

**Wednesday
13 September 2017**

**Volume 628
No. 27**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 13 September 2017

House of Commons

Wednesday 13 September 2017

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

NEW SOUTHGATE CEMETERY BILL [LORDS]

Motion made, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read the Third time on Wednesday 11 October.

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Political Situation

1. **Edward Argar** (Charnwood) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the political situation in Northern Ireland. [900724]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): Northern Ireland remains without a fully functioning, power-sharing devolved Government. Our clear and resolute focus is to re-establish devolved government at Stormont. Together with the Irish Government, we are continuing to support the parties' efforts to find resolution and form an Executive. However, time is short and I urge the parties to continue to work to reach agreement.

Edward Argar: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, as I thank him, as I hope would all Members, for his clear determination, commitment and hard work in the cause of seeking a return to the power-sharing devolved Administration we all wish to see. With that in mind, does he share my view that it is vital that all parties in Northern Ireland continue to approach these discussions in a spirit of compromise and co-operation, with our eyes firmly fixed on the need to secure agreement?

James Brokenshire: I agree with my hon. Friend on the intent that we must have and the approach to be taken. Clearly, we will do all that we can to support the parties in the days ahead. The time for action is now. I stress that we are seeing engagement between the DUP and Sinn Féin. I have been encouraged by the nature of the intensive engagement that they have shown, but agreement has not been reached. A high number of issues remain outstanding and we must focus on finding that resolution and seeing devolved government restored.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): The Prime Minister has been making phone calls, but does she have a date in her diary to make an extended visit to Northern Ireland?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Lady is right; the Prime Minister has been engaged, and she spoke to the party leaders of the DUP and Sinn Féin last night and underlined the need to be constructive in discussions and to find that resolution. She will remain closely engaged and will play whatever role is needed to support and find that positive outcome.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): While it lacks its 10 political members, the Northern Ireland Policing Board remains severely constrained. Although I hope that my right hon. Friend's efforts bear fruit, in the event that the Executive are not restored, what contingency plans does he have to enable the Policing Board to function effectively?

James Brokenshire: I welcome my hon. Friend to his place and to his position as Chair of the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs. I wish him and members of that Committee positive and fruitful endeavours in their work and I look forward to giving evidence to his Committee soon. He makes an important point about the important role of the Policing Board. I am not going to speculate about other options. He highlights the significance—the importance—of the issues that are at stake, and why it is so very important to see an Executive restored.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The Prime Minister has been in touch with party leaders in Northern Ireland in recent hours and she will have heard from our party leader a total commitment to restoring devolution immediately, with no red lines or preconditions, to get on with the job of dealing with health, education, jobs and investment in Northern Ireland. Can the Secretary of State indicate whether Sinn Féin continues to adhere to the view that these matters are not as important as seeking the fulfilment of partisan political demands, or whether any progress has been made on that front?

James Brokenshire: I welcome the statement that the right hon. Gentleman has made on behalf of his party, and indeed the comments that Arlene Foster has made about seeing that desire to get back into an Executive. I would also point to the comments of Michelle O'Neill, who has said that she believes that, while there are difficulties, a deal is still doable. I would certainly encourage the right hon. Gentleman and his party to engage in the way that they have, and encourage all parties to have that focus on seeing devolution restored.

Nigel Dodds: I thank the Secretary of State. Certainly we will continue to engage intensively in those political talks. Northern Ireland needs a devolved Government and it needs its Executive, not least to deal, for instance, with one of the issues on the horizon—jobs in the Bombardier plant in Belfast. I thank the Secretary of State and the Government for the work that they are doing on that already, and I urge him to remain fully committed and involved with us to ensure that those jobs are safeguarded.

James Brokenshire: I say to the right hon. Gentleman that there are a number of issues that would clearly benefit from having an Executive with local decision making by locally elected politicians. He highlights the issue of Bombardier. While this is a commercial matter,

as he knows, the UK Government are working tirelessly to safeguard Bombardier's operations and its highly skilled workforce in Belfast. I remain in close contact with the Business Secretary. He has had extensive engagement with Boeing, Bombardier and the Canadian and US Governments, and the right hon. Gentleman knows about the Prime Minister's engagement, too.

Executive Accountability

2. **Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): If he will take steps to ensure that departments of the Northern Ireland Executive are accountable and accessible to the Northern Ireland electorate. [900725]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): The people of Northern Ireland need a fully functioning Executive where strategic decisions can be made in the interests of the whole community. That is clearly in line with what they voted for in the Assembly election in March and that is the appropriate means to ensure local accountability and accessibility for all the people of Northern Ireland.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Secretary of State for his response. We have Departments that have been rudderless since March, which is six months ago. The accountability that comes with an elected Minister is sadly lacking. If Sinn Féin continues to hold this Government and the people of Northern Ireland to ransom, will the Secretary of State step in to ensure that proper political oversight is provided for each Department, to ensure that accountability and accessibility are back on the cards, and how does he see that taking place?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman knows that time is running short. There is the lack of a budget in Northern Ireland and that cannot continue for much longer. The more we head into October the bigger the challenges will be. He makes a point about accountability. Obviously, as the UK Government we have a primary responsibility in respect of political stability in Northern Ireland, but I note the point he makes about responses from Departments within the Northern Ireland civil service and I will certainly raise that with David Sterling.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): While backing British farming both on the mainland and in Northern Ireland, may I ask my right hon. Friend, in the absence of the devolved Executive, what steps he and his Department are taking to ensure that the views of local politicians are being conveyed to Bombardier, Boeing and the Government of the United States?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Our priority is to encourage Boeing to drop its case and seek a negotiated settlement. I note that the leaders of both the DUP and Sinn Féin have issued a joint letter to the vice-president underlining the particular circumstances and the real significance of this matter to Northern Ireland, and I would encourage everyone to play their part in seeking a resolution.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): While the Secretary of State is trying to square that circle and get the DUP back to work in the Executive, will he acknowledge the opinion of the House of Commons Library that the Brexit Bill is a power-grab from the devolved Administrations? Will the Government be a

part of be asking the DUP Members here to vote to reduce the powers of the Assembly while it is not sitting? Do the other parties elected to Stormont agree with the power-grab?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Lady fundamentally mischaracterises what the EU (Withdrawal) Bill is about. It is about creating UK-wide frameworks to ensure that we have a smooth transition, and I would have thought that was in the best interests of all of the United Kingdom and that everybody should get behind it.

Cross-border Security

3. **Chris Philp** (Croydon South) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Irish Government on cross-border security. [900726]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chloe Smith): The UK Government have regular discussions with the Irish Government on a range of issues, including cross-border security. We work closely together to tackle security challenges and keep people on both sides of the border safe.

Chris Philp: Does my hon. Friend agree that, as we leave the European Union, close co-operation with the Government of Ireland on security will be extremely important? Can she assure the House that that will be a top priority in the coming negotiations?

Chloe Smith: Yes—in short, I certainly can. Co-operation with the Irish authorities is already strong. We wish to see that continue. If I may, I will take this opportunity to commend the security services and police on both sides of the border for all that they do to keep individuals safe.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): The Minister will be aware of the security assessment that the New IRA represents a very real and present threat to security. What discussions have the Government had with their Irish counterparts about that organisation?

