that they will still be matched with relatives beyond their parents, because many of them will have lost their parents but will have siblings, uncles and others with whom they may be safely and appropriately placed?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and I appreciate the time he spent explaining to me what he saw at the camps, which I shall visit next week. He is right: all of us in this country should be proud of the finance and focus we provide, but for every 3,000 people we bring over and help we could be helping 800,000 people in the region. We therefore must be very clear about our focus. As I said, we are clear that post-Brexit we shall want to continue to do the right thing for vulnerable people in the region. I shall be happy to work with him to deliver that.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) on securing this question. I make it clear to the Minister that what the hon. Member said was not based on false premises. I am able to say that because last week I attended the launch of a report from the Human Trafficking Foundation, following an

independent inquiry into separated and unaccompanied minors in Europe. The inquiry found that UK Ministers have done

“as little as legally possible”

to help unaccompanied children who have fled war and conflict in their home nations; have turned away from a humanitarian crisis that “would not be tolerable” to the British public if they were more aware of it; and that by failing to offer safe passage are “unquestionably” fuelling both people trafficking and smuggling. Those are not my words but the findings of an independent inquiry. What will the Minister do about it? [Interruption.] There is no point in shouting at me because the Minister and his colleagues do not like the independent inquiry's findings. The British public deserve to know about this. What steps are the Government taking to resolve the blockages in the transfer of Dubs children, which we voted for in the House last year, thinking there would be 3,000 transfers? When do they expect the transfers to begin?

Brandon Lewis: Transfers have been happening, and we are determined to deliver on exactly what we set out. We will continue to do so—it is part of the 23,000 people, and it should be remembered that we have brought over 7,000¹ children already. I encourage more people to look at what she refers to as an independent report, one of the co-authors of which is a recently retired Labour Member of Parliament. Fiona Mactaggart's foreword makes many accusations and statements that have no evidence base whatsoever. I disagree with the report, but my point about the freedom of information request and several of the other statements that the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale made being based on false premises still stands.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): As well as accepting refugees into this country the United Kingdom is the second largest donor to the crisis following the United States and has given more than the rest of the European Union combined. I support the Government having a holistic, comprehensive approach. Will my right hon. Friend continue to commit the Government to providing the right help in the right places?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: it is important that we focus our help on the most vulnerable in the places that most need that support, while doing what we can as part of our work with our European partners to support those whom we have agreed to support.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Minister knows that helping children in the region and those in Europe and already here is not an either/or. Parliament told the Government to help lone child refugees in Europe when it passed the Dubs amendment last year. I know the Government did not want to agree to it, but it was passed. The way in which they have narrowed the criteria, dragged their feet, and failed even to count councils' offers properly is shameful. Will he confirm that they have helped only 200 children under the Dubs amendment, despite the fact that councils have offered nearly 500 places, and that there are tens of thousands of child refugees still alone in Europe? Italy and Greece cannot cope with what they are having to deal with. It is shameful that all he has managed to do is

1. [Official Report, 5 September 2017, Vol. 628, c. 2MC.]

send a few officials to Italy and Greece to try to arrange a few procedures for the future, when this has been going on for years. Stop the warm words about helping the most vulnerable children and actually get on with it, as Parliament said the Government should.

Brandon Lewis: We are clear about wanting to give children the right support and ensuring they have the support network to be an important and valued part of our community. It is important that we do so within what local authorities can provide, bearing in mind the restrictions and capacity they have. In 2016 we granted asylum or some form of leave to over 8,000 children, and since 2010 we have done so for some 42,000 children. We are doing our bit. We want to continue to do that work. Other countries have their own rules and regulations. I am sure the right hon. Lady will appreciate from her previous role that we have to work with them and with what works with the laws. We shall continue to do so, which is why I will visit Italy and Greece to meet my counterparts next week.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I know that everybody is incredibly passionate about this issue, but I hope that we can collectively be proud of what the country as a whole has contributed to help with the refugee crisis in Syria, because it is tremendous. I am glad that the Minister is going to visit the camps; that does rather shift someone's perception about how the picture forms overall. The Government and I have different views on Dubs, and I still maintain that more capacity is available in our councils and country to help.

Further to what my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) said, I am particularly concerned about what will happen to Dublin III as we move towards this brave new Brexit world. How many children have come to the UK this year under Dublin III already? How will we make sure that the legislation is embedded in our own laws when we leave the EU?

Brandon Lewis: I take my hon. Friend's point about local authorities. We will continue to work with them; our numbers are based on the information that they have given us through roadshows and conversations we have had directly. We will continue to look at the numbers that they feed in, as we deal with children and bring them over within our schemes and commitments.

On Dublin going forward, as I said earlier I can give an assurance that we are determined to fulfil our commitments. Obviously, as we go through the negotiations on leaving the European Union, it is too soon to say exactly what technical format that will take. However, we are determined to stick with our moral and ethical duty as we continue to provide support to the people who need it most, through the Dublin agreement.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): The Minister gets the message: the whole House wants the process to be enacted as speedily as possible. May I take him back to one of the points made by the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) about the Mediterranean summer crisis that will unfold? What additional help is being given to enable those with some responsibility in Libya to prevent boats from setting off

on the Mediterranean? Those journeys will result only in people—children, especially—dying before they reach the mainland.

Brandon Lewis: The right hon. Gentleman has vast experience in this area and he makes an important point. It is very important that in this discussion we do not lose sight of what continues to happen in the Mediterranean. We are working closely with member state authorities and all our partners, including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other non-governmental organisations, to agree what more we can do in that region.

The Prime Minister made a statement and announcement after the last EU Council meeting. We will continue to deliver on that, to make sure that we do two things: that we do not create a pull factor and that we give a clear message that people should not make that treacherous journey. That is why it is so important that we continue our phenomenal work with the £2.46 billion spend, along with the £10 million from the Department for International Development, to work with people in the region and make sure that things there are as safe and flexible as possible.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): As my right hon. Friend has set out, tackling this problem at source and dealing with the trafficking are crucial. Will he outline what the British security services and police are doing with European counterparts to track down, arrest and prosecute people traffickers who wish to profit directly by exploiting the situation?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a good point. It is important that we continue to give a clear message about the atrocious and completely unacceptable behaviour of the disgraceful traffickers out there who continue to ply their despicable trade. The European Migrant Smuggling Centre was formed in February this year in response to the increase in the number of irregular migrants. We continue to work with our partners, along with Europol and our National Crime Agency, to focus on and drive out that form of trafficking, as well as the organised crime that thrives around it. There has to be a clear message at every stage. That despicable behaviour is not acceptable and it needs to end.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): As the Minister will know from the response of the High Court to the judicial review of the consultation on the places available for children in the UK, section 67 is explicitly about families in Europe. May I ask him about a specific case that I wrote to his office about more than a week ago, involving an incredibly vulnerable Syrian family in Lille who have been wrongly refused the right to come to the UK under the Dublin regulations? I have not yet had even an acknowledgment from his office of receipt of that correspondence. Will the Minister meet me to urgently review this case of a suicidal mother and her young children and discuss how we can improve how people claim asylum and come to the UK, so that it is not only the smugglers who meet them in Calais?

Brandon Lewis: As the hon. Lady will appreciate, I am not going to comment on a particular case today, but as soon as I leave the Dispatch Box I will chase up

[Brandon Lewis]

the case she mentions and why she has not had a response. I will make sure that she gets one as soon as possible.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Last year, I visited the Zaatari refugee camp on the Syrian border in Jordan. It was clear from conversations with parents that although they did not want to risk their children's lives across the sea, they would if there were no jobs or education for them. Does the Minister agree that thanks to the UK Government's 0.7% aid contribution, we are able to keep people well and safe in their own region rather than risking squalor in the European camps?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend's excellent point highlights why it is so important for us to continue to do that work in the region. We should be proud of the time, effort and money being spent out there and of the work of the charities as well as the Government in making sure that we do everything we can to help people in the region and deal with the challenges at source. In that way, we can prevent people not only from taking the chance to come to places that are not appropriate for them but from making that treacherous journey and giving profit to human traffickers in the first place.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I draw the House's attention to the fact that I am to be an unpaid director of the Human Trafficking Foundation; that will appear shortly in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

What would the Minister say to Tory-controlled Nottinghamshire County Council, which on Monday suspended support for unaccompanied children despite having places available? One of the senior councillors said that it was because the children come here of their own volition. Is that not simply a disgrace? Is it not also a disgrace that they have turned around and blamed the Government? Is it not about time that the Minister got his act together with his Tory colleagues and stopped unaccompanied children fleeing war and persecution taking the consequences of this disastrous Government policy?

Brandon Lewis: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the role that he is about to take up, and I look forward to working with him to do something about what we agree on: driving out human trafficking completely.

I am pleased that a Conservative authority took control of Nottinghamshire County Council a few weeks ago in local elections. I learned many years ago at this Dispatch Box to make sure that I understood the full details and both sides of any particular case before I comment on it. I will look into what the hon. Gentleman said and talk to Nottinghamshire County Council before I comment any further.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) talked of "hollow words"; in fact, the Government's response has been generous—it is, if I may say so, a typically British generous response to this crisis. Will my right hon. Friend confirm the number of refugees that this country is helping and compare it with the equivalent figures for other EU states?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Just this week, the Home Secretary and I launched and put extra funding into the community support project. We have seen phenomenal work, which people should be proud of, in charities and communities, developing and learning from colleagues from countries around the world such as Canada. I appreciate the time that the Canadian Minister gave us to discuss the issues. My hon. Friend is right: last year alone, we took in more than any other country in Europe. We should be proud of that, but we are clear that we want to build on that. We should be very proud of the fact that we are looking to bring over 23,000 people, to make sure that we are helping the most vulnerable—including the many thousands of children who have already come over and others who will continue to come.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The Minister will have on his desk petitions from children at St Matthew's Primary School and Moss Park Infants School in my constituency asking him to respect the rights of all refugee children under the United Nations convention on the rights of the child—their right to an education, in particular. What assessment is he really making of the quality and experience of education that children are getting in camps? Is it not time that we brought children here to settle them and ensure that they have the chance to develop a happy and successful childhood?

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Lady is effectively agreeing with the point I made earlier. We are working with local authorities to make sure that when children come over, they are given the right support and the home that they deserve, to help them be an important part of the community and give them a fruitful and fulfilling life.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Is the Minister aware that unaccompanied minors are again congregating in and around Calais? But without the camps, there are now even fewer resources. Safe Passage UK and Refugees Welcome are organising a cross-party group of MPs to go there next month. If the Minister is listening, perhaps he would also like to go there to explain what he and his French counterpart are doing to ensure that children with rights under Dublin or Dubs come to this country for safety, rather than stay on the streets of Calais?

Brandon Lewis: Not only have I met Safe Passage UK and explained the slightly different view that I saw when I was in Calais about 10 days ago, but I am discussing the matter with French authorities and the operators out there.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Many of us do not understand why the Government chose to put a limit on the Dubs scheme based on a rather half-baked consultation with local authorities at one particular time. Why do the Government not continue to engage with local authorities and take proactive steps to increase their capacity to take unaccompanied children, including by implementing fully funded places?

Brandon Lewis: First, that is what the amendment and the legislation said we should do. Secondly, I come back to a point I have made a few times. When we bring people—including families and, most importantly,

vulnerable children—over, it is important that we have the facilities and capacity to give them the best start in life. I come back to the point I made earlier. Yes, people will want to play politics with numbers, as some Opposition Members unfortunately do, but the reality is that there is a child behind every number. We need to ensure that if we are bringing children over, we can give them the best possible start. The hon. Gentleman should be proud, as I outlined to the Scottish Minister when I met her last week, that we have already granted asylum or some other form of leave to more than 8,000 children. We have to remember that.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): Europol has estimated that more than 10,000 unaccompanied child refugees have disappeared in Europe over the past two years. What steps are the Government taking to address that and to support our EU partners in improving protection for unaccompanied children at risk of trafficking or exploitation?

Brandon Lewis: There are two sides to this. First, we must ensure that we do not create a pull factor that encourages more children and other individuals to take that treacherous journey, which simply helps the profits of the traffickers we all hope to see driven out. It is also about working with our partners and the National Crime Agency, which is working with Europol, to ensure that we track down and catch the people who commit these awful crimes.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Organisations such as Refuweege are doing a great deal to welcome asylum seekers and refugees to Glasgow. What can the Minister do to ensure that there is adequate funding for local authorities so that those who arrive with nothing get all the support they require to lead a life with dignity?

Brandon Lewis: I fully agree that there is some really good work in Glasgow. I had that conversation with the Scottish Minister last week. A number of local authorities around the country are doing such work. It comes back to the point I have been making: it is very important that we work with local authorities to ensure that they have the capacity, resources, ability and properties to give people who come over the right start in life and the protection, security and safety they deserve.

Mr Speaker: As the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) prepares to step down from the leadership of his party, I thank him not only for his question today, but for his unfailing courtesy and his personal support for the Chair over a very long period, for which I have reason to be very grateful.

Point of Order

1.53 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You will know that page 448 of “Erskine May” states:

“It is not in order to refer to persons in the galleries”.

This is a very old tradition of the House that goes back to clearing the Galleries by saying, “I spy strangers.” The ruling has been strictly enforced in our time, but in recent years lots of Members have referred to people in the Gallery. It was particularly nice the other day when my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) referred to her mother in the Gallery as she paid tribute to her during her maiden speech. The Prime Minister referred to people in the Gallery today, and sometimes we refer to international guests. Is not now the time to completely and utterly get rid of this rather silly and old-fashioned rule?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is, not for the first time, spot on. The prohibition on reference to those attending our proceedings—let me say it candidly—no longer applies. It dates back to a time when the act of noticing such attendance led to the Galleries being cleared, since public attendance was not, in formal terms, allowed for at all. For some time, I have not sought to enforce the rule, nor—to the best of my knowledge and understanding—has it been enforced in Westminster Hall. I hope that Members are adapting gently to this new regime. Reference to visitors must be brief and directly related to proceedings. Such references should not be phrased so as to be in any way intimidating or to seek to influence debate. The House’s guidance, including “Erskine May”, will be gradually updated to reflect this change. I hope that is helpful.

I know that other Members have a desire to raise points of order. I would rather not take further points of order now. We ordinarily take points of order after statements and I see no good reason to change that practice today. I took this particular point of order because I thought it best that I should be here in the Chair, and the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) was here. I am about to leave and the Chairman of Ways and Means will chair the pensions statement, towards the end of which I will return. Members who are poised and perched, ready to raise their points of order on other matters, can do so at that time.

Pensions

1.56 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr David Gauke): With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on pensions.

Last year, the Government commissioned the Government Actuary and John Cridland CBE to produce independent reports to inform the first review of the state pension age required under the Pensions Act 2014. I am grateful to Mr Cridland for his contribution in producing a thorough and comprehensive review. Over the course of his review, evidence was put forward by a wide range of people and organisations. I am grateful to everyone who took the time to engage. Today I am publishing the Government's report on this review.

The Government are determined to deliver dignity and security in retirement, fairness across the generations, and the certainty that people need to plan for old age. In the report, I set out how we will achieve these things. As part of this publication, we have set out a coherent strategy targeted at strengthening and sustaining the UK's pensions system for many decades to come. This is about the Government taking responsible action in response to growing demographic and fiscal pressures. That is why I am today announcing the Government's intention to accept the key recommendation of the Cridland review and increase the state pension age from 67 to 68 over two years from 2037. This brings forward the increase by seven years from its legislated date of 2044 to 2046, in line with the recommendation made by John Cridland, and following careful consideration of the evidence on life expectancy, fairness and public finances.

When the modern state pension was introduced in 1948, a 65-year-old could expect to live for a further 13½ years. By 2007, when further legislation was introduced to increase state pension age, this had risen to around 21 years, and it is expected to be nearly 25 years in 2037. As the Cridland review makes clear, the increases in life expectancy are to be celebrated. I also want to make it clear that, even under the timetable for the rise I am announcing today, future pensioners can still expect to spend on average more than 22 years in receipt of the state pension. But increasing longevity also presents challenges for the Government. There is a balance to be struck between the funding of the state pension in years to come while also ensuring fairness for future generations of taxpayers.

The approach I am setting out today is the responsible and fair course of action. Failing to act now in the light of compelling evidence of demographic pressures would be irresponsible, and place an extremely unfair burden on younger generations. Although an ageing population means that state pension spending will rise under any of the possible timetables we have considered, the action we are taking reduces this rise by 0.4% of GDP in 2039-40. That is equivalent to a saving of around £400 per household, based on the number of households today.

Our proposed timetable will save £74 billion to 2045-46 when compared with current plans, and more than £250 billion to 2045-46 when compared with capping the rise in state pension age at 66 in 2020, as the Labour party has advocated. It is the duty of a responsible Government to keep the state pension sustainable and maintain fairness between generations. That is why the

Government are aiming for the proportion of adult life spent in receipt of state pension to be "up to 32%". This is a fair deal for current and future pensioners.

We will carry out a further review before legislating to bring forward the rise in state pension age to 68, to enable consideration of the latest life expectancy projections and to allow us to evaluate the effects of rises in state pension age already under way. This Government have a proven track record on helping people plan for their retirement. Alongside our automatic enrolment scheme, which has already brought the benefits of private pensions to nearly 10 million people since its inception, we have also set out plans to enhance the availability of impartial consumer advice through schemes such as the single financial guidance body and the pensions dashboard. Today, people have a much better idea of what their pension will be, bringing more certainty and clarity. That is something the Government will build on; making it easier for people to seek advice and make effective financial decisions.

I want Britain to be the best country in the world in which to grow old, where everyone enjoys the dignity and security they deserve in retirement. At the same time, we need to ensure that the costs of an ageing population are shared out fairly, without placing an unfair tax burden on future generations. To deliver that, we need to make responsible choices on the state pension age, and that is what the Government are doing today.

2.1 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, and for arranging to let me have sight of it 30 minutes ago.

Yesterday, the renowned expert on life expectancy, Professor Sir Michael Marmot, described how a century-long rise in life expectancy was

"pretty close to having ground to a halt"

since 2010, when this Government began their failing austerity programme. Last week, evidence from Public Health England showed how deep inequalities in healthy life expectancy remain, both regionally and between different groups in our society, including women, disabled people and black and minority ethnic groups. It is therefore astonishing that today this Government choose to implement their plans to speed up the state pension age increase to 68.

Most pensioners will now spend their retirement battling a toxic cocktail of ill health, with men expecting to drift into ill health at 63, five years earlier than this proposed quickened state pension age of 68, and women expecting to see signs of ill health at 64. This national picture masks even worse regional inequalities. Men who live in Nottingham are likely to suffer ill health from the age of 57, a full 11 years earlier, under this Government's shortened plans, than a state pension age of 68. The Government talk about making Britain fairer, but their pensions policy, whether on the injustice that 1950s-born women are facing or on today's proposal to increase the state pension age to 68, is anything but fair.

The Government claim that it is young people who will have to bear the burden of the state pension, but in fact it is the young who have to bear the burden of the cuts that they are facing already—cuts to education,

housing and working age social security—as well as the Government's endless extensions of the state pension age. Sadly, like much of the Conservatives' policy platform, their approach to this matter appears to have changed little since their election manifesto. At that time, they promised to

“ensure that the state pension age reflects increases in life expectancy, while protecting each generation fairly.”

How does today's statement meet the promise made in the manifesto, given the evidence on life expectancy that we have seen in the past week? What conversations has the Minister had with his new friends in the Democratic Unionist party, whose manifesto promised advocating “for the interests of our older people”?

Perhaps, as the Pensions Minister astonishingly suggested in a debate earlier this month, the Government will force people in their mid-60s to seek out an apprenticeship. A constituent of mine, hearing that suggestion, visited our local jobcentre in Oldham, only to find that the adviser had no idea of any apprenticeship support or Government employment support available to a woman of her age. The Pensions Minister's position was not one shared by Mr Cridland, who suggested that the social security system must be able to support those who find themselves unable to work. Perhaps Mr Cridland was unaware of the seven years of slash-and-burn policy on our social security system; the so-called “safety net” is increasingly inadequate, driving up pensioner poverty by 300,000.

Labour wants a different approach. In our manifesto, we committed to leaving the state pension age at 66 while we undertake a review into healthy life expectancy, arduous work and the potential of a flexible state pension age. We want an evidence-based approach to build a state pensions system that brings security for the many, not just the privileged few, so that we can all enjoy a healthy retirement.

Mr Gauke: Even by the standards of the Labour party, its approach to the state pension age is reckless, short-sighted and irresponsible. When the evidence in front of us shows that life expectancy will continue to increase by a little over one year every eight years that pass, fixing the state pension age at 66, as advocated by the Labour party, demonstrates a complete failure to appreciate the situation in front of us. Compared with the timetable set out by this Government, Labour's approach will add £250 billion to national debt. Let us put that in context: it is almost twice as much as was disbursed into the financial sector following the financial crisis. Let us put it another way: spending in 2040 on the state pension would be £20 billion a year higher under Labour's plans than under the plans we are setting out—that is almost twice the Home Office budget. Where on earth is this money coming from? Even the—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. In fairness, I want to hear both sides so that we can make a judgment, and I am finding it very hard to hear the Minister. This is in a reply to the shadow Minister, so we all ought to be able to hear the answer.

Mr Gauke: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Even the last Labour Government, who were not known for their fiscal rectitude, legislated to increase the state pension age to 68. Yet on top of a long list of unaffordable spending pledges, the Labour party now happily makes

pledges on the state pension that it must know will cause unsustainable damage to the public finances.

The facts are, based on the most up-to-date evidence, and clearly set out in the Government Actuary's report and John Cridland's report, that life expectancy is going up. Healthy life expectancy at the age of 65 is also going up. The Government have to face up to this long-term challenge and not pretend that it does not exist. We should celebrate increased life expectancy, but it has consequences for fiscal sustainability that cannot be ignored. The Cridland review is a serious piece of work with a clear recommendation on the pension age. In contrast with the Labour party, we will act responsibly and accept that recommendation.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for his statement. The Labour party used to work on a consensual basis, given the facts, but it has now departed from that. He is aware that we have a proud track record in reform, for example, in respect of automatic enrolment and the single tier. We also got rid of the default retirement age, where people were forced to retire when they did not want to do so. It is the Conservatives who have a proud record. The single figure that stands out starkly from this review is that if we do nothing about this, it will cost £250 billion more. That is not just a figure, as it will be borne by future generations, as they will have to pay excessive moneys. Given that the Labour party at the last election promised to get rid of the student debt and now reneges on that, does my right hon. Friend think that Labour will be doing the same very shortly on this one?

Mr Gauke: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. He makes some good points about the work the Government have done over the past seven years in terms of fuller working lives and helping more people to work longer, and he has a proud personal record in what he did on that as Secretary of State. He is absolutely right to highlight the irresponsibility of the position Labour Members had at the last election. Just as they have walked away from a deeply irresponsible position on student debt, I hope they will walk away from a deeply irresponsible position on the state pension age.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of the statement. I can see why the Department for Work and Pensions did not want to publish this report by the date it was supposed to have been published by—7 May—because it would undoubtedly have lost the Conservatives more seats than they did lose.

The SNP opposes plans to raise the state pension age above 66. We also have concerns about the fact that the Government have chosen the 32% rather than the 33.3%, which was the more gentle of the scenarios presented in the Cridland review. I am lucky enough to be a few days inside the 69 group, so I will get to retire at 69 rather than 70, which people a couple of weeks younger than me will retire at if the full extent of the 32% in the Cridland review is implemented.

The SNP continues to call for the establishment of an independent savings and pensions commission. The Government are not doing enough to recognise demographic differences across the United Kingdom,

[*Kirsty Blackman*]

and an independent review would look at those and take them into full account.

Mr Gauke: John Cridland looked at exactly those issues and concluded that the divergence within the regions and nations on this matter was greater than the divergence between them. However, if the Scottish Government believe that there should be more support from the state for those approaching retirement age, they will have the power to provide it. If they wish to provide that support in Scotland—effectively, providing support a year or two years earlier than in the rest of the United Kingdom—they have the power to do that. I would not particularly advise them to do it, but that is their decision, and I really do not think there is a complaint to be raised with the UK Government on that front.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for his statement. He is right to be tackling the issues of intergenerational fairness, but retirement is not about the state alone. What other measures, alongside this one on intergenerational fairness, will he propose to ensure that younger people can save for their retirement alongside state provision?

Mr Gauke: One thing I would highlight, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) did a moment ago, is what we have done on auto-enrolment. That means 10 million more people saving for retirement, which is a huge step forward. I am delighted with the success of auto-enrolment—the very low opt-out rates—and that is one example of how the Government are ensuring that people will have a dignified retirement, but we must remember that the public finances need to be in good order as well.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Bearing in mind regional health inequalities, what steps will the Government introduce in terms of social security to support those who will not be able to work until this later age?

Mr Gauke: As a country we spend very large sums—something like £50 billion a year—on support for people with health and disability issues, and we will obviously continue to do that. That is the best way of supporting people who have health difficulties, rather than by having a lower state pension age, which would be unaffordable.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State, although perhaps with not too much enthusiasm, for delaying my retirement by a year. I think I am in exactly the range of people whose retirement has just been delayed. What plans does he have to learn from the issues that arose from previous increases in the retirement age about communicating to people that this change will affect them?

Mr Gauke: First, I should say that the longer we can delay my hon. Friend's retirement, the better that will be all round.

In terms of communicating with those affected, we are giving something like 20 years' notice today, but as

we legislate in due course, it will of course be necessary to communicate properly with those who are affected. [*Interruption.*] It will be done properly. It is proper that we communicate with those people, and we will do so.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): What steps is the Secretary of State's Department taking to ensure that older people are not subject to the Government's punitive sanctions regime?

Mr Gauke: The number of sanctions is down by about half in the last year. We have a welfare system that has at its heart the principle of conditionality for many benefits, and to enforce conditions it is necessary to have a sanctions regime. However, the vast majority—something like 98%—of benefit claimants are not sanctioned.

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): With respect to the statement, my right hon. Friend will be aware that 300 people reached the age of 100 in 1952, when Her Majesty the Queen came to the throne; last year, it was over 13,000. Is he surprised, as I am, at the irresponsibility and recklessness of the Labour party in resisting some of these measures?

Mr Gauke: I do not know whether I am surprised any more by anything that the Labour party does, but it is disappointing. The reality is that we have an ageing population, just as every similar country does. We all have to respond to the facts, and the facts are that, as the population ages, and as life expectancy—and indeed healthy life expectancy—improves, it is necessary for the state pension age to reflect that. To deny that is just to deny common sense.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I had hoped that the Minister was coming here today because he had seen the light; that he had realised that the women from the 1950s have been dealt a terrible set of cards by this Government; that he was going to compensate them; that he was going to make good on the injustice that has been done to them; that he was going to make sure that every single person who was not even notified by the Government that they would be caught by the proposed measures would be compensated; and that he was finally going to acknowledge that women in my constituency who are in their 60s, who say to me that they are completely clapped out because they have had tough, laborious jobs all their lives, are the very people one of his Ministers said should now take up an apprenticeship. How dull are Ministers?

Mr Gauke: I am not sure I would want to call my constituents clapped out, but there we go. The position when it comes to those born in the 1950s, just as with this announcement on those born in the 1970s, is that we have to balance the need and the desire to provide a dignified retirement with the fact that state pensions have to be paid for, and it is unfair on taxpayers if we do not have a state pension age that reflects life expectancy. That is all we are saying, and it seems to me to be very hard to argue against.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The Secretary of State is absolutely right to go ahead with the main recommendation in the Cridland report, which, critically, gives advance notice of more than 20 years to those who will be affected, thereby distinguishing this

Government's record from that of the previous Labour Government, who failed to communicate adequately their changes to women's state pension provision. Will my right hon. Friend confirm, first, that there will be a comprehensive communication programme to make sure everybody knows about these changes in advance and, secondly, whether the Government accept the Cridland report's other recommendations, on means-tested benefits, working past the state pension age and the auto-enrolment review?

Mr Gauke: We are looking carefully at the other Cridland recommendations. Obviously, there are issues that have an impact across Government, but it is right to move swiftly on the key recommendation—on the state pension age—to give people as much advance notice as possible. However, my hon. Friend makes a good point about the communication process and so on, and those things will need to be determined nearer the time. As I said, we are 20 years away from the point at which this change takes effect, but we are determined to ensure that it is brought to the attention of all those who are affected.

Mr Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry North West) (Lab): On the issue of the WASPI women raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), the essence of their complaint, in some respects, is the fact that some of them were not even notified of the change that had occurred. Some were notified late, some were notified after it happened, and some received no notification at all. This point has been put time and again to the Government, and it is about time they came up with an answer to it. Instead of driving the WASPI women to take court action, why do not the Government give them a fair deal?

Mr Gauke: Some 5 million letters were sent out to the addresses that the Government had. As I say, the changes made in the 1995 Act were many, many years in advance of when they took effect. None of those women born in the 1950s had had their state pension age put back by more than 18 months by the Pensions Act 2011.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Demographic pressures are felt acutely across East Sussex, where we have the most 85-year-olds, most of whom live in my constituency. With life expectancy increasing at birth and at older ages, can my right hon. Friend confirm that, looking ahead, people, including those who live in my constituency, can expect to receive more state pension over their lifetimes than generations before?

Mr Gauke: That is absolutely right. Looking ahead, every generation will spend more years, on average, receiving a state pension than the previous generation. That is a very good thing, but it is right that we get the balance right. If Governments do not address this issue, we end up with a crisis, end up having to move quickly, and end up with sharp increases in the state pension age. That is what we are avoiding through the responsible approach we are taking today.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): I am the father of three young daughters. Office for National Statistics figures say that one of them will live to be 100, and that

by the time they retire, there will be only two workers in this country for every retired person. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is blindingly obvious that we need to take the steps that he has outlined today? It should not be a cause of regret—it should be a cause of celebration that our children and grandchildren are going to live to such a grand old age—and it should be treated on a cross-party basis as the perfectly responsible action that any Government should be taking.

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend puts it very well. It is a cause of celebration that life expectancy is improving, but along with changes in life expectancy, inevitably, there are changes in the state pension age, as the change announced today demonstrates.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that thanks to the financial responsibility shown hitherto, we have managed in the past seven years to increase state pensions quite generously by £1,250 a year, and that is why pensioner poverty has gone down?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In order to do that, we need to take responsible decisions on the public finances as a whole, including on the state pension age. That is what we will continue to do, even if we will not get Labour's support.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): As someone who had their state pension age increased to 68 back in 2007, along with everyone slightly older than me and everyone younger than me, I have listened with incredulity to some of the comments made this afternoon. How does this compare with the situation in other countries—for example, the Republic of Ireland? Presumably it is not just a challenge unique to the United Kingdom.

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are seeing increases in the state pension age in the Republic of Ireland, in the Netherlands, and in Denmark. It is what responsible Governments do and what responsible parties support. Unfortunately we have only one responsible party in this country.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I pay tribute to the Cridland report, which is, in part, as excellent as it is because John Cridland was educated at Boston Grammar School in my constituency. Does the Secretary of State agree that by taking responsible, brave decisions, and having reviews such as the Cridland review, we avoid the situation that countries such as Italy find themselves in, where the pension age has to be increased, in one go, by four and a half years? This is the responsible thing to do and the fair thing to do.

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We could have put this off, failed to address it, or kicked it into the long grass, but it is important for the future of this country that we have a Government who are prepared to take these long-term decisions, securing intergenerational fairness and ensuring that we provide more certainty to pensioners that there will not be the need for the sudden changes that may be seen elsewhere.

Points of Order

2.25 pm

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday's Order Paper said that the debate on drugs could continue until 7 o'clock. The final speaker sat down four minutes early. The normal practice in this House is then to use that time for other speakers to contribute. It was particularly interesting that the final speaker, the Minister, had denied interventions on the grounds that she did not have enough time to finish. The Standing Orders are not clear on this point. Is it not right that we get some definition of past practice in relation to cases where speakers do not have anything else left to say and other Members can contribute to what would then be a full debate?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for his characteristic courtesy in giving me advance notice somewhat earlier of his intention to raise it. I am loth to quibble with the hon. Gentleman, who is a considerable authority on matters parliamentary, as evidence by the well-thumbed tome on how to be a Back Bencher of which he is the distinguished author. That said, I am inclined slightly to quibble with him on his proposition that it is normal or commonplace, if a ministerial wind-up concludes early, for other Members to be invited to contribute. In my experience, that is not commonplace. I would not say that it never happens, because you can almost always find an example of something if you try hard enough, but certainly when I am in the Chair I tend to work on the assumption that the ministerial wind-up is indeed the conclusion of the debate.

I note what the hon. Gentleman says about the conclusion of this debate taking place earlier than listed on the Order Paper, although I am sure that he will readily accept that the *Official Report*—that is to say, the verbatim account of what was said; there is no question of misleading anybody—will show that the debate concluded a little early. The Chair does not normally allow a further Back-Bench speech, and—this is not directed at the hon. Gentleman; it is just a wider point—certainly not from a Member who had already made a substantial speech in the debate.

As for interventions, the hon. Gentleman, as the author of "How To Be An MP"—available in all good bookshops, and of which I am myself a noted admirer, as he knows—he will appreciate that a Member is free to take interventions or not. I note what he tells me—that the Minister said, "No, I can't take interventions because I haven't time"—but that is not something on which the Chair can rule. Sometimes Ministers can be a tad neurotic in these circumstances, it is true, as can sometimes, perhaps, shadow Ministers, but that is not a matter for the Chair. Whether the Member seeking to intervene likes it or not, the situation is as I have described.

Let me take this opportunity, in a positive spirit, to encourage all new Members—I am not sure the Whips would agree about this—to read the hon. Gentleman's books on being a good parliamentarian. *[Interruption.]* "No!" says a Government Whip, chuntering from a sedentary position, in evident horror at what bad habits new members of the flock might pick up. I think that they are fine tomes. The hon. Gentleman has used his position as a Back-Bench Member to stand up for his

constituents and to fight for the principles in which he believes. That has sometimes pleased his party and sometimes not, but that is what we are supposed to get here—Members of Parliament who speak to their principles and their consciences. That is a good thing, and, as he knows, I like to encourage it. In fact, when I was a Back Bencher, I had a relationship with my Whips characterised by trust and understanding—I didn't trust them and they didn't understand me.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday, the Department of Health accounts were finally laid before the House, after a week of to-ing and fro-ing that prompted no actual changes, as I understand it, to them. The Comptroller and Auditor General has raised some concerns about the accounts. I seek your guidance on two points, Mr Speaker. First, the accounts have again been laid late. Last year, they were laid on the final day on which Parliament sat; this time, they were laid only a couple of days before the final day. Secondly, what can we do to ensure that a Minister turns up to the House to explain the Department of Health accounts and address the financial concerns that many Members of the House, and not least the Public Accounts Committee, have about the Government's handling of health finances?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady, who has put her concern on the record. It will have been heard by those on the Treasury Bench, and I suspect that the contents of her point of order will wing their way to Health Ministers ere long. The truth of the matter is that there is no resolution of her grievance available from the Chair. The Select Committee on Health may wish to return to this matter if it is dissatisfied, and the Public Accounts Committee, of which the hon. Lady is herself the distinguished Chair, may wish to pursue this matter further. Realistically, I fear that that will have to wait until September, although if the hon. Lady—she is of course a London Member, and a very assiduous attender—is present in her place tomorrow for the summer Adjournment debate and wishes to expatiate further on her concerns, she may well find she is able to catch the eye of the Chair.

If there are no further points of order—I think that there are none—we come now to the presentation of Bills.

BILLS PRESENTED

ASSAULTS ON EMERGENCY WORKERS (OFFENCES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Chris Bryant, supported by Holly Lynch, Stephen Crabb, Mr Graham Brady, Ms Harriet Harman, Mr Dominic Grieve, Jo Stevens, Diana Johnson, Tulip Siddiq, Lilian Greenwood, Carolyn Harris and Philip Davies, presented a Bill to make provision about offences when perpetrated against emergency workers, and persons assisting such workers; to make certain offences aggravated when perpetrated against such workers in the exercise of their duty; to require persons suspected of certain assaults against such workers which may pose a health risk to provide intimate samples and to make it an offence, without reasonable excuse, to refuse to provide such samples; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 20 October, and to be printed (Bill 7).

MENTAL HEALTH UNITS (USE OF FORCE) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mr Steve Reed, supported by Norman Lamb, Mr Charles Walker, Jim Shannon, Keith Vaz, Sarah Jones, Mr David Lammy, Dr Rosena Allin-Khan, Marsha De Cordova, Caroline Lucas, Clive Lewis and Heidi Allen, presented a Bill to make provision about the oversight and management of the appropriate use of force in relation to people in mental health units and similar institutions; to make provision about the use of body cameras by police officers in the course of duties in relation to people in mental health units; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 3 November, and to be printed (Bill 8).

PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCIES (AMENDMENT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Afzal Khan, supported by Joanna Cherry, Hannah Bardell, Mr Alistair Carmichael, Liz Saville Roberts, Lady Hermon and Caroline Lucas, presented a Bill to amend the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986 to make provision about the number and size of parliamentary constituencies in the United Kingdom; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 1 December, and to be printed (Bill 9).

HOMES (FITNESS FOR HUMAN HABITATION AND LIABILITY FOR HOUSING STANDARDS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Ms Karen Buck, supported by Luciana Berger, Jess Phillips, Matthew Pennycook, Shabana Mahmood, Heidi Allen, Marsha De Cordova, Andy Slaughter, Alex Sobel, Kate Green, Diana Johnson and Clive Efford, presented a Bill to amend the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985 to require that residential rented accommodation is provided and maintained in a state of fitness for human habitation; to amend the Building Act 1984 to make provision about the liability for works on residential accommodation that do not comply with Building Regulations; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 19 January 2018, and to be printed (Bill 10).

Mr Speaker: Friday 19 January is a splendid day—it is my birthday.

CIVIL PARTNERSHIPS, MARRIAGES AND DEATHS (REGISTRATION ETC.) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Tim Loughton, supported by Mr Graham Brady, Dame Caroline Spelman, Mrs Anne Main, Frank Field, Heidi Allen, Caroline Lucas and Antoinette Sandbach, presented a Bill to provide that opposite sex couples may enter a civil partnership; to make provision about the registration of the names of the mother of each party to a marriage or civil partnership; to make provision about the registration of stillborn deaths; to give coroners the power to investigate stillborn deaths; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 2 February 2018, and to be printed (Bill 11).

ORGAN DONATION (DEEMED CONSENT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mr Geoffrey Robinson, supported by Paul Flynn, Sir Vince Cable, Caroline Lucas, Michael Fabricant, Liz Saville Roberts, Dr Philippa Whitford, Kate Green, Sir Oliver Letwin, Jim Shannon, Angela Rayner and Crispin Blunt, presented a Bill to enable persons in England to withhold consent for organ donation and transplantation; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2018, and to be printed (Bill 12).

REFUGEES (FAMILY REUNION) (No. 2) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Angus Brendan MacNeil, supported by Stephen Twigg, Robert Neill, Stuart C. McDonald, Tulip Siddiq, Tim Farron, Jim Shannon, Caroline Lucas, Anna Soubry, Ian Blackford, Stella Creasy and Hywel Williams, presented a Bill to make provision for leave to enter or remain in the United Kingdom to be granted to the family members of refugees and of people granted humanitarian protection; to provide for legal aid to be made available for such family reunion cases; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 March 2018, and to be printed (Bill 13).

PARENTAL BEREAVEMENT (LEAVE AND PAY) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Kevin Hollinrake, supported by Will Quince, Sir Nicholas Soames, Craig Tracey, Carolyn Harris, Antoinette Sandbach, Jeremy Quin, Huw Merriman, Victoria Prentis, Diana Johnson and Rebecca Pow, presented a Bill to make provision about leave and pay for employees whose children have died.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 20 October, and to be printed (Bill 14).

REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE (YOUNG PEOPLE'S ENFRANCHISEMENT AND EDUCATION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Vicky Foxcroft, on behalf of Jim McMahon, supported by Jeremy Corbyn, Tom Watson, Peter Kyle, Diana Johnson, Lucy Powell, Sir Peter Bottomley, Stephen Gethins, Jo Swinson, Jonathan Edwards and Caroline Lucas, presented a Bill to reduce the voting age to 16 in parliamentary and other elections; to make provision about young people's education in citizenship and the constitution; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 3 November, and to be printed (Bill 15).

OVERSEAS ELECTORS BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Glyn Davies presented a Bill to make provision extending the basis on which British citizens outside the UK qualify to participate in parliamentary elections; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2018, and to be printed (Bill 16).

PARKING (CODE OF PRACTICE) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Greg Knight, supported by Kevin Brennan, Pete Wishart, Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg, Daniel Zeichner and Graham Jones, presented a Bill to make provision for

and in connection with a code of practice containing guidance about the operation and management of private parking facilities; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 2 February 2018, and to be printed (Bill 17).

Mr Speaker: I think the nation should be aware that, perhaps because the right hon. Gentleman's Bill relates to parking, he is sporting a notably colourful tie, which features a very large number of cars. Knowing his penchant, I assume that they are classic cars.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): They are, indeed.

UNPAID TRIAL WORK PERIODS (PROHIBITION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Stewart Malcolm McDonald, supported by Ian Murray, Lady Hermon, Caroline Lucas, Christine Jardine, Patricia Gibson, David Linden, Alison Thewliss, Chris Stephens, Patrick Grady, Carol Monaghan and Martin Whitfield, presented a Bill to prohibit unpaid trial work periods in certain circumstances; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 March 2018, and to be printed (Bill 18).

PRISONS (INTERFERENCE WITH WIRELESS TELEGRAPHY) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Esther McVey, supported by Andrew Selous, David T. C. Davies, Kirstene Hair, Trudy Harrison, Philip Davies, Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg, Mr Christopher Chope, Paul Farrelly, Mr Kevan Jones, Mr Stephen Hepburn and Sir Edward Davey, presented a Bill to make provision about interference with wireless telegraphy in prisons and similar institutions.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 1 December, and to be printed (Bill 19).

STALKING PROTECTION BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Dr Sarah Wollaston, supported by Mrs Cheryl Gillan, Ms Harriet Harman, Alex Chalk, Antoinette Sandbach, Luciana Berger, Richard Graham, Victoria Prentis, Maria Caulfield, Mims Davies, Jess Phillips and Vicky Ford, presented a Bill to make provision for protecting persons from risks associated with stalking; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 19 January 2018, and to be printed (Bill 20).

Mr Speaker: Friday 19 January—I do hope I am here.

EMPLOYMENT AND WORKERS' RIGHTS BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Stephanie Peacock, supported by Louise Haigh, Rachel Reeves, Dan Jarvis, Ellie Reeves, Clive Lewis, Lisa Nandy, Jo Stevens, Ian Mearns, Mike Amesbury, Laura Smith and Chris Stephens, presented a Bill to make provision about employment conditions and workers' rights; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 27 April 2018, and to be printed (Bill 21).

LICENSING OF TAXIS AND PRIVATE HIRE VEHICLES (SAFEGUARDING AND ROAD SAFETY) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Daniel Zeichner presented a Bill to make provision about the exercise of taxi and private hire vehicle licensing functions in relation to persons about whom there are safeguarding or road safety concerns; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 2 February 2018, and to be printed (Bill 22).

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION (EXTENSION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Andy Slaughter, supported by Dan Jarvis, Jo Stevens, David Hanson, Ian C. Lucas, Ruth Cadbury, Christian Matheson, Clive Efford, Stephen Timms, Ms Karen Buck, Louise Haigh and Kate Green, presented a Bill to make providers of social housing, local safeguarding children boards, Electoral Registration Officers, Returning Officers and the Housing Ombudsman public authorities for the purposes of the Freedom of Information Act 2000; to make information held by persons contracting with public authorities subject to the Freedom of Information Act 2000; to extend the powers of the Information Commissioner; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 June 2018, and to be printed (Bill 23).

REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE (YOUNG PEOPLE'S ENFRANCHISEMENT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Peter Kyle, supported by Nicky Morgan, Norman Lamb, Sir Peter Bottomley, Rachel Reeves, Ruth Smeeth, Wes Streeting, Anna Turley, Holly Lynch, Conor McGinn, Caroline Lucas and Jim McMahon, presented a Bill to reduce the voting age to 16 in parliamentary and other elections; to make provision for auto-enrolment onto the electoral register for people aged 16 to 24; to make provision about the use of educational establishments as polling stations; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 11 May 2018, and to be printed (Bill 24).

PHYSICIAN ASSOCIATES (REGULATION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Anne Marie Morris presented a Bill to make provision for the regulation of physician associates; to make physician associate a protected title; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 26 October 2018, and to be printed (Bill 25).

NATIONAL LIVING WAGE (EXTENSION TO YOUNG PEOPLE) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Holly Lynch, supported by Chris Bryant, Jo Stevens, Anna Turley, Wes Streeting, Jess Phillips, Tulip Siddiq, Ruth Smeeth, Gareth Snell, Conor McGinn, Naz Shah and Graham Jones, presented a Bill to extend the National Living Wage to people aged 18 to 24.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 6 July 2018, and to be printed (Bill 26).

Mr Speaker: I thank colleagues for their patience.

Tuition Fees

Emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

2.37 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Government's decision to increase tuition fees implemented by the Higher Education (Basic Amount) (England) Regulations 2016 (S.I., 2016, No. 1205) and the Higher Education (Higher Amount) (England) Regulations 2016 (S.I., 2016, No. 1206).

Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this emergency debate. It is a shame that it has been necessary when we have a First Secretary of State who called for a national debate on tuition fees, a Brexit Secretary who says that this House always votes on statutory instruments and a Justice Secretary who, when Leader of the House, actually accepted the need for a debate and a vote. Of course, that was before the election; 100 days later, this weak and wobbly Government do not even trust their own Back Benchers with a vote on their own policies.

The Higher Education and Research Act 2017, which the Education Secretary and the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation took through this House, is very clear on the matter. Paragraph 5 of schedule 2 states that the upper limit of fees can rise only when

“each House of Parliament has passed a resolution that, with effect from a date specified in the resolution, the higher amount should be increased”.

Will the Minister guarantee that no students will have to pay the higher fees until both Houses have passed such a resolution allowing it, and will he tell us when the votes on these resolutions will take place?

The Minister seems to be one member of the Government who does not want this vote, judging from his Twitter feed last night. He said that plans to raise fees were first outlined in July 2016, and that we have since had extensive debate. Perhaps he forgot that the plans were announced on the last day before summer recess last year, and were snuck out as one of 30 written statements on that day. The statutory instrument was then put before the House just before Christmas last year. Not long after that, the Opposition prayed against the measures, yet despite repeatedly pushing for it we were not given a debate. As the Minister said, the regulations came into force on 6 January.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): On the subject of being weak and wobbly, will the hon. Lady confirm whether it is still Labour policy to pay off all £100 billion of the outstanding student debt—yes or no?

Angela Rayner: I do not know how many times I have to explain this to Conservative Members before they finally understand. A cynic might say that they are wilfully misrepresenting my party's policy. We have never said that we would simply write off all existing debt. Conservative Members refer to comments made by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition, and I remind them that he said we would look at steps to reduce or ameliorate the debt burden. Perhaps that confused Conservative Members, because their Front Benchers have not done that in seven years. For instance—

Several hon. Members rose—

Angela Rayner: Conservative Members may want to listen to this before they intervene. For instance, we would look again at the repayment threshold for student debts; the Government have frozen it at £21,000, which will cost lower-earning graduates the most. We would look at the interest rates on debt, which the Government have allowed to reach an extortionate, unacceptable 6.1% for the year to come. I have said it once and I will say it again: we have no plans to write off existing student debt and we never promised to do so. Unlike the Conservative party, we made sure that all our plans were fully costed and outlined in our manifesto. Perhaps it could learn something from that.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): In 2010 the Government tripled tuition fees and then slashed the education maintenance allowance. In 2015 they took grants from students and now they are raising fees again. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is no surprise whatsoever that young people are turning away in their droves from this Government?

Angela Rayner: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, who makes an important point. Conservative Members have a sour-grapes attitude because they clearly understand that, unlike them, we have connected with the young people of this country.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I wonder if the hon. Lady could put to one side the script she was given seconds before she got up and answer this very simple question. During the election, her party made it categorically clear to endless numbers of students that it would abolish the student debt. Will she now get up and apologise for using them as election fodder?

Angela Rayner: As I said to the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), that was not—
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Members must calm down. Earlier we were blessed with the presence of the Father of the House, who asked a question at Prime Minister's questions. The rest of the time, he exuded a Buddha-like calm, which other right hon. and hon. Members should seek to emulate. I deliberately granted this debate the full three hours, so there is plenty of time, but Members should not shout at each other across the Chamber.

Angela Rayner: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) seems to have failed to understand our policy, which was absolutely clear: we would abolish tuition fees from the day we took office—
[*Interruption.*]
Please listen to my answers. That was absolutely clear. We said that we would abolish tuition fees from the moment we got into power. We also said that we would bring back maintenance grants. Unlike Conservative Members, who are chuntering away and not listening to what I have to say in response to their interventions—

Several hon. Members rose—

Angela Rayner: I am not taking any more interventions if Conservative Members are not prepared to listen to the answers.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): May I suggest to my hon. Friend that she does not take any nonsense from Government Members? They repeatedly told this House that whenever the Opposition prayed against a statutory instrument, they would guarantee a vote in this House so that people could put their vote where their mouth was, but they have repeatedly failed to do that. They are trying to do this by the back door, which is why she is absolutely right to show them the door.

Angela Rayner: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and I congratulate him on having more experience than I do of such matters.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Angela Rayner: I am going to make some progress.

The Minister said that the regulations came into force on 6 January, but they did so without debate, let alone a vote in this House. Then, when we were finally granted a debate and a vote, the Prime Minister called her early election and the regulations came into force while Parliament was dissolved. We have since raised the issue repeatedly, only to be told, eventually, by the new Leader of the House that the Government do not intend to provide any time for it. So much for the Minister's "extensive debate".

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I promise the hon. Lady that I will listen intently to her reply. She and I will agree, I am sure, on one thing: this country is very lucky to have people with high-quality brain power at university today. They have told me and my Conservative colleagues what they thought her party leader said during the election campaign, and it is at huge variance with what the hon. Lady claims he said. Nobody remembers the weasel words and caveats that she has deployed today. Will she now apologise?

Angela Rayner: The hon. Gentleman calls them weasel words, but I can guarantee him that before and throughout the general election campaign I travelled up and down the country with my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition and we were absolutely clear on this. Many students—

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mr Speaker: Order. Members have really got to learn the ropes and the hon. Gentleman has been here a number of years. It is normal manners and parliamentary etiquette that a Member be given the chance to respond to an intervention before being hollered at to take another. It is not a laughing matter, Mr Jenrick.

Robert Jenrick: I wasn't laughing.

Mr Speaker: You were—you were smirking. Don't smirk at me. I am telling you what the situation is and you can accept it, whether you like it or not. Behave.

Angela Rayner: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I believe that our party was absolutely clear on the matter. The thousands of students who have contacted me are clear on it as well, so I do not know why the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) is not.

The consequence, of course, is uncertainty both for universities and for thousands of students due to go to university next year. Perhaps the Minister will tell us what will happen if, once we eventually secure a vote, the regulations are revoked during the university year. This fees hike is damaging enough in itself, but leaving it unclear is even worse.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government's response to this debate is extraordinary? They are mocking the issues when they should be much more concerned about the recently published drop in university application figures and the rising debt of young people. Parents and grandparents have told me of debts of about £50,000 for young people and their families. Should we not be sending a message of hope to young people, not saying that we will increase their anxiety before they even start on life?

Angela Rayner: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. This was a really hot topic during the general election. I believe that the Opposition have the best interests of young people at heart, and the Government really need to listen to where the population are on this particular issue.

The current plans are all part of a pattern of behaviour from this Government. They tripled tuition fees to £9,000. They abolished maintenance grants for students, meaning that the poorest students will take on the most debt. They promised, when they tripled tuition fees, that the threshold at which graduates repay their student debts—it is currently £21,000—would rise in line with earnings. In fact, the then Universities Minister said:

"We will increase the repayment threshold to £21,000, and will thereafter increase it periodically to reflect earnings."—[*Official Report*, 3 November 2010; Vol. 517, c. 924.]

They broke that promise as well. While tuition fees continue to rise, the repayment threshold remains frozen, hitting graduates on lower salaries each and every year.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The hon. Lady refers to broken promises. Will she tell us which party stated in 2001 that it would not introduce top-up fees because it had legislated against them, and then introduced them in 2004?

Angela Rayner: The hon. and learned Lady will know that when we introduced tuition fees and dealt with that issue, we invested considerably and increased the amount of maintenance grants and support on offer to poorer students. Recently, even Lord Adonis, the architect of those tuition fees, called fees a

"Frankenstein's monster of £50,000-plus debts for graduates on modest salaries who can't remotely afford to pay back these sums while starting families".

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I was in Parliament at the time when that Bill went through, protesting against it. Not only has our noble Friend Lord Adonis had a change of heart; so has the entire Conservative party, because it railed against the introduction of top-up fees. George Osborne called it a "tax on learning". Who would have thought that only a few years later, it would be the Conservative party that plunged students into the highest levels of debt in the western world?

Angela Rayner: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I am really trying to make this debate constructive, instead of ping-ponging who said what. It should be about what the young people and students of today expect of us. They are telling us that the current debt levels are unsustainable, and they clearly are unsustainable.

Conservative Members say all the time that a record number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds are going to university. If only that was the whole story. The evidence shows that students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are the most likely to be deterred by debt.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that something different is happening in Wales, with the implementation of the Diamond review? It is moving back to a grant-based system, so the vast majority of students will receive a full grant and support for living costs, which is something that the National Union of Students and various other student union bodies have called for. That shows that there can be a different way. That is the difference between having a Labour Government in Wales and a Tory Government in England.

Angela Rayner: I am sure that my hon. Friend will have pre-empted some of the interventions from Conservative Members, who like to say that the Welsh Government are not doing things right. Of course, the Welsh Government have invested in their young people. They believe that their young people are the future of the Welsh economy. I congratulate them on making those decisions. Of course, the Welsh Government make decisions about education—before I get an intervention about what Wales is doing about loans.

As I was saying, burdening students with more than £50,000 of debt means that we will see more disadvantaged young people not going to university. After all, we have seen that at many of the most prestigious universities, including Oxford and Cambridge, the number of disadvantaged students is falling.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The hon. Lady complains that we keep asking questions about who said what and when. The trouble is that the Opposition perpetrated a scam on the British people. They clearly led students in our constituencies to believe that their loans would be written off. If she is now saying that that was not the intention, but that they would just cancel future tuition fees, how is it fair to those people, including my children, who have notched up tens of thousands of pounds of debt, which she is complaining about, that she leaves them with a debt when future students will not have a debt? What is fair about that?

Angela Rayner: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I cannot really say it any more clearly than we have said it. We said we would look at that, but that we would not do anything with it unless we could afford it.

I have put forward and will continue to put forward three things that the Government could do right away to help our students, including the hon. Gentleman's family members. First, the Government have decided to freeze the repayment threshold, which they do not have to do. They could put it in line with earnings. Secondly,

they could look at the percentage rate of the loans. It is 6.1%, but it does not have to be that much. It was the Bank of England rate plus 1%, which would now be 1.25%—considerably lower than the current 6.1%. Lastly, if the Government really care about social mobility and getting students into university, let them bring back maintenance grants.

Ms Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): I was a nurse until a month ago. I was not even adequately paid, let alone overpaid. I got a bursary when I trained. I was a single parent and I could not have trained without it. The fact that nursing applications have fallen by 23% since the Government took away bursaries means that people like me will not be able to train. What are my hon. Friend's comments on that?

Angela Rayner: I welcome my hon. Friend to this place. She makes an extremely important point. Ending nursing bursaries has had a negative impact on people applying to go to university to do nursing courses. As we look to exit the European Union, Members on both sides of the House know that we have to train and skill up our own workforce in order to provide all the nurses, doctors and other skilled workers we require. Conservative Members said during the general election campaign that they wanted to cut immigration. If they truly want to do that, they have to invest in young people in this country.

It seems that the Secretary of State believes that access to higher education simply ends with admissions. Figures from the Office for Fair Access show that the proportion of students dropping out before they finish their studies is at a five-year high. Disadvantaged students are nearly twice as likely to drop out than their more affluent peers.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I appreciate that this is a difficult day for the hon. Lady because she has come to raise some important issues, which we should debate, but her credibility is completely undermined by the difficulty of her saying that she speaks in the best interests of young people on the one hand, while on the other hand her party's policy has changed to a position where today she says she has no plans to write off student debt. Therefore, her party's word cannot be trusted on anything and young people will become more cynical about what politicians say.

Angela Rayner: The hon. Gentleman knows that we are talking about the tuition fee rise that his party said it would not impose on students and that it is trying to deny us a vote on. I hope he will push his Government to ensure that we do get a vote and that he will vote with us not to hike up tuition fees for young people.

Social mobility is stalling and drop-out rates are rising. Student debt in the UK is the highest in the world and more than 75% of students will never pay off their debts. The fact is that the Government's policy on higher education simply is not working.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): My position on tuition fees is perfectly clear, as my voting record in this Chamber will attest. The difference in what the hon. Lady has outlined today is that the normal run of things with Labour policy is to promise students something and backtrack when in government; this time, Labour has promised to write off students' debts and then

[Andrew Percy]

backtracked in opposition. Will she therefore apologise to the grandfather in my constituency who simply got his information from the news and wrote to me to tell me that he was going to vote Labour so that his children's debts would be written off? If not, is she accusing him of being a bit stupid?

Angela Rayner: What I promise I will do for any of the hon. Members in this Chamber and any of their constituents who potentially were misguided is ask them to refer to our website, where they can get a copy of "For the many not the few", which highlights our national education service. That is a huge number of pages longer than the policy in the Conservative manifesto, which was, quite frankly, to take the food from children's mouths. That was rejected by the people of this country quite outstandingly.

There is an alternative—one that was outlined by the Labour party at the last general election. We pledged to end university tuition fees so that future generations will not be burdened with debt simply for seeking an education. We would fund that by taxing only the wealthiest individuals and the biggest businesses, rather than forcing only those graduates unfortunate enough to be £50,000 in debt to foot the bill. By contrast, the Government's system will still cost the taxpayer nearly £6 billion a year in the long term. We would also bring back student maintenance grants to support students from low and middle-income backgrounds with their living costs, reversing one of the Government's most regressive decisions.

There is someone in the Conservative party who for a long time agreed with that policy. There was a Tory shadow Education Secretary who said that the removal of the maintenance grant would

"far from widening access, narrow it."

She told her party that it needed to

"show we care about the student who wants to go to university, but can't afford tuition fees."

She then helped to write, and stood on, a manifesto that would have scrapped tuition fees altogether. She is now the Prime Minister. But she is now the one narrowing access, not widening it. She is showing students that she does not care, and is hoping that her manifesto promises can be disposed of as quickly as Nick and Fiona were.

To think that on Monday the Secretary of State accused me of peddling "snake oil propaganda". I guess that is her specialist subject. She promised to protect school budgets in her manifesto in 2015 before cutting them in real terms. She pledged to give 30 hours of free childcare to working parents only to tell tens of thousands of them that they do not earn enough to be eligible. Now she is breaking every single promise the Conservative party has made to students.

I have told the Secretary of State again and again what could be done to address the existing debt burden. I repeat that she could look again at the extortionate interest rates on students, due to rise to more than 6% at a time when the Bank of England base rate is 0.25%. She could keep the promise originally made to students to raise the repayment threshold on their debt in line with average earnings. She could look again at the unacceptable levels of disadvantaged students dropping out of university, and give them proper maintenance support.

All of those things would reduce the burden of debt on today's graduates, and most of them would not cost the taxpayer an extra penny. The 2015 general election feels like a long time ago, but I remember a time when the Conservatives stood on a manifesto that said that "we as a nation should not be piling up and passing on unaffordable levels of debt to the next generation."

But that is exactly what the Government are doing. Increasing tuition fees again will simply leave more and more young people with debts they will never repay. Labour believes that is the wrong thing to do. Conservative Members may disagree, and that is their right, but what is not right is to deny this House the chance to decide.

Tuition fees are an important issue, but they are not the main issue before us today. The question before us today is much more fundamental. It is about trust in our Government and ultimately our democracy. Frankly, if Ministers cannot keep their promises to us, why should anyone else believe them?

James Cartlidge: On a point of order—

Mr Speaker: I hope that this is a point of order, rather than a point of frustration.

James Cartlidge: The point of order is that the Leader of the Opposition said to the *NME*—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must resume his seat. It was a nice try, and he is an industrious fellow, but that is a matter of debate. He cannot ask the Chair to adjudicate on who said what when, especially when it was outside the Chamber. I appreciate his assiduity, but he needs a rather better disguise than that.

Angela Rayner: I am sure the Minister is about to make what he believes is a convincing case. However, the real test is not to give us his words, but to give us a vote on them. That is the question I put to him now. If he is so convinced that what he is doing is right, will he have the courage of those convictions and put them to the House?

3.4 pm

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): The Labour party wants to talk about process because its policy platform is disintegrating before our eyes. I welcome the opportunity to set out once again the Government's approach to the student fees regulations. This is hardly new terrain for Parliament. The Government made it clear as far back as the Budget in June 2015 that maximum tuition fees would rise in line with inflation, and I set out changes to fees in detail for 2017-18 in a written ministerial statement in July 2016. Changes to fees were subsequently extensively debated during the passage through both Houses of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, with numerous votes on student finance issues that were all won by the Government.

The regulations are not "proposed" as the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) suggested: they have been in force for six months. This debate, which cannot change arrangements for 2017-18, is therefore a sham exercise. I suspect that this is simply more of the same cynical politics we saw over the weekend, when Labour broke its own pre-election pledge—about which we have heard so much this afternoon—to write off historic student loan debts.

Let us recall precisely what the Leader of the Opposition told the *NME* seven days before the general election. He said:

“I don’t see why those that had the historical misfortune to be at university during the £9,000 period should be burdened excessively compared to those that went before or those that come after. I will deal with it.”

That was a clear pledge to young voters. The first sign of trouble came when the shadow Education Secretary said a few days ago that she was still trying to work out the costs of that policy on a big abacus. The penny dropped completely over the weekend when we heard from the shadow Chancellor and others that that pre-election promise was being downgraded to the lowly status of an ambition. We all know what that means. It means that it is never ever going to happen. It does not do anything for the credibility of the Labour party to abandon such a striking commitment to young people just a few weeks after the general election.

Simon Hoare: I may be becoming a little forgetful, but was the manifesto to which my hon. Friend just referred the “fully costed” manifesto from the Labour party?

Joseph Johnson: My hon. Friend has exposed the truth, which is that the Labour party is delivering what is perhaps the biggest act of political deception we have seen in decades. It is the old game of bait and switch, saying one thing before a general election and another thing immediately after. Of course, given that this would be a £100 billion hit to our public finances, which would hurt hard-working taxpayers across the country and deliver a significant addition to our national debt and the interest burdens of the next generation, I am glad that the Labour party has done this spectacular and embarrassing U-turn. I suspect that it will not be too long before it abandons the rest of its unaffordable, unfunded and fantastical policy platform. It is a programme that it has clearly taken wholesale from the statist playbooks of 1970s tax-and-spend regimes that all ended up needing the International Monetary Fund to step in.

The policy that Labour proposed before the general election would have increased our national debt by a whole five percentage points of GDP, adding no less than £3,500 to the debt carried by every household in the country.

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): At what point does my hon. Friend think the hon. Lady decided to make that U-turn? Can he enlighten the House on that? It seems a real puzzle.

Joseph Johnson: I suspect that the Opposition decided to do that spectacular U-turn when they realised what impact it would have on hard-working taxpayers up and down the country. As I have said, the proposal to write off student debt will add £3,500 to the debt carried by every household in the country.

Ms Karen Lee: The decision to scrap the maintenance grant means that the most disadvantaged students will graduate with the highest level of debt. Does the Minister think that is fair?

Joseph Johnson: A better way of looking at it is that the Government are making the most resources available to the people who are most in need of them. We want

people from disadvantaged backgrounds to go to university. We are delighted that they are doing so in record numbers, and that they are now 43% more likely to do so than they ever were before.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): If we were to put the best possible gloss on what the Leader of the Opposition said, and imagine that he was merely misunderstood in his intentions by students when he said that he would “deal with it”, what faith can we put in the new language that is being used? It is now being said that the Opposition will merely “look at” a number of propositions. If we cannot trust what “deal with” means, how can we possibly trust merely “look at”?

Joseph Johnson: That is exactly right. The Opposition’s policy platform is collapsing before our eyes. The inevitable next step is their abandonment of the albatross around their neck that is their policy of abolishing tuition fees in their entirety. They are currently saddled with it. They are trying to wriggle off the hook of their clear promise to abolish student debt, and they will soon be trying to get rid of that appalling albatross of getting rid of tuition fees in total. As I have said, abolishing student debt would mean a huge addition to our net debt. The proposal to abolish tuition fees and reinstate maintenance grants would add £12 billion to the national deficit, which is equivalent to 0.7% of GDP and to an additional 2.5p on the basic rate of income tax.

Chris Bryant: Let me make a very simple procedural point to the Minister. If the Government want to make dramatic changes in schemes, they should take those changes through the House fairly and properly so that Members can vote on them. Ministers have said repeatedly in the House that if the Opposition pray against a statutory instrument, including those that are relevant in this case, there will be a vote. That promise has not been fulfilled. Will the Minister make it again now?

Joseph Johnson: As I said in my opening remarks, we have had lots of votes on student finance issues, and we won them all. [HON. MEMBERS: “What about the statutory instrument?”] The statutory instrument in question has been in force for six months. It went through all the parliamentary processes. Labour Members had plenty of opportunity to push for votes at the correct time; they are now six months too late.

When we reformed student finance in 2011, we put in place a system designed to make higher education accessible to all. Students are now supported by a system of Government-subsidised loans, which are repayable only when borrowers are earning more than £21,000 a year. Controlling the cost of higher education to the general taxpayer who has to fund public spending in this way allowed us, critically, to remove the cap on student numbers and ensure that higher education was available to all with the potential to benefit from it.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister rightly points out that funding higher education will involve a cost to the public purse. His own Government will be aware that 45% of all loans that are taken out are never repaid, and that after the 30-year rule period has elapsed, 70% of students have a debt outstanding. Has he worked out the figures to establish whether that money, which the Government

[Gareth Snell]

must ultimately pay off, could be better used to reduce the cost of tuition fees up front so that more students could go to university?

Joseph Johnson: The hon. Gentleman is correct in saying that there is a Government contribution towards the loan book. It is a conscious, deliberate Government subsidy towards the skills base of the country, and towards giving more people from disadvantaged backgrounds a chance to go to university with finance being absolutely no barrier. We want people to pursue worthwhile, socially valuable careers that may not lead to high earnings—careers in social work, for instance—and we also want people to be able to take on childbearing and family-rearing responsibilities. Those are all reasons why the state will continue to make a contribution towards the cost of the loan book

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Joseph Johnson: I have already given way a number of times, and I am now going to make some progress.

The move to a predominantly loan-based system has enabled us to increase the level of financial support available to disadvantaged students. I am pleased to say that the application rate for 18-year olds from disadvantaged backgrounds is at an all-time high. We have also seen record numbers of black and minority-ethnic students going into higher education in recent years. There is more to be done, but we are making progress. The effectiveness of our system and our reforms has been recognised by the OECD. In September 2016, its head of education, Andreas Schleicher, said

“the UK has been able to meet rising demand for tertiary education with more resources...by finding effective ways to share the costs and benefits”.

The Government remain committed to providing a fair deal for students and ensuring that England’s universities are sustainably and properly financed. That has enabled them to maintain their world-class standing, with funding per student per degree up 25% as a result of our changes.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): There are two great universities in my constituency, and they are both telling me that they face huge uncertainty because of Brexit, not least because they do not know their own fee arrangements for EU students. They are worried about not attracting those students. What is the Minister doing about that, if he wants to ensure that they are well funded for the future?

Joseph Johnson: We have provided significant clarity in that respect. EU students will continue to be eligible for access to student support in 2016-17, 2017-18 and 2018-19. We have provided the clarity that they need. They know that for the duration of their studies they will be able to come here, access home fee status and access student support.

The £9,000 fee cap that we set in 2012 is now worth £8,500 in real terms. If we leave it unchanged, it will be worth just £8,000 by the end of this Parliament. We simply cannot let that happen, as it would inevitably put the quality of teaching in our universities at risk and undermine the financial sustainability of the sector.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): I chair the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee. Before tuition fees were trebled in 2012, the Committee held a session during which it interviewed the then Secretary of State for Education. He said—I quote from the report—

“When the Government’s economic policies have produced the successful outcome that we all expect, we can return to the question of how universities can be supported in a more generous way, but at the moment we face a massive financial crisis.”

The current proposals are actually less generous, not more generous. Are we still experiencing a financial crisis? If not, when will the present Minister and the current Government live up to the commitment given by that Minister?

Joseph Johnson: I am puzzled by that intervention. Our per-university, per-student funding has risen by 25% as a result of our reforms. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to read the report published last week by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, he will see that, on a per-student basis, our universities, per degree, are better funded than they have been at any point during the past 30 years.

James Cartledge: May I pursue the logic of that point? Is it not the case that if these fee increases do not take place, we will effectively be cutting spending on universities? Should we not be fighting cuts and opposing Labour’s plan to cut spending on higher education?

Joseph Johnson: Indeed. Our system of student finance is enabling our universities to be funded sustainably. As I have said, per-student, per-degree funding is up by 25%, but we will put all that at risk if we move anywhere near Labour’s policy platform.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Is it not true that Labour Members are now feigning confusion over parliamentary process on this, having previously deliberately created their own confusion? The reality on the doorsteps across Eastleigh was that Labour’s promise to deal with tuition fees included the possibility of covering bank overdrafts. Does the Minister agree that this is an empty promise from a mathematically illiterate party? People felt bank overdrafts, as well as student loans, were being dealt with.

Joseph Johnson: That goes to show the extent to which the Labour party misled the country in the run-up to the general election, and I think my hon. Friend’s constituents are owed an apology.

Let us not forget that it was a Labour Government under Prime Minister Tony Blair who sensibly put in place these legal powers, which we used some six months ago, to uprate fees in line with inflation through a negative procedure. However, under the regulations we are debating today, rather than increasing fees for everyone, we are only allowing providers to maintain their fees in line with inflation if they can demonstrate that they are using these resources well in terms of providing high-quality teaching and good outcomes for their students. Universities UK and GuildHE, the two main representative bodies that collectively represent over 170 higher education providers, have made it clear that allowing the value of fees to be maintained in real terms is essential if our providers are to continue to deliver high-quality teaching. Gordon McKenzie, the chief executive of GuildHE, made it clear that

“fees had to rise by inflation at some point and it was fairer for students if those rises were linked to an assessment of quality”, as the Government are doing.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): University education is also a route to higher earnings, worth up to a quarter of a million pounds over a lifetime. If we go forward with Labour’s policy to abolish tuition fees, it would have a damaging effect on those from disadvantaged backgrounds, as we have seen in Scotland, where there is a fall in the number of people from disadvantaged communities applying to university.

Joseph Johnson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Labour’s policies would do the opposite of what it says they would do; they would represent a huge step backwards for social mobility in this country, they would be bad for taxpayers, who would be left shouldering the entire cost of the higher education system, and they would leave the finances of our university system in tatters.

As Professor Steve Smith, vice-chancellor of Exeter University, has said:

“The Teaching Excellence Framework presents us with an opportunity to invest in our students’ futures and the long-term economic success of our country, and to be recognised for outstanding teaching at the same time... The Government rightly wants ‘something for something’, for the economy and for students.”

Wes Streeting: I am shocked that vice-chancellors want tuition fees to rise—this comes as a complete surprise to everyone!

Vice-chancellors want fees to rise every year. Surely the Minister will be able to confirm today that tomorrow he is very likely to use powers to once again increase tuition fees to a higher level, and that once we get to 2019-20, under the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, passed just before the general election, we are going to have to have votes in Parliament in order to allow and facilitate fees rises. If we are going to be doing that in the future, why not do it now?

Joseph Johnson: As I have already made clear on a number of occasions, these regulations have been in force for the last six months; they are already law—they are already applying across the sector.

Widening participation is an important policy objective for this Government. Alongside incentivising improvements in teaching, the Government’s policies on student fees have also allowed us to lift the student number cap. This is allowing more people than ever before to benefit from a university education. As I said, disadvantaged 18-year-olds are now 43% more likely to go to university than in 2009, and 52% more likely to go to a high-tariff institution. For the last application cycle, the entry rate for 18-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds is at a record high: 19.5% in 2016, compared with 13.6% in 2009. The application rate and actual number of English 18-year-old applicants is at record level in this entry cycle.

This Government have made it clear that finance should not be a barrier to going to university, which is why we have made more funding available to students. By replacing maintenance grants with loans, we have been able to increase the funding for living costs that some of the most disadvantaged students receive. It is an increase of over 10% in the current academic year, with a further 2.8% increase for 2017-18. We have worked with the Office for Fair Access to encourage universities to do more to help disadvantaged students.

In 2017-18, institutions are expected to spend over £800 million on measures to improve the access and success of disadvantaged students. This is more than double the amount spent in 2009-10.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I am sure my hon. Friend is aware that our education exports last year exceeded those of our insurance industry, mainly fuelled by the excellence of our universities. If we do not fund them properly, we will not maintain world-class education at our universities.

Joseph Johnson: My hon. Friend is entirely right. Sustainable funding of our system is essential for our universities to continue to attract international students from around the world. Moving to the system Labour is advocating would leave their finances in tatters and be hugely damaging to the quality of teaching they can offer.

Although we are making good progress on widening participation, more can be done, and we are doing more. For example, in the latest guidance given to the Director of Fair Access we acknowledged that selective institutions, including Oxbridge and parts of the Russell Group, already do much to widen access, but we have asked the Director of Fair Access to push much harder to see that more progress is made. In the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, we are strengthening our approach to widening participation by placing an overarching duty on the Office for Students to consider the promotion of equality of opportunity in relation to access and participation in all that it does. The new Director for Fair Access will have a clear role looking across the full student lifecycle.

The hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) has been chuntering about drop-out rates for several minutes. I would like to inform him that drop-out rates are lower now for all students—young, mature, disadvantaged and those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds—than when we came into office in 2010, and we are taking all the steps I have just mentioned to ensure they stay among the very lowest in the OECD. The Act also requires individual higher education providers to publish their respective student application, offer, acceptances, drop-out and attainment rates, broken down by gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic background, through the transparency duty on the Office for Students. Greater transparency will push universities into further action in this area, to build on what has already been achieved.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm that applications from mature students were down by 18% in the last year alone? In 2011-12, applications from part-time students were down by a massive 30%.

Joseph Johnson: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, and I acknowledge the fall, but he needs to understand that there are complex reasons for it, including the rapid increase in the proportion of people entering higher education at the young age of 18. This means that there is a smaller stock of students seeking to participate in part-time and mature study later in life. We also have one of the most buoyant labour markets of any economy anywhere in the world, which increases the opportunity cost of study for people later on in life, at a time when they would otherwise be earning significant sums of money. But we recognise

[Joseph Johnson]

that there is a fall, and we are taking significant steps to address some of the financial barriers that mature students face. That is why from the next academic year we are introducing a part-time maintenance grant on the same basis as the current full-time equivalent grant.

Andrew Percy: On the point about disadvantage, before young people get to university they have to go through the FE system. Will the Minister therefore congratulate North Lincolnshire's Conservative council, which has confirmed this week that its post-16 student bus passes will again be set at £30 for the coming year, down from £200 a year under Labour? Does this not demonstrate once again that, when it comes to students, Labour says one thing when in opposition and does something very different when in power?

Joseph Johnson: My hon. Friend makes some superb points, and he is a tireless champion of his constituents.

On the repayment of loans, our repayment system offers a fair deal to students. The current student loan system is deliberately subsidised by the taxpayer and is universally accessible to all eligible students, regardless of their personal financial circumstances or credit history. Our repayment system is based on income, not on the amount borrowed. Graduates with post-2012 loans pay back only when they are earning more than £21,000, and then only 9% of earnings above that threshold. After 30 years, all outstanding debts will be written off altogether with no detriment to the borrower, and the Student Loans Company has no recourse to their other assets. The maximum fee cap is being maintained in line with inflation in 2017-18, so it will not be increasing in real terms for anyone going to university. We believe that it is right for those who benefit most from the higher education they receive to contribute to the cost of it. We should not forget that higher education leads to an average net lifetime earnings premium that is comfortably over £100,000.

Labour continues to scaremonger about the changes to higher education. The Conservative-led coalition and this Government have introduced important reforms. The Opposition have promised to write off student debts, to cut tuition fees and to restore maintenance grants. However, they have failed to set out a credible plan on how to fund their promises, and are now shamelessly abandoning them just weeks after the general election. That is hardly surprising, given that they had not even managed to persuade key figures in the Labour party who served in their previous Government. For example, Lord Mandelson described their policy offer as "not credible" and urged Labour to "be honest about the cost of providing higher education".

Of course, it is not just Lord Mandelson who has commented on this. The former shadow Chancellor, Ed Balls, said that his party's failure to identify a sustainable funding mechanism was a "blot on Labour's copybook".

I therefore challenge the Opposition to explain how they would fund their alternative proposals on tuition fees, maintenance grants and the write-off of student debt. We estimate the annual cost of their policy on tuition fees to be £12 billion a year over the next five years of this Parliament. In addition, a one-off expenditure would be required to make good the promise of writing off historical student debt to the tune of £89.3 billion in

cash costs. If Labour wanted to go the whole hog, a further £14 billion would be required to compensate graduates for historical borrowing that they had already repaid.

Make no mistake, Labour's policy of abolishing fees would be a calamity. It would be ruinous for our world-class university sector, leading almost certainly to a fall in per-student funding of the same magnitude we saw in the decades before the introduction of top-up fees—a fall of around 40% in terms of the unit of resource. It would lead to the inevitable re-imposition of student number controls, which would cause the poorest and most disadvantaged to miss out on university, throwing social mobility into reverse. It would do all this at an eye-watering cost to the hard-working general taxpayer, whether he or she had been to university or not. Gone would be the concept of a fair sharing of the costs of university between graduates with higher-than-average lifetime earnings and society at large; taxpayers would foot the entire bill. That would be bad for universities, bad for students and bad for the taxpayer. It is no surprise that in the one place where Labour is in power, it has chosen a different approach. Last week, the Labour Government in Wales quietly increased their tuition fees for 2018-19 to £9,295 a year, making them marginally higher than the current rates in England. Labour in Wales at least knows that the party opposite's plans are unfair to students and ruinous to universities. Perhaps it should tell the Labour party leader.

Angela Rayner: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I hope that it is not a point of debate.

Angela Rayner: It is not, Mr Speaker. I did not want to interrupt the Minister earlier, but he claimed that the Opposition had had the chance to call a vote on the statutory instrument and did not do so. Perhaps you could confirm for the record that a prayer was laid against the regulations, and that the Government have simply refused to allow the House a vote on them since then. I understand that the Minister has a particular responsibility not to misinform the House and I therefore ask for this matter to be clarified.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady has put me on the spot, but I make no complaint about that. Knowing the Minister as I do, I know him to be a person of integrity, and I would not and am not doubting that for one moment. My recollection—I am open to advice and possibly even scholarly correction from the source from which it usually derives—is that the Opposition had prayed against this set of regulations. My further recollection—I think this is in the *Official Report*—is that the Government had indicated an intention for this matter to be debated and voted upon. It is not always possible to predict the course of events, but I think the commitment was made on 31 March for 19 April. Members will recall, and others will be aware, that on 19 April the House debated a motion to facilitate the calling of an early general election. Thereafter, there was a small amount of business in what we normally call the wash-up session, and then we departed to our constituencies, so there was no debate and vote. That is how I remember it.

It is not desirable for the Chair to be asked to take sides between the parties, and I am not taking sides. I am certainly not taking sides on the merits or demerits

of this issue; the Speaker should not do that. I had thought there was an expectation of a debate and a vote, and that the Opposition had done what was necessary to maximise the chance of such a vote. To be honest, I thought that the Government were open to such a debate and vote, until events overtook. That is history; we are where we are.

As to whether there is to be a substantive vote now, I await the development of events. *[Interruption.]* I am being fed a note. Oh, that is very helpful—and I mean very helpful. It is from one of our senior Clerks and says: “Don’t have the details. Believe you are correct. We can check.” I am very grateful to the Clerk, who is extremely committed to the public service.

3.36 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a fundamental Scottish National party principle that access to education should be based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay. SNP MPs have a strong and principled record of opposing tuition fee increases in England and Wales and, if we are able to, we will reject any Bill that would increase the financial burden on students.

In 1997, I personally lobbied my predecessor in this place on the introduction of student fees. I had never met him before, but I think he still remembers that meeting, because I was incensed at the idea that students should have to pay fees. I found their introduction by a Labour Government particularly objectionable, especially as so many of them had gone to university themselves; they then pulled up the ladder behind them. Neither I nor the SNP have changed our view that access to education must be based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay.

The SNP’s commitment to free tuition is firm and unequivocal. In 2007, the SNP Scottish Government abolished tuition fees. The Scottish Government’s free tuition policy benefits 120,000 undergraduate students in Scotland every year, saving them from accruing debts of up to £27,000, unlike their peers in other parts of the UK. The SNP will always guarantee that access to education is based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay.

Since we came to office in Scotland, the number of Scottish-domiciled full-time first-degree entrants has risen by 12%, but this is also about our values and the kind of Scotland we want to live in. Scotland as whole values free access to higher education, as does the SNP. Unlike the Tories in Scotland, we have no intention of billing our young people for their education, either up front or after they have graduated.

In 2015, the president of the National Union of Students Scotland, Vonnice Sandlan, said:

“The idea that abolishing free education—a clear recognition of the public and social good provided by higher education—would improve fair access seems bizarre.”

It is almost as bizarre as the recent comments by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on “The Andrew Marr Show”, when he said that only graduates benefit from their studies. As a Scot, has he not heard of the commonweal? Everyone benefits. Society benefits from a higher tax take, and from its teachers, its doctors, even its lawyers, and sometimes, perhaps, its MPs.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Has the hon. Lady read the report by the Sutton Trust, the social mobility

charity, which was absolutely damning about social mobility in Scotland as a specific result of the SNP’s policy of capping places? Does she not deprecate the fact that social mobility in Scotland is going into reverse?

Marion Fellows: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I totally disagree with him. I will come on to that point further on in my speech. The fact is that Scottish education is different; the way into it and how to progress in it are completely untypical.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend share my frustration at the blatant gaslighting that is going on, once again, around the number of young people in Scotland from disadvantaged backgrounds attending university? Does she agree that our young people have many pathways to university? If children coming through further education colleges are included in UCAS figures, there are significantly higher numbers of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in Scotland going through to university than in the rest of the UK.

Marion Fellows: As a former further education lecturer, I have personal experience of that. Indeed, I will be disseminating my wisdom on this when I take up my place on the Education Committee; I see that the Chair of the Committee, the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), is sitting on the Government Back Benches. The point that has been raised is a well-known canard. We cannot measure Scottish education by the same yardstick that we use in England and Wales because it is different.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. I have for some time been trying to make the point that things are done slightly differently in Scotland. I once was a Member in another place. The scrutiny of subordinate legislation in Scotland is very thorough indeed, and consideration is given to whether it should be positive, negative or super-affirmative. The heart of the problem is that the instrument to which the parent Act refers is perhaps a little too draconian in the powers that it gives the governing party. The fault may lie with what was originally agreed months ago—this may be what is bedevilling hon. Members—and perhaps the role of the House was not made suitably strong.

Marion Fellows: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and welcome him to his place. Yes, there are many differences, and trying to compare apples and pears just does not work.

Wes Streeting: There are international comparators. The fact is that the SNP Government’s record on education in Scotland is a national disgrace: there are 4,000 fewer teachers, class sizes are up and, of the increased number of students going to university, 10 times more are coming from the wealthiest backgrounds than the poorest backgrounds. The gap is widening, and that is under an SNP Government.

Marion Fellows: If the hon. Gentleman listens to the end of my speech, he will find that I completely refute what he is saying. The facts tell a different story. Larry Flanagan, the general secretary of the Educational

[*Marion Fellows*]

Institute of Scotland, has said that Scottish education is not in the parlous state that is ascribed to it by other parties. I believe that he is one of the hon. Gentleman's colleagues.

Scottish-domiciled full-time first-degree university entrants rose 12% in 2006-07. The figure now stands at 28,777, 58% of whom are women. As I have said, the SNP firmly believes that access to university should be based on the ability to learn. To support that, the SNP Government have invested record levels of funding in our universities—£5 billion since 2012-13, with a further £1 billion planned in 2017-18.

The latest UCAS statistics have shown a drop in Scottish-domiciled students applying to higher education institutions, but that is not necessarily a negative. Indeed, it is further evidence that the approach taken in Scotland to ensuring that young people have equal choices and chances to succeed in life is working. For example, the youth unemployment rate has fallen from 14% since 2007 and now stands at 8.4%, and Scotland continues to have among the lowest rates of all the EU countries.

A record proportion of young people from Scotland's most deprived communities are continuing their education, entering training or getting a job after they leave school, with 88.7% of school leavers from these communities going on to a positive initial destination—the highest ever proportion, and up since 2011-12. A record 93.3% of young people are continuing their education, going into training or getting a job—that includes modern apprenticeships—after leaving school. This is a good news story. They do not all want to go to university; many of them want to earn and learn.

According to the Scottish Funding Council, nearly 85% of further education students who achieve a qualification go on to a positive destination such as further study, training or employment. In 2015-16, almost 12,000 more students than in 2008-09 in both further and higher education at college successfully completed full-time courses leading to a recognised qualification. I know about that because I taught in a further education college. People in the most deprived areas of Livingston and West Lothian, where I taught, started in further education colleges at 16, and in some cases at 15. They progressed through college. They did further education for perhaps one or two years—in the same place—and continued on to higher education courses at higher national certificate and higher national diploma level. They were then able to articulate into the second or third year of Scottish university courses. That is how it is done in Scotland.

I was privileged to be part of the educational journey made by these people, some of whom were from the worst areas. I can think of one woman student who got pregnant at 15, had to leave school and came back to university. I interviewed her and saw her potential; she had no formal qualifications, yet she ended up with a degree—and no debt. I think that answers the question of the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeter) about social mobility.

Thanks to free tuition, Scotland is making progress towards achieving the target of 20% of students who enter university coming from the 20% of Scottish communities that are most deprived. There is no doubt about the SNP Government's investment in additional places for access students; my husband was an access

student. He decided to go to university aged 65 and joined the local college, which at that time was called Motherwell College. He took an access programme, did a year at college and gained a place at Glasgow University. He was unable to continue his educational journey for various reasons, but I know many others who have followed the same route. These students go to not only former technical colleges or institutes of technology that have since become universities, but our ancient universities. That is to be cherished and encouraged—and they have no fees.

That is why the Scottish Government continue to invest £51 million a year in supporting approximately 7,000 places. Scotland's universities continue to attract students from around the world, and the number of non-EU international applicants has increased by 6% since last year; that is higher than the 2% increase in the UK as a whole. This is good news for Scotland, and we are keen to welcome those who wish to come to Scotland to live, learn and work.

The Scottish Government are determined to support our valuable higher education sector and are committed to working with our universities to continue to attract the very best students from around the world. The UK Government's failure to provide an offer that goes far enough for EU nationals after Brexit has had a worrying knock-on effect on applications to HEIs in Scotland.

Down here, the Tories are all for front-door fees; back in Scotland, the Tories are all about back-door fees. If Ruth Davidson's Tories had had their way in the 2016 election in Scotland, they would have introduced a £6,000 graduate tax, which would have had to be paid back when graduates earned £20,000. The UK Tories want to stop international students studying in the UK by abolishing the vital post-study work visa, but the Scottish Tories want to deter EU students by threatening them with additional taxes. By contrast, the SNP Scottish Government have pledged to reform student loan repayments: graduates will not pay loan debt until they earn £22,000; the repayment period is reduced to 30 years. If even a wee country like Scotland can do that, so can any other.

Over the past 10 years, the SNP Scottish Government have worked hard to make Scotland the best country it can be. It is no wonder that other parties are now taking their lead from the SNP on tuition fees. Labour and the Tories opposed progressive SNP policies tooth and nail for a decade; now they have changed their minds. The SNP has opposed tuition fees since they were first introduced by Labour in 1997, and scrapped them in 2008. Now Labour has said it will follow our lead in England—imitation is indeed the sincerest form of flattery.

Average student loan debt in Scotland continues to be the lowest in the UK: £10,500 per student in 2015-16, compared with £24,640—up 2% since 2014-15. By contrast with the UK Government, who abolished maintenance grants entirely for new students in England from the 2016-17 academic year, we raised the income threshold for the maximum bursary from £17,000 to £19,000. That will benefit an additional 2,500 young students and 400 independent students.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Have not further education budgets in Scotland been cut continually, which has led to a reduction of 152,000 young students in Scotland?

Is it not high time to do what the Conservative party manifesto pledged to do, which is to reverse those cuts so that we give our young people a fair chance in life?

Marion Fellows: May I also rebut that canard? When I started teaching in further education in Scotland in 1992, many college courses were not vocational but leisure courses. West Lothian College ran a very successful one on which people my age—now—spent six hours a week doing art. The Scottish Government cut funding for courses like that and increased funding for vocational training. They also do huge programmes in places where there has been a loss of jobs locally, and the first thing the Scottish Government do when they send in a taskforce is include local colleges to provide short-term training courses. More people now leave further education with good qualifications—and that is totally what matters.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Marion Fellows: I am sorry, but I would like to continue—I am feeling a little dizzy, to be fair.

The SNP Government are not complacent and are committed to doing more to support students. They want to ensure that support is equitable, in particular for the most vulnerable, which is why the Scottish Government are conducting a comprehensive review of student support under an independent chair and a wide range of membership, from Scotland's colleges to the National Union of Students and other bodies.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Marion Fellows: As the hon. Gentleman persists, I will give way.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: The hon. Lady is generous in giving way. She has talked about the most vulnerable students in Scotland and about being able to work and learn. Can she explain why the Scottish Government receive the apprenticeship levy yet sponsor only a very modest 30,000 apprenticeships, compared with the 3 million awarded in the UK during the last Parliament?

Marion Fellows: Let me say one thing in response to that. The Scottish Government consulted businesses in Scotland; they were already doing good work with businesses, encouraging them to take on modern apprenticeships. Modern apprenticeships were far further advanced. The Scottish Government did not just make decisions for themselves. There was almost an imposition on the Scottish Government because our devolved Parliament deals with issues such as training and education. When the UK Government introduced the new levy for all employers, we consulted those employers and the agreement went forward.

I am not prepared to take any more interventions; I have almost finished.

The terrible decision to introduce fees for nurses and to scrap bursaries in England and Wales is clearly having an impact on nursing application numbers from England; figures show a massive 23% fall on last year. In Scotland, we remain committed to free tuition fees and protecting the non-means-tested, non-repayable nursing and midwifery student bursary, which we believe is essential to ensure a steady supply of trainees into the profession.

Those who want a highly educated workforce should follow Scotland's example. After all, it ranks at the top of the world's statistics, with Canada and Russia: 45% of Scotland's population aged between 25 and 64 are educated to degree level. Will the Minister consider doing what the Scottish Government have done so well? Do not attempt to increase fees for students in England and Wales—abolish them. We have world-class universities too, and what the Scottish Government do works.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Education Select Committee, Mr Robert Halfon. As we have discussed, the right hon. Gentleman is welcome to speak from a seated position if he wishes.

3.56 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): This is an important debate. I have huge respect for the Minister and all the work he has done to make our university sector better by ensuring that students from all backgrounds have the chance to climb the ladder of opportunity.

In considering student fees, we have a duty of fairness to both the taxpayer and the student, and it is right that taxpayers should not bear the burden alone. A number of principles need to be clear when it comes to tuition fees. The first is that we help students from disadvantaged backgrounds not just get on that ladder of opportunity, but get to the top. The second is that the interest rates charged should be fair for students. The third is value for money. When we talk about disadvantaged backgrounds, we need to be sure that we mean those at the very bottom struggling the most, as well as those who are just about managing.

Earlier this year, we heard that the numbers of working-class students entering the top universities had fallen over the last decade. Although more of our poorest young people are entering university, most are winning places at the lower and middle-ranked institutions rather than those offering the best opportunities for high-earning graduate careers. Disadvantaged graduates will suffer even more acutely than their more affluent peers on graduation, but they will also suffer a class pay gap that means that professional employees from poorer backgrounds are paid almost £7,000 a year less than their peers from more privileged families.

My hon. Friend the Minister spoke powerfully about what he wanted to do to improve the prospects of part-time students, and he recognised that the figures had declined. I welcome that and urge him to do everything possible to support part-time students, particularly single parents on low incomes who may fear going to university because of the size of the loan.

What does value for money mean when it comes to a university education? Why can universities charge the same high fees when there is such variation in the jobs that students find? The Minister has done a lot of work on that and on the new measurements he has introduced, but surely the time has come to look at the level of fees as compared with the destination data. People go to university to climb the ladder of prosperity, and to improve the skills and productivity of our nation. If they pay £9,000-plus and come out with a good job—job done. If they do not come out with a good job, we need to ask why.

James Cartledge: My right hon. Friend is making an excellent argument, but does it not focus his attention on the repayment threshold? In a sense, a higher threshold enforces the very point he is making. If people get the higher salary, fair enough; they repay their loan. If not, they do not repay it anyway.

Robert Halfon: I have a lot of sympathy with my hon. Friend's point.

We need to look carefully at the salaries of the senior management of universities. Something is going wrong if there are significant increases in the salaries of top management but poor destinations for graduates. To be honest, I do not mind what management figures earn if every single person who leaves that university gets a good job at the end. If they do not, I cannot understand why some vice-chancellors receive huge increases in their pay but fail to provide good outcomes. I am not going to name those universities today, but we need to take a hard look at this.

Julian Knight: My right hon. Friend is making a powerful and considered speech. Does he agree that we should also look at the length of university courses? Three years seems a little long for some courses, considering the smaller number of teaching hours.

Robert Halfon: Yes. My hon. Friend makes a point that I will come to, which relates to business rates. This is about not just the length of courses, but the way in which terms are structured. I said at the beginning of my remarks that the burden on the taxpayer needs to be fair, but we also need to ensure that the burden on the student is fair.

A constituent of mine entered university during the first year of £9,000 tuition fees, and her debt is now around £45,000 including the maintenance loan. I am not against student loans. It is not fair for working people in my constituency to bear the full burden of paying for all students to go to university. However, value for money also involves interest rates. Interest rate levels are much lower in the United States and, as I understand it, there are quite a few months in the year when students have more opportunities to work so they can pay back their loans. That relates to what my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) just said. The interest rate here, which the Minister knows is quite high, puts people off. I urge him to look into what can be done to have a system similar to that in the United States.

Of course, not all courses or institutions offer the same opportunities for employment after graduating. A history degree from a Russell Group university could, after five years, see someone earning double what they would have earned had they received the same degree from a less prestigious institution. University graduates have traditionally out-earned their non-graduate peers, but the gap appears to be narrowing. The value of a degree has begun to decline as the supply of graduates has outstripped demand. The Institute for Fiscal Studies recently warned that further increases in the number of graduates could lessen the financial gains of a degree.

The Minister knows that I am passionate about and strongly believe in apprenticeships, and he is a huge supporter of degree apprenticeships. It is important that all students know that there is a choice. There is a

chance that we can offer every young person an apprenticeship, all the way from level 2 right up to degree level. We need as much investment as possible in degree apprenticeships, for which there is no loan. Apprentices earn while they learn, are virtually guaranteed to get a job afterwards, and get the skills and training they need. That would be a huge boon to people from disadvantaged to backgrounds. The levy must be used to fund degree apprenticeships as much as possible, as this will transform the nature of the debate, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. At this stage, as colleagues will be aware, I have not imposed any time limit on Back-Bench speeches, and I would prefer not to have to do so from the Chair, but it might be a helpful guide to colleagues if I say that a seven-minute speech by each colleague would probably enable everybody to contribute. If somebody goes on longer, let that Member be clear that he or she is stopping other Members speaking, which would seem rather unfair.

4.5 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I am pleased to follow the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), and I congratulate him on his election as Chair of the Select Committee and on his thoughtful contribution to the debate, which bodes well for the future. I represent more students—some 36,000 at the last count—than any other Member of this House, and consequently I chair the all-party parliamentary group on students. I represent many post-2012 graduates as well. They have been described as “generation rent” but we might also describe them as “generation debt”. The poorer the family they come from, the greater the debt as a result of the Government's actions, as the Institute for Fiscal Studies has reported. We are talking about debts of up to £57,000.

It is five years since the coalition Government forced through the £9,000 fees, but the impact is only beginning to take effect. This recent election was the first to be held since students starting graduating with the debt as a consequence of £9,000 fees—in May 2015, they had not started to do so. As a consequence, the issue took centre stage in this election. It is an issue not just for generation debt, but for their parents and, apparently, for some senior members of the Government. Even the Prime Minister's deputy, the First Secretary of State, says, in a way that contradicts the confidence of the Minister, that we need to have a national debate on the issue. He is right, because we do, and this is only an opening salvo. We need to examine how we can provide the funding that our universities need to maintain their world-leading position, but without burdening our young people with unsustainable debt. That is the big challenge.

There are some immediate things that the Government could do on this. First, they could scrap the proposed increase in interest rates to 6.1% from the current 4.6%. This will be 6.1% at a time when the base rate is 0.25% and rates for average mortgages are less than 4%. The Minister will say that this is an automatic rise based on the formula of RPI plus 3%, but that formula is wrong. It means, as the IFS estimated, that students are accruing

an average of £5,800 of additional debt in interest during their studies—before they even have the chance to start paying it off. As the former skills Minister, the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), has argued:

“It is unutterably depressing for hard-working students to see the amount they owe spiralling upwards, before they have even started paying it off.”

The greatest burden is on the students from the poorest homes. So will today’s Minister hear what his colleagues are saying, what students and parents are saying, and what this House is saying, and commit to press the Chancellor to scrap the proposed increase in the interest rate and to review the formula?

A second thing the Government should do immediately is reintroduce maintenance grants for students from lower-income households. The grants were a central part of the package put together in 2012 and without that commitment this House would probably not have passed the proposals that saw tuition fees rise, because the grants mitigated the impact of trebling the fees. Scrapping grants for the poorest at the first opportunity after the 2015 election says a lot about this Government’s priorities and went a long way towards undermining confidence in the system.

While we are on the question of confidence in the system, the Government should think again on their retrospective changes to the terms of repayment, which make graduates pay for the Government’s miscalculation of the cost of the funding system and the escalating RAB—resource accounting and budgeting—charge. The Minister says it was a conscious decision; he knows well enough that the conscious decision his predecessor talked to the House about involved a RAB charge of 28%. That got out of control—it rose into the 40% area, and it was even being modelled at more than 50%—and the Government made graduates pay for their miscalculation.

Anticipating that before the 2015 general election, I asked Ministers for assurances that they would not make students pay for the Government’s mistakes by changing the terms of the 2012 system, and the Minister’s predecessor told me there were no plans to do so. Running into the election, the promise to students was that there were no plans to change the terms of the repayments. However, no sooner were the votes counted than the plans were rolled out in the 2015 Budget, freezing the repayment threshold and making graduates pay more than they signed up for. Conservative Members talk about broken promises, but there could be no worse breach of faith, breach of promise and breach of contract than that retrospective change. It is, frankly, fraudulent, and if this had been any other organisation than the Government, the Financial Conduct Authority would get involved. This decision undermines confidence in the loans system, and it should be reversed.

Let me highlight one further thing, of many, that should change: the decision to scrap bursaries and to introduce fees and loans for nursing, midwifery and allied health courses. Back in January 2016, when we debated the issue in Westminster Hall, the then Health Minister, Ben Gummer, told Members that the Government wanted—listen to this—

“to spread to nurses the same benefits that have been realised in the rest of the student population.”—[*Official Report*, 11 January 2016; Vol. 604, c. 236WH.]

Some of us in the debate expressed some scepticism that nurses and midwives would see £50,000 of debt as a benefit. We warned that these courses, which still provided a route into professional careers for those who were put off university by fees—mature students and others from low-income backgrounds—would see applications fall, at a time when we need more nurses.

Those concerns were cavalierly dismissed by the Government, but the final numbers have been published in the last few days, and Sheffield Hallam University in my city has seen a 22% drop, with the drop across the country estimated at 26%. The Government were clearly wrong. Will they accept that and reverse their decision on bursaries? They have been wrong time and again. We need a fresh start in this whole policy area.

4.12 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): At the general election, the Labour party managed to rally an extraordinary number of young people to its cause—in one constituency, it even had young people standing on roundabouts with “Vote Labour” signs. I am sure many Labour Members will concede that they have those votes to thank for their place in this House today.

It is not difficult to see why students were tempted: not only did Labour promise to abolish tuition fees, but there was even talk of forgiving all student loan debt—an extraordinary, expensive undertaking. I wonder what those young voters must think now, barely a month on from the election, as they see Labour desperately trying to downgrade that promise to an aspiration, or as they see Wales—the only corner of the kingdom where the Labour party is in power—actually increasing fees, despite Labour’s having attacked them during the campaign.

What goes around comes around. I should inform the House that the film of the Labour party, effectively, backtracking on this promise has been shared 1.3 million times, so perhaps those roundabouts will not be quite so full of young students holding up signs for the Labour party at the next general election.

Perhaps the Labour party, including in Wales, now realises that there are very progressive elements to the tuition fee system.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Julian Knight: I am not going to give way at the moment.

Loans are available in this progressive system to everybody. They are paid back only when the student is earning enough to afford it, and the amount to be repaid scales up with income. Effectively, student loans are a type of graduate tax, rather than a tax on everyone, including everyone who does not go to university. No bailiffs are sent out to collect on student loans, and after 30 years any outstanding debt is forgiven by the Government. No other loan has so many protections built in for low earners.

However, to focus narrowly on the repayment structure is to ignore so much of what makes the current system a good deal for less-advantaged students. It secures more places and higher-quality teaching.

I know there is a lot of nostalgia in some circles for the days when university was free, but too often those people fail to acknowledge that this was only possible because the proportion of school leavers who went on

[Julian Knight]

to higher education was tiny. I was the first member of my family to go to university. I come from a council house background and a lone-parent family. It was a really unusual event at my school to go to university, to such an extent that when people found out that I had a place, I and a few others at my school were called on stage. When I went to university, only one in 10 were able to take up the advantages that I had, and I do not want us to go back there, under any circumstances.

When the previous Labour Government decided to massively expand higher education, the costs for universities ballooned, and it was rightly decided that those who stood to benefit should shoulder a share of the cost. The alternative was to fund the entire cost from general taxation—shifting the burden to millions of people who have never had higher education—or to leave it to universities to fill in the gaps in their budgets themselves. Scotland illustrates the dangers of that approach. Local students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have been consistently squeezed out of Scottish universities in favour of fee-paying international students.

Marion Fellows: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Julian Knight: I am not going to give way, I am afraid.

Marion Fellows *rose*—

Julian Knight: Actually, I will.

Marion Fellows *indicated dissent*.

Julian Knight: Scotland used to say to the rest of the United Kingdom, “We have a gold standard in education.” I think it is a matter of shame that the SNP has presided over the collapse of Scottish education in the way that it has.

Marion Fellows: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Julian Knight: No—you had your chance.

As all studies show, the introduction of fees in England has seen an increase in the number of students from poorer backgrounds. Tuition fees have opened up the opportunity to study, and the repayment structure shelters them if they do not get the graduate dividend that they hoped for.

Of course, the current system is not perfect. There are legitimate questions over the interest levied on loans, and especially about the fact that nearly every university charges the maximum amount of fees. Price signals should be an important way for students to gauge the actual value of a degree course. I also think that some courses may be too long, and if they were to be time-limited, that would bring down the costs for all. But abolishing fees and forgiving debts that will only ever be repaid by high earners, and replacing the current system with one that taxes those who do not benefit or leaves universities fighting over high-income applicants, would be a huge transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich, and a ferocious attack on opportunity and social mobility.

4.17 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing me to make my maiden speech in this important debate on tuition fees—a subject that

came up time and time again on the doorstep in Blaydon. I know this debate will be of interest to many constituents.

I would like to start by thanking the people of Blaydon constituency for electing me to represent them here. It is a great privilege. Some of you may first have heard of Blaydon through our local anthem, “Blaydon Races”, played proudly by many a brass band at the Durham miners gala. You will be glad to hear, Mr Speaker, that I will not be bursting into song in this Chamber—parliamentary decorum and a lack of musical talent mean that I should avoid that at all costs—but it does remain a theme and a constant symbol of our proud and sometimes raucous local history.

It is customary in maiden speeches to talk about your predecessor, and for me it is not just a tradition but a matter of great personal pleasure to talk about my great friend and comrade, Dave Anderson. Dave served Blaydon very well in the 12 years he was in this House, and was—and still is—a great champion of working people not just in Blaydon but throughout the trade union movement, working most recently on the Shrewsbury 24 campaign with Ricky Tomlinson. As a former Unison president, Dave spoke up for the public service workers who do so much to deliver the vital services that we all need. Dave will also be remembered here for his work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on muscular dystrophy—a campaign close to his heart as it affected his family, and for which he twice received charity champion awards in this place.

In this maiden speech, I want to talk about the communities that make up the constituency—a constituency that takes in rural areas, industrial sites and areas of great natural beauty, representing the traditions, past and present, of Blaydon. I start from Chopwell, in the west, separated from County Durham by another river, the Derwent. Chopwell, known as “Little Moscow” for its strong socialist links, is a community defined for many years by its proud mining history, and it retains its strong community links and boasts the Chopwell woods, which were thankfully saved from sell-off in 2011. Then I move on to Crawcrook and Greenside, where last Sunday I was proud to open the Greenside community picnic, part of the celebrations to commemorate the last shift at the local pit, and where on 8 July I marched with the local community and the band through the village on our way to Durham for the miners gala, banner flying high. And on to Ryton, where the beautiful Ryton Willows and the Keelman’s Way run alongside the River Tyne towards Blaydon itself. The old Blaydon horse races have long been replaced by a road race on 9 June each year from Newcastle to Blaydon. You can still see hundreds of people

“Gannin’ along the Scotswood Road”,

not to see the Blaydon races, but taking part in them.

Then on to Whickham, where Dave Peacock and other members of the local community have recreated a lost garden, making a tranquil green retreat in the village open to all, and to Sunnyside, another former mining community that is proud of its history, as well as to Winlaton and High Spen, where the red kite now flourishes after being reintroduced some years ago. It was magnificent to see them high overhead as we knocked on doors. Further south and east are the communities of Birtley, Lamesley and Kibblesworth, and the magnificent Angel of the North. Created by Antony Gormley, it

looms over the A1 and the surrounding landscape, demonstrating the strength and endurance of our local communities. Sadly, I never managed to identify the Angel's voting intention, but I think I could have a guess.

Blaydon is also open for business, taking in much of the Team Valley trading estate and the Metro Centre, representing manufacturing and retail. On the day we have seen the new polymer £10 note, I must mention De La Rue, which produces passports at the Blaydon site—and long may that continue.

These communities, and so many more I could mention, make up my constituency of Blaydon, but as in so many areas, the people of Blaydon have had much to deal with. They have felt the impact of austerity. Too many of my constituents have been hit hard—by the bedroom tax, by benefit sanctions, by reassessments for employment and support allowance or for the personal independence payment—and too many find themselves without money to buy the necessities of life for their family, like food or money to pay for gas and electric. It is fortunate for them that we have a well-established food bank in Blaydon, and I must pay tribute here to the Reverend Tracey Hume, who has worked with so many local volunteers in Blaydon to make sure that those who need help get it. What they do is magnificent, but this should not be needed in 2017.

Then there are the 1950s-born women, who told me on the doorstep how badly they have been hit by the equalisation of state pensions. This cannot be right or just. Mr Speaker, I must declare an interest as one of the 1950s-born women. Sadly, unlike me, most of them are not able to take up an apprenticeship in this House and must manage as best they can, but I intend to do all I can to work for them.

All of us come to this House with not just a passion for politics, but a personal history that influences the issues we care about, and I want to share a little of mine. Seventeen years ago, my husband, Charlie, ended his life by suicide. Many of you in this House will have been affected by suicide, but you only find out how many others have been affected when it happens to you. I do not ask for sympathy; I ask for your support for action to reduce the number of people who take their lives. I am glad to be a Samaritans listening volunteer, but we need deeds as well as words to prevent suicide.

In March, Samaritans produced a report, “Dying from inequality”. To put it bluntly, a rigorous academic study has shown that suicide risk increases when people face unemployment, job uncertainty and poverty. These are the very problems faced by the constituents I have talked about and by many others. Two weeks ago, I had the chance to ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he planned to take in the light of this report, and he told me that he always listens to the views of Samaritans. I give notice that I will be pressing the Secretary of State for Health and other Government Ministers to take real action to tackle the causes that lead to too many people taking their own life. As Samaritans chief executive, Ruth Sutherland, said:

“Each suicide statistic is a person. The employee on a zero hour's contract is somebody's parent or child. A person at risk of losing their home may be a sibling or a friend. And each one of them will leave others devastated, and potentially more disadvantaged too, if they take their own life. This is a call for us as individuals to care more and for organisations that can make a difference, to do so.”

Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing me to speak in this debate. I will do all that I can in this House and in my constituency to speak up for the people of Blaydon and to represent them in the best way that I can.

Mr Speaker: I thank and congratulate the hon. Lady on that wonderful maiden speech.

4.25 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called to speak in this debate and a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist). I congratulate her on her maiden speech, which was very moving and powerful, particularly in relation to suicide. We all share her sentiment and hope to see greater progress on that. It is a terrible tragedy that so many still choose to take their own lives.

Having stood on many a football terrace, I am familiar with the Blaydon anthem, but I do not think that the edited lyrics to which I have been subjected are repeatable in this Chamber. I welcome the hon. Lady to the House.

This debate is on an important subject. Having intervened earlier on the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), I have great sympathy for her. She has maintained her composure in the face of her party's policy wobble over historical student debt, but, if we look at what the Leader of the Opposition said to the *NME* prior to the election, we cannot form any conclusion other than that he wished to wipe out historical student debt. He said that he would “deal with it.” Those were his words. What other conclusion could we form?

The politics of this are quite cynical. Talking about helping students means helping a large number of people, but it is a limited base. Spreading policies to all graduates with historical student debt, however, means appealing to a vast number of people, so to renege on that so clearly is disappointing and deceptive.

Equally, we all have to accept that people are worried about levels of student debt. I have four children and worry about them, should they ever get to university, racking up enormous debts. Who, as a parent and a human being, would not be concerned about that? However, we have to think rationally about the issue.