Chloe Smith: Obviously, it is not possible to comment on specific assessments and security matters at this moment, but as I said in my previous response, co-operation is very strong across all security matters. We wish to see it continue that way in order to keep people on both sides of the border safe not only from the scourge of terrorism, but from cross-border crime where that is relevant, too.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for her response and I am sure she will join my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) and me in welcoming Adrian O'Neill, Ireland's newly appointed ambassador, to London. Will she also speak to Dublin about how it, as a co-guarantor of the Good Friday agreement, can assist in moving the peace process forward? I very much welcome the spirit of her words.

Chloe Smith: There has been close co-operation with the Irish Government every step of the way in seeking to re-establish the devolved Government, which is a common and shared priority. As the hon. Gentleman

has said, that spirit is shared not only by Members on both sides of the House, but by the Governments. I am clear, however, that the UK Government have the specific responsibility of delivering public services and good governance in Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom. We act consistently in accordance with our obligations under the Belfast agreement and we are not looking for any principle that might be inconsistent with that agreement.

Common Travel Area

4. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What discussions he has had with the Taoiseach on maintaining the common travel area after the UK leaves the EU.

[900727]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): The Government's position on Northern Ireland and Ireland affirmed our commitment to maintaining the common travel area. That is supported by the EU, as confirmed in its recent paper on Ireland. I have regular discussions with the Irish Government and know that they, too, are supportive of maintaining the common travel area.

Patrick Grady: Does the Secretary of State acknowledge the warning from Mary McAleese—the former President of Ireland, who was born in Belfast—that maintaining the common travel area in the long term would be impossible, because it is impossible to distinguish between a UK and Irish or any other citizen who holds a CTA entitlement? Does he acknowledge her view that that would inevitably mean border checks and passport control?

James Brokenshire: I point the hon. Gentleman to the paper that the EU itself issued, which said:

“The continued operation of the Common Travel Area is fundamental to facilitating the interaction of people in Ireland and the United Kingdom...Continuation of the Common Travel Area arrangements, in conformity with European Union law, should be recognised.”

I encourage the hon. Gentleman to do so.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Given that neither Ireland nor the UK is a member of the Schengen agreement, and given that security information is already shared whenever members of the public cross the Irish sea, does that not provide a framework for co-operation between north and south?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend highlights the strong co-operation between the Irish and UK Governments in respect of the common travel area. We want that to continue in the future. It has served us well over many decades, which is why our paper highlights its importance. Indeed, I think that the EU itself recognises that too.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The Government have produced a thoughtful, imaginative and innovative position paper on the issues of movement of people and goods across the border on the event of exit. Is the Secretary of State therefore disappointed that Dublin Ministers have taken up Sinn Féin calls for a border along the Irish sea, for special status for Northern Ireland and for staying in the customs union, instead of engaging positively with the Government on the proposals?

James Brokenshire: The Irish Government recognise the particular challenges. We encourage all those involved to engage positively and proactively with the position paper we published to encourage further discussion. It has workable proposals and we need to get down to having a detailed discussion on them.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): In his discussions with the Taoiseach, has the Secretary of State reflected on the fact that the common travel area is based on neither country being in Schengen, and that the real threat to Ireland and the UK would come from a part of mainland UK joining Schengen, for which the Scottish National party keeps arguing?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes a very important point about Schengen. Our common framework on the common travel area has operated since the 1920s, and the UK, the Irish Government and the EU recognise its significance. We are determined to find a positive way through, and that can be achieved.

Northern Ireland Powerhouse

5. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Whether the Government have plans to establish a Northern Ireland powerhouse; and if he will make a statement.

[900728]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chloe Smith): This Government fully support business groups and civic leaders collaborating across boundaries to grow local economies. We are committed to doing our part to build prosperity right across the United Kingdom. For example, in Northern Ireland our UK industrial strategy will support business growth, employment and innovation, and boost levels of trade and investment.

Chi Onwurah: The north-east has been part of the northern powerhouse brand for some years now without succeeding in obtaining any significant investment. The Democratic Unionist Party on the other hand seems to have managed the opposite trick of receiving £1 billion of investment without any scrutiny, oversight or branding—or at least not one that it would be orderly of me to cite. Does the Minister agree with me that it is far better to have the money without the branding than the branding without the money?

Chloe Smith: I would hope that those on both sides of the House would agree that in every part of the United Kingdom we need to see jobs growth, the growth of key industries and people living a secure and prosperous life. I am pleased to note that this morning it was announced that the Northern Ireland unemployment rate for the May to July quarter of this year has decreased again. I hope that the hon. Lady would welcome that kind of growth. I also hope that she would turn her attention to what she could do to support the economy in her own constituency. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. There are plenty of private conversations taking place in the Chamber, but I am very keen to hear the thoughts of Mr David Simpson.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am sure the Minister agrees with me that when Northern Ireland achieves the status of 12.5% corporation tax, along and combined with our industrial strategy, our skills base and productivity, we would be ripe for a powerhouse initiative.

Chloe Smith: There are two things to say. First, we would like to see additional economic co-operation within Northern Ireland—namely, the possibility of there being city deals. Secondly, the hon. Gentleman's comments about corporation tax clearly remind us that we need to work towards the restoration of an Executive who can take such decisions for the good of the people of Northern Ireland.

Governance and Political Stability

6. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure good governance and political stability in Northern Ireland. [900729]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): I have pressed the parties on the urgent need to resolve the current impasse in the interests of the entire community and I believe a deal remains possible. Locally accountable government is essential for the delivery of public services, good governance and political stability in Northern Ireland.

Bob Blackman: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer and his patience and perseverance in restoring the Executive. How concerned is he about the lack of accountability to locally elected politicians of civil servants who are delivering public services in Northern Ireland?

James Brokenshire: I am concerned, because it is not right that we do not have locally elected politicians making decisions and, yes, making sure that civil servants who act to deliver those services are held accountable. That is why we need to see the restoration of the Executive at the earliest possible opportunity, serving all communities, and delivering those public services that people need.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): Given that we have not had a functioning Northern Ireland Assembly for nine months, why on earth do the 90 Members of the Legislative Assembly continue to receive their full salaries and their full staffing allowance? It is an absolute scandal that that continues to be the case.

James Brokenshire: I certainly hear that message loud and clear. There is no direct way in which I can intervene; there is no legislation that would authorise me to do so. As I said in a speech in Cambridge on Friday, if we were to be in the situation where the UK Government have to make direct directions, that is certainly an issue that I would have to consider.

Mr Speaker: Having heard the hon. Gentleman regularly expostulating from his seat, it would be good to hear him on his feet. Mr Martin Docherty-Hughes.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. If the Secretary of State is so perturbed by a perceived lack of good governance in

the province of Northern Ireland, perhaps he would like to tell his Back Benchers why he and his Government technically gave £1 billion to an unaccountable executive, led by the DUP.

James Brokenshire: We have recognised the case for the needs of Northern Ireland, where there has been under-investment in infrastructure and mental health issues. I am sorry if the hon. Gentleman does not acknowledge and recognise that. We firmly do, and act in the interests of all parts of the United Kingdom.

Brexit Discussions

7. **Jo Churchill** (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with political parties in Northern Ireland on the UK leaving the EU. [900730]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): UK Government Ministers have held a number of meetings with Northern Ireland's political parties about EU exit. However, our priority remains restoring the Northern Ireland Executive, which will enable direct ministerial engagement on matters relating to the UK's departure from the EU.