There are measures that can be used to ameliorate the situation. My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), the Chairman of the Education Committee, mentioned interest. Of course, student debts are packaged and bought on the basis of securitisation. I want to understand more about how that works, including the redemption penalties and whether it is possible to change those contracts without huge cost to the taxpayer. We would all benefit from knowing more about that. Perhaps my right hon. Friend's Committee could take evidence on it.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): My hon. Friend makes a strong point about the level of interest on debt and securitisation. He will accept that, because of the high proportion of that debt that is written off, it is in effect a grant, so the interest rate will need to be higher to make it attractive to people who want to take on that security.

James Cartlidge: I am afraid and suspect that that is true. I think that it is also the case that the higher interest rate enabled the Government to increase the low threshold under Labour to the higher threshold of £21,000 under us.

On the subject of the cap—this goes back to my intervention on my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow—if we are able to raise the threshold at which people pay, that is a fairer deal for the student because it ensures greater quality. They repay when their earnings reach a point where we think it is fair for them to start doing so. I think we should look at that, but it is not cheap. My understanding is that if we raise the threshold to £25,000, it will cost almost £2 billion a year in lost income to the Revenue. That is not a minor detail.

We really have to make a decision, as a country and a Parliament, about our priority. What is the most important thing that we want from higher education? Why do people go to university? In my view the most important thing is to have the highest-quality education possible—the best quality degrees. That is what matters. We need to think about the upside, which is that someone who goes to university could earn £250,000 more in their lifetime—the figure is often far more than that—than someone who does not. In fact, to access highly paid professional jobs people need a degree.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Was my hon. Friend as interested as I was to discover that the uplift is £250,000 for females and only £170,000 for males? Both are significant figures, but is it not interesting that the larger figure is the uplift for females who go to university?

James Cartlidge: I am always interested in female uplift. The striking thing is that, regardless of whether they are a man or a woman, university is an incredible opportunity for individuals to improve their standing and their circumstances and to get a career, so that they can afford a home and to raise a family. That is the upside.

To me, the most important thing is the quality of the degrees. I worry that if we go back to a free system, the quality of degrees will not improve but fall, partly because the funding will fall. We will go back to rationing the funding and the places. If we are honest, will the students who go to university when it is “free” take their education as seriously as those who go when it is not? Of course, it is not free. That is the great delusion. As my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) said, it is not free; it is just that somebody else pays, rather than the beneficiary. The whole of society pays.

The money has to come from somewhere. The Labour party will supposedly pay for it by raising corporation tax. Never mind the fact that all the evidence shows that by cutting corporation tax, we are raising the revenue to the Exchequer. This will not happen without a cost. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) chunters about the Laffer curve—he’s having a laugh about the Laffer curve! If Labour Members studied this, they would realise the reality. The OECD figures show that the predicted tax take from corporation tax when it goes to 17% will be the same percentage of GDP as in 2010 when it was at 26%.

The point is that there is a downside of going back to free education. We have to pay for it in some way. What we need is the upside, and the upside is having a competitive graduate system so that our graduates have the best quality qualifications.

I want to conclude with the big picture. The big picture is that people who go to university now are heading into a much more competitive labour market—a globalised, international labour market. Whatever the effects of Brexit are, that will not change. When our children go to university, they will be up against it. They will be up against graduates from India and all over the world. We need to give them the best weapons in their hands—the best tools with which to navigate their way through the challenges of life—and that means getting the best possible qualifications. I therefore urge my hon. Friends to consider the importance of quality.

Finally, I will remark on a very welcome measure that my hon. Friend the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation has brought in. As I understand it, universities will be able to raise fees to the maximum level only if they can demonstrate that their teaching is of the highest quality. We are moving towards a quality-based scheme. I very much welcome that and we should all support it.

4.32 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on her moving, personal and powerful maiden speech, and wish her well for what I hope will be her long and distinguished service to the House.

The late, great Ron Dearing set out in his compact a clear route map for how higher education should be funded. Ultimately, it was to be funded by the beneficiaries. Graduates should make a contribution as beneficiaries; business should make a contribution, because it benefits from well-educated graduates; and society, as taxpayers, should make a contribution, because collectively we benefit from the contribution our universities make, both through learning and teaching, and through their wider impact on our country.

Under the Conservatives in government, first with the Liberal Democrats, then alone and now with the Democratic Unionist party, the Dearing compact has been broken. People in this country graduate with the highest levels of debt anywhere in the world. Most terribly of all, it is students from the poorest backgrounds who graduate with the greatest debt.

Having followed these debates for some time, dating back to my tenure as president of the National Union of Students, I think that one of the most egregious things about Conservative policy on higher education is that every single concession that was fought for and won has been gradually eroded. Maintenance grants, which were reintroduced to help people from the poorest backgrounds, have been abolished by the Conservatives. Interest rates are now well above inflation, which is not what was promised. The repayment threshold has been frozen, which means that the poorest graduates will pay back a disproportionate amount. The NHS bursary has been abolished, which unsurprisingly has led to a free-fall in nursing applications. The part-time and mature access rate would make any decent Government blush.

Michael Tomlinson: On poorer students, does the hon. Gentleman not welcome the fact that more students from disadvantaged backgrounds are going to university than ever before—an increase of 43% from 2009 to 2016, and an increase of 73% from 2006 to today?

Wes Streeting: As someone who has always campaigned for wider access to higher education and who believes strongly that we should have more, rather than fewer, better educated people in our country, I welcome the fact that more students are in higher education than ever before. I am glad that the hon. Gentleman raises that point, because it brings me to the issue of Government complacency. It is not really a surprise that more young people are going to university than ever before: there are more young people than ever before. In addition to the shocking record on part-time and mature access—students in those cohorts tend to be from non-traditional and under-represented backgrounds in higher education—the Government are hugely complacent about the extent to which working-class young people are being deterred from accessing higher education by fear of tuition fees and debt.

Joseph Johnson: The hon. Gentleman has made a specious point. It is the rate for people from disadvantaged backgrounds that is 42% higher than it was in 2009-10. That has nothing to do with the number, although that is also higher.

Wes Streeting: The Minister is right that there has been progress—I do not doubt that—but once again he underlines my point about complacency. Research published by the distinguished academic Professor Claire Callender of University College London warned:

“When we compared working and upper-class students with similar GCSE results, taking account of differences in gender, ethnicity and type of school attended...a lower percentage of working-class students had applied to university...compared with those from an upper-class background...because of these fears.

Our study is an important reminder that academic achievement at school cannot adequately explain the lower proportion of students from poorer backgrounds. High fees and fear of debt play a crucial role.”

I caution the Government against complacency on this issue. They have been consistently complacent about it since they decided to treble fees. If they were not complacent, they would never have abolished the maintenance grants, which was one of the most terrible policies of the last Parliament.

It is not surprising that so many people—not just young people, but parents and grandparents—are angry about the extent to which students and graduates have been plunged into record levels of debt. It is not surprising that the issue has hit the top of the political agenda. It is not only Ministers who are to blame; university vice-chancellors should take some responsibility, too. There is scant evidence that trebling university tuition fees has led to a better quality of experience for undergraduate students. In fact, the student experience survey suggests the opposite. Students believe they get less value for money than they did before. Frankly, looking at retention rates and graduate destination data for certain courses at certain universities, those vice-chancellors who continue to award themselves inflation-busting pay increases should be ashamed.

The truth is that if people from a disadvantaged background take the plunge, go to university, take on the risk of the debt and, for whatever reason, are unable to complete the course, the cost to them is far higher than if they had never been to university—not just in terms of the debt that they still have to repay, but because on their CVs they will forever be branded failures by employers. Having been awash with cash, thanks to higher fees, in a way that the rest of the public sector has not, universities have not demonstrated the duty of care or responsibility to students that I would expect for the fees that they charge and the level of debt that results. We have to be much firmer with universities.

My final point is a broader one about where social mobility in this country is headed and the state of political debate about that. I am horrified by the number of housing cases that I deal with involving children, and the impact on their education. As I said in Communities and Local Government questions this week, I did a school visit last week, and at the end of the Q and A with a group of year 6 students, I was pulled aside by an 11-year-old boy who told me that he, his mother and his two brothers have been living in one room in a hostel, in so-called temporary accommodation, for more than a year.

I will never forget the conversation that I had in my surgery with a mum and her teenage daughter. Again, they were living in one room, in a bed and breakfast. The daughter has to do her homework under the covers at night, with a torch. She does not want to disturb her mother's sleep, because her mother works all hours to try to make ends meet—evidently not very successfully, which is why they are stuck in poverty in a single room in a hostel.

I will certainly never forget another mother who came to me, a victim of domestic violence living in Ilford with three children, two of primary-school age and one teenager. Her daughter had admitted that she had considered taking her own life because her circumstances were so appalling. That family do not live in Ilford any more; they were moved to Harrow in west London, and then to Wolverhampton.

This is what really upsets me, as someone who grew up on a council estate and did not enjoy the experience: however bad I thought my childhood was—growing up in poverty and relying on the benefits system; living in a council flat that was not nice and to which I did not want to invite friends round to play, because it was not the sort of environment in which they would feel welcome—I realise how lucky I was now. The policies of successive Conservative Governments have led us to a point at which we are disrupting children's education by moving them from pillar to post in temporary bed-and-breakfast accommodation, with huge consequences for their education today and their life chances tomorrow.

If the Government were serious about social mobility, it would be an overriding priority running through every single Department. However, their policies and their pet projects—grammar schools, free schools and everything else—are so far removed from the reality of most people in the country, and from policies that would genuinely make a transformational difference, that they really ought to be ashamed. Theirs may be the largest party, but there is a reason for their failure to win a majority at the general election, and that is their deep detachment from the everyday lives of most people in this country.

4.41 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), although I did not concur with all his points. I will address one or two of them in my speech. First, however, let me join others in congratulating the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist). She made a very touching and well-delivered speech, and it was wonderful to hear about her work in the Samaritans, which—in addition to her work as a Member of Parliament—shows that she is a true public servant. Whatever the public or the media may say, I believe that the vast majority of people who decide to enter the world of parliamentary politics do so because they want to make the world a better place, and it is clear that that is why the hon. Lady is sitting on the green Benches today. I welcome her to the House.

I think that all of us, when we remember our time at school, describe someone as our favourite teacher. Mine was a gentleman called Ken Hudson, my physics teacher. Ken was a pipe-smoking, bespectacled gentleman with a haircut like Ray Reardon's—hon. Members may remember that he was a snooker player. Ken was definitely my inspiration, although I did not do tremendously well in physics at A-level or at college.

I remember the day we did our physics mock O-level. None of the class did particularly well. Ken walked into our classroom, stood by the blackboard, wiped it down, and just looked at us until we all went very quiet. Then he wrote across the blackboard in chalk, "The world does not owe you a living". That has stuck with me for 37 years, and it has stuck with my children, too, because I tell them about it an awful lot—the principle that the world does not owe anyone a living. I also tell them that their parents do not owe them a living.

My son, who had just left his sixth form, had to choose whether to go to university or enter the world of work. Was he going to invest in his education? Was he going to university? If a person can provide for themselves at 18, the world does not owe them a living. At that point, it is their decision whether to invest their money—tuition fees and student accommodation away from home—and time. All that would add to my son's debt in the future. Did he want to spend up to £30,000, £40,000 or £50,000 on his education, which might pay in the future? As we have heard, it could pay up to a quarter of million pounds over a lifetime, so that might have been a sensible choice to make. He decided not to do that, but instead to move into the world of work. Do I think it is right that he, having made that decision, should fund others who choose to go down a different route and enter higher education and university? I do not think it is right that he should have to bear that burden; surely the burden should be carried by those who benefit most from that education.

Of course other people benefit from the fact that our society is better educated, but there is a clear correlation between someone's education and their investment in it, and the long-term return that they will see from it. A balance needs to be struck; somebody has to pay. We do not have a bottomless pit of money; that is an absolute fact. So who will pay is the key question.

I tried to intervene on the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), because I wanted to ask him a question. He has a very sensible economic perspective. At a time when we are spending £60 billion more every

year than we are collecting in taxes, does he honestly feel that the £11.2 billion a year allocated to this policy in the Labour manifesto is the best way to spend that public money at this time, with all the other demands we have, including on our healthcare and our pre-18 education? Does he honestly feel that is the best use of that public money? I do not.

We have to make ends meet in this country, and therefore must choose where to allocate our resources for the best effect. [*Interruption.*] I am happy to take an intervention, but the point is that the Labour manifesto clearly has £250 billion of extra spending, plus £25 billion a year in infrastructure spending, which is another £125 billion. It would also nationalise the water companies and the railways. That amounts to £500 billion of extra debt. That same manifesto also says that if Labour had been in government they would have reduced the national debt over the course of this Parliament. How is that possible? How does any of this stack up? It is uncoded spending after uncoded spending.

The issue of past student debt was not in the manifesto, of course, but what the Leader of the Opposition said about that is clear, and not every party commitment needs to be in the manifesto for people to have a reasonable degree of expectation that it will be delivered. He said:

"I will deal with those already burdened with student debt."

That was a clear commitment. So on top of that £500 billion, there is another £111 billion—uncoded debt after uncoded debt. That is the reality, and we cannot carry on like that. We must not go back to the 1970s, which is when I grew up; my household had uncollected rubbish and the TV used to go off at 10 o'clock. I am old enough to remember that, and we will return to it if we do not maintain a sensible economic policy.

It is wrong to think that we on this side of the House are not worried about student debt. Of course I am worried about student debt—both that of the many students across the country, and potentially that of my children, as I have three more children, some of whom might choose to go to university. We should be talking about constructive ways of allowing students to go through university and benefit from higher education without incurring so much debt. One way of doing so would be to have shorter courses. My daughter is looking at a psychology course.

Joseph Johnson: My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, enacted on the last day of the last Session, makes it possible for universities to offer shorter courses, such as two-year degrees.

Kevin Hollinrake: That is an example of ideas in action, and it is tremendous news. I should have been following that more closely, but—[*Interruption.*] I see that you want me to conclude, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I will make a couple of quick points, if I may.

We should look at the US system, with its modular courses. Students can also live closer to home and not incur the accommodation and living costs involved in moving away. There are ways to reduce the financial impact on students, but overall this is about choice and who pays for those choices. I believe the burden of the cost should be borne by those who benefit from the education.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I call James Frith to make his maiden speech.

4.49 pm

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is an absolute pleasure to be here making my maiden speech during this debate on tuition fees, and I give thanks to the people of Bury, Tottington and Ramsbottom for the fact that I am standing here in the first place. Bury North is an amazing place, and I have 100 years of history there, from my late great-grandfather, a vicar in Bury, to me, his great-grandson, the new MP. For me and my wife, Nikki, and our three children—with a fourth on the way—it is our family's home town.

Growing up, public service was a staple of my home life. My mum was a leaving-care worker and magistrate with a passion for music. Dad was a Church of England minister with a love of cricket and politics. And so it goes that my passions are politics and music. These were supercharged within me when, 20 years ago, I witnessed Romania and South Africa newly emerging as political states, recovering from a ruthless dictator and the abhorrence of apartheid respectively.

I then moved to the music capital of the world—Manchester—to study. There, I formed an indie rock and roll band, in which I was the singer for 12 years. I joined the Labour party and married a Bury woman. The rest is history. I never did get that elusive record deal, though few people need to know me for long before learning that I did in fact play Glastonbury festival, long before it became the thing to do. [*Laughter.*] I'd have killed for his crowds, though.

During the election—the competition, as my son, Henry, called it—my eldest daughter, Jemima, asked me, “What is an MP, Daddy?” I tried to explain, saying, “If someone wants help, might be in trouble, wants something changing, needs to talk to someone or maybe just has a really good idea, they might go and see their MP.” Jemima looked at me and said, “Well, Daddy, you're my MP already.”

It is customary to pay tribute to one's predecessor. David Nuttall was graceful in his victory last time, as he was in his defeat this time. For all our considerable political differences, I always found him to be an affable man. I wish him and his wife the very best for the future.

Bury North is a fantastic place to live. It is book-ended by two traditional market towns, and the world-famous Bury market is home to the new superfood, Bury black pudding. There is also a magnificent market in Ramsbottom, from where, one winter morning, my wife started her own business. My constituency stretches from the foothills of the Lancashire Pennines in the north—it is overlooked by Peel Tower atop Holcombe Hill—to Gigg Lane, home of the mighty Shakers, Bury FC, in the south. Proudly, we are home to the Lancashire Fusiliers and veterans. They are legendary for being awarded six Victoria Crosses before breakfast at the battle of Gallipoli in 1915—a battle in which one Clement Attlee also fought.

Local charities including SuperJosh, Annabelle's Challenge and Bury hospice are an inspiration. Whether attending a community event at the Jinnah Centre, relaxing around the boundary at Greenmount cricket club, enjoying our countryside or a curry at the Jewel in the Crown, or taking the East Lancashire railway up to

Ramsbottom, all human life and experience is there. Local employers set high standards, drawing on the strengths of our town and its heritage. They include the award-winning Eagle and Child pub and Pennine Communications. Stories of this fine place are expertly retold by the local paper, the *Bury Times*. My new constituency office will be hosted in the same building as the Freedom church, which welcomes everyone to its door with “it's great to see you”—a simple message that sums Bury up.

But, Mr Speaker—sorry; Madam Deputy Speaker—Bury has had seven years of bad luck, with £120 million cut from services, local government and our economy. Our walk-in centre is used by thousands of patients a month. They rely on it not as Labour or Conservative supporters but as patients, so why is it threatened with closure? The reality of austerity is being lived through in hospital wards, or by carers and the underpaid, overworked parents who know differently. Mental health services are disappearing. We do not have enough nurses because the Government's own target is 20,000 short. Children with special educational needs are no longer supported. Social care has been reduced to minutes per day. Last year, 6,000 food parcels were handed out in Bury alone. A veteran in Bury had his benefits sanctioned for selling poppies. There is no access to finance for many of our growing businesses without people risking the family home. In this once weathervane seat many feel, at best, that we have stood still as a country; many more feel stood on.

As my daughter might ask, so we say from this House: what are we for? What do we do? For Bury North, I am here to help to determine what comes next. That is the point of being here: the power to intervene, to disrupt and to change; the authority to speak out and to help manage. That is the point, not to manage decline or sponsor disadvantage. But austerity continues at pace. Austerity is not “living within our means”; austerity is lifeless economics. We must be as much about humanity as about eventually balancing the books. You grow by investing. You nurture talent and empower people. A business would not seek to grow by taking its people off the road, and nor should a country.

I believe that politics is a force for good and for hope, not an excuse for despair. My belief in Labour values is why I believe we need a fairer, more diverse economy. We need an economy that is more innovative and entrepreneurial and that takes risks and gives rewards. We need an economy with work-life balance, an economy that affirms the fact that both public and private sectors combine to create wealth. From nursery to university, these ambitions should feature, too. We need proper investment paid for by a broader economy. We should be empowered by a curriculum that prepares our young people for a successful, modern working life, whether via an apprenticeship or a degree, or if they are starting up for themselves, not the ever-narrowing curriculum it has become.

Too often, it is our young people who have been the first to face the political calculation of this place. With tuition fees as they are, they face a future saddled with debt, and rising interest rates on that debt. We must move to a higher-skilled economic ground. We must harness our assets: creativity, intuition, emotion, empathy and intelligence. In doing so, we must outbid the threat to jobs and livelihoods that automation poses for so many. We need a collaboration of all levels of education,

[James Frith]

research development, trade unions, business and new national industry, pulled together by the Government, jumpstarting the plan.

In closing, Mr Speaker—sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker; you will have marked me out already. On Brexit, please, a less bombastic approach and more grace; a Brexit that works for Bury is what I have said. I am not religious about Brexit—few people are—but away from this bubble, Brexit for many was a chance to stop the show, smash the glass and pull the leave cord, and it struck a chord. For the first time, many who have not been listened to have now been heard, but they did not vote to be worse off or poorer.

I am proud that in Bury North people voted to trust Labour with public services, and to trust Labour to ensure that industries are made anew and that our workers are protected. My mission is to improve the lives and the living of everyone I represent in Bury North, whether they voted for me or not.

I am not here to trade insult but to advance our argument. Politics—the great intervener, the enabler, the change we want to see, the kicking out and the putting in—may too often be a wasted force, but it is a force for good. After a historic result in Bury North, I now join my colleagues in what might feel to this musician like a difficult second album. I will be working with my friends and colleagues to advance our argument and win it with inspiration, assurance and vision. Desmond Tutu once said “never underestimate man’s capacity to do wrong. But never underestimate man’s capacity for good also.” The same is true of our estimation of politics, and the responsibility on us to ensure that our politics’ capacity for good begins in this place—restoring faith in politics and professing to a new generation that its power is the best force for good and for change that we have for the many, not the few.

5.1 pm

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bury North (James Frith). He paid a fitting and generous tribute to his predecessor and my friend, David Nuttall. He spoke with eloquence and with confidence. He said that his passions are politics and music; I would stick to politics and cricket. He said that we should not be trading insults, so I look forward not to trading insults with him in future but to disagreeing well. I am sure there is much on which we will disagree, but I look forward to his future contributions in this place.

In a very short speech, I shall make just a few points. The history of tuition fees has already been mentioned, providing a helpful reminder of what happened. The fees were introduced by the Labour party in 1998. In 2001, the Labour party manifesto pledged:

“We will not introduce top-up fees.”

Then Labour proceeded to do just that in 2004. The final piece of the jigsaw that has not yet been mentioned is the Liberal Democrats’ pledge in 2010 that they would scrap university tuition fees, and, in coalition, they voted to put them up.

This debate is not just a timely reminder of those facts, but an opportunity for us to consider the issue of social justice. It is an issue that my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), the new Chairman

of the Education Committee, picked up. I love his vision and his picture of the ladder. What we mean by social justice should be opportunities for the next generation, particularly for those who are less advantaged. Others can make the economic argument. My hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) did so eloquently and well. I fear that the Leader of the Opposition has dug himself into a bit of a hole if we listen to what he said in the run-up to the election campaign—the promise that he made on the stump to students—and what was said at the Dispatch Box this afternoon.

It may seem counter-intuitive, but more people from disadvantaged backgrounds are now going to university than ever before—not just more people, but a higher proportion of people. The Minister set it out quite rightly at 43%. It has gone up from 13.5% in 2009-10 to 19.5% in 2016. The proportion has gone up 73% since 2006. This is not an accident, but a result of this Government’s policy. The *quid pro quo* is that we give universities more money, but, as part of the deal, they must ensure that there is social justice and that more people from less well-off backgrounds get to university. We heard some of that from the Minister this afternoon. I look forward to more about it in the future. The hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) said that we should not be complacent. He is absolutely right—we should not, and this Minister and this Government should ensure that these statistics persist and that we continue to see more people from poorer backgrounds going to university, improving their life chances. It is happening now under a Conservative Government.

What would happen if Labour got into power and introduced its policy? We would see a reduction in funding, reduced access, crumbling institutions and fewer students—and, importantly, on the question of social justice, we would see fewer students from disadvantaged backgrounds going to university. How do we know that is true? How do we know that is right? We look at Scotland; we look at what has happened when student tuition fees have been taken away. My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) made this point in an intervention earlier and he is absolutely right. These are not my words but those of the Sutton Trust—they tried it in Scotland and there were “particularly negative consequences for less advantaged students.” If people are concerned about social justice and about the ladder mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow, they should follow this Government’s policy on tuition fees.

5.5 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I am grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to give my maiden speech in this important debate on education fees. Many young people are facing this increased burden more often.

It is with great pride that I rise to speak representing a constituency in my home city of Manchester. In May, the city I love was the victim of a terrible attack—22 adults and children were killed and more than 100 people were injured attending a concert at Manchester Arena. It was an act of pure evil. Faced with this tragedy, the people of Manchester responded in the only way they know: with solidarity, with compassion, and with the determination that those who seek to endanger our way of life will not succeed.

When such events happen there is always a danger that some people will try to use them to divide us, and unfortunately we witnessed an increase in hate crimes in the wake of the attack, yet just a few weeks later the people of Manchester elected me—a Muslim—as the city’s first ever BME MP. I cannot think of a more powerful message to the terrorists and bigots that their attempts to divide us will never succeed.

I am humbled to follow in the footsteps of my predecessor, the late Sir Gerald Kaufman. Sir Gerald was a legend in this place and he will be missed by Members on all sides. He brought colour to proceedings here—sometimes literally through his keen sense of style, and at other times through his sharp wit. He served in this House for almost 47 years, until he passed away earlier this year. He served in many roles: as an Environment Minister, a senior shadow Cabinet member, Chair of the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport, and later Father of the House. But above all, Sir Gerald was a tireless champion for his constituents and in return he was loved by them. I worked with him for 20 years on issues such as peace in south Asia and the middle east and standing up for oppressed people in general—work that I will try to continue in this House. I was always grateful for his support, advice and, above all, his friendship. I know he will be a hard act to follow, and although I cannot promise to match his dress sense I will try my best to at least fill his shoes. Most of all, I will never forget the people of Manchester Gorton, who have given me the privilege of representing them here.

The Gorton constituency is a wonderfully diverse and vibrant place, taking in Fallowfield, Gorton, Levenshulme, Longsight, Rusholme and Whalley Range. It has thriving local businesses, such as Belle Vue speedway and dog track; wonderful green spaces such as Platt Fields, Debdale, Alexandra and Crowcroft parks; and, of course, the famous curry mile. It is also a spiritual place, home to a huge number of places of worship, with beautiful historic buildings such as Gorton monastery and Victoria Park mosque, the first mosque in Manchester.

But it is not without its challenges: seven years of austerity have hit my constituents hard; more than one in three children live in poverty, the average wage is £100 less than the national average; £300 million has been cut from Manchester City Council’s budget; and there are 2,000 fewer police on our streets.

During my election campaign, I promised I would always put Manchester, Gorton first; that is exactly what I intend to do during my time in this place. Manchester is a thriving, world-class city and a great place to live. The people in my constituency are decent and hard-working. They play by the rules and do the right thing, but they have not always felt the benefits of our city’s success and they have not had a fair deal from this Government. So I will stand against the cuts and further austerity, and I will fight for the extra investment in housing, schools, NHS and local businesses that Manchester, Gorton needs and deserves.

My own journey to this place has not been a typical one. I was born in Pakistan and came to the UK when I was adopted out of poverty as a child. Since then Manchester has been my home for nearly 40 years. I often tell people that although I was born in Pakistan, I was made in Manchester. I left school with no qualifications and, at 16, went straight into work as a labourer in a cotton mill. Later I became a bus driver and then a police officer, one of Manchester’s very few BME officers

in the 1980s. That caught up with me during my election campaign when a voter approached me and said he would not vote for me. Like any candidate, I was a little hurt and wanted to know why. He said, “Twenty years ago, you arrested me.” Even after a brief chat, I was not able to change his mind.

I always felt that I had missed out on an education. I was supporting my wife and young children, but I also went to night school, got my O-levels, A-levels and eventually a law degree. I became a solicitor because I wanted to defend those most in need. I worked my way up to become a partner at my own law firm in Gorton. Over the past 17 years, I have been a Manchester councillor and Lord Mayor, and latterly an MEP.

I entered politics because I believe in the power of social justice to transform lives, to bring hope and to deliver opportunity. I believe in a world in which someone’s prospects should be determined by the content of their character and not by their circumstances at birth or the colour of their skin. Although progress has been made, it is clear from the recent increase in inequality that more is still to be done.

As a father, I can see society’s unfairness clearly when I look at my children—I have three, two daughters and a son. I see them equally, but society does not. It is more than 45 years since the Equal Pay Act 1970, but women still earn less than men. I do not want to have to wait for another 45 years for my great-great-granddaughter to be treated equally.

In the House, I will always be a champion of equality; I will stand against anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and all other forms of discrimination. I look forward to the upcoming release of the race audit so that we can better ensure that our public services do not fail the most vulnerable in our society. I will no doubt touch more on such issues in future debate. I also hope to bring my experience from my time in the European Parliament to bear on the important discussions to come on Brexit.

For now, I thank the House for indulging me while I made my maiden speech. I look forward to making the voice of Manchester, Gorton heard loud and clear during my time in this House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I call Mike Hill to make his maiden speech.

5.14 pm

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech today. As the first person in my family to attend university—on a grant, a wing and a prayer—I know just how difficult it is to survive university, let alone be saddled with debts as a result of tuition fees.

I begin by paying tribute to those who elected me—the most wonderful, friendly, warm-hearted and welcoming people. It is an honour and a privilege to represent Hartlepodlians in this House. I should also like to pay tribute to the town’s previous MPs—Iain Wright, Peter Mandelson and Ted Leadbitter. Sadly, I did not know Ted, but I do know that he was a true and much respected constituency MP, and that is something that I aspire to emulate. I thank Peter Mandelson for his energy and efforts in helping to regenerate the town, for throwing his weight behind some wonderful projects such as our most beautiful world class marina, and for flying the flag for that little known northern delicacy, guacamole.

[Mike Hill]

As for my immediate predecessor Iain Wright, who could ever forget his true tenacity and ruthlessness as Chair of the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee as he exposed the disgraceful and completely unacceptable exploitation of workers at Sports Direct, or his dogged determination to stand up for British Home Stores workers when they lost their jobs in the blink of an eye and during the pension scandal that followed? Yes, we lost our BHS in Hartlepool too—and yes, Philip Green deserved to lose his knighthood over it.

At the turn of this century, I had the good fortune to land a new job with the trade union Unison. Of all the places where I could have lived in the wonderful region of the north-east, I chose Hartlepool. As I said earlier, the people are warm and welcoming—straight-talking and honest folk. But they were not the only attraction. Hartlepool is a real hidden gem, a beautiful coastal town steeped in history. From Greatham to the Fens, from Elwick village to Hart village, from the prehistoric petrified forest seen at low tide at Seaton Carew to the medieval St Hilda's church on the Headland, there is history everywhere.

Robert de Bruce is famously connected with the town. It has sitting in a dry dock in its centre one of Nelson's original flagships, HMS Trincomalee. We have recently welcomed to the town the new Royal Navy museum of the north. The Heugh battery on the Headland, a survivor of the first bombardment of British soil from the sea in the first world war, is a hidden treasure. Hartlepool truly has a wonderful tourist offer, and I am proud to be here to promote it today.

My constituents are no fools—they know their own minds and speak plainly. They voted massively for Brexit; 69.5% was the highest vote in the north-east. But that did not mean that they were converts to UKIP or the Tories, as UKIP found out when it lost its deposit in the general election and as the Tories found out when we increased our majority. I thank the Prime Minister for deciding to go to the polls early. The fact that Hartlepudlians voted in the local football mascot H'Angus the Monkey as their first ever elected Mayor shows their humour and ability to challenge the establishment when they need to.

Unlike the monkey Mayor, I did not get elected for promoting free bananas for every primary school pupil, but I did on the promise that I would fight for those kids, for their schools, for the NHS, for our hospital and for our public services—and against the Government hellbent on breaking them. I pay tribute to all those who supported me in getting elected to this strange place—particularly to my family, who are with us in the Gallery, and to my mother and father, who passed away in February this year. My dad, Mr Robert Hill, from the other monkey town of Heywood in Lancashire, was a true inspiration and he would be proud of me today. Yes, it is true—I moved from one monkey town to another and became its MP. You simply could not make that one up, could you?

My experience here so far has inspired me all the more to do what I promised to set out to do. Hartlepool is a wonderful place, yet it has some of the most deprived wards in the country. Life expectancy for women is the second lowest in the country, and unemployment is significantly higher than in any other

town in the north-east. It is my job—my determination—to fight tooth and nail in this place against the constant attacks on our people and communities by the failed austerity agenda delivered by a Government who are disconnected and uncaring of our people and communities.

I want to champion and fight for mental health services—mental health is a growing issue emerging from austerity—and, as a former union official, for health workers, who themselves fall ill and often suffer a second-class service when it comes to their own treatment. I want also to champion and fight for the trade union movement and the co-operative movement. I am proud of my co-operative and union roots. I pay personal tribute to all my work colleagues and friends in Unison, particularly my secretary, Angela, and everyone at the Middlesbrough office, who are nothing short of family to me.

I also pay tribute to a true inspiration and giant of the trade union movement, Mr Rodney Bickerstaffe—my friend and the former general secretary of Unison. He is a brilliant man and working-class hero who is currently suffering from a terrible illness and is having an operation today; I wish him well.

I am unashamedly a trade unionist and my constituents know that. They also know that I am a tried and tested campaigner. I am privileged to have their support and to be able to do what I said I would do: fly the flag for Hartlepool, put the town on the map, and fight every inch of the way for the people who elected me.

5.21 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The House will know that I was not here for most of the debate, but I would like to join the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) and send best wishes from this side of the House to Rodney Bickerstaffe, who I knew in my various roles. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman and his supporters on doubling the majority of his predecessor. The House will look forward to many more contributions from him. The less controversial ones will be welcomed, including his commitment to investment—private and public—in his constituency, and the more controversial ones may get a riposte later on.

The hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) comes to this House as one of the best qualified people to contribute to our debates for all the reasons he mentioned in his speech. He is the sort of person who will give Parliament a good reputation. I hope he and we can co-operate, working across the House to achieve many of the things to which he is committed. I congratulate both hon. Gentlemen on their maiden speeches.

5.22 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Blaydon (Liz Twist), for Bury North (James Frith), for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) and for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) on making excellent maiden speeches today. I came into the House with them and I am sure that we will carry on our journey together to help transform this country.

I have been waiting for 20 years to make a speech in a debate on higher education funding and tuition fees—ever since 23 July 1997, when Ron Dearing published his report and I was an executive officer at Leeds University union. In the past three months, I have spoken to

hundreds of students from the University of Leeds and Leeds Beckett University. Since Parliament dissolved, they were not aware that their fees were rising to £9,250 from £9,000. The fact was not made clear to them at all. The Government seem to have created a tuition fee rise escalator. In other areas, they are abandoning such escalators, but not for tuition fees. Fees are expected to hit £10,000 by 2020. I wonder how many students are aware of that.

The teaching excellence framework adds an additional element, starting an Olympic-style race with gold, silver and bronze medals awarded for quality. Future increases will be linked to the rostrum, creating a new hierarchy in higher education whereby gold medal-winning universities will be able to place their fees ever higher.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies has shown that the average student now graduates with more than £50,000 of debt. The replacement of maintenance grants with loans also means that the poorest students are worst hit, whereas the richest 30% of households would have lower borrowings, at “only” £43,000. The poorest are hit hardest, the richest are hit the least and the middle are hit in the middle. Is that the sort of system we are trying to create? How much further does debt need to rise before the Government stop the debt spiral they created in 2012?

Graduates have raised the issue of loans with me consistently over the last period and before I was a Member of Parliament, because students currently repay loans at a rate of 9% of their earnings over £21,000. The repayment threshold was due to rise in line with earnings, but in 2015, after the previous general election, the Conservative Government froze the threshold until at least 2021. We are now seeing inflation rising but the repayment threshold staying the same, which is creating a real-terms increase in the payments. In addition, people have to deal with the high interest rate. We are talking about mortgage-style debt—this is not a short-term loan—but the Government are treating it like Wonga. Students are having to pay 3% above RPI; this is currently 4.6%, but in September, when the new academic year starts, it will go up to 6.1%. Why are students being lent money without fully knowing the terms that they will be repaying? Why are they totally at the whim of the economic climate and of the Government? A further irony is that graduates who earn more pay their loans back more quickly and incur less debt than those on lower incomes, who have to wait longer to repay their loans and are continually having to pay back interest.

So we have a quadruple whammy of rising fees, real-terms cuts in the threshold for when graduates have to pay back, rising interest rates and larger debt for lower-earning graduates. Has not the worst of all worlds been created? Students know that no aspect of this system is fit for purpose, and the general election showed just that, with many new hon. Members, some of whom spoke today and made maiden speeches, now representing university and student-heavy seats because students have lost trust in the Government. They know that the only party that will fix this broken system is the Labour party, with the action on both fees and loans outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner).

5.27 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I was lucky enough to go to Liverpool Polytechnic to study law in 1987 and have my tuition fees paid in full. I am sure many of the people here in this Chamber who went into higher education also had their fees paid. I do not know whether the prospect of having substantial debt at the end of my studies would have put me off, but it would have made me stop and think. That is the crux of the problem with tuition fees: many students from low-income families that might not even earn £20,000 a year would seriously balk at the idea of having to pay back £50,000. With maintenance grants being replaced by loans, total student debt for those from poorer families will be much higher than for those from wealthier ones. It is therefore no accident that, on average, one in 20 freshers drops out from university every year, whereas the figure for those from poorer families is one in 12. Even when they graduate, those from poorer families earn 10% less than their wealthier peers, who find it easier to get placements and internships, and impress with CVs with better extracurricular activities. On the subject of jobs, it is also worth noting that many professions, including teaching and nursing, are struggling to recruit graduates, partly because of the low pay and the inability of graduates to pay off their loans.

Another invidious factor that arises from tuition fees and debt is that many young people are putting their lives on hold, as they have to live with their parents sometimes well into their 30s to save up enough money to buy a home of their own. That has a knock-on effect on their relationships and life choices, such as whether or not they want to start a family. It is not just young people who are affected by this; many potential mature students and part-time students have already been put off studying since 2012, when tuition fees were hiked up to £9,000. We have seen an overall decline of 61% in part-time students and 39% in mature students.

With the Institute for Fiscal Studies estimating that average student debt is £50,000 on graduation, and with 77% of students expected never to pay off their loans entirely, it is scandalous that the Government are trying to increase tuition fees at this time. They should take immediate steps to reduce tuition fees, not increase them.

We have heard that Conservative Members question Labour policy on tuition fees, but if they wanted to debate Labour party policy properly, they should have voted for our amendment on Monday to give us more Opposition days.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Government's decision to increase tuition fees implemented by the Higher Education (Basic Amount) (England) Regulations 2016 (S.I., 2016, No. 1205) and the Higher Education (Higher Amount) (England) Regulations 2016 (S.I., 2016, No. 1206).

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I thank hon. Members for their self-denying ordinance. We managed, without a time limit, to come in almost exactly perfectly on time. In particular, I pay tribute to the people who have made their maiden speeches this afternoon and done so within the limits which Mr Speaker asked them to keep to. Thank you very much indeed.

Exiting the European Union: Sanctions

5.31 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Exiting the European Union and Sanctions.

May I congratulate those who have just given their maiden speeches?

The United Kingdom has long been one of the most networked and outward-looking countries in the world. The Prime Minister has set out her vision for the country, following our exit from the European Union: a truly global Britain—a country that goes out into the world to build relationships with old friends and new allies alike. We hold fast to a vision of a UK that is respected abroad, tolerant at home, engaged in the world, and working with international partners to advance the prosperity and security of our nation.

That said, we live in a fast-changing and uncertain world. The United Kingdom faces a number of threats from states that act in contravention of international law, from individuals who peddle messages of hate or commit acts of terror, and from companies that corrupt basic standards of behaviour, and this country needs as many tools as are available to counter these threats and to influence the behaviour of others.

Effective, targeted sanctions policy is one of those tools. Sanctions have helped resolve complex and serious policy issues—for example, by bringing Iran to the negotiating table to agree to robust constraints on its nuclear programme. The UK currently implements 34 sanctions regimes, around half of which result from legally binding resolutions of the UN Security Council, and half from additional measures agreed with partners in the European Union. We must retain the ability to impose, update and lift sanctions regimes, both to comply with our international obligations and to pursue our wider foreign policy and national security objectives after we exit the European Union.

The referendum result last year was a clear message from the people of the United Kingdom that we need to change our relationship with the European Union and take back control of our laws, and this Government are delivering on that instruction through the ongoing negotiations, the second round of which is under way this week, and through the introduction of essential legislation, such as the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, which the Government published last week.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): This mantra of taking back control of our own laws has been very prominent in the Brexit debate. Could the Minister give an example of an EU sanction that the United Kingdom would not want to apply, or of a sanction that it would want to apply, but that the European Union does not currently apply, just to give us some idea of how much control we need to take back in this area?

Mr Walker: I will respond to the hon. Gentleman perhaps later in my speech. This is more about powers than policy. The UK wants to pursue a consistent policy as we go forward, but to do so, we will need powers as we exit the European Union.

The UK's implementation of UN sanctions and European Union multilateral sanctions relies on the European Communities Act 1972. The UK has some limited domestic powers to impose sanctions—notably in domestic counter-terrorism—but these are not sufficient to replicate the full range of sanctions in force through the European Union. While the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill will preserve or freeze existing sanctions, it would not provide the powers necessary to create new regimes, as we may need to in future, or to update, amend or lift sanctions, as we have done in the past when there are changes in circumstances in the fast-moving world of foreign policy.

When the United Kingdom exits the European Union in March 2019, we will therefore need to have new legislation in place. As set out in Her Majesty's Gracious Speech, the international sanctions Bill will be introduced this Session. The Bill will focus on powers, not policy, establishing the legal framework that we need to continue implementing UN sanctions, and to return decision-making powers on non-UN sanctions to the UK, while preserving flexibility, for now, on how we use those powers in relation to specific countries or threats.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Does not the Minister accept that what he has outlined of this process really does underline the stupidity of some of the arguments around sovereignty? He says that we can now impose our own sanctions regime, but we are less powerful and less influential acting alone than we would be acting through the European Union.

Mr Walker: I do not agree. The referendum clearly took the key decision that we would be leaving the European Union, but that does not prohibit us from working with allies in the European Union, or indeed elsewhere. The UK will continue to be a powerful, positive influence in the world, and we can work with allies on a number of planes.

Returning to the Bill, on 21 April the Government—the Foreign Office, the Treasury, and the Department for International Trade—launched a nine-week consultation, which closed on 23 June, on the United Kingdom's future legal framework for imposing sanctions. The consultation document was published online and sent to over 30,000 individuals and companies. Government officials also held roundtables to consult key sectors, including financial services, the legal profession, industry professionals and representative bodies, as well as international partners. The views of those who participated in the consultation have been carefully analysed by officials, and the Government response will be published shortly.

We intend to preserve important elements of our current approach to sanctions, using them in a targeted fashion to maximise the intended pressure while minimising unintended consequences. In line with the Human Rights Act 1998, we will designate people only when this is justified by evidence, and we will provide a framework for sanctioned persons to challenge their designations in a court. We will improve current practice where we can, using the greater flexibility we will have in future to provide guidance to UK businesses affected by sanctions and to grant licences to prevent sanctions from disrupting humanitarian operations. The Bill will ensure that the United Kingdom is ready, on exit day, to continue to

play a leading role as a global foreign and security policy actor. It will allow us both to meet our international obligations and to support our own foreign policy and national security.

It is clear that sanctions are most effective when agreed multilaterally with our allies and partners around the world. The more countries acting in concert, the greater the impact of sanctions and the less scope there is for evasion or retaliatory measures. UN sanctions are therefore the gold standard, as they bind the entire international community. However, as we see in relation to Russia and Syria, we also need to be able to work with the EU, the US and Canada, and other allies to impose sanctions outside the UN framework.

We cannot say with complete certainty at this stage what the precise form of our future co-operation with the EU will be, and what that will look like after the UK's exit. That will depend on the wider negotiations on our future relationship in the field of foreign and security policy. However, as the Prime Minister and others have said, there is a clear mutual interest in a deep and special partnership. We remain committed to European security and to working with our EU allies to counter global threats that we all face. Sanctions are an important means to that end, and the international sanctions Bill will ensure that we retain the necessary powers.

I welcome today's debate as an important opportunity for Members across the House to feed into the vision for a global Britain, and to discuss how our sanctions regime will operate after we leave the European Union.

5.39 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Sanctions are obviously an extremely important policy lever. People often think of sanctions as a modern policy instrument, but Thucydides mentions them as one of the instruments used against Megara in 432. Unfortunately, on that occasion they did not succeed in averting the Peloponnesian war. Sanctions are crucial nowadays, and it is vital that Ministers have the legal powers to implement sanctions policy in line with foreign policy objectives and responsibilities.

As the Minister has just said, the Government produced a consultation document on 21 April, and the deadline for people to respond was 23 June. The plan was originally that we would have a Bill before the summer recess, and I ask the Minister who will respond at the end of the debate: where is the Bill, and why have we not got it?

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I may be able to help the hon. Lady. There was something called a general election that came along, and these things cannot be announced during purdah, so to have a proper response to the consultation, it is appropriate that we should prepare it during the coming few weeks and months. It would have been improper to have done so earlier.

Helen Goodman: I am not of course suggesting that the Bill should have been produced in the middle of the general election campaign, but it is quite clear that consultation responses were coming in during that period. As the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union said, officials have been looking at the responses.

This is another example of the chaos and confusion that is evident on the part of the Government in the whole Brexit process. We had another example of that on Monday, when, without any explanation, Ministers withdrew the motion on a unified patent court. Across the board, policy is not being processed sensibly. These are not pieces on a chess board, but important areas of policy responsibility.

The consultation paper said that the legal powers we need to maintain sanctions will be put in the Bill, but it will not look at the policy goals or at how we will align future UK sanctions with those imposed by the European Union. I can understand the first part, but I really want to learn from Ministers whether the second part can be true. For sanctions to be effective, they must obviously be co-ordinated with our partners. Surely the way we make decisions to initiate and review sanctions must be explicitly linked with the processes of our partners in the UN and the European Union.

Hitherto in the EU, sanctions have often related to upholding values set out in the common foreign and security policy, including human rights, democracy, good governance and the rule of law. These should continue to be the cornerstones of our policy post-Brexit. I would be grateful to the Minister for Europe and the Americas if he confirmed that. The European Council has hitherto adopted decisions, together with any necessary regulations, and set out the elements of each individual sanctions regime. A number of UK Departments—principally, the Home Office, the Treasury and the Department for International Trade—have then taken on the responsibility for implementation. Will Ministers explain which Department will take the lead in co-ordinating other Departments on future sanctions?

In 1998, the Labour Government carried out a wide-ranging review of UK sanctions policy. When reporting to Parliament on the outcome of that review, the then Government outlined the core principles of sanctions policy: sanctions should be targeted to hit the regime, rather than ordinary people; they should include exemptions to minimise the humanitarian impact on innocent civilians; they should have clear objectives, including well defined and realistic demands against which compliance can be judged, with a clear exit strategy; there should be effective arrangements for implementation and enforcement by all states, especially neighbouring countries; and sanctions should avoid unnecessary adverse impacts on UK economic and commercial interests. We believe that these principles remain appropriate, and I would like an assurance from Ministers that they take the same view.

In the consultation paper, the Government state:

“Primary legislation will create a framework containing powers to impose sanctions regimes, the details of which will be laid out in the secondary legislation”.

That is somewhat vague. We seem to be being presented with a number of Henry VIII powers. We would be grateful if Ministers could tell us what the supervision and accountability arrangements with Parliament will be.

Assuming that the Bill creates a broad framework, and given the importance of ensuring that individual sanctions regimes are carefully calibrated, we believe that there is a good case for saying that all secondary legislation imposing UK sanctions should be subject to the affirmative procedure. In other words, new sanctions or changes to sanctions should require a debate on the

[Helen Goodman]

Floor of the House, rather than in Committee upstairs. That is the only mechanism that would provide the requisite parliamentary scrutiny and the opportunity for us to hold the Government to account.

We would also like to know what level of oversight will be built into the process of reviewing sanctions. The consultation paper says only that both

“UN and EU sanctions are subject to internal reviews... We propose a similar approach under our new legislation... Internal reviews by the Government could include periodic reviews of individual designations or of entire regimes.”

Obviously, sanctions regimes need to adapt to changing circumstances, so ongoing parliamentary scrutiny and independent oversight will always be necessary. We want Ministers to provide clarity on that, so that procedures for accountability and independent oversight are built into any new legislation. We would like the Government to publish an annual report on the implementation of the sanctions regime, and to give Parliament a role in periodic reviews of UK sanctions—for instance, by making the Government’s annual report the subject of debates in both Houses—as well as a role in re-authorising ongoing sanctions on a yearly basis.

It is really difficult for a meaningful debate on this issue to take place until we have more clarity on the extent to which future UK-EU co-operation can take place, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) has said. That is particularly true of decisions as to whether sanctions should be imposed in the first place. The case of Ukraine is a good example of why it will remain important for us to work with the EU in future. It serves as perhaps the most prominent recent reminder of how collectively imposed sanctions can still have a real impact outside the UN. Everybody knows that the UK played a key role in making the intellectual case for those sanctions, and that the UK undertook significant diplomatic efforts in the EU and at the G7. How will the Government ensure not just that UK-EU co-operation on sanctions continues after we leave the EU, but that we will maintain our ability to shape decisions on when the EU sanctions are imposed? [Interruption.] “We won’t,” mumbles the Minister. We will hear whether, instead of mumbling on the Front Bench, he can answer those questions at the end of the debate.

Sir Alan Duncan: I hope that the hon. Lady will allow me to not mumble from the Dispatch Box. I was trying to alert her to the fact that most of those sanctions are imposed by the UN, to whose authority we are subject as a member.

Helen Goodman: As a matter of fact, the right hon. Gentleman’s colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, just said—I think this is right—that about half the sanctions in which we are involved are not subject to UN resolutions, but have come separately from the European Union. Given that the debate is about exiting the European Union and sanctions, it is reasonable to focus on the European angle.

The Government have set up their consultation and scheduled this debate, but they are not able to explain how in practice we will co-operate with our allies in the EU on issues such as intelligence sharing, policing and

judicial matters, and all the things that are needed to enforce compliance with sanctions regimes in an effective way. The lack of any plan is another example of the Government’s recklessness in threatening to use security co-operation as a bargaining chip in the Brexit negotiations. The role of the financial sector is likely to be key in implementing any effective UK sanctions regime, particularly in terms of tackling money laundering and terrorist funding. The size of the City of London means that our role is vital. We have a record of leading in this area, although concerns remain about money laundering and sanctions evasion.

A critical question concerns the extent to which any new sanctions regime will be applied to the UK’s overseas territories. Following the revelations of the Panama papers, it is clear that all the UK’s overseas territories could play a part in tracking down and clamping down on illicit finance. That applies especially to the Cayman Islands and British Virgin Islands, which have faced heavy criticism in the past, but also to territories such as Bermuda that are responsible for their own legislation in this area.

What is the Government’s assessment of whether sanctions are being adequately implemented and enforced in all UK overseas territories and Crown dependencies? Will the Channel Islands and Bermuda be responsible for their own legislation in this area under a new regime? What steps will the Government take to monitor implementation and enforcement in the overseas territories? Will they commit to reporting regularly to Parliament on this matter?

The question of sanctions is important and significant. It is a shame that we have not had more clarity from the Government today in the form of legislation, but I hope that when the Minister winds up the debate, he will be able to answer some of our questions.

5.51 pm

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): It is with humility and excitement that I make my maiden speech representing the constituency of Saffron Walden, the jewel of Essex. I am honoured to serve the people of this beautiful constituency and hope I can repay the faith they have placed in me.

I am also burdened by the weight of expectation. You see, Madam Deputy Speaker, Saffron Walden has not had a maiden speech since Rab Butler’s in 1929. He held three of the great offices of state, but I am most proud that, as a Conservative Minister, he introduced the Education Act 1944, which gave every British child a statutory right to free secondary education.

I also pay tribute to my most recent predecessor, the right hon. Sir Alan Haselhurst, who served Saffron Walden with distinction for 40 years. He is well known to many of us here as a former Deputy Speaker and one of the kindest Members to grace this House—the ultimate gentleman. He is much loved in the constituency, and I am forever grateful to him for being a brilliant mentor and helping every day of the campaign, come rain or shine. I am still bowled over whenever I remember that Sir Alan became a Member of Parliament 10 years before I was born. It has been a joy to follow in his footsteps—except when we were out delivering leaflets and I found myself consistently outrun by an 80-year-old man.

Like you, Madam Deputy Speaker, I am proud to be an Essex girl. Saffron Walden is a great place and was judged the best rural place to live by no less than the *Daily Mail*. After seven years of Conservative-led Government, unemployment is at an all-time low of 0.7%, and 99% of children go to a good or outstanding primary or secondary school. We also boast the UK's oldest land college in Writtle.

The constituency covers rural Chelmsford and the major settlements of Thaxted, Great Dunmow and the medieval market town of Saffron Walden itself. It was called Saffron Walden because of its large saffron crop. The spice was worth its weight in gold and was used in medicine, in perfume and even as an aphrodisiac. Like the saffron crocus, I am not a native of the great county of Essex—I come from more exotic climes. While I may not have all the attributes of this versatile flower, I hope that I will equally take root in the area, bring prosperity to the local people and add some colour and spice to this Chamber.

Much has changed since then, but more change is needed—change to the rickety network on which mobile phones operate, change to the inadequate broadband service that has left parts of the constituency with little access to the outside world, and change to the railway line that has become synonymous with being late for work. We cannot claim to offer opportunities to rural areas if basic infrastructure is not provided. My constituents are more likely to get to Spain faster than London, because we have Stansted, the country's fourth-largest airport. It has brought jobs—and noise—and growth to the area on a huge scale, and has cemented my constituency's position as the epicentre of business, travel and wealth in Essex.

I am often inexplicably confused with a member of the Labour party—I cannot think why. I am a Conservative. To all intents and purposes, I am a first-generation immigrant. I was born in Wimbledon, but I grew up in Nigeria. I chose to make the United Kingdom my home. Growing up in Nigeria I saw real poverty—I experienced it, including living without electricity and doing my homework by candlelight, because the state electricity board could not provide power, and fetching water in heavy, rusty buckets from a borehole a mile away, because the nationalised water company could not get water out of the taps. Unlike many colleagues born since 1980, I was unlucky enough to live under socialist policies. It is not something I would wish on anyone, and it is just one of the reasons why I am a Conservative. I believe that the state should provide social security, but it must also provide a means for people to lift themselves out of poverty.

As a woman of African origin, I also believe that there is a lot that Africa can teach us. Sound money is not just a catchy phrase. The lesson of Zimbabwe is salient for us today. Money cannot be printed and redistribution cannot be successful without first creating wealth. Edmund Burke said that society is a contract between the dead, the living and those yet to be born. I say to colleagues who are wavering on tackling the debt and the deficit, “Hold your nerve.” This is part of that contract that we owe to our descendants. To leave our children carrying the burdens of our debt and excesses is morally wrong.

I believe in free markets and free trade. But there is more to conservatism than economic liberalism—there is respect for the rule of law; personal responsibility;

freedom of speech and of association; and opportunity through meritocracy. Those freedoms are being subtly eroded in an era when emotion and feeling are prized above reason and logic. It is those freedoms that I will seek to defend during my time in this House.

There are few countries in the world where you can go in one generation from immigrant to parliamentarian. Michael Howard spoke of the British dream—people choosing this country because of its tolerance and its opportunity. It is a land where a girl from Nigeria can move, aged 16, be accepted as British and have the great honour of representing Saffron Walden.

There are some in this country, and this Chamber, who seek to denigrate the traditions of this Parliament, portraying this House as a bastion of privilege and class, that “reeks of the establishment”, as someone said. It is no coincidence that those who seek to undermine the institutions of this island—Parliament, monarchy, Church and family—also propagate a world view that sees Britain, and the values we hold dear, as a force for bad in the world. Growing up in Nigeria, the view was rather different. The UK was a beacon, a shining light, a promise of a better life.

Often we hear the radical reformer John Bright misquoted as saying that the House of Commons is the mother of all Parliaments. What he actually said was that this country is the mother of all Parliaments. Our political institutions may not always be held in high esteem, but I believe that politics is a mirror held up to society. Yes, it can sometimes be unedifying. Yes, we see human weakness on display. But it also embodies much that is great in our country. When I walk down these corridors and stand in this Chamber, once graced by my heroes, Winston Churchill, Airey Neave and Margaret Thatcher, I am filled with nothing but awe, respect and pride for all that it stands for.

As Woody Allen said about sex, “If it's not messy, you're not doing it right.” The same is true of democracy. It is not always predictable; its results are not always elegant; it can throw up results that no one expected—but we adjust. The British Parliament always has adjusted, and that is why it is the oldest in the world: it takes its lead from the British people.

We live in difficult times and face historic challenges. People are rightly concerned about what Brexit will mean for the country, for their jobs and for their families. But I do not believe that winter is coming. I believe that the vote for Brexit was the greatest ever vote of confidence in the project of the United Kingdom: that vision of a global Britain to which the Minister referred. It is a project that, as a young African girl, I dreamed about becoming part of. As a British woman, I now have the great honour of delivering that project for my constituents in the greatest Parliament on earth.

6 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I warmly welcome the hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Mrs Badenoch). She made a fantastic maiden speech, and she is a great credit to her community. Her speech was delivered with verve and class, and a good deal of wit. While I may not have agreed with everything she said, I am sure that her contributions will be very welcome to the Chamber.

The world looks at the United Kingdom as the Brexit negotiations develop, to see how we will manage the situation in which we find ourselves, and what kind of

[*Hannah Bardell*]

relationship we plan to have with the European Union and, indeed, the rest of the world. Given that the UK is without a coherent strategy and seemingly bereft of ideas—and, as we have seen in recent photos, notes—I suspect that the external image of how things are going is not entirely positive. Our international reputation is on the line. SNP Members, however, welcome the opportunity to debate the real impact that leaving the EU will have on our international influence and clout.

There is a risk that after leaving the EU, the UK will be marginalised and diminished on the international stage. I know that no one in the Chamber wants that to happen, but there will inevitably be a reduction in our ability—if not a complete loss of ability—to impose meaningful sanctions on our own, or to make any meaningful contribution to a progressive international agenda. One of the Government's own colleagues, the former Foreign Secretary, has called for the UK to keep its seat on the EU's Political and Security Committee. I hope that the Secretary of State and his fellow Ministers will enlighten us as to whether he agrees with his colleague.

As has already been pointed out, sanctions rarely operate effectively in isolation. Success depends on a combination of dialogue, agreement and conflict prevention between various countries. Clearly, working with the EU presents a broader range of tools than would be available to the UK when operating alone. Giving up our seat at the sanctions table will see the UK lose the ability to apply sanctions with the same breadth and weight. It will also lose access to key forums through which to push for ongoing momentum and accord among fellow EU member states. There must not be any serious divergence from EU partners in respect of sanctions. The UK must not relax any sanctions that are materially more restrictive than existing or new EU sanctions, especially when the UK has significant trade with a particular country.

Many have expressed fears that the UK may be dragged on to the new United States President's rather unpredictable turf. For example, as President-Elect he severely criticised the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran. If he were to impose new sanctions on Iran, there might be pressure on the UK—and our “special relationship”—to follow suit. The new President has also indicated that the US would ease sanctions on Russia. The EU's foreign policy chief, Federica Mogherini, has indicated that the EU will not change its policy on Russia, even if the US does. The UK must do likewise. Leaning more closely towards an Administration led by Donald Trump creates concern for many. We must hear from the Government that they will continue to take their international obligations seriously, keeping fairness and decency at the heart of any new trade deals and sanctions policies.

As the largest trade bloc in the world, the biggest global aid donor and a notable international investor, the EU adds weight to the UK's foreign and security policy efforts. Commenting on the possible impact of Brexit on the EU's own sanctions policy, Dr Erica Moret at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva recently said:

“A Brexit-weakened EU sanctions policy is likely to intensify the need to employ other, more expensive, controversial or complicated forms of diplomacy, coercion or pressure. It will also likely

strengthen Russia's hand against Europe, as it benefits from a fragmented Europe with a weaker toolbox of security instruments at its disposal.”

Those comments are deeply concerning and should worry us all.

Indeed, a Foreign Affairs Committee report said that the United Kingdom's relations with Russia gave an interesting insight into trouble ahead for the UK acting alone on sanctions. The report concluded that

“it will be increasingly difficult to sustain a united western position on sanctions, not least if they become a bargaining point during Brexit negotiations.”

Our worry is that there is everything to play for, but also everything to lose.

We should all be concerned, because our international role and responsibilities extend much further than just Russia. On 4 April, the latest in a series of barbaric chemical weapons attacks took place in Khan Shaykhun in Syria. More than 80 people were killed and estimates suggest more than 500 were injured. Just this week in Brussels the UK was able to play a central role in imposing sanctions against those involved in that horrific attack. The EU's Foreign Affairs Council agreed on Monday that 16 individuals will be sanctioned, their movements restricted and their assets frozen. But after Brexit the UK will be diminished and we will have no clout to impose meaningful sanctions, resulting in the UK losing its opportunity to contribute to a progressive international agenda.

After Brexit the UK will need to establish the necessary independent policy development and sanctions design architecture, for which it has mostly relied on Brussels until now.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making some important points, but does this not underline the arguments she is making about the complexity of imposing travel bans, asset freezes and so forth, and stopping those who are the target of sanctions? Does this not underline the argument for a proper transition period in respect of our withdrawal? The suite of instruments the hon. Lady refers to are complex in nature, not least legislatively. I do not see how we are going to be able to complete the process of putting in place a framework that we can apply independently in the tiny timescale that we have before our scheduled exit from the EU.

Hannah Bardell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman and think he may have been reading my mind, as will become clear from my next point.

If the UK Government cannot agree among themselves on a transition policy for Brexit and a deal, as we have seen this week with the vastly differing approaches of the Chancellor and the International Trade Secretary, I and others seriously doubt their capacity to design sanctions architecture, let alone agree on what and where those sanctions should be imposed. And even if they do, the effectiveness of UK-only applied sanctions will be severely diminished.

The UK Government's own White Paper sets out, in pretty stark language:

“The UK needs to be able to impose and implement sanctions in order to comply with our obligations under the United Nations (UN) Charter and to support our wider foreign policy and national security goals. Many of our current powers flow from

the European Communities Act 1972 so we will need new legal powers to replace these... It is not possible to achieve this through the Great Repeal Bill, as preserving or freezing sanctions would not provide the powers necessary to update, amend or lift sanctions in response to fast moving events.”

And events are moving fast; we have a short period, so the Government need to think very carefully and give us a response on that transition period.

Any new legislation must be clear about how these powers will be developed and implemented and, further, what infrastructure and regulation will look like to support those new powers. Additionally, the Law Society of Scotland has raised a number of pertinent points in relation to the UK Government’s White Paper. These points are significant because they highlight the complexity—as the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) has just said—and scale of the task at hand, not to mention just how many sectors and areas of competence will be impacted by exiting the EU, and the need for a new set of rules and regulations. It is clear that lawyers, accountants and consultants will be very busy over the next few years—and, no doubt, considerably richer. But what estimate have the Government made of the cost of training lawyers and accountants to deal with the new laws and regulations, and what provision has been considered for the teaching of the new regulations and laws at our universities, colleges and institutions? We need a workforce that will be ready to go when those new provisions arrive.

An interesting point about cross-border jurisdiction also arises on page 23 of the Government’s White Paper. The Law Society of Scotland is very concerned about this. The White Paper identifies special advocates as

“barristers in independent practice of the highest integrity, experience and ability, from civil and criminal practices. They are bound by the ethical standards of the Bar Council.”

I know that many in the profession would like clarity and assurances that special advocates should be able to be drawn from the ranks of not only the Bar in England and Wales but the Bar in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and from suitably qualified solicitor advocates in all those jurisdictions, but it appears that the UK Government have again—whether by accident or intent—failed to recognise at the most fundamental level that the devolved nations exist.

According to the Law Society of Scotland, the Government’s proposed additional power to seize funds and assets in order to freeze them appears to be unrelated to the withdrawal of the UK from the EU. This therefore seems like a curious thing to sneak in. Will the Secretary of State clarify why this has appeared at this juncture? It concerns me and, I am sure, others that the UK Government would introduce new legislation that is potentially unrelated to the UK exiting the EU. This is not good practice, and we need to understand the rationale behind it. It is clear that the UK Government are going to have very little, if any, time in which to do their day job as they deal with the enormity of Brexit, but they have some serious questions to answer on how they will manage and develop their sanctions policy. It is key to our reputation on the global stage, and to how we will work with the rest of the world.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I call Mr Andrew Lewer to make his maiden speech.

6.11 pm

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) for her speech. It was comprehensive, but rather different in its thrust from mine. I must not pass up the opportunity to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Mrs Badenoch) on her excellent speech and to refer to the really great camaraderie that she and I and the rest of our intake have enjoyed. I am particularly fond of Saffron Walden as it is where my mother went to college. In fact, Rab Butler cut the ribbon at the opening of her college in 1965. I hope she does not get annoyed with me for mentioning the date.

I am truly honoured to have been chosen as the Member of Parliament for Northampton South. I have big boots to fill, in a town that is rich with an industrial history of manufacturing boots and shoes. There is not a place in the world where a British man or woman has not left their footprint with a Northampton boot or shoe, whether in a jungle or a desert, or on a mountain or a snow-laden plain. In 1830, there were 40 shoe and boot manufacturers in Northampton, and they employed a third of all the men in the town. That does not include the ancillary industries; they were employed in actually making the boots and shoes. The fortunes of the town’s shoe and boot industry have risen, fallen and risen again. Although we are now left with only a handful of shoe manufacturers, they produce some of the most exclusive and desirable handmade shoes in the world.

My upbringing, most particularly at Queen Elizabeth’s Grammar School in Ashbourne, taught me the value of tradition. Thus—and staying with the metaphor of footprints—I would like to acknowledge the work of the former Member for Northampton South, Mr David Mackintosh. Although his tenure was short, his impact and the footprint of his public service to this House and to his constituents were significant. When I recently visited the Hope Centre, a local homelessness and anti-poverty charity in Northampton, I learned that he was held in high regard there for helping to push through the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and for his local work on combating homelessness.

The Northampton South seat was established in 1974, and those who represented the constituency are still making their footprints on public life to this day. Lord Naseby sits in the other place and still has an involvement in local public life through his work with Northamptonshire county cricket club. Mr Tony Clarke, who succeeded Lord Naseby in 1997, was a passionate public servant and continues to be so today by educating the young adults of the town in the local further education college. Then there was Mr Brian Binley, who is well known to many here and still centrally involved with the regeneration programme, Northampton Alive.

Charles Bradlaugh, whose bust I walked past today, was a particularly famous Northampton MP. He was a radical, and I came across him many years ago when I was doing postgraduate research—he and Charles Newdigate Newdegate had some enormous debates across the House about the difference between taking an oath and taking an affirmation. Previous Northampton MP Spencer Perceval is also well known in this Chamber. It is interesting that speeches made about him in previous years referred quite light-heartedly to his fate. In more recent years, of course, that has changed significantly.

[Andrew Lewer]

When we think of Spencer Perceval now, we think of much more recent and tragic events, and about the continuity of the risks that people run when they enter public service.

Francis Crick, who—with James Watson—co-discovered DNA, which is now the driving force of so many scientific breakthroughs and discoveries, was from Northampton, but there are also less well-known people, such as Walter Tull, who played for Northampton Town football club and then for Spurs. He was the British Army's first black officer; he fought in the first world war but, after an incredible war record, alas he was killed in 1918. Margaret Bondfield, the first ever female Cabinet member, briefly served as MP for Northampton, so there are big shoes to fill indeed.

The constituency of Northampton South is the home of Cosworth, Travis Perkins, Barclaycard and Carlsberg. Those are prestigious brands and significant employers for the area, but I draw colleagues' attention to another business. Under the shadow of the Carlsberg plant is the Phipps brewery, which was recently re-established after years of dormancy—and a welcome return it is. Pickering Phipps II served as the Member of Parliament for Northampton from 1874 to 1880. In many ways, his brewery and Northampton—because of the tannins involved in shoe manufacturing—was responsible for the revival of recipes that gave birth to the real ale movement, which has been going from strength to strength since the 1970s.

Northampton is one of the fastest-growing towns in the country, and has been for decades—I noticed that all my predecessors made reference to that fact in their maiden speeches. As I will, they referred to the pressures on public services, challenges for the high street and the major issue of housing. With the Deputy Leader of the House of Commons, my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis), I will be campaigning for new and better facilities for Northampton General Hospital to meet the needs of a rapidly expanding town. We need more housing, better transport infrastructure and a more focused regeneration effort. As championed by Northampton Borough Council and the county council, we need an emphasis on culture and heritage to bring new vitality to Northampton town centre.

I hope my time as a county council leader myself will be helpful for all that, but—and here is a link to the debate topic—just over a month ago I was a Member of the European Parliament in Brussels. I have been told—I keep saying it and no one has contradicted me yet—that I am the only person ever to have served as a council leader, a Member of the European Parliament and an MP. As an MEP, I specialised in culture, education and regional development and fought for things that matter to me, such as the possible continuation of the Erasmus+ programme, or the introduction of a home-grown successor if not.

Helen Goodman: A very good idea!

Andrew Lewer: I do not know whether that is in reference to Erasmus+ or the home-grown successor—don't answer that!

As an MEP, I also spent quite a lot of time working on the revision of the audiovisual media services directive, making the case for avoiding the unnecessary burden of

over-regulation while protecting freedom of speech. I was also particularly interested in religious freedom and highlighted the case of Asia Bibi, who lives under a death sentence for blasphemy in Pakistan. I hope in this place to continue the work I was involved in to try to save her from the terrible situation she is in.

I was a reluctant leaver, but I still believe it is the right choice for the UK. In many ways, the complexity of leaving, which we are discussing tonight, simply underlines how much of our sovereignty we had lost and reminds us all that our work here is about not only getting a good deal as we leave but being ready to innovate in policy areas that this House has not had the lead on, or even much of a say about, for many years. Trade, environment and agriculture are not just something on which we will get a deal, but something on which we will need to work and innovate for ourselves henceforth.

Finally, let me go back to the tradition of describing one's constituency as the most beautiful. Northampton certainly does have some beautiful buildings. It has a fascinating history, notably in the medieval period. It is my non-conformist and Methodist roots coming out when I say that much of its beauty lies in its industriousness, and that much of what makes the country as a whole great is to be found there. Much of what will challenge us as politicians in the years ahead can also be found there within its boundaries.

6.20 pm

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): It is a great pleasure to follow two such excellent maiden speeches. I congratulate the hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Mrs Badenoch) on her speech. We share a background and a love for the London Assembly, of which we have both been members, and for Nigeria; I sense that she shares not just my love for it, but my frustration that that wonderful country still faces so many challenges. I look forward to working with her over the coming years. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) on his speech. He has described his interesting and illustrious predecessors, but his track record, both in Europe and as an excellent council leader, augurs well for his future here. I am sure that he will be named similarly in future maiden speeches. I welcome them both to this place.

Today, we are here to focus on exiting the European Union and sanctions. I want to discuss both those things—together and slightly separately—because they are very connected. I reiterate the comment made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), which is: where is the Bill, Minister? We have already seen the publication of the grand repeal Bill, but this Bill has a pretty important connection with that. We cannot do the one without the other, and it really sums up, as the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) said, the challenges of how we timetable and deliver on this hugely challenging programme for our Parliament over the next 20 months. The Minister's response to that from the Dispatch Box underlines the lack of planning that we have seen on the Public Accounts Committee, which I have had the privilege of chairing for the past two years, where we have repeatedly heard examples from permanent secretaries about the lack of planning—a deliberate policy.

For example, on 7 July, the permanent secretary to the Treasury confirmed, when questioned, that the Prime

Minister had said at several points that the civil service was not, as a whole, preparing for Brexit. On 13 July, Sir Martin Donnelly, the permanent secretary to the then Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, said:

“We were following the guidance given by Ministers, which was not to make contingency plans for this outcome.”

On 26 October, we heard from Jon Thompson, the permanent secretary and chief executive of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, of the eight serious areas that his Department has to consider now that Brexit is a reality. I will not run through them all, because it is not the main point of the debate, but let me just mention customs. He said that,

“we run £40 billion-worth of the benefits system in tax credits and child benefit...there is excise and the decisions to be made there...there is VAT...and the question of what difference this would make to direct taxes and state aid.”

He went on to list other big concerns.

Let me take HMRC as an example of the challenges that this Government, this Parliament and this country face as we move to leaving the European Union over the next 20 months. That Department is already going through huge change in its estate management, in its IT and in the way that it tackles and deals with taxes.

We all know that it takes about 18 months on a fair wind to make a major change to the tax system, which is why budgets are planned some time in advance for those technical points, and yet the permanent secretary and the chief executive of HMRC has listed to our Committee and to this House eight other serious areas of concern—more than one Government Department can realistically manage—and that is just one Department. I have to say that that permanent secretary was the only one who actually had a long list. Other Departments—I will not name them all—mentioned the discussions they were having, but nothing really concrete about how they were planning to implement our exit from the European Union.

Hannah Bardell: The hon. Lady is making some pertinent points about HMRC and the challenges of the customs system going through a transitional phase when it is already creaking under the pressure. Does she not also share my concern that in constituencies such as mine in Livingston, a high proportion of staff who are highly skilled in such systems and processes will be lost because of the transition the Government are going through? If we put Brexit on top of that, it becomes a perfect storm that is about to hit us.

Meg Hillier: The hon. Lady makes an important point. If we add on the other changes in Government Departments—the DWP is going through some changes of property and where jobs might be—that poses a challenge. We face a challenge with skills in this country anyway, and we can add to that our exit from the European Union and the fact that we have so many unanswered questions about what will happen to EU citizens residing in the UK and others who need to come here. We heard only the other day that the NHS needs to bring in a large number of GPs from the European Union because we are unable to recruit in this country. Whatever one might have thought of these policies before, we are now seeing skilled people who are potentially unable to move to new locations and we

do not yet have a skills strategy to fill not just those gaps but the others we might see as we leave the EU. A perfect storm is perhaps a polite way of putting it; I could think of fruitier ways of describing it, but I will leave the fruity conversation to the hon. Member for Saffron Walden, who stretched the boundaries further than I will on this occasion.

I will not list every Department and its problems, but we have a long list if other hon. Members are interested in seeing it, given the challenges that each Department faces in its exit from the EU, the lack of planning, and the lack of joined-upness across Government. A problem in one Department, such as HMRC, will have knock-on effects in another, such as the Department for International Trade. We cannot see these things in isolation and there is not yet a coherent plan.

I hope that when he sums up the Minister can reassure me that what I am saying is not true, but the evidence we have seen in Committee suggests that this is the reality. As I have said, senior civil servants acknowledged that they were told very definitely not to plan for the leave scenario, which has put us very much on the back foot.

Chuka Umunna: Does my hon. Friend agree that this reinforces the need for proper transitional arrangements? We are talking not only about the time that will be necessary. It seems to me that all the points she has just made are an argument for this country remaining part of the customs union and part of the EEA—the single market—at least in the interim, as we make our way out of the European Union.

Meg Hillier: My hon. Friend raises an important point. As we approach the summer recess—with only one Bill published for our exit from the EU, with no serious plans on the table, and with it becoming apparent that when we come back in the autumn we will not get going seriously until October—we are getting to a point at which we will not even have 18 months to get this show on the road. I am assuming and hoping that Ministers will work 24/7 over the summer to get us to a better place, but even then the timetabling of business through this House means that practically—whatever one’s philosophical view—this cannot be done in time.

I am not saying this because I am a remoaner or a doomsayer. I might have been very positive about wanting to stay in the EU, as was my constituency, but let us be practical about the reality. The delay in delivering the sanctions Bill is another of the many concerns.

It is important that I highlight the concerns of many of my constituents who are EU citizens about the uncertainty they are still facing. Even now people are phoning me or coming up to me in the street in tears because of their concerns about their future. We have heard some degree of certainty from the Prime Minister: she has told us that there will be a mechanism for those people already living here who are EU citizens to regularise their stay, but that will not be published until the end of 2018 and there is still no certainty about the costs.

I was a Home Office Minister, and much as I like to gloss the previous Labour Government as one of the best we have ever had, the reality is that the Home Office—then and now—faces huge challenges in the number of people going through its immigration system. I grappled with that as a Minister, and I did not solve it. We grapple with it as Back Benchers. I certainly do in

[Meg Hillier]

my constituency, where I have a high number of people going through the system. The idea that, between the end of next year and when we leave, all those who so wish will be able to go through a regularisation process is cloud cuckoo land. It is not surprising that those who can afford it are going through the long-winded process of regularising their stay, getting residency and applying for citizenship.

I spoke at the weekend to a constituent, an international banker who has children. It costs £300 to reach the first hurdle in the legal process. She told me, “If I’m not wanted here I might just leave.” For her, leaving is a real option as she could get a good job elsewhere. Other good, skilled people who have given up their lives in other countries to work in the UK and pay taxes feel like turning their back on us. Some who have been settled in the UK for 15 or 20 years, whose children have grown up here, are very concerned about what the future means for them. Despite the Prime Minister giving some words of comfort—late in the day, and I do not know why this could not have been dealt with before—we need to resolve this sooner rather than later.

Sanctions are the main thrust of the debate. I am strongly of the view that UK-EU co-operation needs to be maintained. I say that not because I am trying to rewind the clock on the referendum—much though this is not where I wanted us to be—but because of a simple question: where would we have differed from the EU on sanctions? There are issues with money laundering and our approach to big international questions such as freezing assets across boundaries, travel bans, trade, and market restrictions, which are but a small part of that approach.

The timetabling of a sanctions Bill to fit with the great repeal Bill is another practical problem. For three years, on behalf of the British Government, I negotiated home affairs at the table in Europe with 27 member states. It took long enough to reach agreement but it was possible. However, trying to enact our Bill and align us, where we would normally agree with our European counterparts, will be incredibly challenging. It will be difficult, at this pace, to write that into law.

We must be frank: this House is not very good at legislating. The Government draft legislation—often in a hurry, and quite a lot will now be written in a hurry—the House has little chance seriously to amend it but must instead pick on the bits we can most likely amend, and as a result it often does not hang together very well. We legislate in haste and repent at leisure, taking a long time to unpick things. That is not true in every case, but as Ministers or Back Benchers dealing with our constituents’ problems we have seen it often.

Would the UK seriously go it alone? No, I think we would not, and I hope the Minister will be clear on that. Why do we not find a way of maintaining the status quo, for a transitional period at least? I fear how the Bill will fit in when it eventually comes before the House.

I have some simple questions for the Minister. How do the Government intend to timetable the repeal Bill and the future sanctions Bill, ensuring that they can work together and there is no contradiction? It would be crazy if we ended up legislating on two separate issues related to Europe, only to find that they do not work together.

6.33 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate. I add my congratulations and best wishes to the hon. Members for Saffron Walden (Mrs Badenoch) and for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) on their maiden speeches. They spoke with enormous passion, and although their speeches were very different in style no one can question their commitment to their constituents. I welcome both of them to the House. I thought the Woody Allen quote was a reference to my attempts at cooking, but perhaps that says something about my sheltered upbringing.

Three different things could happen when the United Kingdom is no longer automatically bound by European Union decisions on sanctions. We can attempt to impose sanctions where the EU does not do so, but that will be a waste of time because no one will pay any attention. We can choose not to impose sanctions where the EU does so, but that will probably lead to our dealing with some very dodgy characters on the world stage. The most likely outcome, however, is that we shall allow the EU to take its decisions without any UK input and tamely and obediently follow suit. Even that is not without its risks.

I am hoping that when he sums up the Minister will tell us what assessment has been made of the legal risk of the United Kingdom imposing, on its own, sanctions that have also been imposed by the European Union. It seems to me that an aggrieved party who might be put off from taking on the European Union in the courts might see an individual stand-alone legislator as a softer target. What assessment has been made of the risk that the United Kingdom will find itself as the fall guy—being sued in the courts every time the European Union does something that the bully boys of corporate business do not want to take on the EU about? They might happily have a pop at one wee tiny island in the north Atlantic.

In his opening remarks, the Minister said that we wanted to work with other countries as well as the EU. He specifically mentioned the United States of America. My hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) has already raised some of the alarms on that. We have recently discovered that the President held a secret, unlimited, unrecorded meeting with Vladimir Putin at the G20. We do not know whether that was in the context of a possible trade deal or state visit—maybe the President just wanted to catch up with his unofficial election agent.

What happens if those talks, which were not talks, were about the United States being willing to ease or break sanctions against Russia? Where would that leave the United Kingdom? Our bestest pal ever across the Atlantic says, “Trade with Putin!” The European Union says no and our conscience has to say no. Can the Minister give an assurance that regardless of what crazy crackpot scheme Trump and Putin cook up between themselves, until the Russians have returned every last square inch of Ukrainian territory into the hands of the people and elected Government of Ukraine, there will be no lessening of sanctions by the United Kingdom unless that has been agreed by the entire European Union?

Another concern would be if the UK decided to impose sanctions but nobody else did. We have to remind ourselves that the United Kingdom is no longer a colonial power; the sun sets every day on the British

empire, which does not extend any further than the British isles. There is a real danger that, to prove some kind of political machismo, the United Kingdom will attempt to impose sanctions on countries for whatever reason and nobody else does. I was going to say that we would be made to look like a laughing stock, but it is a bit too late for that.

Can the Minister name a single example of a country where unilateral sanctions imposed by the United Kingdom would make a blind bit of difference? It seems to me that we are frantically, with a huge amount of hassle, taking back control of something. Attempting to exercise that control unilaterally and in an isolationist manner will achieve absolutely nothing, but it will incur significant expense and legal risk for the United Kingdom.

My hon. Friend the Member for Livingston raised some of the comments made by the Law Society of Scotland. One of the things that it has identified is what would happen if the United Kingdom wanted to start, on its own, imposing sanctions on countries believed to be sponsoring terrorism—I will not mention the secret report on Saudi Arabia that the Government appear to have commissioned but now will not tell anybody about. Of course, there is no suggestion at all that the Saudi Arabian Government are involved in anything unlawful in Yemen or anywhere else. How could anyone possibly suggest that?

What steps are the Government taking to arrive at a legally sound definition of what a terrorist-supporting state actually is? If that is not clear at the beginning, the door is again open for us to be sued by any aggrieved party. I am reminded that one of the very few countries that Gordon Brown, the previous Prime Minister, used anti-terrorism legislation against was Iceland. That shows what can happen if a definition of terrorism is a bit too vague. I have never known Iceland to sponsor state terrorism, but Mr Brown apparently thought that it did.

I understand the need for the Government to talk positively and bullishly about every single aspect of Brexit, despite the fact that the majority of their own party voted against it in the referendum, but we need to be realistic. We need to be alert to the fact that the United Kingdom's trading position and international reputation could be at risk and its economy severely damaged.

The Minister chose not to name a single example of EU sanctions that the Government would want to lift or of where the United Kingdom would want to impose sanctions that have not already been imposed by the European Union. This appears to be yet another example of where the desperation to take back control has come before any sensible, intelligent consideration about whether in some cases control is better exercised by 28 nations acting together than by one tiny little island in the north Atlantic that thinks it can do it all by itself.

6.39 pm

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): It is my first opportunity to welcome you to your new seat in the Chamber, Madam Deputy Speaker; it is great to see you there.

We have had a useful and informative debate this afternoon, although it has been slightly shorter than we anticipated because of other important debates. There have been some helpful contributions from across the

House, including the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Mrs Badenoch), who likened herself to her constituency's namesake, spice. I am certain that she has a wonderful future ahead of her in this House and that her constituents will be, rightly, proud of her today. The hon. Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) spoke of his pride in his constituency's boot-making heritage. His affection for his constituency was obvious and it was a treat to be in the Chamber to hear his maiden speech. Well done. I welcome both hon. Members to the House.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) spoke of the need for transitional arrangements. Surely this argument is all but over. There will be a transitional period, and I look forward to the day when a Minister stands at the Dispatch Box and tells us what we all now know to be inevitable.

The debate has been helpful in that it follows the White Paper on international sanctions published in April, and precedes the introduction of the Bill. Are the Government considering adopting a similar approach to the other Brexit-related Bills announced in the Queen's Speech? My hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) asked: where is the Bill? But perhaps this new approach is a welcome sign of a new and collaborative approach from the Government. Ensuring that Parliament has a sufficient grip on the Brexit process is important to the Labour party and to the country.

Many of our constituents voted to leave the European Union because they want this House to take control of our law making. It falls to MPs to take a tight hold of the process and not allow the Government to take decisions, grab powers or devise processes that exclude Parliament. The European Union (Withdrawal) Bill proposes sweeping delegated powers but lacks effective oversight or accountability. This is fundamentally undemocratic and unacceptable. The Labour party will not wave through Bills that demean our Parliament in this way.

The House has yet to see the draft legislation on sanctions, but we hope that the Government are not developing a habit and do not put something before the House that seizes more powers for Ministers than is absolutely necessary. The start the Government have made with the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill is bad and needs to change. It is not in the national interest to present poor legislation before the House and then get upset when the Opposition decline to support it. The Government should and must do better. Labour agrees that the vital issue of international sanctions must be resolved before we leave the EU. We recognise that and will not seek to obstruct the forthcoming legislation needlessly, but it is vital that we get the details right. This is too important to get wrong.

Britain needs the ability to act unilaterally when it is appropriate to do so, but when attempting to influence or restrict the capabilities of states such as North Korea, Sudan or Iran, it is the combined effort of many nations that may, over time, prompt the change we want. Britain's national security is enhanced by working with our European allies, and there is no reason this cannot continue after Brexit. The Government need to set out detailed plans for future co-operation between the UK and the EU. Any decision to impose new sanctions or revoke existing ones must be subject to adequate scrutiny

[Jenny Chapman]

and periodic review. The Government need to make clear how they intend to enable parliamentary scrutiny of decisions when the intention seems to be to make regular use of secondary legislation. Does the Minister agree that sanctions decisions ought to be subject to a debate and a vote in this House? Ministers must not be allowed to make it up as they go along. The decision to implement sanctions, or not, will have a significant impact on the UK's standing internationally, our relationships with other nations and our ability to influence. The Minister needs to reassure the House that there will be a process in place that is transparent, fair and accountable to Members of this House. Does the Minister plan to provide regular updates to the House on the impact of sanctions measures, and will this requirement be in the Bill?

It is clearly desirable for the UK to continue to work closely with the EU after we leave. Our ability to work together to impose sanctions, especially when the UN has declined to do so, is extremely important. We also need to maintain our ability to influence our EU partners, so that sanctions are as effective as they can be. With that in mind, do the Government intend these measures to come into force on exit day or might sanctions in the end form part of the now inevitable transitional period? The Government need to make it clear whether or not they plan to participate in common EU foreign and security policy, and, if so, what institutional arrangements they wish to put in place. The EU imposed tough financial sanctions on Russia following the illegal annexation of Crimea, including a total ban on imports of goods originating in Crimea or Sevastopol unless they have Ukrainian certificates.

My former constituency neighbour, Lord Hague, has said of sanctions on Iran:

"The ability to agree among 28 countries, sanctions that were also co-ordinated with the United States made an enormous difference to world affairs. Twenty eight countries left to their own devices would not have had identical sanctions, or brought Iran to the negotiating table. The ability to do that is very important."

The Government's approach to sanctions policy in the forthcoming Bill will be read as a signal of their intent to align or distance themselves from working with like-minded international partners. Do the Government want to work more closely with the US or to continue to align with Europe in a common foreign and security policy? If so, how? Do we want to negotiate continued permanent membership of the EU's Political and Security Committee, as Lord Hague has proposed, or do the Government envisage a looser parallel arrangement?

The Minister's face seems to suggest that he thinks these are big questions for a general debate taking place before any legislation is even published. However, these are the issues—the extent and nature of collaboration; common aims and means with EU and other nations; and the use of secondary legislation and the role of this House—that the Government must be able to answer to win the confidence not just of MPs, but of the country.

6.47 pm

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I welcome you to the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I start by saluting two exemplary maiden speeches that we have heard today? My hon. Friend the

Member for Saffron Walden (Mrs Badenoch) made her maiden speech with great confidence, saying it was the constituency's first since 1929; I take it that was because Sir Alan Haselhurst had previously sat for Middleton and Prestwich. Of course I am slightly saddened that the population of Sir Alans in this House has reduced by one, but her speech was utterly charming and beautifully judged, and I can see, as can all of us, why those in Saffron Walden have so rabidly taken her to their hearts. I said "rabidly" by mistake; of course I meant rapidly. It may well be that her locally produced saffron aphrodisiac will soon be on sale in the parliamentary shop, and I would urge hon. Members to form a most orderly queue. Her good sense on economics is a message all in this House should heed. I congratulate her on the most perfect maiden speech.

I offer similar congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer), whom I have known as the most diligent MEP for the East Midlands. He remains local to the East Midlands now that he is a Northamptonshire MP. He has a passion for high-quality Northamptonshire shoes; may I assure him that I endeavour to be a loyal customer? None of that Italian stuff for me. We will also try to raise a glass, when we can, charged with either Carlsberg or Phipps. He can forever be proud of the maiden speech he made tonight.

As my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union said in his opening speech, the Government intend to continue working closely with allies to counter threats such as terrorism, conflict and the proliferation of nuclear weapons. An effective and targeted sanctions policy is a very important means to that end, and a global Britain will continue to use sanctions to influence the behaviour of others as part of a broad and internationally co-ordinated approach.

We currently implement over 30 sanctions regimes, targeting specific countries as well as terrorist groups. Most of these sanctions result from resolutions of the UN Security Council or decisions by the European Union. Typically, they involve travel bans, asset freezes, and financial and trade restrictions. UN and EU sanctions are currently brought into effect in the UK through the European Communities Act 1972. The House has heard about the principles we apply when imposing sanctions. There must be clear objectives linked to wider political strategy; solid justification; and careful targeting to maximise the intended pressure while minimising the unintended consequences. I want to reassure hon. Members that the Government remain committed to these principles.

Today's debate is about the principle of whether, once we have left the EU, the UK should establish a sanctions regime that allows us to replicate the sanctions powers currently deriving from our membership of the EU.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister give a commitment that the 34 sanctions currently implemented will be exactly the same after Brexit?

Sir Alan Duncan: There are over 30, and the intention is to lift and shift, but all will be subject to statutory instruments of this House. This House might, if it were to use its numbers, reject them, but the intention is to remain aligned with the EU—with existing sanctions—so that we are in harmony with it.

Jenny Chapman: The Minister said that these measures would be subject to votes in this House. Am I to read into that that he intends them to be subject to the affirmative procedure?

Sir Alan Duncan: I will come to that in just a moment, if I may.

A sanctions Bill will enable the UK to continue to impose, update and lift sanctions in response to fast-moving events. The European Union (Withdrawal) Bill will not be sufficient to do that, since we need powers to do more than simply preserve or freeze existing sanctions. The United Nations Act 1946 is also insufficient for UN sanctions, because in 2010, the UK Supreme Court ruled that it could not lawfully be used to implement asset freezes, and that additional powers were needed for measures of this kind involving any infringement of individual rights. In short, the sanctions Bill will enable the UK's continued compliance with international law after we leave the EU, ensure that, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, the UK continues to play a central role in shaping UN sanctions, and return decision-making powers on non-UN sanctions to the UK.

As my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary said, the Bill will focus on powers, not policy. As such, it might be described as a framework Bill. It will provide powers to implement UN sanctions and to impose UK sanctions independently or in co-operation with allies. The question of how we use those powers will be addressed later, when we introduce secondary legislation applying sanctions to particular countries. We are obliged to implement UN sanctions, but we will face political choices on how far to replicate current EU sanctions.

The Bill will take account of the consultation mentioned by my hon. Friend in his opening speech. We envisage four main elements: powers to impose sanctions where justified and appropriate; powers to ensure that individuals and organisations can challenge the sanctions imposed on them; powers to exempt or license certain types of activity that would otherwise be restricted, such as humanitarian deliveries and supplies, in countries that might have been sanctioned; and powers to amend and adopt regulations for anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing.

Detailed scrutiny of the Bill can obviously come only once it is published. That is why we will have Second Reading, Committee, Report and so on, as this House always does. However, perhaps I can respond as rapidly as I can in the time I have—and I am running out of time—to some of the questions that have been asked, mainly by Opposition Front Benchers. “Where is the Bill?” was one question. We have a consultation. We have just had an election and purdah, and we need to consider the responses and then decide our final position. Only then can we publish the Bill—but we will do so. The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) asked who will lead on it. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office will take the lead on foreign policy, including sanctions.

On the question by the hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) about whether the procedures we intend to adopt will be affirmative or negative, we note—this is very important for the efficacy of sanctions—that the delay involved with affirmative procedures can lead to asset flight before assets are frozen or caught.

We are considering this issue, and will respond in our consultation response, which will be published very shortly.

Hannah Bardell: Will the Minister give way?

Sir Alan Duncan: I have no time; I am very sorry.

The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland asked about the overseas territories. The UK has responsibility for the external relations and national security of overseas territories and Crown dependencies, and we will continue our policy of ensuring that the overseas territories and Crown dependencies apply international and UK imposed sanctions. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary is chairing regular meetings with the overseas territories and Crown dependencies on how best to achieve this end. We will include a power in the Bill for the UK to continue to legislate directly where appropriate.

It was suggested that we would lose the ability to be part of international sanctions development. I would say very clearly that I believe that we will not lose this ability. The Bill is intended to give us all the necessary powers to work internationally. We note that the UK, with its international allies, was a key player in securing the Iran nuclear deal. We will continue our constructive and productive relationship with our European and international partners after we leave the EU.

The hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) asked about the legal risk of the UK adopting EU sanctions—in other words, our having a separate regime and doing this individually. The UK will take responsibility for the sanctions it adopts, including taking on legal risks. When working with the EU, we will take all necessary steps, co-ordinating sanctions and sharing information, to reduce the risk, and if the risk is not acceptable, we do not have to follow the EU.

There are some other issues that we have not had the chance to discuss, but I am sure we will do so on Second Reading and in further consideration of the Bill. On civil liberties, for example, there is a very delicate balance to be struck between using sanctions to counter threats such as terrorism and respecting due process to protect the rights of individuals.

Another issue is abuses and violations of human rights as a reason to impose sanctions. The Government are firmly committed to promoting and strengthening universal human rights, and holding to account states responsible for the worst violations. Indeed, during the previous Parliament the Government amended the Criminal Finances Act 2017 to allow law enforcement agencies to use civil recovery powers to recover the proceeds of human rights abuses or violations, wherever they take place, where the property is held in the UK. We also have powers to exclude from the UK individuals whose presence is not conducive to the public good, and we operate a watch list system to support this.

We know that innocent individuals and organisations can sometimes be inadvertently affected by sanctions. We hear reports of this, for example, from humanitarian organisations delivering assistance in countries subject to sanctions. We will do everything we can to minimise these unintended consequences. We will publish guidance to make UK sanctions regimes as clear as possible to the individuals and companies affected. We will have more flexibility to issue general licences to humanitarian

[Sir Alan Duncan]

organisations in order to cut bureaucracy and make it much easier for them to continue operating in the most difficult of circumstances.

The Bill will be published in due course, and the response to the consultation will come out soon. I urge the House to appreciate that as we look across the world and see the dangers of terrorism and misconduct of all sorts, having an effective sanctions regime is absolutely crucial to our foreign policy and to making the world a better place. Replicating a sanctions policy once we have left the EU is absolutely essential. If we did not do that, the world would be a poorer place.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Exiting the European Union and Sanctions.

PETITION

Climate Change Objectives and Obligations

7 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I rise to present a *petition on behalf of residents of Dulwich and West Norwood*.

The petition states:

The petition of the residents of Dulwich and West Norwood,

Declares that there is widespread concern that the Government is not on track to meet the fourth or fifth carbon budgets; welcomes the Prime Minister's continued verbal commitment to the Paris Agreement; notes that in order to meet the UK's commitment to achieve the carbon budget action is necessary; further notes that the Committee on Climate Change reported in June 2017 and concluded that the UK can successfully navigate the transition to a growing, low-carbon economy but new policies to deliver that transition are overdue; and further notes that much domestic legislation for reducing emission and tackling climate changes is neither contingent on the UK's membership of the European Union or ends in around 2020, including but not limited to the levy control framework supporting low carbon power, fuel efficiency standards for new cars, renewable heat incentives, capital funding for flood defences to protect homes and businesses, and targeted biodiversity plans to help build the resilience of the natural environment to climate change.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to lay before the House their plans for meeting the fourth and fifth carbon budgets, as well as committing to protecting existing environmental protections.

And the petitioners remain hopeful and expectant that this request is granted, etc.

[P002046]

Tesco House, Cardiff: Job Losses

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

7.1 pm

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the issue of the closure of the Tesco customer operations centre in my constituency of Cardiff North with the loss of up to 1,100 jobs. If you will allow me, Madam Deputy Speaker, I shall do three things: first, highlight the way in which Tesco has acted; secondly, describe the human impact of these actions; and finally, explore how we respond to these things and the next steps.

On Wednesday 21 June, without any warning or consultation with either the Welsh or the UK Governments, Tesco announced it would be closing its customer contact centre in Cardiff in February next year, leading to the loss of up to 1,100 jobs, with the possible relocation of 150 of those jobs to Dundee. The centre deals with inquiries from consumers all over the UK, including those made via social media. It has a highly motivated and skilled workforce who take great pride in their work.

On the morning of 21 June, staff went to work as usual. On arrival, some were told by visiting management to clear the top floor and find somewhere else in the building to work. An events management company had been brought in to install a PA system. Staff then received an email inviting them to a meeting on the top floor at 1 pm. To those crowded into that room on the top floor, an official statement was read out telling them they would all be made redundant. There was no opportunity for questions. This shock announcement has inevitably had a huge impact on the dedicated staff, some of whom have worked there for over 20 years. In some cases, two or three members of the same family work there.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my disgust at the fact that many of the employees, including constituents of mine in Caerphilly, only learned about the closure on social media?

Anna McMorris: Yes. Some staff members who were not there that day only actually found out that they had lost their jobs through social media. There also seems to have been no formal means of contacting them or managing their concerns.

Following the announcement, I met Tesco executives to press them on their reasons for the job losses and why jobs in Dundee have seemingly been prioritised over jobs in Cardiff. We were told that there is more space in Dundee and that the company had already taken the decision to have one site where customer relations staff would be based. They were unable to provide any reason why they had not entered into discussions with either the UK Government or the Welsh Government.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. I, too, have constituents who have been affected by this absolutely absurd decision. Does she agree that it is completely bizarre for Tesco to not provide those reasons, particularly when Cardiff has gained a reputation

as an excellent place for customer care centres? Many different companies choose Cardiff because of the excellent skilled workforce there.

Anna McMorris: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I think that these job losses are the latest in a string of cuts implemented as part of the so-called turnaround plan by Dave Lewis, the group chief executive, who joined Tesco in autumn 2015.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): As my hon. Friend knows, job losses on this scale will be felt keenly not just in Cardiff but across south Wales. A constituent of mine who works for Tesco contacted me, saying:

“I believe that what they (Tesco) have told the press is incorrect as I know they are outsourcing parts of their business to a site in Bury.”

Does my hon. Friend agree that the company should be questioned on that, too?

Anna McMorris: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that it should be questioned on that, and I will address the issue later in my speech.

In his first year in charge as the group chief executive, Mr Lewis axed nearly 5,000 head office staff and UK store management jobs, as well as more than 4,000 roles overseas and at the group's banking division. More than 2,500 jobs were lost with the closure of 48 so-called underperforming Tesco stores, and 3,000 jobs were put at risk in April when the chain cut night shifts for shelf stackers in some of its biggest supermarkets.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend and parliamentary neighbour for securing this debate. According to last year's Tesco accounts, the chief executive, Dave Lewis, was given a £4.15 million pay package, of which £2.4 million was a bonus. Does my hon. Friend agree that he could have taken a little bit less and the company could have kept a few more of those jobs? Every little helps.

Anna McMorris: I think it is absolutely the case that the company is prioritising management over the hard-working workforce, who are highly skilled and motivated.

I suspect that nearly every Member of this House has a Tesco store in their constituency. It is one of the UK's biggest and most recognisable brands, with a loyal customer base.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing this debate to the House. Does she agree that there is something obscene about the loss of 1,100 jobs at the customer contact centre at Tesco House in Cardiff? On behalf of Tesco employees in my constituency, I register my support for her campaign. Does she agree that we should ask the chief executive officer of Tesco to reconsider his decision immediately?

Anna McMorris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support.

In his desire to achieve more savings, Mr Lewis needs to understand that he has an absolute responsibility to treat his employees fairly and with respect. He owes them a duty of care and he should listen to what his staff are saying.

In the days following the announcement, I went to the customer centre to meet the staff affected, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) and my local Assembly Member, Julie Morgan. The staff are utterly devastated and feel let down by a company to which some have dedicated their working lives. One staff member told me:

“We had felt like we were part of one big family and took pride in coming to work. This feels like being dumped like an old pair of shoes after being promised a secure future. Now we are feeling exploited and used.”

Some of the worst-affected households are those with multiple members losing their jobs. Some families will lose two, three or even four wages from their budgets. One couple in their late 20s who had their first child less than a year ago are both set to lose their jobs.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Following the coalition Government's halving of the statutory consultation period from 90 days to just 45 days, the employees whose whole lives will be devastated by these redundancies have just 45 days to find another job in a small area where there will be more than 1,000 redundancies. Does my hon. Friend agree that 45 days is far too short a period for employees to find alternative jobs and for companies to look at straightforward alternative business proposals to fulfil their duty to consult properly with staff and look at real alternatives to keep those jobs in place?

Anna McMorris: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend about that, which is precisely why I brought this debate to the House.

One worker told me:

“We are absolutely devastated as my fiancée is currently on maternity leave with the birth of our baby daughter. We have also planned to get married next year so this news has come at the worst possible time for us in our lives and we are very worried for the future.”

Another staff member contacted me on Facebook. He said:

“It's been stressful for a lot of us, some more than others. I've been made aware that there are options to apply for a store role or to move to the Tesco site up Dundee. This is not an option as it'd be too much of a drastic life change and there are very few roles considering the number of employees in our centre. The announcement has also left me wondering, if I moved to another role in the business, would I be any less vulnerable to another redundancy announcement in future.”

He went on:

“A lot of my colleagues whose time at Tesco exceed 10 years are choosing to stay until the end for their redundancy package as they'll get a significantly larger amount but for many employees like myself who have been with Tesco just a little over a year, we see no incentive in staying as I don't feel valued as an employee anymore and barely feel like I'm part of the place now.

The morale has dropped rapidly on my work floor whereas it felt like a small community only a year back, and now it feels very empty and makes me feel quite down whenever I'm in the environment. I used to love coming to work but now the hours feel longer and it just feels like it's getting in the way of the hours I could be using to find progression in life.”

Those are just a few of the many messages I have had from distraught members of staff who have been affected.

What is going to happen now? The Welsh Government's Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Infrastructure, Ken Skates, has announced the formation of a taskforce to find new employment opportunities for the staff. That is a welcome development. It will pool the knowledge and resources of key partners to ensure that the 1,100 people

[Anna McMorrin]

currently working at the centre are provided with the very best support in seeking further employment, as well as welfare and emotional support. Following my question to the Leader of the House on 22 June, I ask the Minister before us to urge the Department for Work and Pensions to work with the Welsh Government and dispatch its emergency taskforce to help ensure that the staff who are affected are fully supported.

While that work goes on, along with the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers, I will be making the case for Tesco to rethink its plans and for better engagement with its workforce. If there is to be any outsourcing of jobs, at the very least I would like an assurance from Tesco and the management that they will go to companies based in south Wales.

Jo Stevens: My hon. Friend is being very generous with her time. When she and I met staff at Tesco, the point about outsourcing was raised. We heard that work had been outsourced for the past 12 months and that when people left Tesco House, they were not being replaced. Does she share my concern about the lack of transparency from Tesco management about where the work is going, because the number of jobs being lost and the jobs being offered in Dundee simply do not add up?

Anna McMorrin: I agree with my hon. Friend: there has been no transparency on this issue, and that is what I would like to see. I call on the Minister to request it.

I reiterate my deep disappointment at the way Tesco has handled the situation. I struggle to understand its rationale for losing such a highly dedicated workforce. As a company that supposedly values its workers, it should not want to lose decades of experience and the specialist skills staff have acquired. We all know Tesco, we have all shopped there. It has a loyal customer base in Cardiff and its staff deserve more and better than this. I hope that the Minister will join me in condemning this behaviour and work with me and alongside the Welsh Government in making the case to Tesco to rethink its plans and offer better engagement and more transparency to the workforce.

7.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): I welcome the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) to her place and congratulate her on initiating this important debate.

These are worrying times for Tesco staff at the Cardiff customer engagement centre and their families—especially those families with more than one person employed there—and I am sure that all our thoughts are with them. As the hon. Lady said, at 1 o'clock on 21 June, before it was officially announced at 2 o'clock, Tesco notified its staff of its intended plans to simplify its customer services operation by expanding its office in Dundee and—sadly—closing the centre in Cardiff by February 2018. I know that the hon. Lady tweeted, shortly after Tesco told its staff, about how shocked she was to learn of the proposed closure, and raised the issue with my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House during business questions.

A 45-day consultation with the unions has begun. The Government's focus is to support all those affected and to get people back into work as quickly as possible through Jobcentre Plus. I can assure the hon. Lady that we are working with the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that the maximum service is available.

Ruth George: I wish to make the same point to the Minister that I made to my hon. Friend. The period of statutory consultation, even for such enormous job losses, has been halved from 90 days to 45 days. Whatever support the DWP and Jobcentre Plus can put in is very welcome, but 45 days is far too short a period for so many jobs to be found in a city such as Cardiff. Although Cardiff has good employment levels, 1,200 good jobs cannot be replaced in such a short time. Will the Minister look at reviewing that halving to assist companies in supporting their employees?

Margot James: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention and I did note her earlier remarks. I do not think there is any prospect of reversing that decision. I accept that it can prove difficult for people to find alternative employment within the 45 days, but a lot of support is going on in Cardiff, not just from the DWP and the Government but from the Welsh Assembly. It is a buoyant economy and I hope that people will find satisfactory employment within that timeframe.

It is not always easy to find another job, and even if people do so it does not alter the hurt they feel at the rejection that redundancy always involves. But business change is an inevitable consequence of competitive markets, and retail is a highly competitive market at the moment. Commercial and economic opportunities and threats mean that companies will need to reorganise, merge, expand and, sometimes, unfortunately contract in response. To ensure businesses remain viable and profitable, they need the flexibility to respond to the circumstances they are facing as best they can. At the same time, employees will want to know how the changes are likely to affect them, and what their options are for the future. It is vital, therefore, that there is effective consultation with employees about the potential for collective redundancies.

Jo Stevens: Is the Minister aware that this is the largest single number of job losses that has been announced in Wales for a decade? About 100 of my constituents are affected by the decision, and they will be very disappointed that the Minister batted away the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) about the consultation period. Will she please reconsider, and talk to her Cabinet colleagues about the issue?

Margot James: Let me reassure the hon. Lady. The fact that this is the worst case for 10 years points to the buoyancy of the economy in Wales. That part of the country is doing well. When I visited it just two months ago, I was very impressed by the dynamism that I found in Cardiff and the surrounding area. I do not share the hon. Lady's pessimism about the opportunities for people. However, as I said earlier, I certainly appreciate that it is not a simple case of getting another job and all is well, particularly when a whole community is affected as this community has been.

Let me say something about the legislation. Collective redundancy legislation strikes a balance between the needs of the business and the needs of employees. It applies when 20 or more employees are made redundant at one establishment within 90 days. In those circumstances, employers have a statutory duty to consult employees' representatives about the proposed redundancies. The consultation must be with the employees' trade union representatives, or with other elected employee representatives when there is no recognised trade union. It must be completed before any dismissal notices can take effect, and it must be undertaken with a view to reaching agreement, although sometimes—I recognise this—agreement may not be possible. It must include consideration of ways of avoiding redundancies in the first place, reducing the number of people to be made redundant, and importantly, mitigating the effect of the dismissals. Employers also have a number of obligations, including a requirement to notify the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy of the proposed collective redundancies before the start of the statutory consultation.

Redundancy can be—and usually is—a stressful time for those affected. I want to highlight the service offered by the ACAS helpline, which can advise people on their particular circumstances. ACAS has also produced a guide for employers on handling large-scale redundancies such as those that we are discussing this evening.

Let me now say something about the support that is available to employees who are made redundant. Throughout the redundancy process, employers still have obligations to their employees, and should be thinking about the help that they can offer at all times. Employees with at least two years' service who have been given notice of redundancy have a right to reasonable time off so that they can look for a new job or arrange training. The Department for Work and Pensions and the local Jobcentre Plus have already been in touch with Tesco to offer their support.

I recommend that, in the case of redundancies, employers should always contact Jobcentre Plus as soon as possible to discuss appropriate support that can be delivered locally. All decisions about appropriate support are made locally, because a decision based on a specific redundancy situation, an individual's own transferable skills and experience, and the availability of jobs in the local area is far more likely to be the right decision.

Anna McMorrin: Does the Minister agree that these are not normal redundancy circumstances? Does she agree that the DWP should dispatch the emergency taskforce to help those affected to seek new employment, and work with the Welsh Government as well?

Margot James: I very much agree with what is behind the hon. Lady's intervention. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales is taking that forward, and has already met the chief executive. The south-east Wales district Jobcentre Plus will deploy its redundancy response action plan, which includes working with partner organisations such as Careers Wales, the Welsh Government, the National Employer Partnership Team, the local authority, DWP pensions and Tesco trade unions to deliver a bespoke package of support, which I think is what the hon. Lady is after. The typical support provided for individuals is matching people to local

known job vacancies and/or helping to construct or improve CVs. Where there is scope to do so, support can be delivered on a group basis, for example by bringing redundant workers and employers together at a jobs fair as well as at group sessions and one-to-ones on site, to provide support and information on benefits, pensions, support from DWP and Careers Wales. Matching current vacancies to the skills and requirements of the affected individuals is a key part of the service Jobcentre Plus provides. This has been successful in many other redundancy situations.

Tesco has assured Government that its first priority is to do everything it can to support its colleagues in Cardiff, including helping them to find roles within Tesco, working with Jobcentre Plus, USDAW and the Welsh Government, and connecting with other local employers who might have vacancies.

Jo Stevens: One way in which Tesco could assist these staff members is not to make them redundant six weeks before they qualify for their annual bonus payment. Does the Minister agree that such behaviour should be discouraged?

Margot James: I am very sympathetic to that point; that seems to add insult to injury. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales has raised that issue with the chief executive of Tesco, and I am sure he will raise it again thanks to the hon. Lady's intervention.

The Welsh Government have already established a taskforce, which stands ready to support the Cardiff workers once the outcome of the consultation is known. It is being led by Ken Skates; Fiona Jones, DWP's director for Wales work services, is a member of the taskforce, too. Tesco has confirmed that it will also work closely with the Welsh Government on its redundancy action scheme—ReAct—a programme that funds training for people living in Wales who are facing redundancy. Tesco will be engaging with the Welsh Contact Centre Forum and will be keen to reach out to other employers who might have vacancies. A significant number of businesses have already approached both Tesco and the Welsh Government, but the current focus has to be on the ongoing consultation process before any detailed discussions can progress with other companies. At present, Tesco is not able to provide specific details on the package available to staff, as this will be considered as part of the ongoing 45-day consultation.