Jo Churchill: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer, but people still need food and drink. Six million cases of Baileys and other cream liqueurs are made in Ireland every year. In Northern Ireland, production crosses the border several times, as is the case for most products. What is he doing to ensure frictionless borders for our farmers and for food production, and ensure that Baileys and Guinness get here?

James Brokenshire: I note my hon. Friend's focus on drinks and her preferred tippale. The agri-foods sector is a key component of the Northern Irish and, indeed, Irish economy. That is why we highlighted it in our position paper on standards with regard to the need for a frictionless border. We have set out those proposals, and we want that engagement with the EU.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): The Brexit Secretary borrowed a phrase from the Northern Ireland peace process to describe his approach to Brexit negotiations. He called it generously constructive ambiguity, but on the issue of the Northern Irish border we do not need ambiguity. We need certainty, so will the Secretary of State provide some today. Essentially, he has three options: a hard border in Ireland; a hard border in the Irish sea; or maintaining the UK and Ireland in a customs union through political agreement. Which one does he support?

James Brokenshire: I encourage the hon. Gentleman to read our position paper, which sets out the proposals. We do not want a border emerging across the Irish sea. We do not want a hard border, which is why we have set out proposals on the movement of people and goods and, yes, proposals in relation to customs arrangements.

Owen Smith: It is precisely because I have read the Government's paper that I ask for clarity. It has to be made plain exactly what the Government are proposing. The Secretary of State knows that a hard border, either in Northern Ireland or in the Irish sea, would be completely

damaging to the Good Friday agreement and the economy of Ireland. The only answer is to maintain a customs union, and I urge him to advocate that today.

James Brokenshire: We have been clear about the maintenance of the common travel area, and we have set out two alternatives for the operation of customs arrangements. On the question of clarity, I would encourage the hon. Gentleman to ask for clarity from the Leader of the Opposition, who has been anything but clear about whether his party supports membership of the single market or not. I encourage him to work on his own side to deliver that clarity.

Security Situation

8. **Sir Henry Bellingham** (North West Norfolk) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the security situation in Northern Ireland. [900731]

9. **Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the security situation in Northern Ireland. [900732]

14. **Luke Hall** (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the security situation in Northern Ireland. [900737]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chloe Smith): The threat from Northern Ireland-related terrorism continues to be severe in Northern Ireland, meaning that an attack is highly likely. Our response to terrorism and paramilitary activity is co-ordinated, effective and fully resourced. This Government remain fully committed to keeping people safe and secure and ensuring that terrorism never succeeds.

Sir Henry Bellingham: As part of the security review, will the Minister look at the case of Dennis Hutchings and other veterans, who have been hounded and charged in respect of alleged shootings nearly 50 years ago? There is no new evidence, so surely the time has come to restore humanity and natural justice, and bring in some form of time limitation.

Chloe Smith: The Government will always give their fullest possible backing to those brave men and women who have done, and continue to do, an outstanding job serving the community. As part of our work to implement the Stormont House agreement, the legacy institutions will be under a duty to behave in a manner that is balanced, proportionate and fair. We also have the aim of taking cases in chronological order. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: I understand the sense of anticipation, but I remind the House that we are discussing the security situation in Northern Ireland. Out of respect for the people of Northern Ireland it would be good if there were some attention to the questions and answers.

Scott Mann: Will my hon. Friend join me in sending a message of support and thanks to the brave men and women of the Police Service of Northern Ireland who keep us safe in the light of the severe terrorist threat at present?

Chloe Smith: Yes, I certainly do. I send the Government's thanks and support to every member of the security services and the police force who keeps people safe in Northern Ireland and here.

Luke Hall: Will my hon. Friend update the House on efforts made through the "Fresh Start" programme to tackle the scourge of paramilitaries, who continue to exert control through fear and criminal behaviour?

Chloe Smith: This Government have committed £25 million of funding to support the Northern Ireland Executive's tackling paramilitarism programme. However, I return to the point that this reminds us why we need an Executive back up and running to keep people safe, on this most acute of issues.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): The Minister must be absolutely appalled by the report from the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on the response by the Government to Libyan Semtex being used to murder people in Northern Ireland and here in GB. Will she commit to meet my colleagues and me to discuss this report and get a fresh start on dealing with this crucial issue?

Chloe Smith: More broadly, this is a matter being taken forward by the Foreign Office, but I would be happy to meet, or indeed to arrange a meeting, with members of the Government to discuss the issues in more detail.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Can the Minister tell us what steps the Government are taking to try to reassure communities that it is safe for them to come forward and work with the police? Surely working with communities is one of the best ways to improve the security situation in the whole of Northern Ireland.

Chloe Smith: Yes, is the principal answer. It is crucial that people have the confidence to come forward to the Police Service of Northern Ireland, to ensure a safe and prosperous future for all parts of the community.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [900819] **Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 13 September.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I am sure that the thoughts of Members across the House remain with all those affected by Hurricane Irma, particularly in our overseas territories. I would like to update the House briefly. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has travelled to the overseas territories to see the recovery work at first hand and assess what more is needed. As I told the House last week, we had a Navy ship pre-positioned in the region and humanitarian experts on the ground to co-ordinate the UK response. Since Thursday Cobra has met regularly to co-ordinate the Government's response,

bringing together military, aid and consular effort, and today I am announcing an additional £25 million to support the recovery effort, further to the £32 million of assistance that I announced last week. We have now deployed over 1,000 military personnel to the region, with an additional 200 to arrive in the next few days, along with over 60 police. More than 40 tonnes of aid has now arrived. I am sure that Members across the House would like to join me in paying tribute to the hard work of the many people, military and civilian, who are doing an incredible job in difficult circumstances.

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

Layla Moran: I would like to echo the Prime Minister's words of sympathy for the families, but especially the children, affected by Hurricane Irma.

Oxford West and Abingdon has a vibrant local economy, but, reliant on the university, science and car industries, it is set to shrink if we leave the single market and the customs union, risking thousands of local jobs. Is it not time that the Prime Minister was frank with people about the dangers of leaving and allowed them a say when we finally know the full facts?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady's view of what is going to happen when we leave the European Union is not the right one. If she is telling her constituents that, then she needs to think again. She needs to work with the Government to ensure that as we leave the European Union we get the deal that gives us access to the single market and enables us not just to have that access, but to do trade deals around the world and bring prosperity and jobs here to the UK.

Q2. [900820] Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Many of my constituents feel that Yorkshire has not had its fair share of the transport infrastructure cake over recent years, especially compared with London and the south-east. Will the Prime Minister therefore promise to significantly increase the proportion of transport infrastructure that is spent in the north generally and Yorkshire in particular in this Parliament? Perhaps my right hon. Friend can start as she means to go on by ensuring that we get the much-needed and long-awaited Shipley eastern bypass.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend never ceases to raise his constituents' concerns in the House, as he rightly should, and he makes an important point. We are committed to ensuring that the whole country gets the transport infrastructure it needs. I reassure him that that is not about making a choice between north and south. We are carrying out one of the biggest investments in transport in the region for a generation, spending £13 billion—the largest in Government history—on northern transport in this Parliament. On the Shipley eastern relief road, I believe there is a decision to be taken by the local authority. We do want to see such improvements being supported, which is why we have allocated up to £781 million for the West Yorkshire Plus transport fund to deliver local priorities.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I share the Prime Minister's sympathy for all those affected by Hurricane Irma in whichever part of the Caribbean

they have suffered. I hope the Prime Minister will be prepared to look carefully at the speed of our response to Hurricane Irma, and that, if demands are made in the next few days or weeks from any country affected, Britain will respond as generously as we can in helping people at what must be the most catastrophic time of their lives.