In conclusion, I reiterate that retail is a vital sector for the UK economy and we are committed to it.

Anna McMorrin: Will the Minister join the Leader of the House in condemning the way in which Tesco made this announcement? When I asked the Leader of the House about this shortly after the announcement, she was appalled at the way things had been done.

Margot James: I do not think I would go as far as to condemn that, because I believe Tesco made every effort to inform people on a one-to-one basis. Some people were away. *[Interruption.]* If I am wrong about that, I apologise, but the information I have had is that Tesco did make every effort. Some people were away; it did contact them. It is appalling that some people found out about this on social media—and the situation in the Chamber lighting-wise has slightly thrown me off.

[Margot James]

I know that the fact that retail is highly competitive and buoyant will be of little comfort to Tesco workers at the Cardiff customer engagement centre who are facing an uncertain future. Every collective redundancy situation involves individuals, and their needs need to be managed carefully. It is vital that individual workers receive the information and support that they need, as and when they need it. This Government and the Assembly in Wales stand ready to provide every possible support to the hon. Lady's constituents and those of other Members representing the Cardiff area. I wish them all the very best in their search for new employment if the redundancies go ahead.

Stephen Doughty: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I apologise for the unusual nature of this point

of order, just before the question is put. Have you or Mr Speaker had notice of any statements, written or otherwise, to be made tomorrow by the Secretary of State for Transport relating to crucial decisions in Wales on St Mellons parkway station in my constituency and to the worrying rumours about rail electrification in south Wales?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am not aware of any notification of statements, but I am sure the hon. Gentleman knows that if he has not heard anything by tomorrow there will be an opportunity to raise the issue, perhaps during business questions.

Question put and agreed to.

7.31 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 19 July 2017

[MR GEORGE HOWARTH *in the Chair*]

Queen's Speech: Implications for Wales

9.30 am

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Wales and the Queen's Speech.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I am delighted to see so many Welsh Labour colleagues on the Opposition Benches; what a shame that there are no Conservative colleagues here to speak from the Government Benches. In the Gracious Speech on 21 June, the Queen said:

"A priority will be to build a more united country, strengthening the social, economic and cultural bonds between England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. My government will work in cooperation with the devolved administrations, and it will work with all of the parties in Northern Ireland to support the return of devolved government."

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. Does she agree that the Conservatives' giving money to Northern Ireland outside the Barnett formula and not giving the other UK nations their fair share is hardly likely to strengthen the Union?

Jo Stevens: I absolutely agree; it is nothing more than a bung to the Democratic Unionist party to hold up a minority Government. In her briefing on the Queen's Speech, the Prime Minister said that

"this Government will do everything in our power to build a more united nation and strengthen our precious union of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. We will take seriously our responsibility to govern for the whole United Kingdom and will seek to work closely with the devolved administrations."

The Prime Minister and her Government have not got off to a very good start, as my hon. Friend referred to. The DUP bung—a minimum of £1 billion in exchange for 10 votes to prop up the Government—hardly builds a more united nation and certainly does not demonstrate a will to work with all parties in Northern Ireland.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Does the hon. Lady think that the deal actually busts the Barnett formula?

Jo Stevens: The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point. I know that there has been commentary from the Welsh First Minister about whether it needs to be reviewed. Perhaps the Minister will deal with that in his response.

The paucity of the Government's programme for this two-year parliamentary Session was laid bare in the Queen's Speech. Much of the Conservative party manifesto was abandoned: dementia tax; means testing the winter fuel allowance; grammar schools in England—of course, we do not have them in Wales—a vote on repealing the fox hunting ban, although I suspect that Plaid Cymru Members would have been glad at that policy; fixed-term

Parliaments; the energy price cap; and the removal of free school lunches. The U-turns and concessions have continued apace since then.

What exactly was on offer for Wales in that Speech and since from the Government? After the dog's dinner of the Wales Act 2017 in the last Parliament, there has been no progress on tidying up and providing much-needed clarity on the devolution settlement, nothing to offer on rail electrification or anything concrete on scrapping the Severn bridge tolls and no Swansea bay tidal lagoon announcement, despite the Government sitting on the favourable Hendry report since January.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentioned rail electrification in north Wales. Although I welcome the announcement of an HS2 hub in Crewe, does she agree that that was an ideal opportunity to announce at least a plan for the future of connectivity from Crewe to north Wales? Electrification could be a part of that.

Jo Stevens: My hon. Friend raises an important point, which I think demonstrates the Government's lack of vision for Wales; they are always concentrating on what they can do for England, rather than Wales.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): My hon. Friend also mentioned the Severn bridge tolls. The Conservative party had a very late conversion to scrapping the tolls during the election campaign, yet there was nothing about it in the Queen's Speech. Does she agree that businesses and commuters in south Wales need clarity about what will happen next?

Jo Stevens: I absolutely agree. We need clarity on that now, just as we need clarity on so many other things that the Government are dealing with—or not dealing with—at the moment.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that another big gap in the Tory agenda is the issue of low pay in our valleys? Should they not really have brought in a real living wage of £10 an hour, which would make a big difference for our communities?

Jo Stevens: Absolutely. Our party's manifesto promised a £10 minimum wage by 2020—a proper living wage, as opposed to the fake living wage introduced by the Government.

There was no confirmation in the Queen's Speech of any investment to expand our capital city rail station at Cardiff Central and no confirmation that the Wylfa Newydd project will be delivered to ensure a sustainable economic legacy for Anglesey and the wider north Wales region. There was no devolution of air passenger duty and no transitional help for the WASPI—Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign—women of Wales, whose campaign here and in Wales has been led with such distinction by Welsh Labour MPs, including my hon. Friends the Members for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and for Ogmore (Chris Elmore). There was also no announcement on scrapping child burial fees, which was another campaign led so passionately in the House by my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East.

[*Jo Stevens*]

The Government have even cut the number of Ministers in the Wales Office, which is a clear illustration of their lack of interest in Wales.

All we have been offered from the Queen's Speech is an arrogant, hard and damaging Brexit and a repeal Bill—after reading it last week, I see why the word “great” has been dropped. It is a dangerous Bill that offers two power grabs by the Executive for the price of one: from Parliament and from the devolved Administrations. That continues the Conservative party's strategy of many years of minimising scrutiny, challenge and oversight. This week we had the deliberate sabotage of our Select Committees and even the disgrace of the public being locked out of presenting online petitions to Parliament until at least September—an undemocratic and desperate act by a desperate Government.

We have all lived and breathed Brexit for the past 15 months, and today I will focus some of my remarks on what influence women, and Welsh women in particular, have had and will have on the path to Brexit. I do not know about other hon. Members here, but I thought that the EU referendum campaign was the worst I have ever been involved in, for a number of reasons. It was not just the nastiness and vitriol spewed out by some—I emphasise “some”—campaigners, using the excuse that it was a discussion about immigration. It was not just because my friend and our colleague Jo Cox was assassinated by a right-wing fascist the week before the referendum. It was not just the insurmountable task of trying to undo 40 years of negative press and stories about the EU and what membership meant, and it was not just because we had to listen to and watch the then leader of UKIP spout bile every single day of the campaign.

I felt alienated by that campaign because the voices I heard time after time were men's; I rarely heard women's voices, despite our best efforts to be heard. I wrote a piece in our national newspaper in Wales before the referendum urging women to get involved, to get their voices heard and to talk about the issues that concerned all of us. I particularly wanted young women's voices to be heard. A University of Loughborough analysis of the referendum campaign showed that men received an astonishing 91% of EU referendum coverage in newspapers and 84% of the coverage in broadcast media.

The voting patterns by gender in the referendum were also interesting. In all age categories up to age 64, women voted to remain in higher percentages than men. In the 18-24 age group, 80% of women voters voted to remain, compared with 61% of men. The majority of women were not heard during the campaign and the majority did not get the result they wanted in the referendum either. However, it was a woman, Gina Miller, who took on the Government after the result. She suffered horrendous abuse and character assassination in the process, but it was her determination and bravery in the face of all of that that led to the Prime Minister being dragged back to Parliament to obtain specific permission to trigger article 50.

What about the withdrawal negotiations, now that they have started? I know the Minister will say this, so I will pre-empt him by saying that I know we have a female Prime Minister. However, her ministerial negotiating

team is entirely male: the Brexit Secretary and the Secretaries of State for International Trade and for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Their teams at the Departments for Exiting the European Union and for International Trade, and the Foreign Office are also all entirely male—there is not a single female Minister from the House of Commons in those teams. That negotiating team is working on behalf of 65 million people, more than half of whom are women.

We have a lot to lose through Brexit. Wales is a net beneficiary of EU membership and has been in receipt of EU structural funds for a number of years. The availability of the European social fund has supported a range of programmes in Wales that have focused on not only tackling the causes of poverty, but investing in skills and young people. Many of those programmes have focused on addressing the barriers that continue to hold women back and contribute to ongoing economic inequality. Chwarae Teg's Agile Nation 2 project is one of them. Others include Agile Nation 1, funded as part of the previous round of structural funds, and the Welsh Government's Parents, Childcare and Employment programme—PaCE—which provides targeted support to help women gain employment.

On its own, the Agile Nation 2 project is worth £12 million and is funded by the European social fund and the Welsh Government. The project works with women and with small and medium-sized enterprises in priority sectors in Wales to address the causes of the gender pay gap. Those projects not only deliver services that support women; many also provide employment for women. The third sector workforce in Wales is predominantly female, and 66% of the public sector workforce in Wales is female.

European funding has been used to deliver projects directly focused on equalities and, probably more importantly, cross-cutting themes of equality and tackling poverty. So far there has been no guarantee from the Government that funds repatriated to the UK will be made available to Wales to continue work similar to that which has been possible through funding streams such as the European social fund.

Membership of the EU has had a very positive impact on equalities legislation in both the UK and Wales. It is vital that we receive guarantees that the rights and protections from EU-derived equalities legislation in the UK will be maintained post Brexit. The current EU framework of legislation has acted as an absolute equality protection here in the UK. For example, it has prevented the scrapping of parts of the Equality Act 2010 as part of the Government's one-in, two-out deregulation red tape challenge.

Membership of the EU has ensured not only that legislation is passed that explicitly deals with the causes of inequality, but that the impact of all Government policies on equality is considered, in relation to preventing discrimination and advancing equality. We have kept equality impact assessments in Wales, but the UK Government have scrapped them. As a result, the cumulative impact on women of seven years of austerity policies, such as welfare reform and tax changes, under the coalition Government, the previous Conservative Government and the current Conservative Government has not been accurately assessed by Government Departments, and policy is not being developed with a focus on equality. It has been the Labour party and

groups such as the Women's Budget Group that have illustrated the damaging effect of the past seven years on women in Wales and the UK.

Brexit will lead to a further lack of focus on preventing discrimination and advancing equality, and the full impact of Government decisions on women will continue to be ignored by this Government. The Women and Equalities Committee report, "Ensuring strong equalities legislation after the EU exit", published in the previous Parliament, made a number of good recommendations. I hope that the Minister has read them and might discuss them with his colleagues. They included bringing forward an amendment to the Equality Act 2010

"to empower Parliament and the courts to declare whether legislation is compatible with UK principles of equality",

including a clause in the repeal Bill that

"explicitly commits to maintaining the current levels of equality protection when EU law is transposed into UK law"

and developing a cross-Government equality strategy.

I am really concerned about access to equalities data and research and European networks post Brexit. Similar concerns were raised by those who submitted evidence to the Women and Equalities Committee for its inquiry. Wales and the UK must have access to European civil society and equalities networks, and funds must be ring-fenced to allow current equalities research to continue uninterrupted. That evidence base is crucial to shaping domestic policy and demonstrating the UK's progress in meeting international obligations such as the sustainable development goals.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend concerned that the Government are now proposing in the repeal Bill to give themselves so-called Henry VIII powers to modify a whole raft of legislation as seems appropriate, which could have an impact on legislation relating to women?

Jo Stevens: That is absolutely right. Those Henry VIII powers are part of the strategy I mentioned earlier of avoiding scrutiny, challenge and debate.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentioned the WASPI women. Did we not see here in Westminster Hall recently the Government's contempt for Parliament when the motion on that debate was rejected by Members, and instead of there being a deferred Division on the WASPI issue, the Government have completely ignored it and not brought it to the Floor of the House? That shows they cannot be trusted with the Henry VIII powers they are bringing in via the Queen's Speech.

Jo Stevens: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and makes an important point. I do not think there is any trust in what the Government are trying to do with the repeal Bill.

As negotiations progress, it is crucial that thought is given to the financial impact that Brexit will have on women in Wales and the steps that should be taken to ensure that strong equalities legislation is maintained. Leaving the EU must not mean throwing away the decades of positive work that has been achieved in relation to equalities by the trade union and labour movement and progressive labour lawyers. Equality must be at the forefront of the agenda. This is why I, along with

the Mother of the House, have written to the Prime Minister to express our concern about the lack of women involved in the Brexit negotiations. Where is our voice? I cannot see where it will come from.

The Prime Minister has said:

"As we leave the European Union...we will make Britain a country that works not for a privileged few, but for every one of us."

I am afraid I simply do not have faith in those negotiating with our EU partners. I am going slightly off-piste here, but does anyone remember the opening lines of the song from the "Pinocchio" Disney film?

"When you get in trouble and you don't know right from wrong, give a little whistle."

After the £350 million a week to the NHS promise on that bus, the Foreign Secretary's latest insult to the EU 27 just reinforced his Pinocchio credentials. I make a joke of it, but when the task ahead is almost too large to comprehend, we need to have confidence in those negotiating on our behalf, and I do not.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend think that one of the rare shafts of light that occurred during the general election campaign from the Prime Minister was her refusal to guarantee the people of Wales that they would not suffer by losing out financially as a result of the Budget negotiations? Will my hon. Friend ask the Minister to give an assurance that there will be no reduction in the settlement for Wales as a result of the Budget negotiations and the conclusion of the deal?

Jo Stevens: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. The Minister heard the question, and we look forward to hearing his answer.

There are more than 40 years of laws made in the context of European Union membership. The former Lord Chief Justice, Lord Judge, has described Brexit as unleashing a "legislative tsunami", and he thinks it will be the greatest challenge in history to the integrity of Parliament's procedures. The repeal Bill published last week does nothing to reassure us that the integrity of Parliament's procedures will be sustained, and my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) gave the example of what happened in the WASPI debate.

The Bill does nothing to reassure me and women across Wales that the Government will protect and maintain our hard-fought-for rights when we exit the EU. When I hear the Brexit Secretary say, for example, that all current workers' rights under existing law will be protected, I am not convinced at all. It is not a promise, and it is certainly not a guarantee. We know what the Government are up to with the inclusion of those dangerous Henry VIII powers in the Bill. As we all know, Henry VIII's powers never did much good for women—I'm here all week.

Wales is far more dependent than the United Kingdom as a whole on trade with the European Union. We know that 67% of Welsh exports went to the EU in the last quarter of last year. More than 190,000 jobs in Wales are connected to demand from the single market, yet the Wales Office has declined to publish any formal analysis of the effects that different forms of trade partnership with the European Union would have on the Welsh economy.

[*Jo Stevens*]

On higher education, we have more than 5,500 students from the EU enrolled in Welsh universities. Analysis from 2011-12 shows that EU students generated nearly £133 million for the economy and more than 1,200 jobs. Cardiff University in my constituency has gained from live framework programme 7 and Horizon 2020 projects awarded up to the end 2016, amounting to more than £24 million, with further applications to Horizon 2020 in the pipeline to the value of another £20 million. For Cardiff University alone, European structural fund projects are worth an additional £39 million, with a further £22.5 million of projects in development. One significant recipient of the funding is CUBRIC—Cardiff University brain research imaging centre. That is set to become one of Europe's leading facilities for brain imaging, but it was able to exist only because of more than £4.5 million of EU funds.

Cardiff University is collaborating with other EU universities on more than 50 research projects, and 16% of Welsh university research funding comes from the EU; that is far more than the 10% from private sources. More than 4,500 students and nearly 1,000 staff from Welsh universities have studied in other countries under the Erasmus scheme. Where is the guarantee from the Government that the EU funding streams will be replaced in full after 2020? Please will the Minister address that when he responds to the debate?

However, the most pressing issue, which has left at least 3 million EU citizens in Britain and more than 1 million UK citizens in the EU in complete uncertainty, is their immigration status. EU citizens moving to the UK at the moment do not know under what immigration rules they will have to apply to live here. The Home Office website currently states:

“The cut-off date will be agreed during the negotiations but we are clear that it shouldn't be earlier than 29 March 2017...or later than the date the UK leaves the EU.”

That raises the possibility of the Government telling EU citizens who arrived in Wales after 29 March 2017 that they will have to apply under a completely different set of immigration rules, despite that deadline not existing when they arrived here. Not only have the Government failed to guarantee the rights of EU citizens, but the repeal Bill is absolutely clear that the Government will have the power to modify, limit or remove the rights that UK law gives to EU citizens. That can be found on page 10 of the explanatory notes to the Bill if anyone wants to look at it.

There are 73,000 EU nationals living in Wales. Welsh public services are acutely reliant on non-UK citizens to take on public sector roles, and about one third of non-UK citizens living in Wales work in the public sector.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I apologise for not being here at the start of my hon. Friend's speech. She is touching on a very interesting point. During the general election campaign, I met a flower seller in Mountain Ash market who is Italian and lives in Cardiff. He said he was very upset, and when I asked why, he said, “Because ever since Brexit has been talked about, people keep coming to me and saying, ‘You'll be going back home now, won't you?’” He has lived in Cardiff for 15 years and is extremely upset. There are many people in that situation, as I am sure my hon. Friend will agree.

Jo Stevens: I agree entirely: we will all have examples of families and individuals in our constituencies who feel exactly the same way. This is a complete mess. People want to know what will happen to them. It is having a terrible effect on their lives, their family life and their work.

I will give an example. Just last week, a couple came to see me who are living and working in the United Arab Emirates. He is a UK citizen; he is from Cardiff Central and has a home there. He has worked abroad for 20 years, in Greece and now in the UAE. His wife is a Greek national, and their child was born in Greece but has a UK passport. His wife has never lived in the UK and neither has the child. They want to come back to Wales in order for their child to sit his A-levels, and they wanted to know whether they should come back to Cardiff before March 2019 and, if so, whether they would all be able to stay and work in the UK, or, if they left it until after March 2019, whether the mother, with a Greek passport, would be allowed to live and work in the UK. I cannot advise them on what to do. I have absolutely no idea whether they will be able to do that or when they will be able to do it, and I do not even know when I might be able to tell them. I do not think the Prime Minister knows either. Why are the Government treating people in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and England in that way?

I have mentioned before in the House my constituent Bashir Naderi, who came to the UK more than 10 years ago as an unaccompanied child refugee. Now aged 20, he has been living in Cardiff and made his home there. Last year, the Home Office attempted to remove him forcibly back to Afghanistan. Before fleeing Afghanistan as a child, he had seen his father murdered by the Taliban; that happened in front of him. He does not know whether any of his remaining family are still alive. In Cardiff, though, he has a girlfriend, Nicole, and a Welsh family who love him. He has been to school in Cardiff and then to college. He has worked hard to complete his training and is now ready, as an adult, to play his part in the economy and the workplace. That is what Wales needs—people who have worked hard and developed skills to play a part in our communities.

We handed in to the Home Secretary a petition with nearly 15,000 signatures. I organised it, along with Bashir's family and supporters, and it was presented to the Home Secretary in January. I have raised in the House Bashir's case and the wider policy issues about child refugees, and I have written to the Home Secretary about it. However, I have not even had an acknowledgement of my letters, never mind the petition, and when I will get a substantive answer, I do not know.

The Government's current policy on child refugees such as Bashir—forcing them to reapply for asylum when they turn 18—is not only callous, but an ineffective use of Home Office time when the Government could be supporting people who need it. I have large numbers of constituents, as I am sure many hon. Members have, who are appealing Home Office decisions to reject asylum claims.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. I am sure that the hon. Lady is about to relate her remarks back to Wales and the Queen's Speech. I can see the direction of travel, but perhaps she will want to get there a bit sooner.

Jo Stevens: Thank you, Mr Howarth; I will do that. I gave that example because many of these constituents have skills that they want to contribute to the Welsh economy, but they are not allowed to do so because they cannot work while their asylum status is unconfirmed. That is UK Government policy that applies to Wales and is affecting the ability of people to contribute to the Welsh economy.

The current target time for asylum appeals to receive a court date is 48 weeks. That is 48 weeks when people are in limbo. It is partly because of civil service cuts, but also because of cuts to the tribunals service, which have left Wales with inadequate services, too few people to process cases and insufficient judges to hear them. Without action from the Government to improve case processing and decision making, and increasing capacity in our courts system in Wales, the problem will only get worse, but there was nothing in the Queen's Speech to address it.

Those examples show the negative impact of the Government's approach to Wales and our people, and the general election results confirmed that Welsh voters agree. We saw the loss of three Conservative seats, resources poured into target constituencies that the Conservatives failed to win, and the majorities of their re-elected MPs slashed across Wales. We should not be surprised by that. People in Wales know that the Conservative party does not care about Wales. What exactly is the point of Tory MPs in Wales? They have stood by and let the Prime Minister dole out an enormous bung to the DUP and have done nothing and got nothing for Wales. Wales knows that Welsh Labour MPs, Labour councillors, Labour Assembly Members and the Welsh Labour Government continue to stand up for the people of Wales and to fight for an equal and progressive nation. That is why the Conservative party has never been, and never will be, elected to form a Government in Wales.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Before I call the next speaker, I would point out that we have just 33 minutes before the winding-up speeches and seven hon. Members hope to be called. I will at this point give informal guidance. If everyone sticks to a five-minute time limit voluntarily, we might just get everyone in. Even then it will be a bit of a push, but I am leaving that as informal guidance at this point. I call Madeleine Moon.

9.58 am

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Howarth; I will speak fast. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) for an amazing speech and for arranging for the debate to take place. The focus on the rights of women in relation to Brexit was spot on and something that no one else has raised so far. I am so pleased that she has done so.

One highlight of the Queen's Speech was the customs Bill. I want to focus on that and the impact in Bridgend and in particular on Ford's automotive engine plant. Like many other automotive companies in the UK, Ford relies heavily on tariff and customs-free trade. Automotive experts, including the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, have made it crystal clear that customs barriers and tariffs will cripple the industry. It is no secret that the single market and customs union have been critical to the sector's competitiveness. That is critical; we cannot allow that to change. The most

recent figures show how significant the industry is to the UK economy. Its turnover was £71 billion and it supports 800,000 jobs. The EU is the largest market for the UK's automotive sector, with 56% of exported cars going into it.

The Government should heed calls from the sector and ensure that the benefits of the single market and tariff and customs-free trade with the EU is retained. That is essential. Keeping free trade and the supply chain unaffected is imperative, otherwise costs will increase. It is estimated that the effect on the automotive industry of losing free access to the customs union will be catastrophic. This is a highly integrated global industry, with vehicles and parts crossing borders multiple times in the assembly process. It relies on the just-in-time manufacturing process, so we need to maintain a seamless customs arrangement. Without that just-in-time process, we will have companies' cash tied up in making sure that parts are available and stockpiled rather than arriving just in time. That will have a devastating impact on the viability of the automotive trade in the UK.

Leaving the EU without a deal would mean reverting to World Trade Organisation tariffs and customs checks at UK borders, which would increase delays, significantly increase costs and impact competitiveness. The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders found that a 10% tariff on finished vehicles because of World Trade Organisation rules would cost the industry a staggering £4.5 billion, which would inevitably increase costs for consumers—the average cost of a car in the UK is expected to rise by £1,500 as a result. Research from the PA Consulting Group has found that the cost of moving to a World Trade Organisation regime would impose a 4.5% tariff on vehicle components alone, including the parts needed for the engines being built in Bridgend. That would impact the competitiveness of companies such as Ford in Bridgend, and then there is the knock-on effect of 14,000 jobs associated with that factory in Bridgend—14,000 jobs that I am determined to protect.

I cannot stress enough how important tariff and customs free trade is. Investment in the UK car industry has already sharply declined in the first half of this year to just £322 million, compared with the total of £1.66 billion that was invested in the UK's automotive sector last year. Companies are delaying spending because it is difficult to plan amid uncertainty over our future trading arrangements and concerns relating to the World Trade Organisation tariffs. The Government should carry out an impact assessment on how changes to customs procedures will affect the automotive industry, and absolutely avoid the possibility of resorting to World Trade Organisation rules.

The industry needs concrete reassurances and further details on how the customs Bill will ensure frictionless trade. Nothing is being told to the companies, everyone is living with uncertainty and employees are deeply concerned about their future, their ability to invest in mortgages and the uncertainty of their job prospects. Are they actually going to be in work in two years' time? Nobody knows. Without doubt, the imposition of tariffs by losing access to the single market and customs union puts our businesses across Wales, such as Ford, at a significant disadvantage.

Albert Owen: My hon. Friend is making a very important point about the Government's industrial strategy. It talks about the whole of the UK, but in the automotive

[*Albert Owen*]

sector they have done a sweetheart deal with Nissan, putting greater uncertainties on the other car plants in the United Kingdom. If we are going to have an industrial strategy for all, there must be a level playing field.

Mrs Moon: This Government do not like level playing fields. They do bungs to the DUP, and goodness knows what bung has gone into the north-east—I don't know, nobody knows. We have to have transparency, and we do not have transparency.

A completed car being exported into the EU would face a tariff of 10%, with 4.8% on assembled engines and 2% on components. Currently, banking passporting of capital across the EU is allowed. Is the Wales Office monitoring the number of Welsh businesses applying for banking licences in the EU? SMEs will need time to cope with dealing with the customs transition. Are SMEs going to have support, training and opportunities to ensure awareness of the impact of exiting the customs union on their businesses? There is a great deal of concern that that is not there. Finally, will the Minister comment on REACH rules, on the registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals, which are used widely in the automotive industry, and say what he is doing to look at the impact on the automotive industry in Wales?

10.5 am

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) on securing this debate and on her very fine speech.

This is a pivotal period in our history. It is a point that will determine the future of our economy, our governance and our relations with the rest of the world—that is, the world beyond just England—but I regret to say that the Prime Minister's legislative programme is a deficient plan for defining times. The UK Government have no majority of their own, a compromised mandate and, as far as I can see, no real plan for Wales. They do have a split Cabinet, a lame duck premier and a legislative programme dominated by what one senior EU diplomat described to me recently as a vanity project for a few politicians who have now largely jumped ship—all that based on an unassailable sense of entitlement and an optimism that all will be well and the world will beat a path to our door.

My contribution today will be focused on two of the most wretched elements of the Queen's Speech: the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill and the Government's wilful neglect of Wales's infrastructure. It is now quite clear that Westminster intends to claw back powers from the people of Wales. The UK Government intend to encroach on our basic power to govern ourselves, trashing the settlement that, since 1999, has allegedly been based on an agenda of respect. Plaid Cymru MPs will do all that we can to oppose the Bill. We have always said that we will never vote for legislation that takes power away from the people of Wales. Now that the Brexit Secretary has conceded that his withdrawal Bill will need the consent of the devolved Governments, the way that he achieves his purpose will be revelatory, if not miraculous. I look forward to how he will explain himself, but there we are—we live in very strange times.

One way to avoid the provisions of the withdrawal Bill that would most damage Wales would be to make it largely unnecessary by maintaining our economic links with our soon-to-be-former partners. Staying in the single market and the customs union would render much of the Bill nugatory. Yet, as I said, there is no majority, no mandate, no plan, a split Cabinet, a lame duck premier and a legislative programme dominated by a vanity project. As the Prime Minister might say, "Remind you of anyone?" Well, actually, it does; but it is more John Major than Margaret Thatcher.

Turning to infrastructure commitments, where is the concrete commitment—literally concrete—to deliver for Wales? There is a further commitment to HS2, and Welsh taxpayers will be contributing to building the most expensive railway in the world without an inch of it being in Wales. Whatever benefits might come to north and north-east Wales, and perhaps even my constituency, objective commentators have said that it will actually damage the economy of much of the south of our country. I do not think that has been given the attention that it should have been.

The most glaring omission is the electrification of the south Wales main line. I understand that we are to have a further Government U-turn—possibly today, or perhaps it has already been announced—just before we leave for our constituencies. The Prime Minister said the other night that she hoped we would leave Westminster to settle down. Well, we are here not to settle down but to settle up. The Labour Government promised us full electrification in 2009—I took their word for it then, and I am sure their intentions were sincere—and full electrification was promised again in 2010. It is enough of a scandal that eight years later we are still waiting for it, but for the British Government to scuttle electrification of the line to Swansea while expecting the people of Wales to stump up for England's HS2 is breathtakingly arrogant and totally indefensible. I should be glad to hear the Minister's attempt to defend it.

The UK Government are backtracking on the electrification of the south Wales main line. As for the equivalent electrification of the north Wales main line, I suppose we can join the long line of honest people queuing up to whistle for their money from this dodgy Government.

Albert Owen: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Hywel Williams: I think not, because time is rather short.

The Queen's Speech claws away at our ability to strengthen our country, and it indulges the country's constitutional obsessives and imperial Walter Mittys at the same time. Plaid Cymru will oppose this destructive and offensive stupidity.

10.10 am

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) on securing the debate. We had to wait longer than we expected for the Queen's Speech, apparently because the ink took longer than expected to dry on the vellum. When it came, it made no mention whatever of the tidal lagoon. It did include five interesting objectives: working

with the devolved Administrations to ensure prosperity outside the EU; an industrial strategy that spreads opportunity throughout the UK; backing infrastructure to support economic growth; backing new industries; and acting to reduce energy bills. However, it seems to me that, unless I can be convinced otherwise, the Government have no interest in Wales.

Five years ago, in 2012, the first formal planning document for the Swansea bay tidal lagoon was submitted to the Planning Inspectorate. The construction of the tidal lagoon featured in the Conservative party manifesto in 2015, but not in 2017. In January this year, former Energy Minister Charles Hendry published his independent review of tidal lagoons, which concluded that the Swansea bay tidal lagoon would be cost-effective and

“a significant economic opportunity for Wales and the UK more generally.”

Crucially, Hendry stated that moving ahead with a lagoon off the Swansea coast should be seen as “a no-regrets policy” and that it should be built

“as soon as is reasonably practicable.”

The Swansea bay tidal lagoon is set to be the blueprint for tidal energy in the UK. It is a game changer for Wales, but despite the support of the Welsh Government, a number of MPs, AMs, councillors, Wales Office Ministers and Charles Hendry, the UK Government have still not committed to backing the project. We have had enough.

As Cardiff bay, which attracts more than 1 million visitors per annum, has shown, developments that increase the attractiveness and usefulness of Wales's shoreline can provide a catalyst for further investment and leisure use. There is a strong expectation that the new tidal lagoon would support national events and raise Swansea's profile. It could build on Swansea's very strong existing maritime heritage, which includes the National Waterfront Museum and the water sports centre of excellence. As hon. Members will have read in the review, the range of employment opportunities will be far-reaching, not just in design, build and manufacturing, but in related services such as tourism, recreation and recruitment. That will be of huge benefit not just to Gower, Swansea and Wales but to the rest of the United Kingdom. I feel I need to highlight that point, because we are being very short-sighted.

As an educationalist, I feel it pertinent to note how the University of Wales Trinity Saint David is responding by focusing on the skills, needs and opportunities that the tidal lagoon will bring, including the digital skills that are needed to deliver it.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech on the tidal lagoon. It is also worth mentioning that 100,000 tonnes of British steel will go into the project. The Prime Minister said that she was disappointed with Donald Trump for withdrawing from the Paris climate accords, yet she refuses to give the go-ahead to this vital, clean, green energy project. How are those two positions compatible?

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman may be leading the hon. Lady down a rose-strewn path—unless she can find some way of relating his point to Wales and the Queen's Speech.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I can tie it back in: the Government missed the opportunity to include our green agenda in their Queen's Speech.

It is through education and training that we can provide job opportunities for our young people to thrive and prosper in the communities they grew up in. I feel strongly about that, as does a very good friend of mine, an Assembly Member for Llanelli. We do not want the children of Gower to think that they have to get out of Wales to get on. Let them have opportunities locally so that families and future generations can survive in Gower and Wales.

My constituency and the Swansea bay area, which is represented by several hon. Members present, will not see the project's full benefits unless the Government commit to it. Recent reports have stated that the tidal lagoon is in its most precarious position since its inception; it is in danger of not happening. Funding is available until Christmas, but what will happen then? We need answers. More than £200 million has been provisionally committed, with investors ready to raise hundreds of millions more to fund the project, but David Stevens, the founder of Admiral Insurance, recently said:

“If there's no evidence that the government is committed then at some point the patience of investors will be exhausted”.

He is right. Swansea tidal lagoon investors have reportedly now decided to delay their investment. We have to have the go-ahead. It is reported that staff have been asked to cut back to a four-day working week. In the words of Mr Stevens, unless the Government act,

“an opportunity will have been lost and it will be very hard to piece together again”.

This is about the future of my constituency. The tidal lagoon would provide a £1.3 billion infrastructure investment in Swansea bay and the surrounding areas. In each year of operation, it would save approximately 236,000 tonnes of carbon, while still fully powering 155,000 Welsh homes.

My constituents and I are very disappointed. I am led to believe that the last Secretary of State for Wales, the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), was pushing the tidal agenda forward quite forcefully, but the incumbent is stalling. Like my predecessor, he has failed to deliver for Gower and Wales.

Why have the Government not given their support? Are they not interested in green energy, or do they simply not care about Wales? The tidal lagoon project would bring billions to the local and national economy. Wales and the UK would lead the world in exploring green energy alternatives. This project was started five years ago, and now it could be at an end—unless the Government give the tidal lagoon in Swansea the go-ahead immediately.

10.17 am

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) on securing the debate. One thing she said that struck me forcibly was that the Government lost the general election in Wales. I was pleased to see my hon. Friends the Members for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane), for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) and for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) gain their seats from the Conservative party.

Having three new Labour Members of Parliament in Wales is relevant to the Queen's Speech, because it has put a stop to the Government's grammar schools policy,

[David Hanson]

their proposed legislation on free schools meals and their dementia tax proposals, which caused tremendous upset in my constituency during the election. Positive things have happened because of the general election result, such as last week's announcement of the inquiry into contaminated blood that my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) had demanded. [Interruption.] The Minister looks quizzical, but he knows that 28 Labour Members and four Plaid Cymru Members were elected in Wales. The Government's majority is non-existent in Wales.

To secure the passage of the Queen's Speech through the House of Commons, the Government have effectively had to bribe the Democratic Unionist party with more than £1 billion. I ask the Minister: if the Government are going to give a significant £1 billion boost to Northern Ireland—including £400 million for infrastructure development, £150 million for the roll-out of ultrafast broadband, an extra £200 million investment in health, and further investment to tackle deprivation and mental health issues—is the Barnett formula now dead, as the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) suggested? I support the Barnett formula; it works well, ensuring that UK Government expenditure is distributed on a par across the regions of the UK. However, if the Government can find £1 billion from the magic money tree that they said did not exist and give that money to Northern Ireland to invest in things that Wales also needs, such as broadband roll-out, strategic transport infrastructure, housing support and investment in health, then they need to come to defend the Queen's Speech today.

As the First Minister of Wales has said, if that £1 billion had been apportioned correctly to Wales, it would have meant an extra £1.6 billion for the economy of Wales. That money would have been used, for example, to help to boost the projects that other hon. Members have mentioned today, including not only the south Wales tidal lagoon but proposals for a tidal lagoon in north Wales. It would also have helped us to build on the announcement made by the Secretary of State for Transport two days ago on High Speed 2 at Crewe, to ensure that we get the benefits of HS2 in north Wales through investment in the line from Crewe to Chester and the electrification of the lines across to north Wales. It would have ensured that we met the commitment that the Chancellor of the Exchequer made in the Budget statement to provide money for a growth deal for north Wales, which I am yet to see; I hope the Minister will give some indication of it in his winding-up speech today. There are a range of things that could have been done in the Queen's Speech, but which the Government failed to do while giving money to Northern Ireland.

I will mention one other thing, because it is happening today. Today in the House of Lords, there is a by-election for a Member of these Houses of Parliament. It is a by-election for an hereditary peer, and among the hereditary peers who are standing is one of my constituents, Lord Mostyn. I had to fight an election six weeks ago to convince thousands of people to vote for me. His electorate today is 31 people—hereditary peers. I hope the Government will bring forward proposals to ban hereditary peers, to stop this nonsense in the House of Commons and the Houses of Parliament. We must abolish hereditary peers and end this system today.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): Who created that system?

David Hanson: The Labour Government did in 1999, with the pledge to abolish it at an appropriate moment. Now is the appropriate time—let us do it today.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): We have approximately seven minutes before I have to call the Front-Bench speakers to respond to the debate. I ask the remaining two Back-Bench speakers to divide the time judiciously between them.

10.22 am

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Howarth, for calling me to speak. I will certainly do my best to allow my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) to make a contribution on equal parity.

The Queen's Speech was an opportunity lost. It was a two-year programme that did not have a Welsh dimension, which is an absolute disgrace, particularly when we heard warm words from the Prime Minister, and indeed in the Queen's Speech, that there would be a programme for the whole of the United Kingdom.

I will concentrate on three main points; other Members have touched on them, but I want to elaborate on them and get some answers from the Minister. The first is the north Wales growth deal. We have seen Cardiff and Swansea city deals, which I welcome. In no way do I want to take away from them, but north Wales needs a focus of attention. This growth deal has been announced in numerous autumn statements. It is supposed to be bottom-up from the councils in north Wales, but the reality is that they have been squeezed; they do not have the finances or other resources that are needed. If we are to have an industrial strategy for the whole United Kingdom, we need the United Kingdom Government to take the lead and not pass the buck.

Many of us here in Westminster Hall today received increased mandates from the people of Wales, including the people of north Wales. We want to have a voice when it comes to growth deals, and we want to be able to say that we can help deliver the best for our constituents, so I ask the Minister: what is happening with the north Wales growth deal and why are we as MPs being excluded from its consideration?

I know that the Minister has sympathy with me on the second issue I will raise, which is Welsh ports. That is because Welsh ports will be impacted by Brexit more than any other ports in Europe, because they are the corridor to the Republic of Ireland. If we are to have a “seamless” or “frictionless” border, we want to know what that means; businesses need to know exactly what that means. If we have tariffs in Welsh ports, including Holyhead, then we will have delays and additional costs, which will impact on jobs in north Wales, in Wales as a whole and in the whole United Kingdom. We need clarity on that. I understand the issues with the border in Northern Ireland—I understand the Good Friday agreement and the fragility of that policy. However, the issue of Welsh ports is very important, and thus far it has not been given the attention it deserves.

Finally—I want to allow my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore to make as long a contribution as possible—I will refer to the Hendry review and the Swansea bay

tidal lagoon. The policy has just been kicked into the long grass, with excuse after excuse. I support the policy, and when I was on the Energy and Climate Change Committee we conducted an inquiry into it. We concluded, across parties, that it was a good thing for British energy and British industry. The Hendry review was an independent inquiry, based on a model that this Government had put in—contract for difference strike prices. It is their model, it is their review and it is time they delivered.

I will finish with one last point. The DUP has had £1 billion—in many ways, good on it—but that has taken money and attention away from Wales, which is a disgrace. It is the job of the Wales Office to stand up and be the voice of Wales in Westminster, but it is failing us.

10.26 am

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Howarth; I am grateful for the brief time I have.

I want to make three points. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) on securing the debate. I agree entirely with her, and indeed with the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams), about the power grab that the repeal Bill is now conducting against the Welsh Government. I believe that we could be bordering on a real constitutional issue in how devolution moves forward if—at the moment it appears that this will be the case—not all the relevant powers that currently reside with the EU are devolved to the Welsh Government by the UK Government.

There were two things missing from the Queen's Speech that I feel quite passionate about, because they have an impact on Wales and should have been referred to. The first relates to rail electrification. We have had the Transport Secretary on the train to Paddington and we have had the Welsh Secretary driving the train from Paddington to Cardiff, and then saying that we will have additional funding for electrification to Swansea. That would have a significant impact on my constituency and many others across the south Wales belt, and it would have further implications for the electrification of the valleys lines, including the lines through Pencoed up to Maesteg and possibly even to the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon)—that would create a transport hub in Bridgend.

That electrification is vital, and the UK Government—the Conservative Government—are failing the people of Wales by not securing it. That is simply unacceptable, especially given the hundreds of promises that Ministers have made time and again to provide electrification. Maybe the Transport Secretary and the Secretary of State for Wales just like driving trains—that might explain why they are so keen to make false promises.

The key area I wish to focus on is the impact of pension changes on women born in the 1950s, which was not considered in the Gracious Speech. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central for plugging the work of our hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and myself on this issue. The issue is specific to Wales—

Albert Owen: And to the rest of the UK.

Chris Elmore: Yes—sorry; it was a comment made by my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East, rather than by myself.

There was nothing in the Queen's Speech to aid women born in the 1950s. As a result of the pension reforms introduced by the Conservative Government between 1990 and 1997, and indeed by the coalition Government—we must not forget the role of the Lib Dems in this, because it was their Pensions Minister who made the changes—those women have been severely disadvantaged. I am sure that every Member was made well aware of the issue by their constituents during the general election campaign. These women, who account for about 8% of my constituents, had planned their retirements, from both a financial and a social perspective, only to have the goalposts moved. That is a grave injustice, and this Government continue to ignore it.

Public pressure is mounting. Since the swathe of public opinion was made known at the general election, there has been another spike in support for these women. My understanding is that close to 50 Conservative MPs now publicly support the campaign, in addition to all the opposition MPs across parties. I encourage all Members who are concerned about the issue—I will make a plug here—to attend the all-party parliamentary group on state pension inequality for women, which is meeting in Committee Room 5 at 3 pm. Perhaps the Minister would like to come along and listen to accounts of the issues these women face.

In conclusion, the Queen's Speech was littered with missed opportunities. The repeal Bill, in its current form, flies in the face of devolution and makes no effort to respect the constitutional arrangements in Wales while arranging our exit from the EU. The continued lack of clarity about the electrification of the Cardiff to Swansea railway line will serve only to aggravate my constituents and local businesses. The silence on the issue of women born in the 1950s shows the continued ignorance about the injustice of the Government's pension changes. The Queen's Speech was a disappointment and serves only to show that this Government are not seriously considering the issues that impact Wales.

10.29 am

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) on her very good speech and on securing this debate. We in Scotland share many of the concerns she outlined. She spoke about the lack of vision for Wales in the Queen's Speech and asked what was on offer for Wales from the Government. She then went on to mention a long list of major projects they have failed to announce. There was also no mention of transitional help for the WASPI women. We have had all that while the Government also apparently cut the number of Ministers in the Welsh Office. It hardly suggests a Government greatly interested in listening to Welsh concerns.

The hon. Lady went on to highlight the dangers for Wales of the repeal Bill, which features power grabs from the devolved Administrations, as the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales made clear in their joint statement condemning it. She deplored the nastiness and vitriol of the EU referendum campaign, and I very much share

[Deidre Brock]

those concerns. She rightly deplored the awful attack on Jo Cox and highlighted the drowning out of women's voices in the campaign, quoting figures and giving examples that I continue to find shocking, and I look forward to the Minister explaining those.

The biggest part of her speech was on Brexit and the mess we should expect from the EU (Withdrawal) Bill. I, too, think the situation is unsustainable. There is still no proper formal input from the Welsh and Scottish Governments on an issue that we all know will cause massive damage to both nations. The Government's obstinacy is matched only by their eagerness to get a deal done with the DUP, as several Members have highlighted. What are the priorities? Does the DUP get a greater say than the Governments of Scotland and Wales? When will there be proper engagement? If I may press the Minister, what happens if either Scotland or Wales, or both, withhold legislative consent for the repeal Bill?

In a Backbench Business debate on 2 March, the hon. Lady laid out the huge damage being done to the higher education sector in Wales by Brexit and how much damage was likely to follow as research funding dried up. To be clear, Scottish MPs have the same concerns for Scottish universities, but does she consider that the damage will be so great and so long-lasting that it will be too much for Wales to bear? She might conclude that she should be doing whatever she can to frustrate the headlong rush of the Government and her party towards a Brexit cliff.

The hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) rightly highlighted the threat to the automotive industry from Brexit, specifically to Ford in her constituency. As was mentioned, Nissan received some assurances from the Prime Minister early on after the Brexit referendum. I do not recall any similar help or assurances being offered to Ford at Bridgend. Forgive me if I have missed that, but I cannot recall a Minister ever having said that action would be taken to help the Ford workers keep their jobs. What investments will the Government consider to help keep Welsh jobs?

The hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) made a very good speech. He spoke of a deficient plan for defining times and focused on the EU (Withdrawal) Bill, the clawback of powers from Wales and the lack of investment in Welsh infrastructure. His comments about the power grab from the devolved Administrations were rightly scathing. We in Scotland very much share his view. I must also mention the very good contributions from the hon. Members for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) and for Ogmore (Chris Elmore). [Interruption.] Apologies for that pronunciation; my Gaelic is not too bad, but my Welsh is sadly lacking.

Finally, looking at the list of Bills in the Queen's Speech that affect Wales, I cannot escape the conclusion that those things would be better done in Wales. Does anyone seriously believe that Welsh agriculture is better served by legislation made here rather than in Cardiff? Tackling domestic violence and abuse in Wales—would that be better done here or there? I think the Welsh people are plenty smart enough to do those things and a whole lot more in their own capital city.

10.34 am

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. You are known throughout Parliament as a just and fair man and an excellent Chair.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. May I suggest that the hon. Gentleman does not put it to the test?

Chris Ruane: I withdraw. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) on securing this important debate and so eloquently illustrating her points about Brexit by way of graphic examples from her constituency. I pay tribute to her for highlighting a refreshing and original analysis of the gender imbalance in the whole Brexit debate. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), who spoke about Brexit issues and the impact on the car industry in her constituency.

This debate should have been about the Government's vision for Wales and the rest of the UK. It debate should have offered the Government an opportunity to show their deep understanding of the needs, wants and aspirations of the people of Wales. It should have provided us all with an opportunity to discuss and improve the Government's Wales-specific proposals. Regrettably, as contribution after contribution has highlighted, there is no such opportunity, because the Tories have no vision for Wales. The Tories have no programme for Wales. The Tories have no understanding of Wales. We are an afterthought.

The people of Wales saw through the Tory manifesto in the general election. They realised they were being sold a pup—a pig in a poke—and rejected the offer, instead choosing Labour's visionary manifesto. That risible Tory offer stands in stark contrast to Welsh Labour's general election manifesto. From a position of weakness, the Tory Government are now asking for consensus and agreement to get their emasculated manifesto into statute. In the spirit of co-operation, I wish to highlight some of Labour's positive popular policies, which they are welcome to introduce. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, and the Government have already flattered Labour by stealing our ideas for an energy price freeze and ending austerity, which is being discussed in the higher echelons of the Tory party. The more they steal Labour's policies, the more they show themselves to be a party bankrupt of ideas, out of touch with ordinary people and lacking in leadership.

However, there are other policy areas where the Government could learn from Labour to create a more prosperous, healthier, fairer country in Wales. Our manifesto had Wales-specific policies. It had a proudly Welsh agenda, with Welsh values of community, equality, efficiency and hope. It shows that a UK Labour Government working with a Welsh Labour Government would not launch a power grab. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) for highlighting that aspect of the EU (Withdrawal) Bill. It is a naked power grab to take powers back to Westminster. The manifesto shows that a UK Labour Government would be committed to investing in Wales, not another five years of austerity, cuts and indifference.

Many families in Wales, and indeed the UK, are financially worse off than they were 10 years ago. On average, a family is £1,400 worse off. Voters are sick to their hind teeth with austerity, which does not work. Low and middle-income earners are taking all the pain, and the high-income earners are making all the gain. Even Tory Ministers now accept Labour's analysis of austerity. Our manifesto promised investment, reward for hard work and, most of all, hope. It made a commitment to work with the Welsh Government to tolls on the Severn bridge—I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), who highlighted that—and pledged to end years of Tory under-investment in national rail infrastructure. We promised to commit more than £700 million from a national transformation fund to fund electrification of the Great Western main line to Swansea. That was highlighted by my hon. Friends the Members for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) and for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock).

The manifesto contained a commitment to transform transport networks in north Wales, with electrification from north Wales to Crewe, which would link the region with HS2 and create capacity for new, more frequent services into Liverpool, and beyond to the north of England. The manifesto had clear support for the Wylfa Newydd project to ensure a sustainable economic legacy for Anglesey and the wider north Wales community. Those issues have been thoroughly explored by many Members today, especially on the Labour Benches. Also mentioned many times was the impact on our proposals for the tidal lagoon. I commend and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) on raising that issue.

I have outlined numerous Labour policies, but which of those bold, much needed commitments have the Government committed to fully fund in their Queen's Speech? The answer is none—not a single one. Perhaps we should not be surprised, because not only do the Government have no vision for Wales; they have no overall mandate for Wales. My right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) mentioned the Conservatives' target seats and my success and that of other hon. Members in the Chamber today. The Tories proposed a Labour wipeout across Wales. They tried to plant their Tory tanks on Labour lawns in Bridgend, Wrexham, and Newport East. The ConservativeHome website listed the seats they were going to win from Labour Alyn and Deeside, Bridgend, Cardiff South and Penarth, Cardiff West, Clwyd South, Delyn, Newport East, Newport West, Wrexham, Ynys Môn and Torfaen.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. I am following the hon. Gentleman closely. I do not remember any of that being in the Queen's Speech in relation to Wales. Perhaps he will return to the matter of the Queen's Speech and Wales.

Chris Ruane: I will return to the Queen's Speech and Wales and probably the grubbiest element, Mr Howarth: the alliance of the Conservative party with the DUP. The Prime Minister was reduced to securing her own position by throwing money from the magic money tree, which was mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn—the magic money tree that Conservatives alleged Labour had. Well, I want a branch of that magic money tree in Wales. Does the Minister

want a branch of that tree in Wales? *[Interruption.]* He says he will respond in due course. I hope that will be in the positive and the affirmative.

So there is a magic money tree in Northern Ireland that is worth £1 billion. As has been mentioned before, if it was transferred to Wales, that would mean £1.6 billion that we could invest in the infrastructure of Wales. After years of cuts from central Government, amounting to £1.2 billion a year from the Welsh block grant, our constituencies are suffering because of the lack of infrastructure and investment.

I hope the Minister will address the issue of the magic money tree for Wales when he winds up. We are in the mother of Parliaments. We are one of the best democracies in the world, yet we are reduced to pork-barrel politics for Northern Ireland, which is not a way to run a democracy. We need fair, open and transparent funding across the UK. Our people are crying out for it. The Minister knows his people are crying out for it. That is why his majority was reduced by such a massive amount and why I am here today. I will not have a word said against my benefactor and patron, the Prime Minister, who has allowed me to return to this place.

Chris Elmore: Hear, hear.

Chris Ruane: I thank my hon. Friend for his "Hear, hear."

The debate has been very good. There was not much to debate because there was not much in the Queen's Speech to benefit Wales, but we have picked over what little scraps there were. We have done justice to the people of Wales by analysing the Conservative programmes, or lack of them, proposed in the Queen's Speech.

10.43 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) on securing this debate. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane) on his return to the House and to the Front Bench. I am not sure whether that is a reflection of the fact that nobody else was willing to take the position under the current leader of the Labour party. It certainly seems that the only speech to indicate support for the leader of the Labour party was the final speech, from the shadow Minister, but we might have expected that.

The debate has been interesting. It has drifted away from the Queen's Speech as it affects Wales on numerous occasions. Westminster Hall is a forum where hon. Members have more of an opportunity to make a point that is relevant to their own constituencies or to highlight issues of a partisan nature.

On the issue of my survival, which the hon. Member for Vale of Clwyd highlighted, I remember that in 2015 the hon. Gentleman was in my constituency on the Wednesday prior to the election. I can assure him that I was not in his constituency in 2017, because I was looking after my own patch. If a little less hubris had been shown in 2015, perhaps the hon. Gentleman would not have had a two-year break. Now I will take an intervention.

Albert Owen: On the Minister's point about debating the Queen's Speech in Westminster Hall, is it his intention to have a fuller debate in the Welsh Grand Committee, which was set up for Welsh issues only? It would also provide an opportunity for Conservative Welsh Members to attend and to speak up for Wales.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. Welsh politics has always held a great fascination for me, although I do not think this debate is the occasion to run either the last general election, or, as the Minister seems to be doing, the one before that. If we can stick to the issue at hand, I am sure the people of Wales will be very grateful to us.

Guto Bebb: I will take your advice on board, Mr Howarth, and will quickly respond to the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen). We agreed to a Welsh Grand Committee on the subject of the Queen's Speech, but the people of Wales would think it odd if we had the same debate twice. However, we will of course have a Welsh Grand Committee in due course.

It is important to highlight that the point of the Queen's Speech, to be perfectly frank, was to deal with the issue of Brexit. The hon. Member for Cardiff Central is a passionate advocate of remain. I have nothing but respect for her position, but I question whether her comments were more of a cry for help against the Labour manifesto rather than a complaint about the Queen's Speech.

We are dealing with a decision taken not only by the people of the United Kingdom, but by the people of Wales. The decision was made in Wales, in the constituencies of many Labour Members, that Wales would leave the European Union. A vote was held and I suspect that every person here would describe themselves as a democrat. As such, we are left in a situation whereby the Government have an obligation to legislate for what was decided democratically in a referendum by the people of Wales and the United Kingdom. The Queen's Speech therefore highlights the fact that a significant portion of the Bills in it deal with our leaving the European Union. It is clear from the constructive and not so constructive comments made by Opposition Members that everybody recognises that the process by which we will leave the European Union will be complicated and difficult and will require a degree of co-operation across the Floor of the House. I am certain that that will happen. The intention of the Government is to work with, not against, Opposition parties on these issues.

Before we turn to the content of the Queen's Speech, it is worth reminding hon. Members that there was little difference between the Labour and Conservative manifestos at the general election when it came to leaving the European Union. Although the Government remain united in dealing with our exit from the European Union, in contrast with the Labour party, which has already lost shadow Ministers following disagreements about leaving the European Union. I therefore say to Labour Members that although we have 27 Bills in the Queen's Speech, the vast majority of which have an impact on Wales, it is worth highlighting that the aim of the legislation on leaving the European Union is to provide clarity, continuity and certainty for people, businesses and organisations in Wales that are dealing with leaving the European Union.

Hywel Williams: As the Minister has said, the bulk of the Queen's Speech is about exiting the European Union. Is he confident that the economy, foreign affairs and a whole host of other issues will get the attention they require while we spend our time discussing the minutiae of the regulations on fish fingers or whatever?

Guto Bebb: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. It is imperative that all of us try to ensure that while we deal with this complex issue in a constructive manner, we also do not take our eye off the day job. I agree entirely with the hon. Gentleman's comment.

The European Union (Withdrawal) Bill was introduced in the Queen's Speech. The aim is to provide certainty and continuity to businesses, workers and consumers in Wales and across the UK as we leave the European Union. The aim of the Bill is to fulfil the Government's promise to end the supremacy of EU law in the UK by repealing the European Communities Act 1972, removing the supremacy of EU law and returning control to the UK. That is the only way for the UK to leave the European Union and ensure that our future laws are made in London, Cardiff, Edinburgh and Belfast.

That is an important point. We have talked about this so-called power grab, and I assure hon. Members that there is no intention whatever of a power grab. The first person to talk of the importance of UK frameworks as we leave the European Union was none other than Carwyn Jones, First Minister of Wales. I agree. We do not want to find ourselves in a situation where we leave the EU single market and damage the UK single market. The whole point of frameworks within any future settlement is to ensure that the UK market and the UK system work on the basis of equality between businesses and individuals across the United Kingdom. Although I am not surprised that the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) and the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), who represents the Scottish National party, would disagree, it is fair to say that I am surprised that the Labour party, which claims to be a Unionist party, seems to be very annoyed at the prospect of having rules that apply across the United Kingdom agreed across the United Kingdom as part of the withdrawal process.

It is clear that withdrawing from the European Union and repealing the European Communities Act 1972 will leave a large hole in our statute book. We therefore have to ensure that there is no cliff edge on the day that we leave the European Union. Part of the intention of the legislation is to ensure that the body of law is incorporated into UK law, which will be known as EU retained law, to ensure that on the day after departure, businesses, consumers and so forth will be in a situation of certainty, knowing that the rules and regulations that applied on the day before we left the European Union apply the day after we leave. That is an effort to ensure continuity, which will be absolutely crucial.

As the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) highlighted in a passionate speech—I agreed with every single word, I must say—the certainty that businesses require in our departure from the European Union means that the regulations currently in place as part of EU law need to be in place as part of our own law, on the basis of continued EU legislation within the UK. We are trying to ensure that the issues raised about Bridgend are dealt with as we leave.

Jo Stevens: If the point really is about providing certainty, why include all the Henry VIII powers in the repeal Bill? That is what is leading to the mistrust. We believe—we are certain—that the Government will try to change EU law as it comes back into UK law.

Guto Bebb: The hon. Lady is a member of the Labour party, so I understand her suspicion of the intentions of a Conservative-led Government, but the aim of the Henry VIII powers are to correct deficiencies within the law as it stands. There will be thousands of deficiencies where legislation refers to European regulations and European laws. There will be a need to correct them. The same need to correct deficiencies will be granted to the Governments in Cardiff, Edinburgh and, I hope, Belfast. The intention is to correct deficiencies. The last thing the hon. Lady would want to see on the day after we depart the European Union is for our legal system to be inoperable. That would be a dereliction of duty on behalf of this Government.

I hope that gives some degree of comfort to the hon. Lady. Ultimately, there is an obligation on the Opposition to scrutinise as we go through the process of putting that the legislation in place.

Albert Owen: Would the Minister give way on that very point?

Guto Bebb: Not for the time being; I have to make some progress.

Converting EU law into UK law is not enough to ensure a functioning statute book on exit day. As I have mentioned, retained EU law will contain a broad range of deficiencies that need to be corrected; the intention is that those deficiencies can be corrected both at a devolved level and in Westminster.

In addition to the withdrawal Bill, there will be other EU exit Bills, which are absolutely essential for the way in which we can operate as we leave the European Union. The customs Bill will provide for a stand-alone UK customs regime on exit, and the trade Bill will put in place the essential and necessary framework to allow the UK to operate our own independent trade policy. I suspect Opposition Members, who respect the result of the referendum, would not argue against the need for a customs Bill or a trade Bill.

On the comments of the hon. Member for Ynys Môn about ports, the Wales Office is aware of the issues in relation to Holyhead port. I think I am right in saying that the Secretary of State has visited. I have recently had meetings with Irish Ferries, for example, to discuss the issue in detail. Although we all recognise the sensitive nature of the border in Northern Ireland, it is imperative that we ensure that the ports in Wales are also protected. The Wales Office is certainly very aware of that issue, and I am more than happy to deal with the hon. Gentleman on that in due course.

The trade Bill is also crucial because, as has been pointed out by many hon. Members, Wales is more dependent on exports than any other part of the United Kingdom. We saw a significant increase in our exports in the year to March 2017. When I hear the doom and gloom of Opposition Members about the Welsh economy, I would remind them that our exports are increasing, not decreasing, and we are exporting more to the European

Union than we did in the year prior to the decision to leave the European Union. That is some source of comfort.

It is also imperative that we have an immigration Bill that deals with some of the issues raised about the concerns of EU citizens and the wider implications. On the point made by the hon. Member for Cardiff Central about her constituent and the lack of response from the Home Office, I would personally be more than happy to take that up on her behalf with the Home Office, if she would care to write to me about it. Such a delay in responding is simply not acceptable; I will happily look into it on her behalf.

We will also bring forward a fisheries Bill and an agriculture Bill, which will undoubtedly have an impact on Wales. Some 60,000 people are employed in the agriculture sector in Wales—we all know the importance of agriculture to our rural communities. We need to ensure that we have a functioning sector as we leave the European Union.

There are other pieces of legislation in the Queen's Speech that are important to Wales. We will bring forward a number of proposals, for example modernising the courts system and dealing with domestic violence through the creation of a domestic violence and abuse commissioner. Those issues are not England-only; they apply in Wales.

I will try to respond to some of the points raised by hon. Members. I have touched on the fact that a number of pieces of legislation in the Queen's Speech have a direct impact on Wales. Anybody who denied that would be wrong.

On the financial settlement for Wales, hon. Members have very short memories. Just before Christmas, we announced a fiscal framework for Wales that ensured a Barnett floor—something that has been called for by many interested parties in Wales for a very long time and was never delivered by the Labour party when they were in power in Westminster and in Cardiff Bay. It has been delivered by this Conservative Government. The fiscal floor currently ensures that for every £100 spent in England, £119 is spent in Wales. It guarantees that there will be a floor. In other words, because of that funding commitment, the Barnett squeeze will not happen again.

Over and above the Barnett consequentials, the Government have also delivered support for growth deals for Cardiff and Swansea. I assure the hon. Member for Ynys Môn that we are working very hard on achieving a growth deal for north Wales. The hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) is in discussions with us on a regular basis on the growth deal for north Wales.

Stephen Kinnock: Will the Minister give way?

Guto Bebb: I do not have time.

I have recently met every council leader and chief executive in north Wales, and I will be meeting the final ones this afternoon. If the hon. Member for Ynys Môn wants to meet me about the growth deal, I would be more than happy to have such a meeting.

I would point out to the hon. Member for Arfon that he is incorrect in stating that there are no consequentials from the High Speed 2 project. There are: HS2 is included in the Department for Transport budget and therefore there have been consequentials.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. Although it is not required, as a courtesy, the Minister normally allows the Member who introduced the debate time to wind up.

Guto Bebb: Yes, I am aware.

There have been Barnett consequentials to the Welsh Government's capital budget from HS2. I also support the fact that the Crewe hub is essential for north Wales and will be very positive for that area. I hope that I have highlighted that the Queen's Speech is not just positive but relevant for Wales, and that this Government are delivering for Wales.

10.58 am

Jo Stevens: I thank you, Mr Howarth, for your robust chairmanship this morning. I also thank all hon. Members on this side of the House who contributed to an excellent debate. The fact that we have debated much that was not in the Queen's Speech for Wales but should have been is indicative of the current Government's attitude, as is the fact that we have had no contributions whatever from Conservative Members to the debate, other than the response from the Minister. I am sure we will pick this up in September. I hope that "in due course" means September for a Welsh Grand Committee and that we can carry on with these discussions later in the year.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Wales and the Queen's Speech.

Strategic Road Network: South West

11 am

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the strategic road network in the South West.

First, I welcome the welcome the Minister to his place. As you are aware, Mr Howarth, I worked with him on the nuclear issue and Hinkley Point. I also thank his Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heapey), and my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr Fysh) for being here. I am glad that my hon. Friends the Members for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), for Gloucester (Richard Graham) and for Torbay (Kevin Foster) are here too. I am sorry about the pink specs, Mr Howarth—I managed to lose mine.

I am grateful to be able to raise issues about the road network in the south-west. They relate exclusively to that network, and they have to be cured. The strategy for the major roads can be a bit of a beggar's muddle, which roughly translates as a complete and utter mess, liable to cause confusion and dismay. I represent Bridgwater and West Somerset, and the M5 is our only official strategic route. It covers the whole of our area. If someone needs to get strategically to Watchet, Williton or Minehead, they need the A39. That road is every bit as strategic for hundreds of thousands of holidaymakers and for anybody who happens to live there, yet the M5 and the A39 come under entirely different management.

Most A roads in this country are looked after by county councils. All motorways and a handful of A roads are the responsibility of Highways England Ltd. Two years ago, the Government quite rightly shook up the old Highways Agency, turned it into a flash new company and hoped it would learn to operate within budget and focus more attention on customers. There was frustration in Whitehall that new roads took far too long to complete—we have all suffered from that. It would be much better, it was thought, if one company was given a big budget and simply allowed to get on with it. The Government also wanted to speed up the whole planning process.

A chief executive with an impressive track record was hired. Jim O'Sullivan used to be the chief engineer at British Airways, and claims he can still change the brakes, wheels and engines on an aeroplane, but I would rather he concentrated on his day job. After all, Highways England spends £7 million of public money every single week. That is enormous bucks, given that the highway under its control adds up to just 2% of the total road network. The company got a rap over the knuckles from the rail and road regulator in its first appraisal last year. The regulator said that it was not transparent enough about plans or accurate enough about accounting. I can think of quite a few level-headed Somerset people who would agree and go further.

Highways England has sparked a monstrous planning row that shows what is wrong with the whole process of strategic road development. At the end of the week, I will get in my car and drive home to the west country. I usually travel on the M4, then on to the M5 and home. Occasionally, if I am in a hurry, I will risk the A303 and the A358 into Taunton—my hon. Friend the Member

for Yeovil knows how tricky that is—but from drivers' point of view that is a gamble. They face swarms of druid-fanciers at Stonehenge, armies of articulated lorries struggling up hills and enough caravans to drive Jeremy Clarkson bonkers—all going at a snail's pace throughout.

You are probably not aware, Mr Howarth, that parts of the A303 are still single-carriageway. Most of the A358 is a bottleneck, and Taunton has become a snarled-up no-go area. As a matter of fact, there is no good reason to go anywhere near Taunton since the useless council lost its famous cattle market to Bridgwater and is allowing the shopping centre to waste away and die. Councillor John Williams is now the sheriff of a wild west tumbleweed town. He struts about spending oodles of taxpayers' money on gold taps and new showers for Deane House, and people say he is on the take—more of him later, I promise.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his rose-tinted spectacles. On the issue of strategic roads, does he agree that the other key road in the south-west that is worth a mention today is the A417—in particular the bottleneck at the Air Balloon roundabout, which prevents the link between the M4 and the M5?

Mr Liddell-Grainger: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and it is quite correct to highlight such situations. His constituents suffer in the same way as those of my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil on those inadequate roads. We need a policy that covers A roads and motorways. My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester has done a noble job for his constituents, and I am glad he has raised that point.

Highways England had a brief to create an alternative route to the far south-west using the A303 and the A358, even if it effectively bypassed Taunton. As my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil is aware, it would have made much more sense to upgrade the A303 and carry on over the Blackdown hills with improvements to the A30. Devon County Council wanted that option, and my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), who unfortunately cannot be in his place today, argued for it. It would be a much shorter route, and cheaper too.

The most cost-effective solution is just to improve the M5 and widen it. It would save a fortune—problem solved. That would be it sorted. The trouble is that Highways England did not get the choice. It was lumbered with the A303 and A358, and it came up with a series of wildly expensive plans. Surprise, surprise, it picked the cheapest option, although it makes no strategic sense whatever. The result has been a storm of protest. Highways England has totally cheesed off Somerset County Council, which thinks the plan nuts. Highways England stupidly cancelled the public consultation meetings during the May general election campaign. Why? It has made so many blunders that the Campaign to Protect Rural England is threatening to take it to court for a judicial review—ridiculous.

Worst of all, Highways England will be using something called a development consent order to secure the right to build the road. It does not matter how many people protest or what the local council says, because development consent orders were designed to put time limits on all objections. Basically, unless the Secretary of State intervenes,

a development consent order can be a legal bulldozer. I should add that the long list of objectors to the proposal includes Taunton Deane Council, bizarrely, which desperately wants a new road but would much prefer a link with one of its plum building projects called Nexus 25.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the key issues with the A358 is that we must ensure that we have a north-south link between our parts of Somerset, which would enable the Somerset economy to grow to its full potential?

Mr Liddell-Grainger: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He has been a champion for the A303 and A358 since he stood as a candidate. He has done a remarkable job in ensuring that the Government are fully aware of the feelings of the people of Yeovil. Yeovil and Bridgwater are the only two industrial towns in Somerset. This issue matters enormously given that the railway station for Yeovil is outside the town, so we have double strategic problems.

Nexus is a rosy apple in the eye of Tumbleweed Town's Wyatt Earp, Councillor John Williams. Quick on the draw as he is, Wyatt Twerp intends to make sure it happens. Anyone who objects could end up on Boot Hill with an overdose of lead poisoning. Nexus is a plan for a giant business park on green fields next to junction 25, off the M5. Wyatt Twerp's builder pals from Summerfield bought the plot cheap a few years ago. Taunton Deane now intends to use a local development order to force it through. Local development orders were designed for one purpose: to enable the development of brownfield sites, but Nexus is greenfield, and Wyatt Twerp is on the fiddle again with legal trickery to stifle objections. Local development orders, like development consent orders, make a mockery of consultation, but in lawless Tumbleweed Town that's the way they do things. Wyatt Twerp wants to win, which is why he complained so strongly about the plans of Sir Tim Smit, the architect of the world-famous Eden Project, which we have all been to and know so well. Sir Tim Smit wants to build an extensive complex at junction 27 on the M5. It is a well-engineered proposal from a team with excellent form. Sir Tim Smit understands consultation. He actually attends all public meetings in person, which is impressive.

Wyatt Twerp sees any rival development, even in neighbouring counties, as a dreadful threat. Right now, he is getting his posse together to ride out and lynch the man—bizarre, I know. Imagine: Sir Tim Smit's plans might lure people away from the invisible attractions of Tumbleweed Town.

My hon. Friend the Minister will be aware of another crazy caper dreamed up by Wyatt Twerp to merge West Somerset Council, which is in my constituency, with Taunton Deane. That could result in a new authority, no doubt to be called Greater Tumbleweed. West Somerset would end up without a single local office, and with no staff and few elected councillors. Wyatt Twerp organised a consultation process, which, as hon. Members would expect, was shallow, shabby, inaccurate and so badly drafted that few people took part. It was not worth the paper it was written on.

Once again, Wyatt Twerp is on the fiddle. His bid to merge has been submitted to the Secretary of State using a piece of law that gets around the need to consult

[Mr Liddell-Grainger]

anybody. Needless to say, my constituents are crying foul play. When they finally rumble his bent regime and boot him out, he would be very well qualified—dare I say it to the Minister?—to join Highways England as a consultant.

That brings me back to the A358 and the road that Highways England wants to build with no links to Nexus 25. I have a suspicious mind. I have already discovered that Summerfield Developments has bought another large plot of agricultural land, which happens to be remarkably close to all of Highways England's route options for the A358. At present, Summerfield would not get permission to erect a garden shed on it, but if the A358 becomes a dual carriageway, nearby land will become ripe for new homes and Summerfield will be quids in. I wonder how much more land it has an option on already. I wonder which well-known land agents are scouting on its behalf, and who else has invested in that beautiful green-belt corner of Somerset.

Perhaps Wyatt Twerp himself will come clean and tell us why he bought a 30-acre plot close to Stoke St Mary parish church all those years ago. He might claim that it was because of his love of rural scenery or his abiding affection for the great crested newt, which we have all come across. Perhaps it was because of his desire to safeguard a precious plot for posterity. Or was it an early bid for a garden town—"Williamsville", for instance, which is a great name—which my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil has championed? We know that there are fairies at the bottom of his garden and pink pigs flying above them, but the leader of Taunton Deane Council is a greedy builder at heart, and he must have known that 300 houses would fit on 30 acres. Wyatt Twerp bagged a bargain when he bought that land.

The point is this: if the A358 is turned into a highway, there will be huge building opportunities. Highways England understands Wyatt Twerp's ambitions. Taunton Deane Council has been involved in secret talks with Highways England for months, but it took a freedom of information request from a gentleman called Dave Orr, who is not one of my constituents, to prove it. Two weeks ago, he obtained a memo from Highways England's global consultants. Those experts recognised Taunton Deane's extraordinary plan to build 17,000 houses and advised that 3,460 could be built on the land near the motorway junction. As far as I can make out, Mr Orr is a fair man. He decided to alert officers of Taunton Deane Council and Somerset County Council in case they had not seen the document. Nobody reacted, so Mr Orr called the press. It was a story—it was all true—but Wyatt Twerp went bananas and ordered his deputies to threaten the local paper for publishing "fake news". Wyatt had a nasty attack of the Trumps.

That is a revealing episode in a very sad saga. I believe that this is the wrong strategic route for the south-west. We now know for certain that any road developments around this green part of Taunton will bring extra houses by the thousand, which will affect my hon. Friends the Members for Wells and for Yeovil. No wonder so many people are angry. No wonder there is growing distrust of the system and growing contempt for the local politicians—my hon. Friends excluded—who have conspired to allow this to happen. On that point, I rest my case.

11.12 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) on securing this debate, which has the very wide title "The strategic road network in the south-west", and on his extremely pungent and colourful speech. I will start generally and then focus on the specific issues that he raised and the area itself.

As my hon. Friend knows, our road network is the backbone of Britain. Let me remind him and colleagues that the strategic road network, which comprises approximately 4,300 miles of motorways and all-purpose trunk roads valued at more than £100 billion, supports the safe and efficient movement of people and goods. Whatever the optics might be in terms of the percentage of road length the network represents, it is vital to the UK economy and to our current and future economic growth. Around 80% of all goods travel by road, with about two thirds of large goods vehicle traffic being transported on the network. Some 4 million vehicles use the network each day.

As my hon. Friend will be aware, this Government and the previous Government have made a strategic decision to continue to develop the strategic road network by providing extra lanes on our motorways and improving key routes, but also by investing in parts of the country that have suffered due to poor transport connections. That is why the Government are investing £23 billion in England's roads, £15 billion of which will be spent on our motorways and major A roads.

That funding underpins what has become known as the road investment strategy, a five-year plan launched in December 2014 that sets out the schemes and funding levels from 2015 to 2020. In the five years from 2015, the Government will invest around double the capital in strategic roads that was invested in the five years from 2005. That is a record of which the Government and, in fact, all Government Members can be very proud.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) on securing the debate. The Minister highlights the investment that is being made. Will he confirm that that will include finally sorting out the issues at Stonehenge that mean that so much traffic from London to the south-west ends up going via Bristol?

Jesse Norman: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. I will discuss the A303 and Stonehenge later in my speech.

The road investment strategy is the biggest upgrade to our strategic roads—our motorways and major A roads—in a generation. It will see the addition of more than 1,300 extra lane miles to our busiest roads. The schemes cover every region of England; in the two years since 2015, 12 major schemes have opened for traffic and 16 more have started construction.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister agree with me and with Conservative-run Plymouth City Council that it is time

that we continued that investment in our strategic road network by extending the M5 from Exeter to the Tamar bridge?

Jesse Norman: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that question. The answer is that we have a number of funds available and we look forward very much to the submission of bids, which will be given the full scrutiny that they deserve and merit.

Let me turn to the questions raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset. He started by referring to the A39, which I will touch on for a second. He will be aware that that is a local road, but as he also knows, the Government recently announced that from 2020, under the new roads fund that we have set up, which is entirely funded by vehicle excise duty—that is a tremendous innovation, or rather a move back to the future for our road network—we will segregate what we consider to be a major road network investment programme. I think that the A39 will be eligible to be funded under that programme. Once the consultation has been done and work is under way to programme that investment, my hon. Friend and local authorities will be absolutely welcome—indeed, they will be invited—to submit bids. I am aware of his strong feelings, rose-tinted spectacles or no, and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heapey) about the importance of dualling that road in both directions.

Overall, the Government are investing heavily in the road network in the south-west and have committed some £2 billion to major schemes through the road investment strategy. Later this year, we will announce the preferred route for the A303 Stonehenge tunnel, which is a very significant project in its own right, and for the A358 Taunton to Southfields and A303 Sparkford to Ilchester schemes. I understand that my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset has particular concerns—concerns that he expressed with considerable pungency—about the route that the A358 should take into Taunton.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): Will the Minister reassure us all that, regardless of which of those routes and attendant end points for the A303 are eventually chosen, utmost priority will be given to completing that work as fast as possible? My hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heapey) cannot contribute to this debate—he is the Minister's Parliamentary Private Secretary—but I know that he and my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) feel strongly that taking the pressure of long-distance traffic off the M5-M4 triangle and allowing it to make progress down the A303 corridor is absolutely essential for everyone who lives on the M5, as well as for the long-distance traffic that uses it to get through Somerset.

Jesse Norman: I very much take my hon. Friend's point. Of course, the point of the tunnel is not merely to safeguard the extraordinary and historic global asset we have at Stonehenge; it is also part of a much bigger programme of trying to improve the A303 for trunk purposes, in a way that is designed precisely to lift some of the pressure off other arterial routes. I take his point very well.

I should say that I do not recognise the description that has been given of Highways England. From my limited experience as a Minister, I know that it is not a perfect institution, but it has made significant progress since becoming Highways England. It is undoubtedly focused on the task of the effective delivery of schemes in order to get the best outcome for local people, which my hon. Friend mentioned.

John Penrose: May I reassure the Minister that there are those of us who do rather enjoy working with Highways England? It is certainly being helpful on the question of junction 21 of the M5 and junction 21A in my constituency. I can vouch for his point of view.

Jesse Norman: I am glad of that intervention, and if I may, I will proceed with my remarks.

To return to the A358, of course my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset made some quite colourful remarks about that. I am sure he will understand if I do not take a position on the issue, but he has made his concerns, and the public concerns of others, very well, and they sit in the record for further excavation and inquiry.

As my hon. Friend will know, Highways England recently held a public consultation on the routes that the A358 should take, and it will work closely with local partners to advise the Secretary of State and myself on the preferred route. Those schemes are just the first part of the £2 billion plan I mentioned to create a new dual carriageway route from the south-west to London.

If I may range slightly further outside the specific issue of the A358 and the A303, improvements to the A30 in Cornwall—both a planned improvement and one nearing completion—will extend dual carriageway standard road as far as Camborne. The Temple to Higher Carblake section opened last week and Highways England announced the preferred route for the Chiverton to Carland Cross scheme earlier this month.

Highways England is also creating a new junction on the M49 to support development at Avonmouth. The port of Avonmouth and the Avonmouth Severnside Enterprise Area to the west of Bristol currently have no direct access to the M49, which is hindering proposals to support economic growth in the area. A new junction on the M49 will improve access to those areas, ease congestion and contribute to the economic growth of the region.

Richard Graham *rose*—

Jesse Norman: If I may respond in anticipation of the much-welcome but inevitable intervention from my beloved colleague from Gloucester, a little further afield, to the north-east, Highways England is also developing the A417 Air Balloon roundabout improvement—I should say that it is not a small scheme. Potential route options are being identified for public consultation before the end of 2017. That scheme will tackle a missing link in the dual carriageway between Gloucester and Cirencester, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) on his tireless championing of that important scheme, which will certainly have through benefits for trunk users of that road coming from Herefordshire to London.

[*Jesse Norman*]

I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset has a particular interest in the M5 junction 23 Bridgwater scheme and wrote to the Transport Secretary recently on that matter. Let me turn to that, if I may. The Government's view is that it is vital that there be a good connection to Hinkley Point. The new power station—and one must not forget the existing power station there—is of strategic importance to the UK, and the Government will ensure that the road network around it gives all the necessary access to the plant and works. That will support local economic growth, housing and local jobs.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing that up, partly because it affects the seat of my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heapey) as much as mine, and also those of my hon. Friends the Members for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) and for Yeovil (Mr Fysh). We have heard about Weston, and I certainly know, as will my hon. Friend the Member for Wells, that Burnham is a very tight junction. The Secretary of State has been helpful to Somerset MPs in sorting this out, but will my hon. Friend the Minister allude to the need for more capacity at all the junctions from 27 to 21? We may need to revisit that, but I am grateful to him for what he is saying about junction 23.

Jesse Norman: I absolutely take the point. It would have been remiss of me as the Minister not to have addressed this important issue, on which my hon. Friend has been vociferous—and rightly so—along with other colleagues in the past. That is why I have raised it now.

Highways England has been assessing a larger-scale upgrade of the Bridgwater junction, as set out in the road investment strategy. When my predecessor wrote to my hon. Friend recently, he relayed the fact that Highways England was continuing to collect data to inform its assessment so that it could continue to ensure the right solution for the local area. I will make certain that Highways England presses on with that process. I have encouraged it to continue to improve its engagement with colleagues—this is a valuable case in point—so that all relevant views are properly taken into account.

In addition, in March 2017 the Government named 27 proposed small congestion relief schemes that can be delivered quickly. The south-west was allocated some £32 million for improvements, better driver information and queue protection on the M5. Of course, we welcome further inquiries as to how junctions elsewhere in the region and on that road can be improved.

In the time that remains, I will briefly turn to the question of the future. As I have said, the £15 billion currently being invested represents a substantial increase in the rate of investment in roads, but even so, the first road investment strategy—what we call RIS 1—remains only an initial step, albeit more strategic than hitherto. That is why we have already started work on developing the second road investment strategy, RIS 2, which will handle further investment in the network beyond 2020.

The Department is currently gathering and analysing evidence about the performance of the network and the future pressures it faces. Of course, that is a dynamic process as further changes are made and ways of using

the road network themselves change. Central to that approach has been Highways England's work to refresh its 18 route strategies, each focusing on different sections of the strategic road network, which were published in March. As part of that work, Highways England gathered information from MPs, road users, local authorities and other stakeholders through an online public consultation last summer and through face-to-face meetings.

My hon. Friend will be particularly interested in the Birmingham to Exeter route strategy, which identified areas along the M5 where there are current and anticipated future pressures on the network. I am sure that also goes for other Members of all parties present in the Chamber.

We will use that evidence, and the results of a public consultation planned for later this year, to develop an investment plan that is affordable and deliverable and that will meet our key aims for RIS 2, specifically to support economic growth; improve network capability; enhance integration with local roads and other transport modes; reduce the number and severity of accidents; and protect the environment. We remain on track to publish the second RIS before the start of the next road period on 1 April 2020. In that context, I will pick up a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose). That approach also needs to take into account some of the pressures that a route strategy has in relation to other arterial roads to ensure that the counterbalancing we have discussed is properly discharged.

While I am aware that the focus of this debate has been on the strategic road network in the south-west, I hope that I may acknowledge quickly the value of the local road network. Most journeys that use our motorways and major A roads start on the local road network. The Government continue to provide funding for local authorities and local enterprise partnerships in England to help fund large transport schemes that improve connectivity, ease local congestion and improve or update existing infrastructure, thereby helping to promote growth and deliver more housing. Most of the Department's funding for large schemes now sits in the local growth fund, with some £6 billion provided to local enterprise partnerships through different growth deals.

Since 2011, the Department for Transport has invested over £360 million in major local schemes in the south-west. As well as the largest schemes, we continue to fund smaller schemes designed to open up developments and help maintain roads and bridges. The Government are also keen to invest in road maintenance to make roads better for users. That is why £12.5 million has been made available to fix potholes—a topic of great interest to every member of this House—in the south-west.

Shortly, I plan to announce the winners of the 2017 to 2018 highways maintenance challenge fund, whereby the Government will be investing £75 million to improve smaller local roads, including through resurfacing, pothole filling and other infrastructure projects. In summary, we are delivering on our plans for investment in the south-west's road network, both strategic and local, to give the south-west the roads it needs for the future.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

Armed Forces

[SIR ROGER GALE *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I have a couple of housekeeping announcements before we kick off the debate. First, you may have noticed that the clock that we are working to is running about 40 seconds behind the annunciator clock. That will become relevant later when I put a time limit on speeches, because a lot of Members want to take part this afternoon. Secondly, in view of the climate, I am prepared to allow gentlemen to remove their jackets if they wish—but not their ties under this Chairman, thank you very much.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future shape of the armed forces.

As the new Member for Aldershot, the traditional home of the British Army, I am honoured to lead the debate. In the limited time I have, I will touch on the nature of current threats and dwell for a little longer on my central point, which is that our people—our servicemen and women—must be at the heart of our defence policy.

When we consider the future shape of the armed forces, we are seeking to assess current threats but also to predict what threats may arise in the future. That is very difficult, and the only certainty we have is that threats are and will continue to be manifold and deeply alarming. After 15 years or so of engaging in counter-insurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, we still face a threat from global terrorism, which is more dangerous, more mobile and more transnational than ever before. It has recently struck in our cities, and, indeed, at the very gates of Parliament. The middle east is highly unstable, ISIS is diminished but not defeated, we have failed states, we have Hezbollah, we have a dominant Iran and we have North Korea in nuclear stand-off with the rest of the world. We also have a resurgent Russia and the rise of cyber-conflicts.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Does he agree that one vital element of our national defence and resilience is the threat to our cyber-security? Is he concerned, as I am, about whether our armed forces and their hardware are fully protected from that threat, and whether they have sufficient capability to be effectively deployed to deter such a threat?

Leo Docherty: I share my hon. Friend's concern. I think we all agree that the internet has now been weaponised to an extremely alarming degree. That should be at the heart and centre of our defence strategy. I imagine the Minister will take the opportunity to address that.

We face today the simultaneous threats of state-on-state conflict and global terrorism. We are facing down those threats with our allies in NATO and elsewhere, such as our friends in the Gulf states. We will continue to need a very large and potent armed forces to do that; mass matters, and it will continue to matter. It will come as no surprise that, as a former soldier, I am and will always be an advocate for a bigger armed forces. In an ideal world, I would like to see not 2% of GDP spent on defence but somewhere nearer 3%. However, we have to

live in the real world, and we have to play the pitch we inherited. We are still dealing with the legacy of Labour's mismanagement of the economy, which left a large black hole at the heart of defence spending.

In my judgment, the 2015 strategic defence and security review did a good job of assessing and responding to the current global threats I described, and combined with the ongoing investment of £178 billion over the next 10 years, it will deliver a raft of impressive new hardware and, more importantly, an agile and highly deployable force. All of that is against the background of significant financial constraints. I am particularly pleased that elements of the new strike brigades formed as a result of that SDSR—including 4 Rifles, 1st Battalion the Royal Regiment of Scotland, 2nd Battalion Princess of Wales Royal Regiment and 2nd Battalion The Duke of Lancaster's Regiment—will be based in my constituency. We have two impressive carriers coming online, new submarines and new frigates, as well as a total and unreserved commitment to our continuous at-sea deterrence, Trident.

While we praise all that, we must, as parliamentarians and constituency MPs, always critically assess our own Government's policies. We must ensure that our procurement is smart and that the carrier group we are investing in can fight. We must ensure that 2% of GDP spent on defence actually means a real 2%, and we must ensure that projects such as the F-35 are completed on time and on budget. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister will reassure us on that note today.

We clearly need significant force, but just as important, especially when it comes to dealing with global terrorism, is our approach and attitude towards using that force. I think the primary lesson of the last 15 years of expeditionary counter-insurgency wars is that it is only when we are discreet in the use of force, and when we work to empower and partner with local allies, that we achieve great results in combating terrorism.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. However, I am puzzled by his line of argument. He seems to be saying that expeditionary counter-insurgency warfare is what we expect to do in the years ahead, while at the same time saying we must be flexible. What does he think about the notion that NATO has this entirely wrong, that we are focusing on the last war and that the next war may well be, for example, in the north Atlantic or high Arctic? That is something that the Select Committee on Defence is halfway through studying.

Leo Docherty: If my hon. Friend is unsure of the meaning of my remarks, I am saying that mass is important—we absolutely need a very large and potent armed forces—but the lesson of the past 15 years in Iraq and Afghanistan is that we may get counter-productive results if we engage without the politics being right, as he will see from the remainder of my remarks. It is only when we engage and work with allies that results that match our interest and theirs can be achieved.

In both Iraq and Afghanistan, our good intentions were overtaken by the realities of local politics on the ground and an over-optimism about what the British state can achieve politically by the overt use of military force. We must guard against that in future. I learned that lesson as a soldier in southern Iraq more than 10 years ago. I remember one particular day when I

[*Leo Docherty*]

visited a police station run by an Iraqi police unit that we were mentoring in al-Amarah in southern Iraq. Despite our working very closely with them, I was alarmed to find, on visiting the interior of the police station, a picture of Muqtada al-Sadr, who was the leader of the Mahdi army—the very insurgent group we were fighting, supposedly with the Iraqi police. That kind of duality and duplicity undermined our capability and the likelihood of us having a positive outcome in Iraq.

I have carried that insight with me over the years, but for many others, including my friend and fellow soldier, Captain Richard Holmes, that duplicity and the central dilemma of our presence in Iraq had lethal consequences. Richard was a classmate of mine at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and went on to be a fine Parachute Regiment officer. He deployed on his second tour of Iraq in the winter of 2005 to mentor the Iraqi police—something he put his heart and soul into. Progress was made thanks to his efforts, but despite his commitment and earnest professionalism, the forces of sectarianism, violence, Shi'ite rivalry and Iranian meddling prevailed. One day, after leaving the very same police station that I had visited the previous winter, his patrol was struck by an IED, and he and his driver, Private Lee Ellis, were instantly killed.

The point I am making is that no matter how good or how dedicated the servicemen or women are, politics—in the middle east, it is often the politics of violence—will always trump good intentions. The lesson at the heart of this is that we must be discreet, and we must work with allies whose interests match ours and who genuinely need our help. That lesson and that approach should shape the way we do business in the future and the way we train and deploy our forces. If we follow that approach, we can achieve great results.

In Iraq, we are now having a very positive impact. Today we have more than 1,200 personnel deployed on Op Shader across Iraq and Syria, co-ordinating Royal Air Force airstrikes, taking the fight to Daesh and, critically, working very closely with Kurdish peshmerga forces, whose interests match ours. That type of involvement—helping our allies to achieve their goals with the bespoke use of expertise and hard power—is a model for the future. We can and should replicate that approach around the globe.

The other primary lesson we have learned from the campaigns in both Iraq and Afghanistan is that the current generation of British forces men and women are equal to the example shown by their forebears across all three services. Young men and women join the armed forces today in order to deploy. We are in their debt, and it is our duty to arm them, equip them and protect them as best we can. Our servicemen and women are this country's most precious asset, and we must put them at the heart of our defence policy. I welcome the Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Bill, which will have a very positive impact on the working lives of our armed forces men and women. We should celebrate the fact that they are prepared to take risks. They are not victims, but heirs to a remarkable and magnificent tradition. The recent remarks made by the Chief of the General Staff about service personnel needing empathy rather than sympathy were very welcome and apt.

We must maintain our resolve to deploy whenever and wherever necessary. We must not lose our nerve. On that note, I will conclude my remarks by quoting from a letter sent to me recently by a veteran who, as a young commander, led a team in Afghanistan at the height of the conflict. At one point he survived an IED strike so powerful that it destroyed the armoured fighting vehicle he was commanding. His letter reads:

“In Afghanistan I was scared of many things. I was frightened of the Taliban, I doubted myself, I worried about the availability of helicopter medical support. The one thing I never doubted or questioned was the willingness of the soldiers under my command to fight tooth and nail. No matter how badly they were bleeding, no matter how cold, how hot, how tired or how dehydrated they were, time and again their willingness to take a step forward, put their hand up and say ‘ok then, let’s go’ was extraordinary. 18 year olds who had volunteered to go 5000 miles to protect the Afghan people. These much-maligned members of the ‘PlayStation generation’ were in fact the heirs to boys who stood at Waterloo, sailed at Jutland and flew in the Battle of Britain.”

I quote from that letter because those words so eloquently convey why we are proud to have the finest armed forces in the world, why our servicemen and women will always be our greatest asset and, importantly, why, despite all the financial and fiscal constraints of the current time, we should be confident and assured of our future as a formidable military power.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order. Nine Members have submitted their names in advance to speak. I intend to call the Front-Bench spokespeople at 3.30 pm, so I am imposing a four-minute time limit on speeches. It may assist Members to know the batting order, so that they know where they stand: it will be Rachael Maskell, Robert Courts, Chris Evans, Jack Lopresti, Jim Shannon, Andrew Bowie, Luke Pollard, Eddie Hughes and—last but by no means least—Colonel Stewart. Those whose names have not been called will understand that they are not on the list. This is not an open invitation to make lengthy interventions; it is an indication that if they wish to intervene, they should keep it brief.

2.45 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I congratulate the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) on opening this debate so thoughtfully.

I want to pay my tribute to the armed forces and the incredible work that they do in an ever-changing and complex world that evolves day by day. We owe a debt to the vital strategic and critical thinking and actions of our serving men and women as they seek to de-escalate the risk of conflict and bring reparation when not in the throes of the theatre of war.

We know that building strategic alliances secures greater global resilience. We know too that warfare is changing and therefore the shape of our armed forces needs also to evolve. What is really important is that the needs of our armed forces are met. One thing that is clear is that they are not necessarily content at this time, as we saw in the continuous attitude survey this year, which did not make good reading for the Government. They feel let down. Only half are satisfied with the standard of their accommodation and less than a third with the maintenance programme—and those figures are in free fall. We know that low morale in the Army is

up by 12% and satisfaction with service life has fallen by 18% since 2009. Yesterday's Pay Review Body announcement will not help either. Only 33% of personnel are satisfied with their pay, 27% with their pensions and just 23% with the recruitment and retention pay. That is serious, and that is why it is so vital that we listen to our armed forces—which is exactly what I have done in York.

I can tell this Government very clearly that the community wants the armed forces to stay in York. The economy needs the armed forces to stay in York. The armed forces want to stay in York and the families do too, and they are a crucial part of our armed forces. After 2,000 years of the armed forces being in York, the cry from my city is that they should remain there. The City of York Council, which is a Conservative-Lib Dem coalition, has resolved to oppose the Government's plans to remove the Army from York. All stakeholders, except for Government Ministers, have gathered together against "A Better Defence Estate".

The Queen Elizabeth barracks in Strensall and Towthorpe is where the 2nd Medical Brigade and 34 Field Hospital are based. We know of the work they do, not least their work in the recent Ebola crisis. They have recently received a £2.3 million investment, yet are due to close in 2021—a waste of taxpayers' money—despite wanting to remain in York. Imphal barracks in my constituency is also due to close by 2031. That will have a devastating impact, and not only due to the loss of 1,600 jobs from my city. The proper checks and balances have yet to take place, including economic and social impact assessments. Document JSP 507 says that those assessments must take place before closure proceeds, but they have not been carried out. I was told by the Minister's predecessor that it will take 18 months to do that.

The armed forces want to stay in York because Army families' children catch up with their education with our excellent education system, and the spousal employment opportunities and opportunities for future career development are there for all to see. The Nepalese community also wants to remain in my city, and their needs must be addressed. Most of all, I want to stress to the Minister that guarantees were given to my predecessor as late as 2015, after the rebasing programme, that the Army would remain in York. My plea is for the Minister to listen to my city and ensure that they do.

2.49 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) on securing this extremely important debate. I also welcome him to the House, because it is so important that we have Members with his experience to bring first-hand knowledge of the issues that we are discussing today and throughout our deliberations.

My brief comments will be about the need for flexibility. I am conscious of the words of the Select Committee on Defence: that in many ways we face a world that is "more dangerous and unstable" than at any time since the end of the cold war. The point has already been made that there is a real danger that we plan how to fight the conflict that we have just fought. Having spent 15 years fighting asymmetric warfare, we are in real danger of considering that that is the sort of warfare that we will always face, but of course we face, in the

east, a resurgent and much more aggressive Russia. We find ourselves in the extraordinary situation, which I do not think any of us would have thought a few years ago that we would be in, of having to defend and train against a potential conventional threat, with a need for training with heavy armour and eastern forces in the forests of eastern Europe, as opposed to the hot, high and sandy warfare that we have been engaged in for the last few years. My contention is that this dangerous world is best met by flexibility.

We must be careful because history is full of surprises. We know that as soon as we plan for one area of warfare, the one that we are most likely to be fighting will be totally different. The only way we can face that is by having the flexibility in our armed forces to meet the evolving threat, but how do we do that within the constrained budget that we have?

The first factor, as my hon. Friend rightly said, is our people. We must ensure that the armed forces are seen as an optimistic, exciting, challenging, profitable and worthwhile career, so that we attract young people to join and they know that they will learn a trade and, crucially, be looked after. That is why I place such importance on the armed forces covenant. I commend everything that the Government have done to ensure that retention rates in the armed forces are kept at the high level where they ought to be.

For the same reasons, I applaud the Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Bill, which this House will see shortly; I look forward to seeing the detail of it. The Americans do a great deal of that, with greater use of reserve forces. I applaud the Government for looking at the issue, thinking creatively and ensuring that we can get the best from our young people as we go forward.

The two aspects to equipment are hardware and software. Let me deal first with hardware. I am very lucky that my constituency contains Royal Air Force Brize Norton, where the whole of the Royal Air Force's transport fleet is based, and we have the Voyager programme there. The Voyager has the classic capability of a tanker and transport aircraft but, because of the way the AirTanker consortium is set up, there is a surge capability. The aircraft normally can undertake air-to-air refuelling, and there is a relatively limited fleet for peacetime, but were we to need it, we have the ability to bring in a great many more very quickly. With the C-17, C-130 and A400M programmes, we also have outstanding transport capability, so we have very high capability aircraft, but also a greater number of less complex aircraft, which means we can have more for the resources available.

A great emphasis on intelligence is of course critical. That is why, particularly in terms of Waddington, I encourage the Government to keep the Sentry, the Sentinel and the Rivet Joint aircraft at the forefront of their mind—because it is that intelligence that we need to fight the wars that we will be fighting.

Lastly, I come to the software point. Of course, not all warfare these days is fought through hardware, kit and equipment. Much of it is software-based, and if we do not have the intelligence gathering and, crucially, the cyber-skills, we would very quickly find that our aircraft were unable to fly while the others were. Thank you, Sir Roger, for giving me time to speak in this debate. Flexibility is the key, because after all, history is full of surprises, as we know, and so of course will the future be.

2.53 pm

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): I begin by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), who spoke with passion based on his own distinguished service. Even though I am on the Opposition Benches, I also pay tribute to all those Government Members—who I am looking at now—who also served in our forces and served Queen and country with distinction. Thank you very much.

On Saturday 24 June, I joined my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David), who will respond to the debate for the Opposition, to witness our armed forces marching through Caerphilly town centre as part of Armed Forces Day. Anyone watching on that day would know the esteem in which the public hold our armed forces. If we asked anyone marching, they would tell us that they are able to serve only because they have the support of their family. However, many feel that they are being badly let down by the Government. No one will be able to give their best in theatre if they are worried about their loved ones back home, yet that is the reality that those living in service accommodation have to face each and every day.

All regular service personnel are entitled to subsidised accommodation, and those who are married or have children are entitled to service family accommodation. The accommodation is provided by the Ministry of Defence and managed by the private contractor CarillionAmey. The armed forces covenant dictates that service accommodation must be of good quality, in an appropriate location and reasonably priced. However, under the current contract, very few properties seem to meet those criteria.

A National Audit Office report earlier in the year about service accommodation was absolutely damning. One family were left without hot water and heating for weeks, despite informing the contractor, CarillionAmey, that they had a seven-week-old baby and a four-year-old. In fact, in 2016, an NAO report found that satisfaction levels with the contractor's maintenance request responses and the quality of maintenance works undertaken had reached lows of 32% and 29% respectively. At the Public Accounts Committee hearing, we were even told that such was the worry on the part of the Department that the contractor had to face the then Secretary of State for Defence to discuss the way forward.

Since taking up the contract in November 2014, CarillionAmey has consistently failed to meet the key performance indicators that it was contracted to attain. One case in particular highlights the poor treatment of service personnel and their families by the company. The wife of a serviceman reported that their family had been provided with a damp and mouldy property and, despite there being alternative accommodation available, the contractor refused to move them. The family reported that the property's carpets were stained and the oven was dirty, but rather than cleaning the property and getting rid of the mould on the walls, CarillionAmey painted over it. On top of that, the family spent up to hours on the phone to the contractor every day for eight weeks trying to get somebody to help them to deal with the property's many issues.

James Gray: The hon. Gentleman is of course right to criticise CarillionAmey—in many respects it is not great at all—and his party of course does not like

anything being contracted out, but if we took the contract away from CarillionAmey, what would an incoming Labour Government do?

Chris Evans: I am criticising CarillionAmey quite rightly, but what I am saying is that we need a different contract or a different way of tendering for these contracts. This is not good enough; it is not good enough for forces' families or for our men and women in the field. I hope that the Minister will take these comments away and look with urgency at the way the contract with CarillionAmey is being managed. This is not good enough, and I think all of us in the House would agree with that.

On 24 occasions, the family to whom I was referring were told that they would receive a call back regarding the issues, yet they did not, and technicians refused to progress the issues and deal with them. It would be an absolute disgrace if any family had to suffer in that way, but these are the families of our bravest men and women. Joining the armed forces is not like joining Barclays or Tesco; we are asking people to risk their lives each and every day for our safety at home and abroad. No one should underestimate just how huge an impact the standard of service accommodation can have on those in the armed forces. Impact on family life is the most cited reason why people leave the armed forces, and accommodation is a critical factor in that.

I urge the Minister to look at the contract again, to look at the way CarillionAmey is treating our forces' families and to do something about it. I think all of us in the House can agree with those sentiments.

2.57 pm

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger, even if only for four minutes—I will keep to that. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) on securing this crucial debate and on the eloquence of his speech. It is a privilege to be able to speak in the House about our armed forces as someone who has also worn the Queen's uniform. I must declare an additional interest: one of my sons, Michael, recently joined the Army and serves with the 1st Regiment Royal Horse Artillery as a gunner—the fourth generation of my family to do so.

I note the Government's policy on the armed forces as stated in the Gracious Speech:

“My ministers will continue to invest in our gallant Armed Forces, meeting the NATO commitment to spend at least two per cent of national income on defence, and delivering on the Armed Forces Covenant across the United Kingdom.”

For me, the key words are investment, commitment and covenant—words that we in this House would do well to reflect on. Investment means not only providing the resources that our armed forces need, but supporting and encouraging our servicemen and women and their families. Of course, it also means that we must invest in training and equipping our armed forces so that they can do the job we ask them to do. We all remember the shameful stories of service personnel in the 2003 Gulf campaign who were ordered to give away their body armour only for casualties to be suffered subsequently; indeed, there was one fatality. Also, there is no point in having defence assets if they cannot be used. Training on equipment such as fast jets can be expensive, but it is necessary to maintain the war-winning edge that our forces need.

Commitment means that the UK supports its allies, whether in NATO, the Commonwealth or elsewhere. Not only will we need to do that in time of need, but we will help to develop and train our allies' armed forces so that we can prevent conflicts from developing in the first place. It also means that when we commit to spending a minimum of 2% of GDP on defence, we mean a minimum. Some colleagues are calling for 3%, given the uncertainty of the times we are in. That is something we should consider seriously, looking at all the aspects of defence policy and the fact that we are looking to increase our global presence and reach. What matters most for our service personnel and allies is that the UK has the capability to make a difference when we arrive in a theatre of operations.

Last but certainly not least is covenant, which has almost a sacred feel and echo to it. It reminds us that the bond between service personnel and the society that they serve is special, in which case it must be a duty of the Government and this House to ensure that we keep our side of the covenant. Too often we hear tales of administrative incompetence, which adversely affects the lives of our service personnel. Support for families and decent housing is often seen as an additional administrative burden that detracts from frontline fighting efficiency. With an all-volunteer force and a need to recruit a reserve force as well, we must ensure that the conditions of military service are as attractive as in any other vocation, particularly when service personnel are injured and need good medical support and rehabilitation.

I am going to skip forward in my speech. Representing a constituency that is a world-renowned hub of excellence in aviation and defence manufacturing, with companies such as Rolls-Royce, Boeing, GKN and Airbus, I can speak with conviction of the benefits that this brings to local communities and the wider economy. Aerospace Defence Security, the defence manufacturers' trade association, estimates that in 2016 the UK defence sector directly supported 142,000 jobs, of which 32,000 were in research, design and engineering. The sector also supports 4,300 apprenticeships along with the MOD, which supports a further 18,000 apprenticeships, making it the largest provider in the UK.

I am running out of time, but broadly we need more spending, to maintain our commitments and our global reach and technological advancement, but never forget that we need men and women who are prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice. We should never forget that.

3.1 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) for bringing forward an issue of great concern to all of us here. I declare an interest, having served as a part-time soldier in the Ulster Defence Regiment for three years and in the Royal Artillery for 11 and a half. When I look around this Chamber I see many hon. and gallant Members who have also served, and I congratulate them on being here.

I have said this before in this House, but it bears repeating: our armed forces are without doubt the premier armed forces in the entire world. We have highly trained and highly skilled individuals who place Queen and country above their own lives and often ahead of their family lives. I am often concerned when we debate these issues in this House that it is very easy to concentrate on

numbers and not on the human aspect. Some of the contributions so far have dwelt on the human aspect, and I understand how important that is.

I understand that times are changing, and I can grasp the importance of technology and of having the best and brightest minds in the Army. I watch my granddaughter, who can work a tablet without any bother. There is a real need for us to recruit the best into the ranks; however, having served in uniform, I also understand the discipline and understanding that comes from someone making their way up the ranks. I believe that the recommendation to recruit civilian cyber-warfare specialists, aviation experts and tech wizards is essential—hopefully the Minister will respond to that—but there must also be a carefully monitored structure that enshrines the qualities that are taught and lived while in training and in the first years in the armed forces. Those of us who have served and those who have an interest in the armed forces will understand what I mean.

In my office we saw at first hand the effects of the cyber-attack. Indeed, probably all of us in the Chamber witnessed how hard it was to work in an office without the use of computers—it was back to the old times of telephone calls to the executive and the road service. The attack showed just how reliant our society has become on computers, and it is clear that the armed forces must be at the top of their game to handle situations and scenarios like that.

I wish to address the issue of falling numbers in the armed forces. The Minister, whom I and all of us in this Chamber greatly respect, understands the issue—82,000 was the number set out, and we are at 78,000. What is being done to ensure that the target is met? In particular, the special forces regiments are suffering a shortfall in numbers, as others are, especially in those training in information technology and communications. I am anxious to understand what format measures will take to recruit those extra numbers and get back to where we were.

I am conscious of time, but I will just say this: in the confidence and supply co-operation plan that we have with the Government—I want to make it clear that we are very pleased to be part of that, by the way—we secured some more recruitment for Northern Ireland, based upon the fact that our recruitment levels are already up and we can fill some of the gap that I mentioned. The Government responded to us on that point, and we are doing some more recruitment through the Territorial Army and the reserves. I am also conscious of the fact that there are those who have risen through the ranks of life and those who come in at graduate level. A delicate balance of understanding must be found.

I will quickly touch on the spending plans, another issue that weighs upon my heart. While we can and must be wise and good stewards of money, we cannot afford to cut back on the planned spending of £178 billion on kit and maintenance and projects such as the F-35 fighter, Dreadnought nuclear submarines and the P-8 Poseidon spy planes. On procurement, I make a plea to the Minister to make sure that we get some of the contracts in Northern Ireland. The Minister knows that I want that—I have said it before, and I ask for her consideration on that matter. We look to her to honour the spending commitments and to honour our troops.

I would and could not finish without thanking those who wear our uniform for all that they do and reiterating our determination to do right by our past and present

[Jim Shannon]

military personnel. I say to them: your sacrifice will ever be appreciated, and we will stand with you in and out of uniform.

3.6 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I am pleased to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I would like to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) on securing this very important debate.

Britannia Royal Naval College in Devon stands high on a hill overlooking the Dart estuary and the town of Dartmouth. It is an impressive building, designed to instil a sense of pride and purpose in all those who have marched up its famous steps, to awe all who set eyes upon it and to leave no one in any doubt about the importance that this island nation places on the strength of its Navy. Along the front of the building are engraved the following words:

“It is upon the Navy, under the good providence of God, that the Wealth, Prosperity and peace of these Islands do depend”.

Those words are as true today as they were when they were first set down more than 340 years ago. For although it is very easy to forget, this is an island nation, forever dependent on open sea lanes and peace on the high seas for its survival.

To prove that point, let me go through some facts and figures. Some 90% of global trade is carried at sea. The top ten trading nations in the world account for 47% of the total of world trade, and the UK is the fifth largest trader, with 17.3 billion tonnes of goods imported alone, with a value of more than £525 billion. UK ports, the shipping industry and trade support more than 600,000 jobs in this country, and 40% of the UK's food is imported at an annual value of more than £32 billion. Oil is of vital importance to my constituency in Aberdeenshire, and more than half the world's oil supply is moved through set maritime routes, mostly through eight maritime choke points. Disruption at any one of those can have a devastating impact on the oil price. The strait of Hormuz between Iran and the UAE, for example, sees 17 million barrels of oil per day pass through a 29 mile-wide corridor. In the very recent past we have seen how easy it is to disrupt that trade. It is estimated that piracy off the Horn of Africa in the last years of the previous decade cost global trade \$6.9 billion per year, before it was brought under control through the actions of, among others, British vessels working with our partners in Operation Atalanta—an operation with its headquarters here, at Northwood in Hertfordshire.

My point is that as we are a global, island nation, maritime trade is our lifeblood. As such, a strong, flexible, globally deployable Royal Navy is vital. The future make-up of our armed forces must reflect that, and not only for the reasons that I have set out. If we truly want to be at the forefront of the war on drugs or the war on terror, and to be a nation that does not shirk from its international responsibility to provide humanitarian aid to parts of the world ravaged by natural disasters, we need a senior service that is equipped with the tools, and manned with the people, to do the job.

Julia Dockerill (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): Flexibility has been a watchword in this debate. Would my hon. Friend support flexibility in the budgets of

Government Department's engaged abroad? I would like to see aid, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, defence and security budgets interlinked, to allow us to focus on the most pressing priorities in each country where we have a presence, rather than seeing each Department working on their own independent causes without the proper co-ordination that is sometimes required.

Andrew Bowie: I very much agree with my hon. Friend's sentiments on that point.

I stand here proud that, for all we talk today about moving towards a more flexible, agile armed forces, armed and trained to fight the asymmetric wars of the future, the Conservative Government have proven, in not only words but actions, that they do not suffer, as other Governments have, from sea-blindness. In this year of the Navy we have already seen major developments, including HMS Queen Elizabeth, the largest warship and most advanced aircraft carrier in the history of the Navy, sailing from Rosyth in Scotland and undertaking sea trials before arriving in Portsmouth later this summer. Her younger sister, HMS Prince of Wales, will enter the water for the first time at Rosyth—again, in Scotland—later this year. The Type 26 frigate programme, to be built in Scotland, continues apace. The first of the Navy's five next-generation patrol ships, HMS Forth, also built in Scotland, will begin her sea trials.

Outside Scotland—I suppose I have to mention that as well—design and manufacture will continue on the multi-million pound Crowsnest, the early-warning eyes in the sky system for the helicopters that will protect the new carriers. The first of our four Tide-class tankers, RFA Tidespring, has arrived and is undergoing UK customisation work. The fourth Astute-class submarine has entered the water at Barrow. I am proud that it is Scotland, specifically HM Naval Base Clyde at Faslane, that is home to our continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent, the cornerstone of our defence policy. I am equally proud that it is the Conservative party—and, it would seem, only that party—that is truly committed to renewing our deterrent, thereby contributing to the security of not only ourselves but our friends, overseas territories and allies.