The situation facing disabled people in Britain is described by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as “a human catastrophe”. Does the Prime Minister think it was right that while her Government funded tax giveaways to the richest, disabled people have been hit hardest by the cuts her Government have made?

The Prime Minister: On the UK response to Hurricane Irma, I assure the right hon. Gentleman that it was a speedy one. RFA Mounts Bay was already pre-positioned, as I have said, and it was able to go in immediately to Anguilla to make necessary repairs, such as ensuring that the hospital there could continue to operate. We recognise that the devastation that has taken place means there will be a significant need for reconstruction in those British overseas territories and in other Caribbean member countries and countries in the region that have been hit. There will be a point at which it is right to start the reconstruction work, and we will work with our overseas territories to ensure that those countries and their economies can be brought to life once again, enabling their people to have a good life.

On disabled people, we have seen during our time in government more disabled people get into the workplace, we have focused support to disabled people, crucially, on those who are most in need, and we have increased the overall support being given to disabled people. The picture that the right hon. Gentleman presents is, again, not a fair one.

Jeremy Corbyn: The United Nations committee says that the Government's policies have caused “grave and systematic violations” of the rights of disabled people. We have seen punitive assessments and sanctions, cuts to disability benefits, and the bedroom tax that has hit disabled people, 4.2 million of whom now live in poverty. At the weekend, we were told that the public sector pay cap had been dropped. On Monday, the Prime Minister's spokesperson said the pay cap would continue as planned, and yesterday we were told it was over, yet later we found out that police and prison officers still face a real-terms pay cut. Will the Prime Minister tell us what the position is at midday today?

The Prime Minister: I remind the right hon. Gentleman that we spend more than £50 billion on benefits to support disabled people and people with health conditions. As a share of GDP, our public spending on disability and incapacity is the second highest in the G7. I suggest, therefore, that he thinks again on this matter.

On public sector pay, I said to the right hon. Gentleman only last week, I think, when questions were raised on the matter, that two further public sector pay review bodies—for prison officers and for police officers—were to report and the Government had to respond to them. They reported and made their recommendations, and as we have accepted the recommendations of the independent pay review bodies across the public sector,

we accepted them for those two groups of workers. We also recognise, as I have said to him previously, that we need to balance out protecting jobs in the public sector, being fair to public sector workers, and being fair to taxpayers who pay for it, many of whom are public sector workers. There is a need for greater flexibility as we look at these issues of public sector pay in the future. We will be working on that in the lead-up to the Budget, and the remits for the pay review bodies for 2018-19 will be published in due course.

Jeremy Corbyn: Does the Prime Minister understand that inflation is now 2.9%, so anything less than that means that dedicated public servants are worse off again? They have been made worse off every year for the past seven years. Yesterday, the POA was not impressed either with the 1.7% offer, saying, “it is a pay cut. It is not acceptable.”

As we discovered that prison officers and the police have been offered a slightly smaller real-terms cut in their incomes, there came the news that this would be funded by more service cuts. Can the Prime Minister guarantee that no more police or prison officers will be lost as a result of decisions that she has made this week?

The Prime Minister: What the right hon. Gentleman fails to remind people is that these pay review bodies that have reported and recommended these sums of pay are independent bodies. They make a recommendation to the Government, and the Government have taken those recommendations. He has also failed to mention one or two other things: he has failed to mention the automatic pay increases over and above the 1% that many public sector workers get. Indeed, a calculation suggests that a new police officer in 2010, thanks to progression pay, annual basic salary increases and the increase in the personal allowance, which is a tax cut for people, has actually seen an increase in their pay of over £9,000 since 2010—a real-terms increase of 32%.

Jeremy Corbyn: There are 20,000—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is far too much noise in the Chamber. We will get through all the questions, however long it takes; it is just a bit tedious if it is disrupted by excessive noise.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Mr Speaker. There are 20,000 fewer police officers and 7,000 fewer prison officers than in 2010, 43% of police stations have closed in the past two years alone, and police budgets have been cut by £300 million, but the Chancellor is absolutely on the money on this one, literally. Last week, at the 1922 committee, he told Conservative MPs:

“look at us, no mortgage, everybody with a pension and never had more money in the current account.”

A Conservative Prime Minister once told Britain it had “never had it so good.”

Now Tory MPs tell each other, “We’ve never had it so good.” Can the Prime Minister tell us what has happened in the last seven years to the average person’s bank account?

The Prime Minister: I am very interested; the right hon. Gentleman is talking about ordinary people and the situation that they face, but this is his fourth question

and he has not yet mentioned the employment figures today, which show unemployment at its lowest levels since the mid-1970s, and that employment—people in work; people taking home a wage, a salary, to support their family—is at record levels, the highest levels since records began.

Jeremy Corbyn: The only problem is that more people in work are in poverty than ever before. More are in insecure work, and more rely on tax credits and housing benefit to make ends meet. Consumer debt is rising by 10% as wages are falling. Household savings are lower than at any time in the past 50 years. That is the Conservative legacy.

A young woman called Aisha wrote to me last week. She says:

“I have recently graduated from university, with a hefty amount of debt on my head”.

She goes on—[*Interruption.*] I really cannot understand why Conservative MPs do not want to listen to this question; however, I will persist. She goes on:

“However I am scared about the futures of other young people. People who have always dreamed of being nurses no longer want to train to become one.”

The Prime Minister’s Government, with the support of the Lib Dems, trebled tuition fees. This afternoon, will the Prime Minister take the opportunity to vote against another Tory hike in student fees?

The Prime Minister: Once again, there are a few things about people’s circumstances that the right hon. Gentleman failed to mention—things that the Government have done, such as giving a tax cut to 30 million people. For a basic rate taxpayer, that means £1,000 more in their pocket. That is what sound management of the economy by a Conservative Government delivers for people.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about delivering for students. Let us talk about delivery and let us talk about promises that are made. He promised—

Hon. Members: Ah! [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is far too much noise on both sides of the Chamber. I say in all candour and friendliness to the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), who is in a very animated state: I don’t know what you had for breakfast, but I think I ought to steer clear of it.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman promised workers that he would protect their rights and on Monday he let them down. He promised students that he would deal with their debt and he has let them down. He promised the British people that he would support Trident and he has let them down. He promised voters that he would deliver on Brexit and he has let them down. What people know is that it is only the Conservatives who deliver a better Britain.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Institute for Fiscal Studies reports that English graduates have the highest student debts anywhere in the world. The poorest students now graduate with an average debt of £57,000. Who is responsible for that situation but the Prime Minister’s party and the Liberal Democrats?

We are in the middle of an economic slowdown. The Office for Budget Responsibility says that there is a growing risk of recession on the Prime Minister's watch. Growth is slowing, productivity is worsening, wages are falling, jobs are becoming more insecure, personal debt is increasing, saving levels are falling, and homelessness is rising all over the country. It is forecast that by the end of this Parliament, 5 million children in this country—the fifth richest country in the world—will be living in poverty. Is it not true that not only is our economy at breaking point, but for many people it is already broken, as they face up to the poverty imposed by this Government?