I know there are problems in recruitment and retention. I know that the propulsion issues on the Type 45s are not good for the image of the fleet or for the morale of those serving in it. Cuts, although necessary after we were left, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot mentioned, with a £30 billion black hole in the defence budget, obviously left the Navy feeling leaner and more stretched than before. Many, possibly including me, hanker for the days when ships lay six abreast at Pompey, Devonport or Rosyth, when you could cross the Solent without even getting wet—at least, that is what is said. Those days are sadly behind us. What we must do now, and what the Government are doing by not only increasing the budget but for the first time in many years increasing the size of our fleet, is to ensure that as we debate the future of our armed forces in general, the Royal Navy is fit to fight the battles of the 21st century.

3.11 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), because I also intend to speak about the Navy. I want to

pay tribute to not only our armed forces but all the civilians who work with them. It is important that their contribution is also noted, because without them we would not have the armed forces that we have today.

Defence is an issue close to my heart. I have asked the Minister a few questions on the subject, and I am sure I will ask more. I am the son of a submariner, and the future shape of the Royal Navy is important not only to my family but to Plymouth, which I represent. The challenge now is how to adapt the Navy to serve the challenges that we face as a country. I fear that the 2010 and 2015 SDSRs did not do us many favours in creating the shape of the Royal Navy that we need. We have too few escort frigates. We need more, and they need to be more capable in their defensive and offensive weaponry. I am deeply concerned about the armaments on the Type 26 and Type 31, because they do not provide the full-spectrum capabilities that those frigates require in the face of the threats they will be asked to meet.

I am concerned that there is a broad capability gap in our Royal Navy at times, which can best be summed up in what is happening with HMS Ocean, a Devonport-based helicopter carrier. In 2015 there was much hullabaloo in Plymouth after rumours that the Conservative Government were going to scrap HMS Ocean. We had reassurance from the Minister that that was not true, but three months later it was announced that HMS Ocean was indeed to be scrapped and sold off. I am concerned that the Government have still not addressed in the latest SDSR the lack of helicopter carrier capability, especially carriers able to operate in littoral waters, and that needs to be looked at. It is inconceivable that we would put a carrier—a capital ship of that size—so close to the shore that it can adequately deploy a two company lift without having the support of a littoral capability. Our carriers do not have such capability, so I am concerned as to how that fits.

HMS Ocean is not our only amphibious craft. HMS Bulwark and HMS Albion, two more Devonport-based ships, are also vital to the Royal Navy's ability to deploy. One of them is tied up alongside at the moment and the other one is back on sea trials. We need to look again at our full-spectrum capabilities in the Royal Navy to make sure they are adequate.

On the frigate conundrum, I am pleased that the Minister has ordered three Type 26 frigates. I would like to see a full order book. I was in nappies when previous Governments ordered the Type 23s, the workhorse of our Royal Navy, but if we look at the costs of splitting the batches of the Type 23s and at the procurement of ships in the past, we know that we derive greater value from ordering in larger batches. The large cost of the three Type 26s could be reduced further if we ordered more of them at the same time. There could be a risk that we will switch production from Type 26s to Type 31s, which means there is a concern about how skills and efficiencies can be derived from the yards in Scotland where they will be produced.

We have a huge opportunity to make sure that the Type 31 is an adequate and capable frigate. At the moment the outline for the Type 31 frigate includes only one offensive weapon, which is its main gun. Will the Minister think carefully about the capabilities of not only the Type 26 but the Type 31 as well? If we are asking the Type 31 frigates to be put in harm's way, having one offensive weapon on the entire ship is insufficient.

I am pleased that the Artisan radar for the Type 23s will continue on the Type 26s, but there is much to be done on capabilities. Will the Minister think again about how much weaponry we put on the Type 26s and the Type 31s?

3.15 pm

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) for securing this debate. In speaking this afternoon I feel a huge degree of deference to those in the room who have military experience, but we need to reach out to the public if we are to have any discussion of the future of our armed forces. In Walsall North we have three remembrance monuments: in Willenhall, Bloxwich and Short Heath. I will work with the Royal British Legion to ensure that we continue the Remembrance Day parades in those areas, although unfortunately the police are no longer agreeing to road closures for those areas.

Things have changed hugely since the world wars. At the time when I was born, we had Operation Banner in Northern Ireland. I understand that we had 21,000 troops stationed in Northern Ireland at that time. Sadly, 700 of those military personnel lost their lives owing to paramilitary attacks. Coming forward closer to home, the Good Friday agreement and lengthy diplomacy means that now we have only hundreds of troops there instead of thousands.

What is the state of the British military in terms of troop numbers? I read an interesting article from 2014 in *The Daily Telegraph* at the weekend that made a perhaps unfortunate comparison between the number of troops and the number of hairdressers that we have in the UK. At that time we had 185,000 hairdressers, but only approximately 160,000 troops. That feels like a disproportionate balance to me. Where are we today? The papers that came to us in preparation for this meeting suggest that we have not reached the 2020 targets, although we are trying hard to do that, and the adverts tell me that I have people who were born in Willenhall and Bloxwich, but have been made in the Royal Navy.

Our troops are operating in 80 different areas around the world. People in Walsall North will be familiar with some of those areas, such as the Falklands, but perhaps not so familiar with Bahrain, other than as a venue for the Grand Prix. My hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot has written about Bahrain, and I have read his papers. I understand that we have recently celebrated the 200th anniversary of Anglo-Bahraini relations, and the port there is the second busiest area of activity for the Royal Navy outside of Portsmouth.

We deploy troops around the world, but the nature of combat is changing. On 7 October 2001, American forces used the first drone strike two months after 9/11. They have subsequently argued about whose fault it was that it hit the wrong target. The RAF took delivery of 10 drones in 2007. For the benefit of people in Walsall North, I point out that those drones cost approximately £10 million each and fire Hellfire missiles at a cost of £120,000 each. That is sophisticated but expensive equipment. They can fly for 30 hours and can be operated by people thousands of miles away. However, they are no replacement for boots on the ground. We cannot over-exaggerate the reassurance that local people in war zones around the world will feel from having the

[Eddie Hughes]

benefit of our brilliant, brave and well-trained troops offering them reassurance on their safety for the future. The first rule for any Government is that they must protect their residents. We must ensure that we provide sufficient funding for them to do so adequately.

3.19 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): We all know that the first duty of Government is the defence of the state, which historically has meant defending it at any cost, but that may no longer be the case. Western public opinion is not prepared for ever increasing amounts of money to be spent on defence. The last really big conflict, the second world war, was the best part of a lifetime ago. Never in modern history has there been such a gap between wars in Europe. Not being threatened by war makes the public increasingly reluctant to divert funds from such things as hospitals and schools towards military forces—just in case they are needed—when we need those hospitals and schools now. Clearly the armed forces will have many fewer soldiers, sailors and airmen than they did in the past, and almost every one of their training or operational activities will be gauged against cost.

The days of large-scale operations and exercises are over. We shall definitely need more specialised troops—special forces. Those forces are clearly expanding. The Special Reconnaissance Regiment—I was in one of its antecedents—has been formally established, and a parachute battalion is now specifically tasked with supporting 22 SAS. Increasingly we must expect our military forces to operate on the streets of the United Kingdom in plain clothes, supporting the police, the special branches and the security forces on such things as surveillance. It takes 20 people to watch one person. Also, the country is taking the threat of cyber-warfare seriously—witness the establishment of 77th Brigade, which combines Regular Army and Army Reserve forces. It draws on specialists nationwide, and does not necessarily look very military in what it does. Hacking can be more deadly than any gun.

Clearly our armed forces will be much smaller than in the past, which is disgraceful. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) that we do not have enough troops; 82,000 is laughable. The total number of soldiers, sailors and airmen in uniform is about 160,000 to 170,000, which means our armed forces are smaller than they have been since the 17th century. Of course I want 2% of GDP to be spent on defence, but I want more than that: I want us to sort out what we need to spend on defence. We should conduct our reviews by looking at what we need—not against a figure. Some have suggested that the days of armoured vehicles are over, but developments such as the Russian T-99 and the Chinese Type 99A1 suggest that that view is not held by everyone. Armed forces must still be designed to combat state-on-state conflict. It is our duty to have decent soldiers who can deter.

3.24 pm

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger; I appreciate the opportunity to be squeezed into the debate, and I thank my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) for securing this important

and timely debate. I want to focus on a small number of issues that have been taxing my mind for some time, with regard to the structure of the British armed forces. A number of hon. Members have spoken with great knowledge about the senior service, the Royal Navy. No one has specifically discussed the RAF, and a crueller man than I am might suggest that that is because they are the RAF, and they kind of deserve it—but I would not want anyone to think that. [Interruption.] Ah, no—my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) mentioned the RAF, so never mind, that is forgiven.

I want to focus on the Army, but some things that I say will be broadly applicable to the armed forces as a whole. I will echo some of the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Witney, to the effect that the key word is flexibility. I was pleased that Her Majesty outlined in her Gracious Speech the Government's willingness to introduce the Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Bill. This is the right time, if not perhaps slightly overdue, to recognise the different demographics of people joining the armed forces. I cannot help thinking that if we were better at managing flexible working for armed forces personnel we would not lose so many people at the pinch point where personal and family circumstances and military commitments conspire to put them under pressure that forces them to leave. If we could find a way to manage the transitions from full-time to part-time and back, we would not lose so many highly experienced and important individuals.

I am going to be an unapologetic nerd on the subject of equipment. As a Conservative, I obviously believe that all the questions of the future are answered somewhere in the past, and I draw the Minister's attention to other periods in our military history when we have been under huge—often existential—threat as well as severe financial limitations. It should be noted that in the brigades and divisions that went ashore at Normandy the Sherman tank platform had commonality across a wide range of weapon systems. There were the standard Shermans, with the Sherman Firefly in support, the Sexton 25-pounder armoured gun and the Achilles anti-tank gun, all based on a common Sherman chassis, which meant that spares and repairs were easily and efficiently delivered to the front line. I welcome the fact that we are moving to a shared platform now for our strike brigades, and I urge Ministers not to do what we have done throughout our history, which is to start with the best intentions for commonality and shared platforms, and then drift until finally the hard-working men and women in the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers are presented with a plethora of platforms that they have to repair and maintain during conflict. Flexibility as to people and platforms must be the watchword.

3.28 pm

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I congratulate the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) on bringing the issue before the House. It is one that affects us all, irrespective of our background. I have been struck by the thoughtful, intelligent and knowledgeable contributions to the debate, which have done the House proud.

All roads lead back to the last strategic defence and security review, and it would be inappropriate if I did not mention the preceding one, too, which was an extremely

rushed and botched job as a preparation of the country for its own defence. However, the current SDSR is perhaps, if anything, slightly over-ambitious, in that many of the things it contains are difficult to deliver in the timescales. Indeed, it ignores some future challenges and, as has been mentioned, falls into the trap of fighting the last war when the Government should be considering the future threats facing the nation, and some of the opportunities for gain, such as using defence for the growth of the economy.

In Scotland, we are seeing cuts to bases and the diminution of our defence footprint. HMS Caledonia in my constituency, Fort George in the highlands and Glencorse barracks in Edinburgh are all under threat, and that is after decades of an imbalanced defence footprint across the UK. Many Members have mentioned bases and the support they have in their constituencies, whether in Wiltshire or Hampshire, which seem to be awash with military bases. I remind hon. Members that the Royal Navy surface fleet is based no further north than the south coast of England.

Andrew Bowie: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Douglas Chapman: I will try to make some progress. Just give me a second if that is okay, and I may take an intervention later.

The Navy, for example, has more admirals than ships, and not one of those admirals is based in Scotland, Northern Ireland or Wales. If there is to be another SDSR, it must balance the strategic defence needs of the whole of the UK.

The hon. Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray), who has just departed, has been a long-standing advocate of ensuring that the UK, and, by extension, Scotland, takes more account of the threats that face us from the north. The fact that we do not have a surface ship based in Scotland to protect our coastline from increasing Russian submarine incursions into our waters needs to be considered in any future SDSR.

Andrew Bowie: The hon. Gentleman says that there are no surface vessels based in Scotland, but that is patently untrue. The mine counter measures squadron is based solely at Faslane, which if I am not mistaken is north of the border in Scotland.

Douglas Chapman: What a tremendous example: one single minesweeper to deal with the whole of the North sea and the north Atlantic. I am sure everyone in Scotland will sleep easy in their beds tonight.

The hon. Member for Aldershot started his speech by talking about the importance of people. The overall issue is that all three services are currently running significantly under strength—I think the figure across the three services is in the region of 5%. I am told that some critical parts of those services, such as submariners, are about 25% under strength at the moment, and there is continuing pressure for qualified technicians and engineers. While I know that the Minister has made some good progress on recruitment and retention, which we welcome, that has clearly not gone far enough if we are to protect our nation at home, to defend communities here at home and look at our international obligations.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): On the positives, does the hon. Gentleman recognise the contribution of our cadet training forces across the United Kingdom, such as the 383 Alloa Air Training Corps in my constituency, and that we are investing in youth, which will help supply the manpower for our forces in the future?

Douglas Chapman: I am always happy to endorse a neighbouring constituency and the work done there. Again, recruitment into cadet forces and support for them is important if we are to build up the defence structure and infrastructure we need and invest in people from a very young age to ensure that they have the skills and competence to deal with future threats.

There has been much discussion in recent days about the 1% pay cap, and while we immediately think of teachers, nurses and people who work in the public sector, that cap is having a huge detrimental effect on our armed forces. Is the Minister in a position to consider the Government's policy on that in terms of recruitment and retention? For the people currently in our armed forces, there is often a much more attractive life for them in civvy street, where they are not away from home for months on end and the pay and conditions are much more amenable to family life. Will the Minister commit to considering the pay deal in a future SDSR? The issue for her in doing that is that the budget is predicated on an annual 1% increase in pay for all armed forces; any more than that and the overall defence budget begins to become seriously unbalanced. With a Government whose stated aim is to live within our means, there will be no wage increase for our serving personnel beyond the 1% until the Government promote another, more flexible SDSR.

On other financial commitments in the budget, big ticket items such as the F-35 and P-8 are two examples of very expensive pieces of kit procured in the USA. We have seen those costs rise because of the weakness of the pound, which makes imports more expensive, sometimes to the tune of 20%. I know the Minister has previously said that we are hedging as much as we can to ensure the budget is protected, but we cannot protect 100% of costs involved in the current SDSR through hedging.

My final point is on shipbuilding and the Navy, which is critical to what is an island nation. After much asking, pushing and haranguing, the Minister will know that the national shipbuilding strategy is still to be published. As some people in Europe would say, "The clock is ticking." We need a commitment to replace the Type 26s and Type 31s—ships used to protect our aircraft carriers. Although there has been an announcement for three, which is welcome, three is not 13. The clock is ticking on that one. We need an SDSR that does not fight previous wars but balances the needs of all of the UK and truly meets the needs of our serving personnel and their families. On all those issues, the clock is ticking.

On Monday, *The Times* talked about some of the problems with the F-35 programme. Sir Richard Barrons called for a move away from metal and platforms and to think seriously about how to construct armed forces fit for

"warfare in the information age".

[Douglas Chapman]

That is where we are at the moment. I hope the Minister will give some consideration to the points raised and consider producing another SDSR that will meet the needs for a new century.

3.37 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I congratulate the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) on securing this debate. No doubt, the fact that he was the Conservative candidate in Caerphilly in 2015 stood him in enormously good stead in terms of his future career.

We have had a good debate, with a variety of contributions. We have heard about the Navy and the Royal Air Force as well as the Army. We have heard about Scotland, accommodation and some of the problems and dilemmas that the armed forces face in the future. We all agree that the armed forces deserve our unreserved, full and unqualified support—we are all united on that.

It has to be said that when I saw the motion of the debate on the future of the armed forces, what sprung to mind was the problems we have seen at the Ministry of Defence in the past few months, and the continuing problems that have been widely reported. There have been reports in *The Sunday Times* and *The Times* only this week about: F-35 Lightning aircraft and their cost and suitability; Type 45, 26 and 31E surface ships; the lack of surface-to-air missiles in the Navy; the difficulties of the Astute submarine; problems with the Ajax armoured vehicle programme; the Warrior capability sustainability programme; and the difficulties with the new Queen Elizabeth carrier. The list could go on and on. I want to ask the Minister specifically: when will we see the new shipbuilding strategy? It has been promised and promised, and promised again. It is high time that we saw the strategy. When will it be published?

On top of all of those difficulties, there is the lack of personnel in our armed forces. The Army is, as we have heard, woefully under strength, and rumours are rife that there may well be further cuts in the future. The RAF could certainly do with more personnel, but the shortages are most acute—arguably in the short term—in the Royal Navy.

That is happening at a time when there is greater uncertainty and unpredictability across the world than ever before. Against that backdrop, the United Kingdom is in the process of withdrawing from the European Union and questions are being asked by our traditional allies about our future co-operation with them. It has to be said that even the Americans are questioning Britain's international commitments and our resolve to make sure that our armed forces are properly equipped, with sufficient and appropriate personnel. Our answer to those concerns must be that we want to see military co-operation with our European partners continue, and more than anything else we must strongly back NATO.

In the Army, despite the Government's promises—including their 2015 manifesto commitment to have an Army strength of 82,000—the full-time strength of the Army in May 2017 was only 78,150. That is nearly 4,000 short of the MOD's 2020 target. According to information provided to my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), the Minister of State for Defence, Earl Howe, has indicated that many

of the infantry training courses that we have in this country have large vacancies. That applies to Catterick, Purbeck, Winchester and Harrogate, for infantry training courses for 2015, 2016 and 2017. This must be a cause of concern for us all.

In the Navy, there is a worry that personnel are being transferred from other ships to the new carrier because of a lack of qualified personnel. The problem is most acute regarding engineering skills, and so serious is the problem that the Royal Navy is now offering short-term contracts for ex-Navy personnel who are in their late 50s and even for 60-year-olds. Surely this highlights the need for a long-term strategic commitment to proper and well-financed training.

With regard to the Army, much of the recruitment is now in the hands of Capita, a private sector company. The contracts signed with Capita have been much criticised by the National Audit Office and there is growing disquiet in the Army itself about Capita's performance. Capita would argue that it is now meeting the targets set for it, but I am told that many of the young recruits are being falsely attracted and when they realise what the Army is all about, they leave. There is a growing problem with retention and it appears that Capita is contributing to it.

As we heard from the hon. Member for Aldershot, lessons must be learned from Iraq and Afghanistan; indeed, I would argue that lessons must be learned from all the conflict situations that we have been involved in recently. We have to recognise that the threats that we will face in the future will not be tackled simply. There is the ongoing threat of terrorism, which may assume other forms, but, as has been mentioned, there is also the threat of a growingly assertive Russia. That threat will not go away in the near future.

What we need in the future in response to those new threats is flexibility, diversity and adequate levels of funding. Yes, 2% may not be enough, certainly as it is defined by the Government, but we need appropriate co-operation with our allies, which will help to ensure the most vital ingredient of all—the good morale of all our armed forces.

3.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Harriett Baldwin): It is truly an honour to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Sir Roger, and it is a privilege to respond to this debate. It has been a very good and effective debate on a topic that we often do not have the opportunity to discuss, so I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) on securing it. I also congratulate him and his gallant colleagues on participating in it. It has been truly fascinating to hear of his distinguished service and the contribution it makes to our deliberations in this place.

I would point out that it would normally be the Minister for the Armed Forces, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster), who would respond to this debate, but he is going out to visit some of our brave men and women on deployment at the moment, so he sends his regrets for not being with us today.

Several common themes emerged in the debate. I will attempt in the time available to me to touch on each of them. The first was the importance of the armed forces covenant in all our communities. I hope that everyone

here today can share with me the aspiration that next year, when we have the 10th anniversary of Armed Forces Day, we will help our local areas to put on a really tremendous celebration. I am proud to have been part of the Government that enshrined the armed forces covenant in law in 2011.

We also heard about some of the issues around accommodation; in particular, from the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans), who spoke very forcefully. A new contract was announced today with Carillion. In the last financial year we put another £68 million into accommodation, but I will certainly pass back what the hon. Gentleman said about the issues he has seen in his constituency.

I certainly heard a lot of support from Government Members for spending at least 2% of GDP on defence. I hope that the Labour party shares that aspiration; it was in its manifesto.

Wayne David: We do.

Harriett Baldwin: Nevertheless, it is a shame that we have not had quite as good a turnout of Labour Members as we have had of Government Members.

A number of colleagues mentioned the Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Bill. That has started its passage through the House in the Lords, and I was glad to hear a range of supportive voices from the Government Benches for that legislation.

We heard about the issue around the base closure at York, which is scheduled to happen in 2031. We hope that setting such a long-term time horizon will give people the chance to plan around it, and of course there will be significant investment in the Catterick garrison, which is about an hour away from York, in terms of basing decisions.

Bob Stewart: I really must protest, Minister, that in my constituency there is not one military unit, and I want that rectified. What is she going to do about it?

Harriett Baldwin: I think that everyone can see that my hon. Friend himself embodies that military unit. Beckenham is well served in terms of the voice of the armed forces.

A number of hon. Members talked about celebrating the year of the Navy. It is a very exciting year, with HMS Queen Elizabeth going off on her sea trials from Scotland recently. It was also very exciting to announce recently the first of the new frigates, the Type 26. I assure the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) that not only will the way we are ordering the frigates ensure that we have those eight anti-submarine warfare frigates, but it will provide the best value for the public purse. That idea is behind the approach we are taking.

As far as the Type 31e is concerned, we are still in the pre-concept phase on that, and the approach that we take on procurement is that we will always make decisions at the last responsible moment.

Wayne David: Will the Minister give an assurance that she will encourage the use of as much British steel in the new frigates as is humanly possible?

Harriett Baldwin: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. We have published our requirement—I think it is about 4,000 tonnes of steel per frigate—on the Government pipeline website, and we encourage our contractor to look where possible to procure British steel.

As for the other issues raised on the naval front, a number of hon. Members asked about the national shipbuilding strategy. I can certainly say that it will be published in due course, but we are aware of the excitement in Scotland among those awaiting the report. Given the previous exciting events I have mentioned in terms of the Navy in Scotland, we do not want to overexcite the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) with everything all at once.

Douglas Chapman: I can assure the Minister that I am an extremely calm person. The time we have been waiting for the shipbuilding strategy has become unacceptable. We were told in previous debates and in answer to questions that the strategy was expected by spring. Then, in the Minister's own words, it was expected by summer. Going by the weather outside, it is summer. Can she give us a date for when she expects to make the announcement?

Harriett Baldwin: I am pleased that we are giving the hon. Gentleman ships. This week, we are cutting steel on the first of the Type 26s. We have had the HMS Queen Elizabeth sea trials. We will be naming the HMS Prince of Wales later this year. I was up in Govan cutting steel on an offshore patrol vessel earlier this year. We are giving him ships, and he will get his shipbuilding strategy in due course. By the way, he is wrong to say that there is no admiral in Scotland, because Rear Admiral John Weale, the Flag Officer for Scotland and Northern Ireland, lives on his road in Argyll and Bute.

Douglas Chapman: To clarify, I am not the Member for Argyll and Bute.

Harriett Baldwin: I apologise. The admiral lives nearby.

I want to reassure colleagues on the stories in *The Times* this week about the F-35 joint strike fighter. We strongly disagree with the conclusions that the journalists came to. We are confident that the programme is within its budget envelope, despite the fluctuation in the exchange rate. We are also proud of the amazing capability it is demonstrating. We already have 10 of the planes in the States, as colleagues will know. We have about 100 British pilots and ground crew over there, with the pilots learning how to fly them. I have had the pleasure of speaking to one of them, who used to fly the Harrier. He said that this jet is the most amazing jet he has ever come across. The Navy and the Air Force are excited about the arrival of the planes into the UK.

In terms of our overall aspiration for defence, our vision is that we will protect our people, our territories, our values and our interests at home and overseas through strong armed forces and in partnership with allies to ensure our security and to safeguard our prosperity. This debate is a welcome opportunity to reaffirm the Government's commitment to the defence and security of our country and to the armed forces, which so many Members have spoken about and of which we are all so very proud. I pay tribute to the many servicemen and

[*Harriett Baldwin*]

servicewomen who are currently involved in operations at home and overseas to ensure our safety, security and prosperity.

Our armed forces are exceptionally busy. More than 24,000 servicemen and women were deployed on operations at some point during the past 12 months. The RAF has carried out some 1,300 air strikes in Iraq and more than 140 in Syria as part of our comprehensive strategy to defeat Daesh, working with our global coalition partners. Nearly 400 British soldiers are providing engineering and medical support as part of the United Nations mission in South Sudan. Some 500 personnel are still serving in Afghanistan, working with the NATO mission to support the Afghan security forces. With NATO, we have deployed a battlegroup to Estonia. The Royal Navy continues, as it has done since 1969—that is nearly 50 years—to provide our nuclear deterrent patrols, which are at sea every minute of every hour of every day. The Navy maintains an enduring presence in the Gulf and the south Atlantic.

There are many, many other operations and deployments in which our forces are demonstrating daily their unparalleled commitment and dedication to duty, and I am sorry I can mention only those few examples in the time available. This debate is about the future shape of the armed forces. I remind Members that two years ago the Government announced the biggest programme of new investment in our armed forces for a generation. The 2015 strategic defence and security review identified an uncertain world—several colleagues have reiterated that—that is changing rapidly and fundamentally. In response, the SDSR defined the role, size and capabilities of the Navy, Army and Air Force for the next 10 years. Joint Force 25, which is now coming into being, will ensure that the armed forces remain able both to conduct the full range of operations that they might be called upon to undertake and to succeed against ever more sophisticated and capable adversaries.

Colleagues mentioned cyber-security, which is a very important area of investment. We announced a further £1.9 billion investment in the SDSR to go into our cyber capabilities, whether that is to defend the homeland, to deter people from attacking us or in the offensive capability that has been used in the conflict in Iraq and Syria. We have the fully comprehensive national cyber-security strategy too.

In the time available to me, I will skip quickly through some points. It is important to emphasise that we are committed to increasing our defence budget in every year of this Parliament. That increase is not only linked to the size of the economy, but will be at least 0.5% above inflation every year for the rest of this Parliament. We are already the second largest defence spender in NATO and the fifth largest in the world. We will sustain that investment by continuing to meet the NATO guideline.

We plan to spend £178 billion on new equipment and equipment support between 2016 and 2026. Colleagues raised points around that, but that investment will allow us to maintain the size and capabilities of the armed forces with impressive new equipment.

I have mentioned the first of the new aircraft carriers. The second is coming along pretty snappily behind. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) said, they are the largest ships that have ever been built for the Royal Navy. It is an immense achievement for those who designed and built her, and for those now serving aboard her. We have also committed to building the four new Dreadnought-class ballistic missile submarines to provide our nuclear deterrent through until the 2050s at least. I can confirm that we will have eight new Type 26 global combat ships—the anti-submarine warfare ones—and steel will be cut on the first of those by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence tomorrow in Glasgow. I have mentioned other points about the Navy.

I wanted to talk about equipment for the Army. Divisions will be further reinforced by enhanced communications, which is very important. There will also be improved Warrior infantry fighting vehicles. I simply disagree with the tone of the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David), who talked down what we are doing and talked down all these programmes. The programmes are incredibly complicated and complex, and the people involved in delivering them are to be admired and thanked. We are also doing a life extension programme for our Challenger 2 tanks. We are ordering 50 upgraded Apache and Chinook helicopters.

Without having enough time to touch even the tip of the iceberg in all the things that are happening, I will conclude. In every aspect of what makes our armed forces among the very best in the world—whether that is the equipment they operate, the training they undertake or the men and women who serve in the Navy, Army and Air Force—the Government are working and investing for the future; a future in which Britain has the right armed forces to ensure the safety and security of our people.

3.59 pm

Leo Docherty: Thank you very much for your chairmanship today, Sir Roger. I thank the Minister for responding and all colleagues who have taken the time to come and contribute today. The Romans were fond of saying, “If you wish for peace, you must prepare for war”, and I will conclude by saying that I am confident that this Government and her Ministers will allow our great country to do just that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future shape of the armed forces.

Closure of Sovereign House, Newport

[MR ADRIAN BAILEY *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the closure of Sovereign House in Newport.

It is a special pleasure to meet under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. We know of your great contributions to debates in this House, in the Council of Europe and elsewhere, but it is the first time that I have had the chance to serve under your chairmanship.

The closure of Sovereign House in Newport is causing great anxiety in the city and elsewhere, because there is a threat to other jobs. We are not Luddites in Newport. We are very proud of the civil servants we have there, who have behaved magnificently over the past 50 or 60 years. They are of growing importance in the economy of Newport because of the collapse of much of our manufacturing industry. They have done marvellous work and we are greatly proud of the contribution they have made. They are certainly at the heart of the Newport community.

Our civil servants turned out to be absolutely right on one of the few things on which they disagreed with the Government. They were very supportive of shared services, which was a disruptive but very successful Government move to concentrate services in Newport, but when there was a move to privatise services, the people involved quite rightly objected. They were absolutely right to do so, because we went from a position of having saved the country £120 million to one in which there was a loss.

As I have said throughout my time in Parliament, having watched the civil service grow, prosper and provide a marvellous service for the country, the concern is based not on any Luddite proposal or unbalanced view, but on the fact that the civil service goes through various stages in which there is a holy grail. It used to be the Next Steps agencies, and then it was outsourcing, and now we are in the era of the super-hub—people take “super-hubism” up with an almost religious fervour. I am sure that young civil servants are told, “If you want to have a successful career, go into hubism, because that’s the way we are going.” The momentum takes over.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. What the move to super-hubs neglects is the importance of having the jobs in local communities and the support they give to local communities. It also disregards the needs of workers, particularly those with caring and family responsibilities, who have the advantage of jobs close to home.

Paul Flynn: My hon. Friend makes his point with great force. That is precisely the position. People are attracted to super-hubs because they want their career to leave a legacy. If they can think that they have built super-hubs—great phallus symbols—in various places, they can relax when they eventually retire to their haciendas in Spain. It is something to be achieved, but it is not always rational or right.

I thank the Minister for having met my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) and myself to discuss the matter. We want to see a clear, practical exposition of why this decision is the right one.

To my knowledge, Sovereign House has been operating since the early '60s and has provided jobs right in the heart of the city for all that time. There are 182 people working there now, but there is capacity for 400. It is a great asset to the city. One point that is not always taken into account is that the vibrancy of the city centre depends on the workers who are there. They have their lunch in the city, use the shops and so on, so they add to it. If a city is to thrive and survive, we need that working population at its heart. Where does that point come into the calculations of those who make the decisions?

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): My hon. Friend quite rightly speaks about valuing the civil service jobs in both our constituencies, which we always speak up for. Does he agree that we not only risk losing the skills and expertise of those dedicated Department for Work and Pensions staff, but could end up spending vast amounts more by creating a more expensive super-hub that people will have difficulty travelling to?

Paul Flynn: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We must not fall into that trap. If we are going to take a decision, let us see all the facts laid out. Making people’s jobs convenient for their homes is of paramount importance—it is at the heart of the Welsh Government’s policy and I believe that they would say the same. They do not see this mania for super-hubs and bringing everything together as the answer.

There are fashions. There is a fashion for devolution and for economy of scale, and then we go in the other direction and there is a fashion for concentrating activities. These things go on, and we should not be borne along without making a reliable, scientific assessment of the advantages and disadvantages in this case.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that the possible closure and relocation of the offices in his constituency and in mine, in Merthyr Tydfil, will have a massively detrimental effect on the local economies in small towns across the area? Does he also share my concern that the added burden on staff having to travel much longer distances—in some cases requiring up to six bus journeys—would put undue pressure on workers travelling to work in those new hubs?

Paul Flynn: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Although it is Newport that is mentioned in the title of the debate, the threats are spread right around—Merthyr and Caerphilly, the Newport service centre, Cwmbran pension service and the Gabalfa DWP centre in Cardiff. They are all under threat. It is difficult to get on a balance sheet what being told that they have to travel miles further, with more awkward bus routes, means to someone who is already struggling to get to work—particularly women with parental responsibilities—and who may just be managing to cope at the moment.

We know—not from the Government but from elsewhere—that there is a plan for a hub in the Treforest trading estate, which was set up after the slump in the '20s. It has seen the success, and has been the graveyard, of many enterprises over the years. We do not want to see the Government go down this path without fully considering the human consequences.

[Paul Flynn]

One of the great successes that we have seen in employment is in making buildings accessible to the disabled, including people in wheelchairs. It is now possible in many jobs for people to use the lifts and the desks, and to use the public services. We are going to add to those problems. Where do we put that in the equation?

The Government might talk about big being beautiful and the benefits of having a large group of people together, but modern technology teaches us that it is as easy to talk to someone in Australia, or indeed in any part of the world, using various computers methods, such as Skype, as it is to talk to someone sitting at the desk next to you. The location is therefore not that important, and nor is the idea of a hub.

Will the Minister assure us that the Government have made a full assessment of the alternatives to changing Sovereign House? It is an old building and I am sure that it is run down—they all are—but they should not just dismiss it and say, “We can’t do anything with it. The hub is the only object we are considering and the only way we are going.” There should be a proper, full assessment of the costs of bringing Sovereign House up to standard. I hope that the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee will look at these issues. I have had the pleasure of being on the Committee for many years, and I will be going back to it. We must consider locations for the civil service in the future. There has not been a glorious record of unparalleled success recently—far from it. We need proper parliamentary surveillance of such decisions.

Has the Minister consulted fully with the Welsh Government on the closures and relocations? This seems to be in conflict with the policy of the Welsh Government, who have the motto, “better jobs closer to home”. They have gone that way, and we can all see the advantages. There are problems with the flow of traffic going into and out of Cardiff and Treforest—the bottom of the valleys—at that time of day. It is far better to expand Sovereign House than to move the jobs further away.

Has the Minister completely ruled out any compulsory redundancies? What is the situation? There is great anxiety among those involved. Some people are already at their limit of travel, and others may have already moved from another location. Can we guarantee that they will not be put under pressure? Have the Government looked at the equality impact of their proposals? Do they realise that women will be unfairly penalised by the change? Have they carried out an impact study of how the closures will affect the local Newport economy?

Jessica Morden: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is unfortunate that the Public and Commercial Services Union and staff learned about this plan from a leak on an architect’s website before Ministers had a chance to do an equality impact assessment of the decision on staff? Does he agree that if the equality impact assessment shows, as we think it will, that staff with travel difficulties or caring responsibilities will experience difficulties, the Minister should think again?

Paul Flynn: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am grateful to her for that intervention.

We are not looking for a reversal of Government policy if the change makes sense, but they have to prove that it makes sense not just in economic terms but in human terms. The hub will cause disruption, as I believe it will contain many more than 1,000 people. It will be a man-made hub. There are natural hubs in various parts of the country. Those in Blackpool and Newcastle, for example, have grown up due to certain unique circumstances.

This is a question of lumping together offices that have worked magnificently in Merthyr, Cardiff and Caerphilly, because of someone’s administrative theory that hubs are better. I look forward to hearing from the Minister, who has been very courteous and open about this. I hope that he will keep an open mind and say that the Government will look at this and balance the full costs—not just those that show up on a balance sheet, but the heartbreaking human problems that are likely to arise, particularly for the women who are now employed in south Wales and are likely to be transferred to the Treforest hub.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, may I point out, for transcription purposes, that the Chair is Adrian Bailey, not Sir Roger Gale? I have been called many things in my time, but never Sir Roger Gale.

4.14 pm

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): That is something we share, Mr Bailey. It is a delight to see you in the Chair. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) on securing this important debate about the closure of Sovereign House—an office of the Department for Work and Pensions—in his constituency. I thank him for his powerful words about the contribution made by the civil servants who work in Newport and elsewhere.

The Government are committed to building a country that works for everyone. We seek to protect the most vulnerable while supporting everyone to fulfil their potential and play their full part in society. That includes reforming the welfare system to make work pay, and examining our assets to ensure we are deploying our resources effectively.

As colleagues know, the private finance initiative contract with Telereal Trillium expires in March 2018. That gives us the opportunity—in fact, the imperative—to review which offices we will need in the future and how our estate will be managed. We have sought to deliver value for the taxpayer and make best use of the space available, while continuing to provide vital support to claimants and pursuing our reform agenda. In January, we announced proposals to rationalise the DWP estate. Those proposals encompassed most of our Jobcentre Plus offices and processing centres.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My Torfaen constituency is adjacent to the two Newport constituencies. As the Minister is aware, there is a proposal to relocate the jobs that are currently at the Cwmbran pension centre down to Treforest. Can the Minister confirm whether any assessment has been undertaken of the effect on the Torfaen economy of the removal of those jobs from Cwmbran? If one has been, is he willing to share it with me?

Damian Hinds: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I will come on in due course to the rationale for creating the new facility, which, as he said, will be at a site in the Treforest area, and the effect on the five places whose staff will feed into it, including Newport.

The announcement on 5 July finalised the plans to rationalise the DWP estate, which include merging some smaller and underutilised jobcentres, moving some to new buildings or shared Government premises, and creating larger strategic back-office sites. The changes will enable the Department to offer a more efficient service while delivering value for the taxpayer, and will save more than £140 million a year over the next 10 years.

Eight out of 10 claims for jobseeker's allowance, and 99% of applications for universal credit full service, are now made online. That, together with the lower unemployment rates, means that there are fewer face-to-face initial meetings, and that some of the space is under-utilised. Our plans reflect how customers interact with the Department today. The changes are not about a reduction in frontline jobcentre staff. On the contrary, jobcentres are actively recruiting staff. The changes are being made in consultation with DWP employees and the trade unions. That will help preserve the important local knowledge and community understanding held by our staff, with customer service being maintained.

We plan to maintain the vast majority of jobcentres in Wales. Three are merging into nearby sites. Upon consultation, the moves have been received positively by some staff, who will join larger teams in which they can gain new skills and experiences. I believe that in itself will result in better service for customers. We want our back-office operations to reflect the Government's hub strategy, which aims to consolidate the delivery sites of departmental functions. However, in Wales in particular, we considered it important to retain offices away from Cardiff to preserve and grow employment in places where it is needed. It is worth mentioning that we are also growing our back-office presence at our Swansea site, which will grow to around 460 people, and at Bridgend, where our staff will eventually total around 350. All in all, our back-of-house processing presence in Wales will increase by about 20%.

Of course, the change of most significance to the hon. Member for Newport West is the opening of the large DWP office in the Treforest area, just south-east of Pontypridd, in 2020-21. That strategically placed site will enable us to merge functions from five nearby smaller processing centres, including Sovereign House in his constituency. We intend to expand services at the new site and eventually grow it to around 1,600 staff, boosting employment in the area. The building will be a modern, digitally enabled working environment.

I understand that the relocation and consolidation of offices in south Wales will cause some disruption to staff. To maximise the number of staff at those five offices who could transfer to the new site, we studied their home postcodes to help determine that site's location. We were determined to retain staff who had built careers with us and minimise the loss of their valuable experience and expertise.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: When that postcode analysis was done, was analysis also done of the public transport options between those postcodes and the new centre?

Damian Hinds: Yes, looking at both car transport and public transport opportunities was of course part of the analysis when these changes were evaluated.

The Treforest area borders some of the most deprived areas in Wales, and choosing it supports the aim of the Welsh Government's valleys taskforce of creating "better jobs closer to home", which the hon. Member for Newport West cited. I met the Welsh Government's Minister for Skills and Science last week to discuss our plans and how we will support our staff through these changes.

In March this year, there were 212 staff at Sovereign House and only about 50% of the building was in use. As I mentioned, we assessed the distance that staff would travel to work at the proposed new site. Newport is 21 miles, or a 26-minute drive, from Treforest. There is also a bus, which takes around an hour and 11 minutes. Of course, journey times will differ depending on where staff live in relation to the site.

From 2021, we will start to move staff to the new site. We want to retain Newport colleagues, along with their skills and experience, and we have deliberately chosen to phase the moves so that people have time to make decisions about their futures. We are also prepared to pay staff members' excess travel costs for up to three years to assist their transition. Along with other Departments, the DWP will continue to be a significant employer in the area, and I expect the skills and experience of people who work at Sovereign House to be in demand. These changes to back-of-house sites will have no effect on claimants in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, as the jobcentre there will remain open.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether I would go into detail about the rationale for the new site, including the financial rationale. Our strategy for the new service centre in the Treforest area is to bring colleagues together at a single location, resulting in better use of space, increased efficiency in how we work, and greater opportunities for staff development and progression. However, there is also a financial rationale. Fitting out a bespoke new right-size property is better value than refurbishing our existing older properties. Although that is not necessarily universally true for all buildings, the sites in this region are particularly old.

Refurbishing older sites can have quite a high cost, as it generally entails substantial infrastructure requirements, which might include installing more lifts, air conditioning, heating, lighting, and cabling and other technology to increase bandwidth for digital services and call centres. Although we have not acquired specific refurbishment quotes for the buildings in question, industry benchmarks suggest that refurbishing all our existing buildings would cost between 50% and 100% more in fit-out than setting up a new building. Of course, such refurbishment is also disruptive both to our work and to staff. We would need to vacate a property for six to eight months and incur the cost of moving and of temporary space for that period, or move within a building multiple times to free up floors for refurbishment.

Jessica Morden: Will the Minister give way?

Damian Hinds: Will the hon. Lady forgive me if I see how we go? If time allows, of course I will.

We also expect a new building to have significantly better environmental credentials and better energy efficiency than our old buildings, creating savings in the long term.

[*Damian Hinds*]

The hon. Member for Newport West rightly asked about the risk of redundancies. Of course we want to minimise that risk. It is impossible to be absolutely clear at this stage, not least because we are talking about a move that is some years away, but we anticipate that approximately 20 staff might not be able to move to the new site. Now that announcements have been made, it is possible to be clearer about employment and career opportunities, and we will have detailed one-to-one meetings with staff between now and then.

I reassure the hon. Gentleman that we have met our equality duty under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 and paid due regard to the impact of the proposals on our communities, our staff and the customers they serve. He also mentioned the requirements of people with disabilities and how office facilities have become more accessible over time—a development we all welcome. It is of course worth considering the fact that new buildings can often be designed with the specific needs of our staff in mind, including features such as improved accessibility.

Jessica Morden: Will the Minister publish the proposed budget for acquiring the land and for designing and building the proposed hub?

Damian Hinds: As I think the hon. Lady knows, there are some things that are commercially sensitive and that it is not possible to release, and there are other things that it is possible to release. I am happy to follow up with her about that in correspondence.

I know that there is also interest in whether our plans will affect the roll-out of universal credit. I assure hon. Members that the changes take full account of the roll-out of the full universal credit service. We have ensured that our schedule of changes has the flexibility to react to changing demand—both expected fluctuations and future economic trends. From this month, we are expanding universal credit full service roll-out to 30 jobcentres a month and putting extra resources into those jobcentres and the service centres that support them.

As the way we interact with our customers changes, so do their needs and expectations. Reforms have increased our online interactions with claimants so that face-to-face contact can be used for those who require additional support. We are committed to retaining an accessible jobcentre network and continuing to serve customers in all parts of the country. Our work coaches will continue to offer face-to-face support—a core part of our service—at our sites, but customers now have a range of ways to access employment support, including email, telephone, post and online.

Around 3 million more people in this country are in work than in 2010, and youth unemployment has fallen by 375,000. The employment rate has risen to 72.9%, which is a record high. In Wales, a near-record high of 1.44 million people are in work. Now is the right time to consider how we can make best use of our resources to help bring into work those who are able to join the workforce while retaining support and safeguards for those who are not.

Question put and agreed to.

Thameslink

4.30 pm

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Thameslink passenger services.

A recent customer satisfaction survey on commuter trains by Which? ranked Thameslink third from bottom. Thameslink registered an approval rating of just 32%; it was ranked above only the beleaguered Southern and Southeastern. I want to make the Minister aware of that passenger dissatisfaction today and suggest some improvements.

My constituents report cancellations and delays almost every day on the network. Over the last twelve months, trains have been plagued with technical problems. One constituent told me that last year alone he counted 15 broken-down trains on his journeys, including two on the same day, 14 August. Cancellations are often made at short notice. They cause later trains to be extremely busy, which makes it difficult for passengers to get on or off, giving rise to what have been called cattle-truck conditions and meaning that trains often cannot stop at their planned stations. Constituents tell me that on a bad day, which is not unusual, it takes them about two hours to get from London to St Albans, despite the 19 to 22 minutes timetabled for peak-time journeys. I have been told of constituents who have given up their jobs because they cannot afford the extra childcare—some nurseries charge an extra £50 per hour's delay—or are unable to see their children in the evening. Many are consistently late for work despite leaving home earlier and earlier.

The Train Suffragettes are 500 mostly female parents in my constituency who were so fed up with the poor service they receive that they set up a group to show their collective unhappiness. They have shared with me their terrible experiences trying to balance work in London with family life in St Albans. They have missed school plays and parents' meetings and rarely get to put their children to bed. Persistent delays have driven many of them to quit their jobs, and some have even moved away from the Thameslink line altogether. One mum told me:

“After calling in favours too many times from too many people and being late for nursery pick-ups three times in one week alone (once where I was actually stuck on the train for an hour with no phone signal and so unable to call anyone at the nursery), I quit my job in the city in October. Financially a difficult decision but I'd had a skinful of the stress of the commute, wondering if my train home would be on time or if I would have to sprint from the office to get the earlier train, which was often cancelled too.”

A lot of technical problems have been reported with the new Siemens 700 trains, mainly with electrics, software and heating. The doors often fail to open, especially at St Pancras, because they are now controlled by the driver; one day a train sat at the station for about 20 minutes because the driver could not open the doors. I know that Thameslink is aware of those problems. There has been some welcome recent progress, including an increase in Govia Thameslink's public performance measurement from 60% to 83%, but that is still well below the national average of 88.95%.

Over the last year, Network Rail was responsible for 54% of delays, Thameslink for 42%, and other causes for 4%. We appreciate that ongoing Network Rail works

have an impact on the line, but that is no excuse for rail services not to provide a reliable timetabled service or to try to deliver improvements to it. My constituents not only suffer a poor service but get far less generous compensation than Southern Rail passengers when incidents occur. That cannot be acceptable. Network Rail should have better lines of communication with Govia and passengers. People need to know as quickly as possible why they have been delayed and what they can do to avoid disruption.

In the 2016-17 financial year, one in 11 trains run by GTR was cancelled or more than 30 minutes late—the worst performance of all the rail operators in the country. In period 3 of 2016-17, GTR had a cancellation and significant lateness percentage of 15.7%, compared with a 5.7% national average. In period 3 of 2017-18, GTR had a considerably reduced failure rate of 6.6%, but that is still nearly double the national average of 3.7%.

In my first debate on this matter in 2012, I said that First Capital Connect, which then held the franchise—it has now been replaced by Govia—was ranked

“lowest in the country, including value for money, punctuality, sufficient room on trains, satisfaction with the stations and how the train operating companies...dealt with the delays.”—[*Official Report*, 2 February 2012; Vol. 539, c. 342WH.]

Five years on, despite the change of franchise, nothing has changed. GTR still consistently ranks among the operators with the lowest customer satisfaction public performance measures.

The failings that other hon. Members and I raised five years ago remain failings today. Something must be done to improve Govia passenger services for all those who rely on them. It is a simple premise that to deliver an efficient, mobile workforce, we need a decent, well run and affordable rail transport service. People of all ages expect a rail service fit for the 21st century. The travelling public are being asked to pay ever more for their rail fares, and we in Parliament must ask serious questions about the services they are experiencing up and down the country.

I could not speak in a debate on commuter train services in my constituency without referring to the shadow being cast by the Radlett rail freight proposal, which my hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden) and I believe may have a catastrophic impact on the already hugely inadequate commuter service. The application for this strategic rail freight site started in 2006. In December 2016—10 years after assurances were given that access would be granted—Network Rail said that it would be in a position to confirm an “efficient scheduling strategy” once the capability and capacity analysis team completed its evaluation. However, it responded only last week, and its response, which was about essential works disruption and pathing, raises far more questions than it answers.

The Government’s national policy statement on national networks in 2014 identified London and the south-east as the areas with busiest passenger services, with passenger carriage set to increase by 46.1% by 2033. Moreover, the Department for Transport’s 2016 rail freight strategy said:

“Rail freight services operate in response to customer and supply chain demands, making it more challenging to plan for freight services than passenger services, which tend to run to a regular timetable and route.”

Commuters in my constituency certainly wish passenger services would run to a regular timetable and route.

Will the Minister guarantee that the proposed strategic rail freight interchange will not add further delays and cancellations for my constituents, who are already at breaking point? Will he undertake to scrutinise any plans to deliver the site link tunnel, and will he test those plans against the potential disruption to services? I am concerned that the significant rail works necessary to deliver the site will mean a protracted period of disruption that cannot be justified by the site’s limitations. In case the Minister is not aware, the site is in a village with no motorway access. It has a life span of 30 years and is constrained from expansion, unlike the expansion forecast for passenger services. This inadequate proposal cannot be allowed to interfere with the exciting prospect of better and more frequent passenger services for my constituents.

What can be done to improve the current situation? Commuter groups such as the Train Suffragettes in St Albans have suggested changes that would go a long way towards improving the overall service that passengers receive. The first is a consistent and user-friendly refund system to allow passengers to reclaim expenditure, including taxi costs incurred because of delays and cancellations. The second is opening station ticket barriers when there have been delays, in order to ease platform congestion, which is often described as being at a dangerous level.

The third suggestion, which is vital, is to improve communication at all levels. Passengers are fed up with being in the dark when trains have been delayed or cancelled. They have suggested following the model of the London underground, where—as I am sure the Minister is aware—when a tube is held in a tunnel, the driver immediately makes an announcement to let passengers know the reason for delay and how long a wait is anticipated. When a tube station is closed, the driver will helpfully suggest alternative connecting routes for passengers.

The fourth suggestion, which is regularly raised, relates to communication between drivers and staff at stations—St Albans station in my case. Passengers need to be able to speak to station staff to find out exactly what is going on and what has caused the delay or cancellation.

Finally, passengers demand that fares be reduced, or at least frozen, until Thameslink vastly improves the service on the line. I called for the same thing in 2012, but five years later the catastrophic situation that my constituents are experiencing is exactly the same. We also face the impact of the strategic rail freight interchange’s disruptions being put into the mix. I suggest that we are on our knees in St Albans, and the Minister needs to take drastic action now.

4.40 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on securing the debate; it is a welcome opportunity to raise the misery being caused to my constituents as a consequence of the failures of our rail services.

It is hard to overstate the cumulative impact of failing rail services on my constituents in Dulwich and West Norwood over the past two years. The hon. Lady mentioned the bottom three franchises for customer satisfaction

[Helen Hayes]

being Southern, Southeastern and Thameslink. Those are the only franchises that operate in my constituency, so we have, on different parts of the route, different combinations of misery. Commuting by rail from my constituency is a universally difficult and miserable experience.

The debate is focused on Thameslink passenger services, which I will return to in a moment, but it would be remiss of me to contribute to a debate on one part of the GTR franchise without putting on the record the utter misery caused to my constituents who travel on Southern Rail services, which are also run by GTR. I have heard from almost 2,000 constituents over the past 18 months about the catastrophic impact that the collapse in Southern rail services has had on their employment, family life and wellbeing.

The Government's response to Southern Rail's problems has been, frankly, too little, too late. While everyone understands that many of the problems can only be resolved through infrastructure investment, there is much more that can and should be done in the short term to provide passengers with timely information about delays and cancellations, and to re-establish effective negotiations with the trade unions to address the safety concerns that have been raised and to resolve the industrial dispute. The fact that the chief executive of GTR, who has responsibility for the Southern Rail franchise as well as Thameslink services, received a pay package of almost half a million pounds last year simply adds insult to injury for my constituents.

Thameslink services run through Tulse Hill, Herne Hill and Loughborough Junction stations in my constituency, in addition to peak-time services through Sydenham Hill and West Dulwich. Those services are vital for people who work in areas of central London, including Blackfriars, Farringdon and the City of London, or areas of intensifying employment, such as King's Cross and Old Street, or those who need to access the tube network from Elephant and Castle. I was a Thameslink commuter to Farringdon, and then to Blackfriars, for the best part of 20 years prior to being elected to Parliament.

Thameslink services have been becoming more overcrowded and less reliable for many years. Passengers who use stations in my constituency have suffered the consequences of residential densification further down the line, meaning that it is now often impossible to get a seat or even to stand comfortably on trains that were not previously so full. With the exception of Herne Hill station, which has lifts, the stations in my constituency are not accessible. Loughborough Junction is a particularly challenging station to use, with very steep steps and narrow, windswept platforms. At peak times, passengers at Loughborough Junction are often unable to board trains at all because they are so overcrowded. The Loughborough Junction area is currently subject to considerable new residential development, increasing the number of homes in the area. New homes are badly needed, but they must be supported by investment in transport infrastructure to ensure that everyone in the community can continue to get to and from work and to access the services they need.

The current services are also desperately unreliable. There are delays and cancellations every day, and my constituents are forced to organise their lives in order to

mitigate the impact of services they should be able to rely on. New rolling stock is slowly being introduced, and while to some extent those trains provide a more comfortable environment with more standing space, they are often just as overcrowded as the old ones. There is a view among many passengers that they should have been designed like Overground trains, with seating at the sides, to allow much more space for passengers who have to stand. We need 12-car trains across the network and investment to ensure that they can be accommodated at every station to maximise capacity for passengers.

I am also concerned about the potential loss of the direct service from my constituency to Luton airport. My constituents will now only be able to access that really important service by changing at Elephant and Castle, where trains are even more overcrowded. I am concerned that fewer trains will stop at Tulse Hill, Herne Hill and Loughborough Junction overall as a consequence of the timetable changes, in a situation where we need capacity to be increased, to cope with both current and future demand.

I am concerned that services currently run by Thameslink through Sydenham Hill and West Dulwich stations and not included in the current consultation may be lost if, in the Southeastern franchise renewal process, they are not considered to be sufficiently profitable. Those services are small in number but provide a vital route to work for many of my constituents. We need much more ambitious investment in rail infrastructure than is currently proposed to meet the transport needs of my constituents, as both our local population and the population further out of London on the same commuter lines continue to grow.

I have the following asks of the Minister today. The experience of the failure of the temporary timetable on the Southern network into London Bridge tells us that the robustness of the timetable in relation to the capacity of the network is a paramount consideration for reliability. When will the Minister confirm the capacity of the Thameslink core in relation to the proposed new timetable? Will he commit to exploring the reopening of Camberwell station between Loughborough Junction and Elephant and Castle stations, to provide extra capacity and a modern, fully accessible station environment to serve local residents, staff and patients travelling to King's College Hospital and students travelling to the University of the Arts London sites in Camberwell and Elephant and Castle?

Will the Minister commit to ensuring there is no drop in the number of services through Loughborough Junction, Tulse Hill and Herne Hill stations following the consultations on the new timetable? Will he commit to securing the future of services to Blackfriars from Sydenham Hill and West Dulwich? Will he commit to exploring the reopening of the eastern platforms at Loughborough Junction station, to enable trains to stop there between Denmark Hill and Elephant and Castle? That would double capacity at Loughborough Junction station. Will he commit to working with Transport for London to open an Overground station at Brixton East, between Denmark Hill and Clapham High Street stations, to relieve pressure on the Thameslink network?

Will the Minister work to persuade the Secretary of State, who has not previously been inclined to do so, to work in a cross-party way with the Mayor of London to transfer all suburban rail services in south London to

Transport for London to run, so that profits can be reinvested in the improvements we so urgently need, rather than being used to reward the poor performance of senior leaders in the private sector? Finally, can the Minister tell my constituents when they will be able to rely on rail services to run to the agreed timetable, without delays and cancellations, and when they can stop having to organise their lives around the failures of the GTR franchise, including the Southern railway?