The Prime Minister: I just say to the right hon. Gentleman that, yet again, he failed to mention something on student fees. Who was it who introduced tuition fees? It was not the Conservative party; it was the Labour party that introduced tuition fees.

Let us look at what has happened in our economy. What do we see? We see record levels of direct investment in the British economy—firms investing in this country because they believe in the future of this country. We also see from today's employment figures that there are more people in work than ever before. We see more women in work and more 16 to 24-year-olds in work or full-time education than we have seen before. That is what we get with a strong economy.

What do we know and what do the people know? That the Labour party, with its high debt, high taxes and fewer jobs, would only destroy our economy, as it did last time. We had to sort it out. The only people who pay the price for the Labour party are ordinary working families.

Q4. [900822] **Edward Argar** (Charnwood) (Con): Britain's countryside—and, I would argue, Charnwood's countryside—is the most spectacular in the world, because it is cared for by our farmers. Given that today is the National Farmers Union's Back British Farming Day, will my right hon. Friend join me in recognising the huge contribution that farming makes to our economy and our country? In her clear determination to deliver a Brexit that works for Britain, will she ensure that Brexit works for Britain's farmers as well?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in marking Back British Farming Day and recognising the enormous and important contribution that is made to our economy by the food and farming industry. As he implies in his question, leaving the EU does give us a new opportunity for UK agriculture. We will be able to design policies for our agriculture industry, and our food and farming industry, that suit the United Kingdom, our countryside and our environment, and that can provide better value for the taxpayer. Yes, I am happy to back Back British Farming Day, and, yes, we will make a success of leaving the European Union for our food and farming industry.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Since 2007, annual real wage growth in the OECD has been an average of 6.4%. Can the Prime Minister explain to the House how the UK has measured up over the same period?

The Prime Minister: It might be quite interesting if the hon. Gentleman were to tell the House about the economy in Scotland. I seem to recall that the economy in Scotland is not doing as well as—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) should not yell from a sedentary position. I have been doing my best to nurture the hon. Gentleman's rise to statesmanship, but he thwarts me at every turn. Calm; repose—the statesmanlike behaviour of the Father of the House would be more appropriate.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) should look at what is happening to the economy in Scotland under an SNP Government. An SNP Government are failing the people of Scotland, but the people of Scotland now have a strong voice in this House through our 13 Conservative Members of Parliament.

Ian Blackford: I was under the impression that this was questions to the Prime Minister. If the Prime Minister wants to question the Scottish Government, perhaps she can get Ruth Davidson to ask her question.

The UK's record on earnings has been significantly worse than that of almost any other developed country. In fact, real wages in the UK have fallen by 2.6% since 2007. Wages are not growing, the cost of living is rising and household budgets are stretched. The Government can find the money for quantitative easing—£435 billion since 2009—but they cannot find the money for fiscal measures to grow the economy. This is a Government who do not understand how to use economic levers, and our people are paying the price. Will the Prime Minister take responsibility for the Government's gross mismanagement of the UK economy?

The Prime Minister: I notice that in the hon. Gentleman's rather lengthy question never once did he record the increase in employment that has taken place across the United Kingdom, as shown by today's figures.

The hon. Gentleman started off by standing up and complaining that I had referenced the acts of the Scottish Government. He believes in independence; he believes that Scotland should be run only by the Scottish Government. So I think that the Scottish people deserve to look at, and we in this House deserve to talk about, what the Scottish Government are or are not doing for the people of Scotland. The one thing that I can tell him and others is that the Scottish economy and the livelihoods of the people of Scotland are better off in the United Kingdom.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: Order. We have some very excitable denizens of the House today. They ought to take some sort of medicament and calm down.

Q5. [900823] **James Heapey** (Wells) (Con): Residents in communities across the Wells constituency have been angered this summer by a seemingly endless stream of illegal Traveller encampments. Will the Prime Minister look at what more the Government could do to help local authorities to close these illegal encampments more quickly and at less cost to local taxpayers?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important issue, and it is not unique to his constituency; it is felt by many Members across the House. We are concerned about unauthorised encampments and the effect when they leave communities. A wide range of powers is

available to local authorities and the police, and we want to see them working together and with local landowners. We do keep these matters under review, and I am sure my right hon. Friend the Communities Secretary will be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss them.

Q3. [900821] **Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Four years ago, after the death of her mother, my constituent Elissa became the sole carer for her three siblings. Now her eldest sister has gone to university and Elissa has had a child of her own, but despite saving the state hundreds of thousands of pounds in care costs, she is ineligible for the Sure Start grant and for child tax credit. This is an anomaly for kinship carers. Will the Prime Minister today commit to reviewing this ahead of the autumn Budget?

The Prime Minister: Obviously there are certain rules in place for these situations, but the hon. Lady raises a situation with various aspects to it. May I suggest that she writes to me about it, and I will look at the detail that she has set out?

West Midlands Economy

Q8. [900826] **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): When she next plans to meet the Mayor of the West Midlands to discuss the economy of that region; and if she will make a statement.

The Prime Minister: I would be happy to meet the new Conservative Mayor of the West Midlands when my diary allows.

Michael Fabricant: I am very encouraged to hear it. Last week, in the face of stiff competition, Birmingham defeated Liverpool's brilliant submission and won the Commonwealth games bid for the west midlands, which is excellent news for the economy not only in Birmingham but in the greater west midlands, including Lichfield. Will my right hon. Friend speak to the Chancellor—I see that she is sitting next to him—to ensure that he backs the bid as well, and then bat for Britain to ensure that Birmingham wins the Commonwealth games over Kuala Lumpur?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. I have noticed that he is apparently shortly to appear on a Channel 4 programme called "Celebrity First Dates". What I am not sure about is whether he is the celebrity or the first date—maybe he can tell us about that.

My hon. Friend raises the issue of the Commonwealth games. Obviously their being hosted in the UK in 2022, in Birmingham, would present a unique opportunity for the west midlands, and it would of course promote global Britain across the Commonwealth. The next step is for Birmingham to demonstrate value for money in its bid, but subject to that, I have no doubt that Birmingham will continue the UK's rich history of hosting successful sporting events.

Engagements

Q6. [900824] **Louise Haigh** (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Crime involving mopeds and bikes has soared across the country in recent years. Given that yesterday's unfunded

real-terms pay cut to the police will actually cost us more frontline officers, may I suggest to the Prime Minister that the very least she can do is to change the law to protect police officers if they are driving according to their training and experience when pursuing people and responding to blue-light situations, and send a message from this House that no force should be operating a blanket no-pursuit policy? The police protect us every day. Is it not high time that the Prime Minister protected them?

The Prime Minister: First, I agree that there should not be blanket no-pursuit policies in place, but obviously each chief constable will make operational decisions for their own force.

The first issue that the hon. Lady raised—crimes relating to mopeds in particular—has been recognised. She says that this is an issue of funding. It is not an issue of funding; it is an issue of how we respond to those crimes. I am pleased to say that my hon. Friend the Policing Minister held a roundtable on exactly this issue yesterday to look at how we can ensure that the police are responding fully to it.

Q15. [900833] **David Morris** (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): I would like to thank the Prime Minister, because she put me in touch with her powerhouse Minister and we are now looking at getting an enterprise zone in Heysham in my constituency. Ever having a big wishlist, however, may I ask the Prime Minister whether she can help me in any way possible with my ongoing campaign to get the third nuclear power station in Heysham—the tentatively named Heysham 3—built more quickly?