4.47 pm

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): May I begin by thanking you for your chairmanship, Mr Bailey? I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main). I know what a doughty campaigner she has been on this topic. My remarks are only intended to echo some of the points she has made, and indeed some of the points made by the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes).

I should begin by declaring an interest: I commute, for my sins, on this line every day, so I have first-hand experience of it, but also a desire to improve it, as do many of my constituents. Literally thousands of my constituents commute every day from Radlett and Elstree and Borehamwood on that line into central London. They, like other hon. Members' constituents, have sorry tales to tell of the poor performance of the line.

I will give a few statistics. At times last year, less than two thirds of Thameslink trains ran on time. Almost one in five trains were cancelled or significantly late. The level of frustration and volume of correspondence that I received in relation to that poor performance led me eventually to compile a dossier of more than 100 complaints from constituents, which I was able to present to the Transport Secretary. They were very similar to the complaints outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans. The most distressing cases were those of people who felt they had to give up their jobs because they could not rely on the service, and of younger mums and dads struggling with childcare. We know what it is like with childcare—we think we are going to pick our kids up at a certain time, so we allow, say, an hour for the train journey, but it takes two hours. The nursery is closing, and the level of stress involved if family or friends cannot pick our children up is enormous.

Commuters in my constituency are seeking a number of reassurances. I know that many of these do not fall within the direct purview of the Minister—they fall within the purview of the franchisee—but I hope he will be able to bring some pressure to bear on the franchisee in relation to them. Specific points that constituents have asked me to raise include the problem of trains switching at the last minute. I have seen that: people get on a train thinking it is an all-stopper or a semi-fast train, and literally moments before it is about to depart, they suddenly discover that it is either not going to stop where they thought or stopping at every stop. Communicating that effectively to commuters is very important. My hon. Friend drew the comparison with London Underground. Thameslink has been improving a little in this respect, but there is still a lot more it could do to keep passengers up to date with what is going on as it happens. If people know what is happening, it makes things that bit easier. Even if it just involves sending someone a text to say they will be late, it makes it a little easier.

There is also tremendous variability in the length of trains. There can be a full platform waiting for an eight-car train and suddenly there is a four-car train that not everybody can get on. A perennial bugbear for my constituents—although I admit it probably runs contrary to the interests of my hon. Friend's constituents—is that too few trains stop at Elstree and Borehamwood and Radlett, instead running directly to St Albans. When there are delays on the line, my constituents are just looking to get home, and in those circumstances they would look for trains stopping every time. I would be grateful for an update on anything the Minister can do to raise the pressure on that.

There is also a broader question about the infrastructure. A great number of my constituents drive to and park at the station. In both Elstree and Borehamwood and Radlett there are single-tier carparks. I simply do not understand why another level or two cannot be put on those carparks. Given the incredibly high parking fees charged by Thameslink, it would be in its interests to construct other levels. I am interested in the Minister's perspective on that. As the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood said, as the level of densification in these areas of the south-east inevitably continues to rise, the demand for the station will only continue to grow. Equally, there is the issue of capacity at the station. I am grateful for the Government's progress on Borehamwood station—they have announced some additional funding, which is very gratefully received—but that money needs to continue to flow so that we can keep up with the ever-rising demand.

I echo the concerns about the pricing of the railway line. By many measures, this is the most expensive railway line per kilometre travelled not only in the United Kingdom but in the whole of Europe. If passengers are being forced to pay that much, the service really does need to improve to match it. I know that anything the Minister can do to keep pressure on the company to find further efficiency savings to keep the cost of commuting down would be very gratefully received by constituents.

It is also important to look at what happens when things go wrong. As my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans alluded to, the compensation scheme is still not simple and transparent enough, and does not cover a lot of the on-costs. For example, if the line is down, my constituents living in Radlett or Borehamwood often have no alternative than to go to the very end of the Jubilee line and then take a taxi from Stanmore. That is in no way covered in the compensation scheme. It is a completely unavoidable cost for my constituents, and that should be considered.

It is also important to look not just at the franchisee but at Network Rail. Too often, we concentrate on the failures of the franchisee, not those of Network Rail. It is to the Government's great credit that when faced with a dire financial situation in 2010 they decided not to cut back on railway investment. They kept the investment going for Crossrail and for the rather unfortunately named Thameslink 2000 programme. We are hopeful that Thameslink 2000 will be delivered by 2020, but that process has necessitated considerable upgrades at London Bridge. That was clearly necessary, but it has had a bad knock-on effect on commuter services, because capacity has been significantly reduced around the station. I would be grateful for an update from the Minister about

[*Oliver Dowden*]

progress on that upgrade. When can we expect London Bridge to be completed, and when can we expect trains to start fully running through there?

An issue has been flagged to me that I would be grateful if the Minister took very seriously. Capacity in the London core of Thameslink will be effectively doubled overnight when trains go up the northern stretch—on which my hon. Friend's and my stations lie—not just towards Bedford, but to Hitchin and Harpenden. That will mean huge pressure through the central core. At times, there could be trains every minute or two minutes. I know the system will be computerised, but I would be grateful if departmental officials stress-tested the system before roll-out so that we do not face a cliff edge. After all the pain, the moment the system at St Pancras is not working—my hon. Friend alluded to this—we would not want to go back to square one again and have a complete failure of the service.

I would be grateful if the Minister updated me on plans to integrate between franchisees and Network Rail, as announced by the Secretary of State. That is important. One of the problems of privatisation was the artificial distinction, and it is important that we close that distinction. An update would help us understand how that can be addressed in the longer run.

Let me quickly turn to two final issues. There is a desperate need for the Oyster card system to be extended to Radlett. I know the Minister is on the case, but an assurance from him to my constituents that that will be delivered by 2018 would be gratefully received—and the same goes for Potters Bar, which is not on Thameslink but is served by Govia Thameslink, the wider holding company.

We cannot discuss rail freight without looking at the rail freight terminal: the disastrous development that is entirely unsuited to our part of Hertfordshire. My hon. Friend the Member for St Albans and I continue to campaign against it, but if it is to go ahead, we must look at its impact on the railway line. At the meeting we both had with Network Rail, it updated us that the development will involve putting a line under the existing line to access the rail freight terminal. When we think about the infrastructure involved in building one railway line under another, it is difficult to conceive that that will not involve significant delays. I would be grateful for an update on that and, in particular, an assurance that the full cost will rightly be borne by the developer, and that means minimising disruption to passengers, even if that means a higher development cost. Given all that we have heard, it is simply not fair for commuters to bear the cost in terms of delayed journeys for the developer to get a cheaper deal.

Equally, I would be grateful for some reassurance on timetabling. I know Network Rail's argument is that there are already allocated slots, but those slots are not being used by freight trains at the moment. I fear we will lose capacity once they are being used continuously by the rail freight terminal. Some reassurances would be gratefully received.

I thank the Minister for coming here. I was on the radio just now talking about this, and the interviewer said, "This is the last day of term. You will all be watching videos, relaxing." I trust that the Minister will completely disprove that and demonstrate that he will address this issue with vigour.

4.58 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey, in this crucial debate. We have seen the passion presented by all hon. Members on the challenges that their constituents face not just day by day, but week by week, month by month and year by year. The sheer dissatisfaction, frustration and misery that commuters have had to put up with for such a long time shows that resolution is crucial. The passenger must be listened to. We have obviously heard about the disruption brought not only to the commute, but to family life. I give all credit to parents who try to arrange childcare under the best of circumstances, but when they face an unreliable train service as well, the pressures are immense. All hon. Members have articulated that well this afternoon.

When passengers turn into activists and take action against what should be a normal part of their routine and daily life—such as the Train Suffragettes and others I know as well—it really shows that the whole rail system is in meltdown and has to be addressed. As we have heard, it is not just about train operating companies, because this has been a sustained problem across the network for such a long time. However, Thameslink particularly stands out. It has the second-lowest level of passenger satisfaction, at 73%—only Southern, at 65%, is behind—and has issues with punctuality and reliability, as we have heard. Southeastern trains are also not delivering for passengers, which is now spreading to Northern as well. With regard to Thameslink, things have not improved for several years now. When a staggering 23% are satisfied with how the company has dealt with delays, it really shows that it is left wanting, as has the whole situation.

What we have really picked up on today are the consequences of that unreliability, the infrastructure problems, the desperate need for investment and the massive overcrowding issues. The overcapacity issue will not going away, as more housing developments will put further strain on the network. We have also heard about challenges with the choice of destination, the obvious need for improvements right across the network and the impact that late or cancelled trains have on commuters.

It is important that we listen to these real frustrations. We cannot allow the situation to continue in which the Government point fingers but do not lift one to sort out what is happening. We know that there is real chaos in the way the franchise was set up, as was rightly highlighted when the Gibb report was debated in the main Chamber on 4 July. We know that there needs to be effective governance over the whole structure, which has been lacking, to ensure that issues are addressed expediently and that proper dispute resolution mechanisms are put in also. At the forefront of everything, we need to make sure that passengers' concerns are addressed and that their safety is safeguarded. We also heard about access needs, and the fact that some train journeys are simply impossible for passengers with disabilities.

Another point that was rightly raised was the financial cost to passengers. We have seen rail prices go up by 27% since 2010 on this rail network, which is the most expensive not only in the UK but in the whole of Europe, meaning that passengers are having to pick up the cost of this failed network. We are expecting further price increases in August, and we have heard the figure

of 4%—perhaps the Minister can enlighten us on that. We need certainty on pricing; all passengers, whether on Thameslink or other networks, really want to know what is happening on pricing. The Opposition believe that price rises should be capped in line with the consumer prices index. We have heard different answers from different Ministers from the Department: we have heard that price rises will continue to be capped in line with the retail prices index; we have heard twice from the Minister that pricing is under review; and we have also heard that things will be kept as they are this year—but that does not say what will happen next year. Passengers need clarity on pricing.

We need to make sure that we move forward with smart ticketing, which we heard several contributions on. Where are we at with part-time smart ticketing, which will impact on many of those parents? It is an equality issue and we need to move forward on it. We also need to make sure that we see greater flexibility in smart ticketing, including the extension of the Oyster card. With the technology that is in place, how is delay repay being rolled out on the Oyster card? There are opportunities there. Of the amount of money that the network gains, only a minimal amount reaches the customer. The process of trying to reclaim after a delay is difficult.

Mrs Main: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Many of my passengers say that they do not want to have to claim; they simply want the service they have paid for. Delay repay is better, but on the other hand the service needs to improve, because otherwise they just get money back for a bad service. That is not what they want; they want the journey they were guaranteed.

Rachael Maskell: I completely agree with the hon. Lady. However, we also need to ensure that, where there has been a delay, passengers are properly compensated, given that they have paid so much for the privilege of travelling on that network. Between 2010 and 2015, the train operating company generated £575 million from Network Rail for infrastructure delays, yet only £73 million went to passengers, so we have to question who benefits. Again, it comes back to governance over the system, which is poor. That comes up many times. It is a theme that is repeated in every aspect of how the franchise works. The franchise has failed passengers. We need to see delay repay extended so that the customer can be compensated automatically, as opposed to trying to seek out that compensation.

We also need to look at what has happened with the Thameslink programme. It was first put in place in 2006, so those years are moving forward. We need to see that the objectives now being met are not at the inconvenience of passengers—such as major track work, signalling and station remodelling, improvements to the lines approaching London Bridge and the overhead lines north of St Pancras. The programme was very ambitious, but without proper governance it has not been realised. On the issue of capacity, as 24 trains an hour move through the core of central London, the risks increase. We cannot even get the service moving right at the moment. We need to hear from the Minister what mitigation is being put in place to reduce risk and ensure that trains run on time and that passengers reach their destinations on time. About 14,500 additional passengers will use that network.

The Gibb report goes further on the issues that need to be addressed across the networks. It also addresses GTR's responsibilities and Network Rail. The issues it identified include rail renewal, switching and sleeper renewal. The list goes on to talk about telecoms and cable signalling and dealing with things such as vegetation, earthworks and fencing—it is comprehensive. We need to ensure that the improvement programme is put in place and delivered by 2018. We do not want the stop-start approach to maintenance and development. We want to see the investment running into the CP6 funding round from 2019. What exactly is the Minister doing to make sure there is ongoing investment in the railway?

We must thank Chris Gibb for his report, but we must also note the responsibility to move forward on many of the problems experienced across the Thameslink network. We also need to address the issues raised by the Transport Select Committee, which has identified how poorly the franchise has been established. The relationships do not work between the train operator, Network Rail and the passenger. That must be put right. Changing an operator does not change the environment, which is so important. It is right that the Committee highlighted the problems with the initial structuring of the franchise, the inadequate planning that was put in place, weaknesses in the franchising handover period, infrastructure and rolling stock failures, mismanagement, and poor industrial relations.

I want to talk about industrial relations, because it is so important that these issues are addressed. We have people working on the rail network who are seriously concerned about passenger safety and access. We have heard about the overcrowding, which increases risk, and the real challenges on the network. More commuters will be using the line and it is vital that public safety comes first. The unions have been clear that this is not a dispute about money; their concern is about public safety.

I have spoken to train drivers in the last couple of days, and they say it is vital that they have a second pair of eyes. If they miss something, the other person can help pick it up. They say it is vital that there is someone there to deal with incidents, whatever they may be, because it is unpredictable. It could be a driver falling ill, a fatality on the rails, a terrorist attack, derailment or a crash, women's safety at night or antisocial behaviour disturbing other customers. Of course, guards play a much wider role in maximising revenue collection and providing passengers with a wider service. We have heard today how important that service is, particularly with the line of communication, which a number of hon. Members have mentioned. They can let passengers know information, be the first port of call and be the passengers' champion when needed.

I urge the Minister to address those vital issues. We must get the rostering right to ensure that the trains run on time and address the issues in this dispute. This is not rocket science; the dispute is simple to resolve. I know, as a negotiator, that the Minister just needs to sit down and make sure the guards are in place and can continue with their role. It is incumbent on him to sort this out. I know it is not beyond his wit, and I trust he will do so.

In conclusion, we have heard about the painful experiences of commuters. We must remember that the whole rail network is there as a service—a public service—to help passengers continue with their employment

[*Rachael Maskell*]

opportunities and their daily lives. It is absolutely right that focus is now brought on the way the franchises and relationships are not operating and that that is worked through, to bring the service back to customers. That is why the Labour party believes that public services now need to be a public accountability, in public ownership. For far too long, decisions have been made away from the passenger. We want to see the passenger at the heart of those decisions, putting safety and service needs at the forefront and building the structures around the passenger.

I have heard all the frustrations, and Labour will take those on board and work with passengers to make sure that we can provide the service needed in the future. We will keep the pressure on the Government, as the passengers' voice throughout this process.

5.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on securing this debate and presenting her case, as she always does, with great vigour and force; I expect no less from her. She is right to hold Ministers to account for the service on her railway.

Passengers expect a timely, punctual and reliable service, and when they do not get it, they are right to want to understand why, and what Ministers and the train operators intend to do about it. This has been a helpful debate on what is occurring with Thameslink, and I am grateful to both the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) and my hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden) for their contributions. There was also a sensible contribution from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell). We may not agree on the final paragraphs of her speech, but I thought that much of what she said made great sense.

I am aware of how important it is that we deal with this issue. As I said, passengers want a service that they can rely upon, and if they cannot, that should be a concern for us all. The Thameslink service is vital for our country, not least because our capital city depends upon it. Reliability of services through central London is critical. It is one of Europe's busiest rail routes, so it is right that passengers will see new stations—and better stations, in fact—new trains, new infrastructure and new systems to increase capacity, reduce crowding and provide better connections for passengers across London and the wider south-east.

A number of points have been made in the debate, but I want to focus first and foremost on answering the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans. I often find that these one-hour debates are neither fish nor fowl, and I want to give proper attention to the points made by the Member who secured the debate without ignoring the other points made. Normally I run out of time in that ambition, so if I do not manage to respond to all the points now, I ask Members to make sure that I reply to them all subsequently.

The first point made by my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans was about the impact of the new trains. Of course, people want new trains. It is right to point

out that the new Thameslink trains have advanced technology; they are more spacious and modern by their very definition. We have contracted Siemens to deliver 115 of them overall. We have 37 currently in service, between Bedford and Brighton, on the Wimbledon loop and on services in Kent. We expect all Thameslink services to be served by Class 700 trains by October 2017.

Train performance on the brand-new trains is improving bit by bit every period, but I recognise that it has not been good enough. I have spoken to Siemens myself to urge improvement. I know that it is working very closely with GTR. With every software improvement we see a significant improvement, but it is worth bearing it in mind that this platform is a step beyond what Siemens has produced before with its Desiro platform. There will always be slightly more challenges with such a new piece of rolling stock, but we are seeing significant improvement over time, and I fully expect to see significant improvement in reliability over the coming weeks.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Albans gave a number of examples of where her constituents were not getting the service they desire. I have been hearing those tales about this GTR network since I started in this role last July, and that is what has inspired me to focus on trying to deliver the rail ombudsman that we had in our manifesto as rapidly as I can. That is making good progress. I want to ensure that passengers can get binding arbitration at the end of the day where they cannot secure the right outcome from their appeals. We do not want these situations to occur—far from it—but where they do, I want the passenger to feel empowered. That is why I wanted to ensure that we had passenger representation on the Gibb report panel, for example—to ensure that their voice was being heard.

I was fascinated to hear about the Train Suffragettes to whom my hon. Friend referred. I would be delighted if she could send me more of their ideas about how the service could be improved, and I would be happy to take on board as many of them as possible.

Oliver Dowden: I should also highlight Thamestink, which is the campaign group in my constituency. I would be grateful if the Minister could extend the invitation to that group as well.

Paul Maynard: I always risk creating extra work for my private office in inviting all submissions, wherever they are from, but I am more than happy to receive them and give them my full attention.

A number of hon. Members mentioned what is referred to in the industry as passenger information during disruption. It has been a major concern of mine that passengers may, at the breakfast table, consult their mobile phone, get one piece of information that their train is running, beetle down to the station to get the train and then discover that for some reason it has been cancelled. There are too many sources of information across the industry. The Office of Rail and Road has two key obligations under law. One is improving passenger information during disruption. I have asked it to look closely at how that is working across the south-east quadrant as a whole, because I have concerns about both GTR and Southeastern ensuring that we have consistent information. I accept that that is a key point, and it is one that I am taking up.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Albans has raised concerns both with me and with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State about the Radlett freight interchange. Those representations were augmented today by my hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden). I genuinely recognise those concerns; that is why I want to ensure that the timetable is protected from the impact of the works. Network Rail has reassured my Department, just as it has reassured both my hon. Friends, that the work at Park Street has been planned to have minimum impact on passengers, as freight trains will run only outside peak times and overnight, but I recognise that the concerns remain and that there is a wish to have greater oversight of the detail of what is being planned. I suspect the best thing I can offer is to broker a meeting with Network Rail, with me present as well, and perhaps we can test some of those assumptions against what my officials and the Department are also aware of. That might be of assistance to my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans, so we will co-operate as best we can to try to find that reassurance.

My hon. Friend also mentioned overcrowding at St Albans station. We are extending the platform to accommodate 12-carriage trains as part of the Thameslink programme. GTR is working to deliver extended automatic ticket gates at platform 4, which I believe is called the Ridgmont entrance, by 2019. The main station building will also receive an enhanced retail offering, a larger concourse area to accommodate peak periods and associated platform furniture and shelter facilities to improve the station environment. I recognise that there remain capacity concerns at St Albans station. We are thinking through the implications of that for future rail control periods.

In terms of future Thameslink services and how they will benefit St Albans, it is a matter of improved peak frequency and more capacity between central London, St Albans and Bedford, with more peak services, new cross-London routes, and Thameslink services reinstated to serve London Bridge. I expect passengers to see more comfort benefits, with more than 3,000 standard-class seats into London St Pancras, which is 15% extra from today, particularly through using the 12-carriage trains.

Essentially, Thameslink is all about expanding capacity on a key commuter route. We are trying to deliver the trains and the infrastructure to enable that, with 24 trains an hour in the peak through the Thameslink core between Blackfriars and St Pancras, which is an additional nine trains in each direction.

Part of our focus is on making sure that we have the right infrastructure—not just track but signalling. My hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere is right to identify that we need to make sure that signalling and timetabling are robust. We have a planning board, chaired by Chris Gibb, of Gibb report fame, and an assurance panel, chaired by another industry expert, Chris Green, double-checking the work that is going on to make sure it is reliable and will deliver the outputs that we seek.

To date, the Thameslink programme has delivered a new Blackfriars station connecting both side of the Thames. We have seen major enhancements at Farringdon, platform extensions on midland main line stations to allow longer trains and, as I said, 37 of the new class 700 trains. There are new maintenance depots at Three Bridges in Crawley and Hornsey in north London, and

many hon. Members will be familiar with the new London Bridge station, two thirds of the concourse of which has been open since August 2016.

What else can passengers expect? The rest of London Bridge station will be open for business in early 2018. The new class 700 trains will start operating on Great Northern routes and on services in Kent and Sussex. Entire new journeys, such as Cambridge to Gatwick, will open up new journey options and connections for customers, including an interchange with the Elizabeth line services at Farringdon, which I think will transform how people approach travel options within London. Most importantly, from 2018 there will be services every two to three minutes through the central London core between Blackfriars and St Pancras International.

I recognise concerns about performance. We have seen performance steadily improving since the start of the year. When we are able to focus on improving the network, rather than just on industrial relations, we can deliver a real improvement in performance, working together with the drivers. The jump in public performance from 62% last December to a high of 85% this year reinforces that point, but I recognise that we need to do better—85% is still not good enough. We continue to have an immense amount of pressure on the network.

We are also looking carefully at the future Thameslink timetable. Journeys will be improved with better travel across the network, but modern track will make journeys more reliable and new trains will provide additional capacity. GTR has been actively seeking feedback from any interested parties on the timetable changes to make sure that they best match passenger need. The second stage of the consultation has just closed and we are looking carefully at what people are saying.

As I mentioned earlier, our Thameslink industry readiness board, chaired by Chris Gibb, is doing important work. Thameslink brings many other franchises on to its network, and the board is looking at making sure we maximise the potential for all aspects of the train network.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Albans mentioned delay repay, as did the shadow Minister. We have brought “delay repay 15” specifically into GTR as the first franchise to trial it, because we recognise the impact that the disturbances across the network as a whole have had. I share the concern that we need to explain more carefully that the impact of Thameslink is not just felt south of London. It is often hard to envisage how Thameslink is a regional service. What occurs north of London has an impact south of London and vice versa. It is worth highlighting, for example, that right-time presentation, as we call it—in other words, the right-time arrival of the train at the station—is rarely higher than 50% on services from the north of London going south through to Brighton. That indicates that problems in Brighton on trains going northwards also impact on punctuality and reliability, so investment in both sides of the central core is absolutely crucial.

We have improved delay repay, although I take on board the point about improving its delivery. We have to be careful about our terminology, as I have learned. Automated compensation is about improving the behind-the-scenes progress of individual train operating companies. It is about someone getting their compensation without doing anything to achieve it. That requires them to demonstrate that they have been on the train in question. They can either nominate their usual commuter train,

[Paul Maynard]

in which case it can be automatic compensation, or, where they have not specified a train, they must prove that they were on the delayed train. There is sadly a risk of fraud, and we are talking about considerable sums of money from regular commuters, so there has to be that element of assurance.

I share the ambition of the hon. Member for York Central, which is why I have been pushing for delay repay to be rolled out as much as possible. Passengers have a right to expect it. We need to be much better at making people aware of it and confident about using it. I would rather, as my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans said, that there were no delays at all; then we would have a better service in the first place.

As I often mention, there is a £300 million investment in improvement across the Thameslink network. Not all of that is occurring south of London. Hon. Members may think this an issue just on the Brighton main line, but it is not. We are investing in additional land sheriff shifts to reduce trespass and railway crime across the entire length of the line, and there will be more use of predict and prevent condition-monitoring software and processes on the infrastructure. There will be additional incident response teams and embankment works at New Barnet. All of that is occurring north of London on the stretch that covers St Albans. Because of the point I made earlier about interaction, service delays, either north or south, inevitably have an impact on St Albans at some point.

We will continue to deliver that £300 million until December 2018, when we cease the current control period. We will need to invest further in control period 6, and we will be making future announcements about how that spending will be allocated. We are committed to doing what is needed to bring this stretch of track up to the standards required to deliver timely and punctual rail services.

I will try to make a bit of progress, because I recognise that I have not covered any of the points made by the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood. I am not sure whether the shadow Minister had time to be briefed on this before she arrived here, but there will be talks tomorrow at the Department involving GTR, ASLEF and, I think, the RMT—I am not sure whether that is precisely correct. Hopefully, that will be an opportunity to have the discussion the hon. Lady is aiming for.

I do not think anyone disagrees that having a second person on board is a bad thing. We have been able to have a second person on board across the network

where GTR is in operation. That is a good thing in my view. The issue will be the circumstances in which a train may depart if someone is not available. That is the narrow point that was in dispute in the past, and perhaps tomorrow will be the chance to resolve that—we will have to wait and see.

The hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood made a number of perfectly relevant suggestions. I am not sure I can do them justice in two minutes, but if it would be helpful to her I would like her to come to see me and my officials to go through them in more detail. I am aware of schemes such as the expansion of Loughborough Junction and Camberwell, and she deserves a better response than me saying, “We will look at it.” If she gets in touch, I will be more than happy to meet her. I know the Secretary of State met the Mayor yesterday and had constructive discussions.

On the hon. Lady’s point about resilience, we are already seeing greater resilience through a re-diagramming of services. Part of the problem is drivers joining and leaving a service as it passes through the GTR network. By simplifying the diagrams with the agreement of the drivers, we can make for a more resilient service by ensuring that that interruption is reduced.

I noted the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmer. We should not overlook the fact that GTR was criticised in the Gibb report—as was the Department. We saw penalties imposed on GTR last week, which will go towards improving the network. This is not just about trade unions, GTR or the Department; it is about an entire ecosystem, as some have pointed out. I heard my hon. Friend’s point about car parking, and I know the rail delivery group is looking at that. The passenger’s experience begins when they decide to make a journey, and that includes car parking.

Vertical integration is moving according to plan. We have already seen some of the benefits for this franchise of getting Network Rail and GTR to work more closely together and of continuing to work with TfL on the Oyster zone, which should help my hon. Friend’s constituents in particular. One highlight of the last week was the rail delivery group’s announcement of new statistics on right-time arrivals at stations, which I urge all hon. Members to have a look at.

If there is anything I have missed, I ask Members to get in touch. We will keep Members informed—

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Wednesday 19 July 2017

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Contingent Liability: Microgeneration Certification Scheme

The Minister of State, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Claire Perry): The microgeneration certification scheme (MCS) is a scheme that certifies products and installers of renewable technologies to provide assurance to consumers about the quality and standard of their installation.

My Department is going through the process of transferring the assets comprising the MCS to the MCS charitable foundation, as part of establishing the MCS as independent of Government. This will help contribute to a renewable technology market that is sustainable in the long term, and will limit the Government's liabilities in relation to the scheme.

The operation of the MCS brings with it an existing contingent liability which has been previously covered under the annually disclosed overarching BEIS contingent liability for potential liabilities relating to claims from suppliers and third parties.

In relation to this, I wish to inform Parliament of a departmental minute which will be presented to Parliament today, giving notice of the Department retaining this contingent liability for which we would issue indemnity provisions to the MCS charitable foundation and the MCS service company. This contingent liability relates to the risk of potential complaints from affected parties regarding events which occurred during the period prior to the transfer, when BEIS held a position of responsibility for the MCS.

We believe it is appropriate to retain this existing contingent liability, even as we transfer the assets to the MCS charitable foundation. By offering this indemnity and enabling the transfer to proceed, the Department benefits from ceasing to take on further liabilities from the point of transfer onwards. The indemnity would be uncapped and last for a period of six years from the date of transfer.

We believe that the risk of any successful claim is low in relation to this contingent liability.

[HCWS82]

Product Recalls and Safety: Working Group

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): I am today placing in the Libraries of both Houses, the report of the Working Group on Product Recalls and Safety.

The report is a culmination of longer term, ongoing work on product safety and recalls. An independent review of the recall system was undertaken by Lynn Faulds Wood in 2015, with her review published in February 2016.

The Working Group on Product Recalls and Safety was established in October 2016 to build on the initial work by industry to implement the review. The Working Group was tasked with providing options to support a tangible improvement in the safety of white goods and the recalls system, working to a clearly defined timetable.

The Working Group is chaired by Neil Gibbins, former Deputy Chief Fire Officer for Devon and Somerset and Chief Executive of the Institution of Fire Engineers. Its membership brings together product safety experts, the fire service and trading standards professionals to ensure that we utilise expertise in the relevant fields to identify necessary improvements to the system of product recalls and safety.

Key recommendations include:

a need for centralised technical and scientific resource capability to support decision making and co-ordination of activity of Local Authorities and the businesses that they regulate;

a detailed code of practice should be developed with input from all relevant stakeholders; this should be informed by behavioural insights research. This should set out expected good practice with regard to product safety corrective actions (including recalls);

full consideration should be given to establishing central capacity to co-ordinate product safety corrective actions at a central level; systematic and sustainable ways to capture and share data and intelligence should be established and agreed by relevant parties—this should make use of existing systems used by trading standards and the fire service;

manufacturers and retailers should continue to work together and through standards-setting bodies to develop technological solutions to product marking and identification;

Primary authority provides a key mechanism for ensuring that businesses, local authority and BEIS expertise is shared to ensure the protection of consumers; and

the registration of appliances and other consumer goods with manufacturers by consumers should be encouraged to make corrective actions (including recalls) more effective.

Significant progress has already been made by the Working Group, supported by my officials at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, in relation to the development of a code of practice on corrective action and product recalls, and a public consultation will be published shortly. Further work to promote the registration of appliances, understand consumer responses to safety information and recall communications is set out in the report as an important step towards a strengthened product safety framework.

We are also keen to see continued progress on work to promote the registration of appliances and understand consumer responses to safety information and recall communications. My Department has supported the behavioural insights work, which underpins the understanding of consumer behaviour. We have also enhanced the product recalls webpages on gov.uk to make it easier to access information about white goods subject to a recall on grounds of a fire safety risk and made links to the Register My Appliance website.

The Working Group recognised the important role that primary authority partnerships can play in achieving better safety outcomes. My Department continues to champion and push forward the scheme. The legislative changes which we are bringing into effect in October will extend and simplify the scheme so that as many businesses as possible can access its benefits.

Following the tragic fire at Grenfell Tower, I asked the Working Group to consider whether there was any further work or recommendations for their report. The Working Group have completed that review and concluded

that the original report remains valid and relevant. I publish that report today, with copies of the documents placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS74]

CABINET OFFICE

Conflict Stability and Security Fund

The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Damian Green): I wish to update the House on how the Government have been supporting our national security interests through conflict prevention, peace building, stabilisation, peacekeeping and conflict resolution using the Conflict Stability and Security Fund (CSSF).

Details of the programmes funded by the CSSF and its impact so far are in the first annual report, a copy of which will be placed in the Library of the House. The publication of this first report reflects the Government's commitment to transparency in the delivery of official development assistance. We will be updating gov.uk pages with more information on the CSSF and individual programmes.

The CSSF replaced the Conflict Pool in April 2015, as part of a new, more strategic approach to enhancing the delivery of our national security interests directed by the National Security Council (NSC).

As announced in the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR), CSSF funding has continued to increase and will be £1.162 billion in 2017-18. The CSSF is now one of the world's largest mechanisms for addressing conflict and instability. Its programmes deliver against more than 40 cross-Government strategies set by the National Security Council (NSC). These help to secure the UK, promote peace and stability overseas and contribute directly to SDSR objectives.

Parliamentary accountability for taxpayers' money spent via the CSSF is provided primarily through the Joint Committee for the National Security Strategy (JCNSS). The JCNSS concluded its first inquiry into the CSSF in February. We have responded to the inquiry report and are taking forward many of their recommendations. Further announcements on governance will be made in due course.

Meeting both our legal and policy gender commitments is central to the delivery of the CSSF. Last year the CSSF spent £214.5 million on programmes which addressed gender equality. For example the CSSF in the Democratic Republic of Congo supported the provision of free legal assistance to 269 victims of international war crimes, of which 179 were women, mostly victims of sexual violence.

In addition to supporting peace building activity, CSSF funding is strengthening the multilateral system, supporting the UN and other international organisations to develop more effective multilateral responses to instability. The CSSF funds our contributions (known as assessed costs) to the UN peacekeeping budget. We are the sixth biggest contributor, spending over £300 million in 2016-17. In addition, we have been using CSSF funds to help reform the UN and UN peacekeeping, co-ordinating

outreach to member states to secure pledges of personnel for peace operations and to assist with the transition from pledges to deployments. In 2016-17 the CSSF provided a further £15 million to fund the doubling of the UK's troop contribution to peacekeeping through two new deployments: 70 UK military personnel to support UNSOS in Somalia, which provides essential logistical support for the African Union Mission (AMISOM) that is combating the terrorist organisation Al Shabaab; and 370 UK military personnel to provide engineering and medical support to the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS).

To address some of the JCNSS recommendations for the CSSF a rapid review is being undertaken of Cross-Whitehall Fund governance and structures.

Conflict Stability and Security Fund resources, FY 17-18

CSSF	2017-18 (millions)
Peacekeeping and Multilateral	391.7
Regional/Country Strategies	606.3
Security and Defence	150
Delivery support, including the Stabilisation Unit and National School of Government	14.5
Total	1162.5

[HCWS76]

EDUCATION

School Curriculum

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): In order to ensure our education system drives social mobility, it is imperative that the vast majority of pupils—whatever their background—have the opportunity to study the suite of academic subjects that make up the EBacc. These subjects—English, maths, science, history or geography, and a language—are the core of a rounded and well balanced education that should be the entitlement of the vast majority of pupils. According to the Russell Group, studying these subjects at A-level opens more doors to more degrees.

A recent study found that pupils in a set of 300 schools that increased their EBacc entry, from 8% to 48%, were more likely to achieve good English and maths GCSEs, more likely to take an A-level, or an equivalent level 3 qualification, and more likely to stay in post-16 education.

Since 2010, we have increased the opportunity for pupils to study this combination of GCSEs, with 40% of pupils now being entered for this combination of subjects at GCSE, up from 22% in 2010. However, there are still too few pupils studying these subjects, with pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds disproportionately less likely to be studying these subjects.

Research suggests that lower participation from disadvantaged pupils in these core academic subjects can negatively affect social mobility. Yet overall, disadvantaged pupils remain half as likely to be entered for the EBacc subjects as their non-disadvantaged peers, and the gap in EBacc subject entry persists even among the most academically able disadvantaged pupils.

There is no doubt that studying the EBacc subjects up to the age of 16 is right for the vast majority of pupils. As a Government we are committed to unlocking the potential of all pupils regardless of their background and this is why, as set out in our manifesto, we would like to see 90% of year 10 pupils starting to study GCSEs in the EBacc combination of subjects by 2025.

Through our consultation on implementing the EBacc, we sought to understand the barriers schools face in increasing EBacc entry. Having carefully considered the consultation responses, it is my view that we need an approach that is both pragmatic, stretching, and one that takes into account the challenge involved in meeting this ambition.

While some schools are already responding to this challenge by significantly increasing the number of pupils studying the EBacc suite of GCSEs, some schools have more to do to reach our ambition. It will take time to build the right capacity across the whole school system and ensure that schools have access to high quality staff in EBacc subjects, so that all pupils have the best chance of success in their studies.

Taking this all into account it is our ambition that 75% of year 10 pupils in state-funded mainstream schools will start to study GCSEs in the EBacc combination of subjects by September 2022. This will mark an important milestone in driving towards the Government's ambition that the vast majority of pupils—irrespective of background—have access to this core academic suite of GCSEs, which is central to a broad and balanced curriculum.

The Government response being published today considers and responds to the issues raised in consultation responses, and outlines the steps we will take to support schools to deliver the EBacc subjects to the vast majority of pupils.

Copies of the Government's response document will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS73]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Animal Health

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): Today I am updating the House on the implementation of the Government's 25-year strategy to eradicate bovine TB (bTB) in England.

The Government's comprehensive bTB strategy includes one of the most rigorous cattle surveillance programmes in the world, strong movement controls, a focus on good biosecurity, and badger control where TB is rife.

We are making good progress. The Government have this week applied for official TB-free status for the low risk area of the England—more than half the country—two years ahead of schedule, which will bring trade benefits for farmers in these areas.

Further measures I am outlining today will help us eradicate the disease from the rest of England more quickly and more effectively.

A consultation begins today on proposals to catch disease in herds as early as possible, by introducing a simpler, more risk-based TB testing regime in the high risk area with six-monthly routine surveillance tests. Lower risk herds where owners can demonstrate good biosecurity will be subject to less frequent testing. We are proposing some adjustments to the compensation system to improve incentives for farmers to reduce disease risks on their farms. Also included is a proposal to allow farmers to retain in-calf TB test positive cattle for up to 60 days, subject to biosecurity controls.

I can also confirm that we are now confident that supplies of BCG vaccine are sufficient to allow us to resume the badger edge vaccination scheme. This will help protect healthy badgers and stop disease spreading to new parts of the country. Private groups intending to run vaccination schemes will be able to apply for grants later this year for projects to run next summer.

We are also publishing responses to a consultation on supplementary badger control, and its licensing guidance, outlining plans to make sure disease control benefits in areas that have completed intensive culling are maintained while the disease is still present in England.

We are determined to implement all available measures necessary to eradicate this devastating disease as quickly as possible to create resilient and successful dairy and beef industries.

Copies of the cattle controls consultation and the badger control summary of consultation responses have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS75]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

EU Opt-in Decision: Civil Justice Co-operation Regulations

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): My right hon. Friend Baroness Anelay of St Johns DBE, Minister of State for Exiting the European Union, has made the following statement:

On 9 June 2017, the Government opted in to a proposal to change the updating mechanism of three civil judicial co-operation regulations from the comitology procedure to the post-Lisbon treaty delegated and implementing Act procedure. These are technical adjustments that are part of a wider effort to modernise legislation, which the UK supports.

The relevant regulations are the 2001 regulation on taking evidence in other member states to allow for a court in one member state to request to take evidence to another; the 2004 regulation that created that European enforcement order; and the 2007 regulation on service of documents to allow the service of judicial documents from one member state to another.

The Government submitted the explanatory memorandum on the Commission alignment proposals (COM(2016) 798 and COM(2016) 799) on 13 February 2017. The substance and effect of these three regulations will not change, but become subject to the same updating procedures as apply to other, post-Lisbon regulations (a committee composed of representatives from all EU countries providing a formal opinion, usually in the form of a vote, on the Commission's proposed measures). The underlying treaty base (now article 81 TFEU) and the relevant regulations were subject to the UK's justice and home affairs opt-in.

These technical changes protect the UK's position in relation to three important procedural instruments in the area of civil judicial co-operation and demonstrate the UK's commitment to abiding by its rights and obligations until exit negotiations are concluded.

[HCWS83]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign and Commonwealth Office Services

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): FCO Services operates as a trading fund of the FCO. Pursuant to section 4(6) of the Government Trading Funds Act 1973 (as amended by the Government Trading Act 1990), I hereby lay copies of FCO Services' Annual Report and Accounts 2016-2017 before the House.

The report has been endorsed by the FCO Services Board and the FCO Services Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (on which sits the lead National Audit Office auditor and the head of FCO Internal Audit). It has also been examined by the FCO Partnership Board.

On 3 July 2017, the Comptroller and Auditor General formally signed off the report and accounts.

For the reasons above, and upon my own examination, I am satisfied that the annual report and accounts represent a true and fair account of FCO Services' performance.

[HCWS72]

HEALTH

NHS Transformation: Investment

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): This Government are backing the NHS's own plan for the future, the Five Year Forward View, and funding it with an additional £8 billion a year in real terms by the end of the Parliament. Delivering that vision relies on health and care organisations working together at a local level, which the NHS is taking forward through sustainability and transformation partnerships. These are clinically led, locally driven—and can deliver real improvements for patients. The independent King's Fund has called STPs “the right approach for improving care and meeting the needs of an ageing population”.

In the spring Budget the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced an additional £325 million of capital funding to invest in local areas who have come together and developed robust plans.

Today, I announce the provisional allocation of this first tranche of capital funding. From a large number of proposals, 25 schemes have been selected in total from across the 15 STP areas as follows:

Greater Manchester
Lancashire and South Cumbria
Dorset
Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland
Milton Keynes, Bedfordshire and Luton

Derbyshire
West, North and East Cumbria
Nottinghamshire
Suffolk and North East Essex
Herefordshire and Worcestershire
South Yorkshire and Bassetlaw
Mid and South Essex
Norfolk and Waveney
Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West
North East London

Further detail on the schemes that will receive funding is available as an online attachment.

In order to qualify for this first tranche of funding, these areas were all judged to be sufficiently advanced on the basis of the STP assessment data (that NHS England will publish on Friday). This data allows patients, managers and the public to see how their STP area is performing across three themes: hospital performance, patient-focused change, and transformation. Each theme is underpinned by key metrics, such as performance in emergency and elective care, safety and leadership. It is a mechanism by which organisations, patients and the public can hold their STP to account.

The quality and diversity of proposals put forward show that the NHS is working innovatively to identify opportunities for transformation in the delivery of health services across their local footprint. The Government are fully committed to supporting this process and the schemes selected for funding will make a substantial difference to the performance of local health systems.

Final confirmation of this funding will be subject to the successful approval of business cases. Organisations receiving funding will also be required to demonstrate that their proposals form part of a robust capital and estates strategy which maximises all opportunities for generating receipts from surplus land disposals within their STP area. We will also expect them to agree a clear delivery plan for generating these receipts. This process will be supported by a central team of strategic estates advisers

The Government remain committed to considering a further round of local proposals for funding in the autumn Budget, subject to the same rigorous value for money tests. In considering these bids we will look to STPs to demonstrate further progress on generating funding from disposals receipts and other sources of finance.

Attachments can be viewed at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statements/Commons/2017-07-19/HCWS71/>.

[HCWS71]

Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): On Wednesday 12 July, Ministers at the Department of Health were informed by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) about an issue identified during a routine inspection of Bio Products Laboratory (BPL). The MHRA provided confirmation on Monday of this week that, in light of all of the

information currently available, their assessment is that no patients have been harmed and none put at additional risk of harm due to the issue.

BPL is responsible for the supply of a range of plasma products to the NHS and a range of other major health systems around the world. The company, in line with best practice, operates a three stage process to ensure the safety of its products:

1. Selection of healthy donors, with all donations tested and traceable to the donor.
2. Further safety tests of plasma in advance of the manufacturing process.
3. During the manufacturing process, all products are specially treated to inactivate viruses.

The MHRA informed Ministers that their inspection identified a problem with the computer software, which controls the stage one process set out above. Following the identification of the issue by the MHRA, a manual review was undertaken by the company to ensure that no inappropriate donations made it through this stage of the process due to the problems with the computer system. This manual review confirmed that no inappropriate samples had made it through to the next stage of the process, and a range of other risk mitigation steps were also implemented.

The MHRA have continued to provide progress updates to Ministers regularly since notification on 12 July.

On Monday of this week the MHRA confirmed to Ministers their assessment that the problem had been addressed through interim measures to provide the necessary assurance while long-term solutions are being implemented. In the opinion of the MHRA, due to the three stage process outlined above, and in light of all of the information currently available, no patients have been harmed and none put at additional risk of harm due to the issue.

The MHRA is continuing to undertake all necessary regulatory activities in order to ensure patient safety, and will continue to keep Ministers informed of this work.

Although there is no evidence of risk to patients in this case, in the interest of transparency, I wanted to update the House to this situation as quickly as possible with the relevant information. In the unlikely event of any changes, I will update the House accordingly.

[HCWS70]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Fire and Rescue Authorities: England

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): In May 2016, this Government set out plans to create an independent inspectorate for fire and rescue authorities in England as part of our fire reform programme.

The response to the recent tragic Grenfell Tower fire showcased the very best of fire and rescue services. As the dreadful event unfolded, we saw the resounding bravery and skill of our firefighters and emergency responders.

An inspectorate will help support the continuous improvement of this critical public service and enable fire and rescue authorities to become even more effective, as it is only by identifying and understanding problems that action can be taken to overcome them.

I can today announce that this inspectorate will form part of a newly expanded Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary (HMIC). In order to preserve fire and rescue's distinct identity, HMIC will re-brand as Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services.

I have recommended to Her Majesty that, following commencement of fire and rescue inspection provisions in the Policing and Crime Act 2017, she appoint Her Majesty's chief inspector of constabulary, Sir Thomas Winsor, as chief fire and rescue inspector, and for HMIC's existing inspectors to be appointed fire and rescue inspectors. This will be in addition to their existing police inspection responsibilities.

A dedicated team will be appointed to carry out fire and rescue inspections which will include expertise drawn from the fire and rescue sector.

The new inspectorate will work alongside other institutional changes under way in the fire and rescue sector, namely the establishment of the National Fire Chiefs Council and the planned creation of a body with responsibility for setting professional standards for fire and rescue services.

HMIC has a strong track record in holding policing to the highest standards and identifying where action must be taken to improve behaviour and practice. I expect them to replicate this when inspecting fire and rescue authorities. This new inspectorate will provide a crucial assurance function to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of every authority in England and whether they are fulfilling their statutory obligations.

My officials, together with representatives from the fire and rescue sector, will work with the inspectorate over the coming months to develop a comprehensive inspection framework against which fire and rescue authorities will be inspected. The Secretary of State is required to agree both the inspection framework and programme. The first inspection will take place in early 2018 and every fire and rescue authority in England will be inspected thereafter with a report published on every inspection.

The provisions made by the Policing and Crime Act 2017 require the chief fire and rescue inspector for England to lay before Parliament an annual report on the inspections undertaken. This will include his assessment of the efficiency and effectiveness of fire and rescue authorities in England for the period in respect of which the report is prepared. The Home Secretary also has the ability to commission the inspectorate to inspect and report on any particular issue in addition to individual authority inspections.

[HCWS78]

Avon Fire and Rescue Service

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): On 2 February, the previous Minister for Policing and Fire announced an independent inspection, led by Dr Craig Baker, into a number of allegations made against Avon Fire and Rescue Authority. I am pleased to announce to Parliament that the inspection is now complete and the Government have today laid before the House and published the report and recommendations.

The inspection, which was the first of its kind, was established under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999 (the “1999 Act”). The inspection considered the authority’s compliance with its “best value duty” under section 3 of the 1999 Act which requires the authority to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

The report concluded that, in the lead inspector’s opinion, the authority is failing to comply with its duty under section 3 of the 1999 Act and makes a number of proposals for improvement in the areas of governance, leadership, culture and external scrutiny. The proposals include:

- a review of the senior management board to ensure they have the necessary experience and capabilities to plan and deliver the transformational change required;
- a de-layering exercise with regards to the senior management board with a focus on culture change and professionalism;
- a review of the authority’s integrated risk management plan; and
- the introduction of a programme board to drive change and support the senior management team.

The Government welcome this independent, comprehensive report and will work closely with Avon Fire and Rescue Authority, the National Fire Chiefs Council and the Local Government Association (LGA) to fully consider the inspector’s findings.

Public safety is a key Government priority and it is our ambition to build on the good progress fire and rescue services have already made to create a service that is more accountable, effective and professional than ever before. To support this, the Government have already announced:

- an independent inspection regime for fire and rescue services in England;
- the development of an independent professional standards body that will provide a coherent and comprehensive set of professional standards to drive improvements across the sector; and
- a consultation on amendments to the fire and rescue national framework for England to include a requirement to discourage the practice of re-engaging senior officers post-retirement with an increase in take-home pay and pension benefits. The national framework is undergoing a complete revision and the new version will be published in early 2018.

I would like to thank Dr Baker and his team for the detailed report and recommendations and the professional manner in which they approached the inspection.

[HCWS79]

Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): Section 19(1) of the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures Act 2011 (the Act) requires the Secretary of State to report to Parliament as soon as reasonably practicable after the end of every relevant three-month period on the exercise of her TPIM powers under the Act during that period.

The level of information provided will always be subject to slight variations based on operational advice.

TPIM notices in force (as of 28 February 2017)	7
TPIM notices in respect of British citizens (as of 28 February 2017)	6
TPIM notices extended (during the reporting period)	0
TPIM notices revoked (during the reporting period)	0
TPIM notices revived (during the reporting period)	0
Variations made to measures specified in TPIM notices (during the reporting period)	7
Applications to vary measures specified in TPIM notices refused (during the reporting period)	1
The number of current subjects relocated under TPIM legislation (as of 28 February 2017)	7

The TPIM review group (TRG) keeps every TPIM notice under regular and formal review. The TRG met on 12, 13, 15 and 16 December 2016. The next TRG meetings took place on 6, 9, 13, 16 and 17 March 2017.

[HCWS80]

JUSTICE

Justice Update

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): Probation services play a vital role in protecting communities and rehabilitating offenders. In delivering the sentences of the court, supervising offenders and helping them to address problems such as unemployment, homelessness and mental health issues, probation officers keep the public safe and prevent future victims of crime.

In 2014-15 the Government reformed the probation system to strengthen its focus on reducing reoffending and protecting communities, and much progress has been made in implementing these reforms. For the first time around 40,000 offenders a year released from custodial sentences of less than 12 months are entitled to statutory support from probation on release, and new through-the-gate services have been introduced to improve the resettlement of released prisoners in the community. We have established 21 community rehabilitation companies (CRCs) to supervise low and medium-risk offenders, and a national probation service (NPS) dedicated to protecting the public from higher-risk offenders. Staff working in the probation system deserve enormous credit for their commitment and professionalism during this period of significant change.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the current delivery of some aspects of probation services must improve. It is inevitable that such fundamental reforms to a complex public service will take some time to bed down. In addition, since the contracts were negotiated the number of offenders sentenced to community orders has fallen, and there has been an increase in the proportion of offenders assessed as posing a higher risk of harm. The result is fewer offenders are being referred to CRCs, leading to falls in CRC income to significantly below the levels expected at the time of the competition. This has made it extremely challenging for CRCs to deliver the services outlined in their contracts. In turn the NPS has seen a growth in their caseload and increased demands on its staff. That is why we have been reviewing the probation system, and why we are now taking steps to improve services.

We have recently taken urgent action to adjust the payment mechanism within the CRC contracts so it better reflects the fixed nature of most of the costs that providers incur when delivering services to offenders. This additional investment, which will see projected payments to CRCs still being no higher than originally budgeted for at the time of the reforms, will make CRC income less sensitive to changes in demand and therefore more reflective of their actual cost structures. This increased certainty about future income will enable CRCs to focus on delivering critical operational services. We are also exploring with providers further improvements that could be made to the delivery of rehabilitative services, and we will set out at a later stage any further changes we will be making as a result.

In addition we are working with the Department of Health, NHS England and Public Health England to develop a joint protocol setting out how probation, health and treatment services should work together to support those serving community sentences in England. We will seek to implement the protocol in a number of test-bed areas this year, and have agreed with the Welsh Government that we will seek to establish a similar protocol in Wales. We are also providing additional funding to Her Majesty's inspectorate of probation and supporting them to introduce a new framework for the inspection of probation services from April 2018. This will provide stronger scrutiny and increased transparency of the performance of probation by introducing annual inspection of CRCs and NPS areas and the publication of individual ratings for providers.

The Government remain wholeheartedly committed to reducing reoffending and protecting the public. The transforming rehabilitation reforms created a framework for more effective probation services and we intend to ensure they deliver the benefits of reduced reoffending. Over the coming months we will continue to work with providers to improve the delivery of probation services and we will make further statements in due course.

[HCWS81]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland Finances

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): When the Assembly dissolved in January, no budget had been set for the Northern Ireland Executive for the 2017-18 financial year. Since the end of March it has fallen to the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Finance to allocate funding to Northern Ireland Departments under powers provided by section 59 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

This situation has led to understandable concern and uncertainty among businesses and those relying on public services alike. Since April I have therefore worked closely with the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS), in conjunction with the NICS board, to keep under review how to provide ongoing assurance around the budget in the absence of an Executive.

In the first instance this led, on 24 April, to my written statement to the House setting out an indicative budget position and set of departmental allocations.

This sought to enable Permanent Secretaries to plan and prepare to take more detailed decisions on cash allocations.

Disappointingly, we remain without an Executive three months on. While progress has been made in discussions between the parties, resolution has not been reached. The parties have, however, made clear that they remain committed to engaging with each other to agree a basis on which an Executive can be formed. If an agreement is reached, I will move quickly to bring forward the necessary legislation to allow an Executive to meet at the next earliest opportunity.

While it is for the Northern Ireland parties to reach an agreed way forward, the UK Government remain committed to working with them and, as appropriate, the Irish Government to secure the restoration of devolved government as quickly as possible. I will maintain close contact with party leaders and the Irish Government over the coming weeks to seek to consolidate progress and encourage continuing discussions towards a deal.

While agreement remains possible, it is clear that an Executive will not be capable of being formed before the autumn. During that time pressures will continue to build, particularly in health and education services. And so as I set out in my written statement on 11 July, I consider it necessary to provide further clarity to support Northern Ireland Permanent Secretaries in addressing those pressures, maintaining public services and continuing to uphold the commitments arising from the Stormont House and Fresh Start agreements.

With that in mind, I set out below adjusted indicative budget positions and departmental allocations for this year. These include resource and capital funding provided in the spring Budget by the Chancellor, as well as resource and capital funding expected to be available from budget transfers and updated forecasts, subject to final data and the usual HM Treasury approval processes.

The allocations do not include any of the financial support the UK Government would be prepared to make available to Northern Ireland following the agreement between the Conservative Party and the Democratic Unionist Party. This Government recognise the unique challenges faced by Northern Ireland as a result of its distinct history and geographical position. However a restored Executive will need to agree how it wishes to allocate these funds to projects within the priority areas.

As previously, the allocations in the table showed in the attachment do not reflect input from UK Government Ministers on priorities nor do they constrain the future ability of an incoming Executive to adjust its priorities. And it remains for NI civil servants to allocate cash under s59 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. It is important to acknowledge, however, that as the year progresses the scope for significant changes will become more constrained.

This statement does not replace the ultimate need for a formal budget for Northern Ireland. The exercise of s59 powers cannot be sustained indefinitely. And though the advice I have received from the Head of the NICS is that we have not yet reached that critical point, it is approaching. It should be for a new Executive to make swift decisions on its budget to make use of the spending power available to it.

At the same time we will not forget our ultimate responsibility as a Government to uphold political stability and good governance in Northern Ireland. Accordingly,

I reaffirm that the UK Government remain prepared to take forward legislation at Westminster to give authority for the expenditure of Northern Ireland departments should an Executive not be restored in the autumn. If resolution continues to prove intractable beyond that point, we will take further steps to provide the necessary political decision-making in the best interests of everyone in Northern Ireland.

Attachments can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-07-19/HCWS77/>.

[HCWS77]

Petition

Wednesday 19 July 2017

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Climate Change

The petition of residents of Macclesfield,

Declares that climate changes impacts upon both people and places; further that on the global stage the

UK should exercise leadership in the implementation of the Paris Agreement, ensure coordination between government departments in the production and implementation of plans for emissions reduction with particular emphasis on local energy, cutting energy waste in homes and reducing the impact of vehicles on the environment.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Prime Minister to give priority to the urgent issue of global Climate Change.

And the petitioners remain, etc./

[P002047]

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**not later than
Wednesday 26 July 2017**

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