The Prime Minister: Once again, my hon. Friend is campaigning tirelessly for his constituency. I welcome his efforts across a number of issues which he referred to. We do need affordable, clean energy to keep the lights on in the decades ahead, and he is absolutely right that nuclear energy is an important part of our energy mix. In regard to the particular site, I believe there is land next to the existing Heysham nuclear power station, which is one of the eight sites in the UK that has been designated for new nuclear build.

Q7. [900825] **Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): The House and the Prime Minister will remember the case of my constituent, Lola Ilesamni, whose daughter is under threat of female genital mutilation from Lola's abusive ex-partner. I want to thank "Channel 4 News" and Cathy Newman for breaking the story, and the Prime Minister for intervening and granting an 18-month reprieve. Lola now has a temporary right to work, but no recourse to public funds if she cannot find a job. That wee girl and her family need long-term certainty. Will the Prime Minister look again at that case and allow Lola and her family to stay in Livingston in the long term?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is right. She has raised that case before, and I understand that the Immigration Minister was in touch with her. I can confirm that, following a comprehensive and rigorous review, Ms Ilesamni has now been granted leave to remain in the United Kingdom, as the hon. Lady set out.

I want to say something about the issue of female genital mutilation, which the hon. Lady raised. She talked about her concern about the threat that Lola's daughter might be facing. FGM is an absolutely abhorrent crime. The Government have done a lot to deal with it, but we cannot tolerate that practice. Our work to tackle FGM is an integral part of our strategy on violence against women and girls, which we published in March last year. We all accept that we need to do more to ensure that young girls are not subject to this horrific abuse.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Labour party's cynical attempt to block the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill on Monday shows that it is still interested only in playing party politics, rather than delivering the best deal for our future, which is what my constituents and the majority of this country want to see?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Most people in this country want to see the Government doing what we are doing, which is getting on with the job of delivering the best deal for Britain from Brexit. There was a certain amount of noise from the Opposition when I said earlier that the Leader of the Opposition let workers down by failing to protect their rights on Monday, but that is exactly one of the issues in the Bill. It is about bringing workers' rights that are contained in EU legislation into the UK, and he voted against it.

Q9. [900827] **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): As the Prime Minister was visiting survivors of the Manchester terror attack, families who were heartbroken to have lost their children were also in the vicinity, but the Prime Minister did not visit them. Chloe Rutherford and Liam Curry from South Shields tragically lost their lives, and their parents feel ignored by the Prime Minister. I wrote to her seven weeks ago with their concerns, but she has failed to respond. When will she properly acknowledge their loss?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady raises an important issue. I am not aware of her letter, so I will of course look today to see why she has not received a response. I can only apologise to her for the fact that she has not yet received a response.

I acknowledged at the time, and I continue to acknowledge, that the attack in Manchester damaged lives in many ways. There are those who were injured and are living with the consequences of their injuries, those who lost loved ones—relatives or friends—and are affected by that, and those whose lives were sadly cut short at all too young an age. We must all ensure that we are providing support for the victims and that our authorities—police authorities and agencies—have the power to prevent attacks in the future. I will look into the issue of the letter because, as I said, the hon. Lady should have had a response already. I am sorry that seven weeks have gone by without her receiving one.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): Following our successful Offshore Europe exhibition last week in Aberdeen, can the Prime Minister assure me and my constituents that support for the oil and gas industry will be at the heart of the industrial strategy so that we can maximise economic recovery in the North sea?

Does she agree that the biggest threat to the industry would be the instability of a second, divisive independence referendum?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have already given significant support to the oil and gas industry. I was pleased, some months ago, to visit Aberdeen and to visit the technology centre for the oil and gas industry. It is doing really interesting work looking not just at existing fields but at decommissioning work and how it can export its knowledge and expertise across the world. He is absolutely right that what people and businesses want is the certainty of knowing that Scotland will remain in the United Kingdom and that there will not be a second independence referendum.

Q10. [900828] **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): Cambridge parents tell me that when young people returned to schools and colleges last week, in some cases they found that almost half the cooks and cleaners had gone. *Cambridge News* reports that pubs in the area will not be able to serve food, because they cannot find the skilled staff to do it. Is it not ironic that taking back control is a further blow to the great British pub? Will the Prime Minister tell us what plans she has put in place to help institutions deal with this chronic and acute sudden shortage of labour?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman talks as if there is no longer net migration into this country, whereas, of course, there is net migration into this country. People are coming here to take on work. The wider issue, which the Government are dealing with, as we have seen from some of the announcements made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education, is making sure that young people in the United Kingdom get the training, skills and technical education they need to be able to take on the skilled jobs of the future.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Today is World Sepsis Day. Sepsis claims at least 44,000 lives a year in the UK and earlier this year I almost became part of that tragic statistic. Will the Prime Minister look at what more the Government could be doing to support awareness-raising programmes, so that we can catch sepsis more quickly, treat it more effectively and save more lives?

The Prime Minister: I am sure I echo the feelings of everybody across the whole House in saying that we are pleased my hon. Friend managed to battle sepsis, come through and win that particular fight. I commend him for his recovery. I commend all those who supported him in that fight and in that battle, including the excellent medical staff who provided him with the care he needed. He is absolutely right. The estimate is that 10,000 deaths a year could be prevented by better and earlier diagnosis of sepsis. We need to get better at spotting it and at raising awareness. We will be publishing a new sepsis action plan for the NHS. A NICE quality standard is due to be published this week. NHS England will also publish guidance to further support frontline staff.

Q11. [900829] **Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): At the last census, there were 3,000 Aberdonians who said that they were born in Nigeria. Recently, the UN human rights office reported concerns about threats to

the Igbo people in northern Nigeria. The Foreign Secretary recently visited the country. Will the Prime Minister tell me what her Government are doing to encourage the communities there to live in peace?

The Prime Minister: We make efforts across a number of fronts and we are providing support to Nigeria in a variety of ways. As the hon. Lady says, there is a significant diaspora with Nigerian connections and heritage in the United Kingdom. She is right that the Foreign Secretary visited Nigeria. We continue to work with Nigeria. It is important to work with Nigeria on the state of its economy to ensure that communities across Nigeria can feel stability and security for the future.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): Yesterday, the shadow Justice Secretary refused four times to condemn illegal strike action. Labour's biggest union paymaster seems to agree. Such illegal action would cause misery for millions of people across the country. Will my right hon. Friend join me in condemning illegal action? Does she agree that it is the Conservatives who understand that this great country was built on the principles of democracy and the rule of law?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. She is absolutely right. I was struck to see this week that Len McCluskey—or perhaps Mahatma, as his friends call him—had said that if they need to act outside the law, so be it. I have to say that I join my hon. Friend. On the Conservative Benches we are very clear: we condemn illegal strikes. We condemn action outside the law. The people who suffer from illegal strikes are the ordinary working families who cannot get their children to school, who cannot access the public services they need, and who cannot get to work. Once again, the price of Labour is pain for ordinary working families.

Q12. [900830] **Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Owing to recent changes to maternity services in my constituency, a vastly increased number of pregnant mothers are having to make a more than 200-mile return trip to give birth. One can imagine how dangerous that is in the depths of a highland winter. While I recognise that this is a devolved matter, may I nevertheless ask the Prime Minister for advice about how I can help to sort out this desperate situation?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman, who is obviously right to speak up on behalf of his constituents in the highlands, points out that health matters are devolved to Scotland, so of course it is for the Scottish Government to make full use of their powers to deliver the healthcare services that people in Scotland deserve. People in Scotland will be sorry that their SNP Government are failing to deliver for them in relation to health services. This week we marked the 20th anniversary of the vote to create the Scottish Parliament, so it is particularly notable. I welcome him to his place in the House, however, and wish him the best in his efforts. Standing up and mentioning in this House the failure of the Scottish Government is part of the answer to his question.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The widow of our murdered colleague Ian Gow has expressed dismay and disgust that hundreds of former soldiers

face reinvestigation—yet again—over incidents that occurred 40 years ago, while her husband's suspected killers walk free. Will the Prime Minister now introduce legislation for a statute of limitations, coupled with a truth recovery process, finally to put an end to this grotesque situation, as she is perfectly able to do?

The Prime Minister: I say first to my hon. Friend that the overwhelming majority of our armed forces in Northern Ireland served with great distinction, and we owe them a huge debt of gratitude for what they did. As part of our work to implement the Stormont House agreement, we will obviously ensure that the new legacy bodies are under legal obligations to be fair, balanced and proportionate. This will make sure that our veterans are not unfairly treated and will recognise the fact that 90% of the deaths in the troubles were caused by terrorists, and we should never forget that. Our focus, however, is on ensuring that the investigative bodies responsible for looking at deaths during the troubles operate in a fair, balanced and proportionate manner.

Q13. [900831] **Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Today is also Back Welsh Farming day, and National Farmers Union Cymru estimates that agriculture contributes 60,000 jobs in Wales and £500 million a year. How will farming be able to continue that contribution once the International Trade Secretary opens up domestic markets to lower-standard food while simultaneously losing unrestricted access to our main export market?

The Prime Minister: As I have said, I support Back British Farming day, and obviously I back farmers in Wales as well—I was pleased in recent months to sit down and talk to farmers in Wales. We are looking to leave the EU with a good trade deal that enables trade to continue on as friction-free and tariff-free basis as possible, and that will be good for Welsh farmers. There are opportunities, however, for Welsh farmers to export to the rest of the world, and we want to ensure those opportunities through our trade deals with the rest of the world.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Tomorrow, I will have the great honour and privilege of hosting in this place a celebratory event marking the 50th anniversary of the Multiple Sclerosis Society. We will welcome partners from across the world who have come together over that half century to tackle and defeat that pernicious condition. May I invite my right hon. Friend, as Prime Minister, to send her good wishes to the MS Society internationally as we celebrate this important milestone and to commit the Government, as they have done over the past few years, to work across Departments to ensure that those with MS have the maximum support and encouragement to get back into work, which so many of them wish to do?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue, and I am happy to join him in sending our best wishes to the MS Society. I know from my own family of the impact that multiple sclerosis can have. Society campaigns tirelessly for people with MS, and I am very pleased that my hon. Friend is hosting a reception to mark this important milestone.

We have seen progress over the past 15 years. The Department of Health has made funds available for neurological research, which, of course, includes research on MS. As my hon. Friend says, however, it is not an issue just for the Department of Health. It is important to try to help people with MS back into the workplace—which we are doing in the Department for Work and Pensions—because many of them want to continue to be in the workplace and to provide for themselves and their families.

Q14. [900832] **Norman Lamb** (North Norfolk) (LD): Four years after teenager Christina Edkins was tragically killed by Philip Simelane, a man who was acutely ill with psychosis and had only recently been released from prison, the chair of the independent panel has expressed extreme concern about the fact that vulnerable prisoners are still being released without adequate support. Will the Prime Minister make it an urgent priority to ensure that we guarantee that there is proper support, proper continuity of care, and the sharing of information between prisons and mental health services to reduce the risk of another tragedy taking place?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman has raised a very important matter. He has campaigned long and hard on mental health issues, and has made a huge contribution in doing so.

The issue of the relationship between health services and prisons is long-standing. Efforts have been made, and there has been some progress in improving that relationship—in the context of the responsibilities of the Department of Health and the national health service in prisons—to ensure that cross-cutting action of exactly that sort can be taken; but we will, of course, continue to look at the issue.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): It is an honour every day to work alongside some incredibly talented female Members of Parliament on both sides of the Chamber. This afternoon there will be a Westminster Hall debate on women in Parliament. What does the second female Prime Minister believe should be done to bring even more talented women into Parliament?

The Prime Minister: I am very pleased, because I think that my hon. Friend is playing his own role—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us hear the answer.

The Prime Minister: I think that my hon. Friend is playing his own role in supporting Women2Win, the organisation in the Conservative party that encourages women to see Parliament as a career and to gain the expertise and the skills that will ensure that they sit on these Benches. I am very pleased to see the increased number of Conservative MPs who are women. As a party, we will continue to support women coming into Parliament, and, through the excellent role models that we have of Conservative Members of Parliament, encourage more of them to come forward.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Can the Prime Minister explain the logic behind treating European fruit-pickers and cleaners as an economic threat, while at the same time being completely relaxed about European ownership and control of the railways, the water system and the electricity companies, and, indeed, about last week's takeover of one of Britain's few remaining technology companies, Aveva? Is this not a case of being biddable to big business, but paranoid about people?

The Prime Minister: We are very clear, in relation to immigration, that we want to welcome the brightest and best who wish to come to the United Kingdom. We have rules for people from outside the EU, and we will be able to have our own rules for people coming from inside the EU.

I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his election to the leadership of his party. He and I, of course, worked together during the years of the coalition, although we did not always agree on absolutely everything. However, in raising the issue of our relationship with Europe, he said something with which I did agree: that a second EU referendum would be “seriously disrespectful and politically utterly counterproductive”. I was therefore rather disappointed to hear that he has now reversed his position and backs a second referendum; but perhaps it is not unusual for a Liberal Democrat to say one thing before an election and another after it.

Point of Order

12.50 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Further to the earlier remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), I seek your advice on how to elicit a response from the Government on the question of the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its report of 31 August. I wrote to the Secretary of State on 5 September, calling on him to come to this House to debate the UN report, but to date have not received any response from him. Obviously, the House rises tomorrow and I am again concerned that the Government have not been held to account on this very important issue. As you know from the earlier remarks, Mr Speaker, the UN describes this as “a human catastrophe”. Have the Government given you any indication as to when they might report to the House? May I also seek your guidance on how to ensure that this House is the first place to hear of how the Government intend to take forward the Committee’s detailed recommendations?

Mr Speaker: I am most grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. The short answer to her particular inquiry is that I have received no indication from any Minister of an intention to make a statement on this matter. However, I note what the hon. Lady has told me, and I am conscious of, and sensitive to, the fact that the House will cease to sit tomorrow for the period of the conference recess, and therefore I understand the rationale behind the hon. Lady raising the matter with some sense of urgency today. My response to her is to say, first, that an attempt could usefully be made at business questions tomorrow to elicit from the Government their thinking as to whether, and, if so, when, they intend to broach this matter in the House. My secondary suggestion is that if that does not bear fruit, it is open to the hon. Lady as soon as we return from the conference recess to seek to raise the matter, and if she thinks she can justify doing so, to do so on the basis that it is by then demonstrably urgent.

Carbon Monoxide (Detection and Safety)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

12.53 pm

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about requirements for carbon monoxide detectors; to make provision about carbon monoxide safety; and for connected purposes.

Carbon monoxide is a killer. In recent years, more than 25 people have been killed each year in carbon monoxide-related incidents and hundreds of people have been hospitalised—264 last year—and the figures I have seen show that approximately 4,000 people go to A&E each year with symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning. We have a problem, and it is a serious problem; in fact, it is a fatal problem. That should not be the case in the 21st century, because it is almost entirely preventable. We should make this “silent killer” history.

Nearly three months ago, on 14 June, at least 80 people tragically lost their lives in the Grenfell Tower fire. I believe the first hearing of the public inquiry into the fire will be held tomorrow, with an interim report expected by Easter 2018. I am sure there will be many opportunities in future for Members to contribute to the debate and the subsequent changes in legislation that will no doubt follow. But Grenfell serves as a reminder that we need to improve safety across the board for all residents across both the public and private housing sectors, and to design out any weaknesses. That is why I took this early opportunity to secure one of the ten-minute rule Bill slots at the start of this Parliament.

Carbon monoxide poisoning is predominately a matter of housing safety, and I have no doubt that the improvements to current legislation proposed by my motion will contribute to a reduction in the number of unnecessary deaths each year due to carbon monoxide poisoning. The stories associated with these deaths are heart-rending.

For example, I have been contacted by Avril Samuel of the Katie Haines Memorial Trust. On 12 December 2009 Avril’s daughter Katie had the happiest day of her life when she married Richard Haines at the church of St Mary the Virgin in Gloucestershire. Katie had planned the day down to the minute and everything went to plan. They honeymooned in Brazil and Argentina before returning to settle into a happy married life. But Katie’s life was tragically cut short just a few months later on the evening of 18 February 2010 when she died of carbon monoxide poisoning. Her husband Richard and father-in-law Gordon were also poisoned, but, thankfully, survived. The Katie Haines Memorial Trust was founded by Katie’s husband Richard and her family to promote awareness of the dangers of carbon monoxide, and in time to support other charities that would have been close to Katie’s heart.

I have also spoken to Project SHOUT, which was created following the death of Dominic Rogers, whose mother Stacey bravely tells Dominic’s story on the Project SHOUT website. On a night like any other, Stacey kissed her 10-year-old son goodnight, told him she loved him and went to bed. The next morning when she went into his bedroom, she found him cold and face down. Following an investigation, it was announced

[Eddie Hughes]

that he had died from carbon monoxide poisoning, that the carbon monoxide had seeped through the brickwork from the neighbouring property, and that Dominic would have been overcome by the poisonous fumes within five minutes.

Even one of my staff has shared with me a story of a friend of theirs who moved into a brand-new home just a couple of years ago: brand-new boiler, up-to-date building standards, and ticked all the building reg boxes, but there was a problem, and no one spotted it, because carbon monoxide is undetectable to human senses. A young mother and her child started to get headaches and to feel unwell, and ended up in their local A&E department. It turns out there was a fault with the boiler and they had carbon monoxide poisoning. That would have been completely detectable and preventable if a carbon monoxide detector costing less than 15 quid had been installed.

I firmly believe that not only should carbon monoxide detectors be mandatory in new-build properties, but they should be installed in all rented properties, including social housing and those in the private rented sector. We should be designing this problem out.

However, we also need to ensure that people are fully aware of the risks associated with a gas that people cannot see, smell or taste, because any fuel-burning appliance that is not properly maintained has the potential to be a source of carbon monoxide. This is why I am also proposing that fire authorities have an explicit duty to promote carbon monoxide safety. That would not be an additional strain on the public purse, but would make current best practice by many forces enshrined in law.

The timing of the presentation of this motion is fortunate given that today sees the launch of gas safety week. The promotional material for this event includes an assertion that we should check gas appliances for warning signs that they are not working properly. These include a lazy yellow flame instead of a crisp blue one, black marks or stains around the appliance, and too much condensation in the room. The material also reminds people of the six signs of carbon monoxide poisoning: headaches, dizziness, breathlessness, nausea, collapse and loss of consciousness. People can see a short video of one survivor's account of her symptoms on the website of the Carbon Monoxide and Gas Safety Society. I am very grateful to Stephanie Trotter OBE, the president and director of that organisation, for the help and support she has given me. In fact, I welcome all of the work done in promoting this seventh annual gas safety week, and I hope that many Members from all parties will promote the event enthusiastically across all media platforms.

But it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the work that has already been done recently to improve legislation relating to gas safety. Prior to 2015 there was no statutory requirement on private landlords to install either smoke detector alarms or carbon monoxide detector alarms in their properties. The Government have addressed

that, following consultation, via the Smoke and Carbon Monoxide Alarm (England) Regulations 2015, which came into force on 1 October 2015. These regulations require that smoke alarms be installed on every storey of a rented property and that carbon monoxide detectors be installed in any room housing a solid fuel combustion appliance. These changes are of course welcome, but they do not go far enough in helping to prevent unnecessary deaths from carbon monoxide poisoning.

To mark the start of carbon monoxide awareness week in 2011, Professor Dame Sally Davies, the chief medical officer for England, said:

“Carbon monoxide is a silent killer which leads to many deaths every year...We can all prevent these avoidable tragedies by making sure gas and fuel appliances are properly installed and maintained and fitting an audible carbon monoxide alarm that meets European Standard EN 50291.”

Six years later, this advice is still valid. Some devolved nations have already changed legislation to ensure that residents are protected by the presence of carbon monoxide detectors. In Northern Ireland, carbon monoxide alarms are a mandatory requirement for all new homes built since 31 October 2012, after a change to the building regulations there. In Scotland, landlords have been required to install a carbon monoxide detector in every space containing a fixed combustion appliance since 2015. We should embrace some of this best practice. Big international cities such as New York also have similar carbon monoxide laws. Now is the time to enshrine that protection in English law.

I understand that many prefer to leave such matters to individuals, so that people can make choices for themselves rather than being compelled to action by an overbearing state. In general, I would wholeheartedly agree, but this will not involve loads of new red tape or piles of regulation that will end up becoming an annoyance. It involves three simple things we can do as a society to prevent needless deaths and raise awareness. If we intend to ensure that the lives lost in Grenfell Tower serve to prevent others from losing their lives in the future, we need to carefully consider all options for keeping people safe in their homes—the place where they have a right to feel most safe and secure. This should include protection from carbon monoxide. In a hung Parliament, it is even more important that MPs work cross-party to get things done, and I hope we can all unite in trying to stop deaths from this silent killer. Thousands visit A&E every year with symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning, hundreds are hospitalised and many die. Let us take this opportunity to do something about that.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Eddie Hughes, Michael Tomlinson and Mr Barry Sheerman present the Bill.

Eddie Hughes accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 19 January 2018, and to be printed (Bill 107).

Mr Speaker: That will be a fine day, because it will be my 55th birthday.

Opposition Day

[1ST ALLOTTED DAY]

NHS Pay

1.3 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House notes that in 2017-18 NHS pay rises have been capped at one per cent and that this represents another below-inflation pay settlement; further notes that applications for nursing degrees have fallen 23 per cent this year; notes that the number of nurses and midwives joining the Nursing and Midwifery Council register has been in decline since March 2016 and that in 2016-17 45 per cent more UK registrants left the register than joined it; and calls on the Government to end the public sector pay cap in the NHS and give NHS workers a fair pay rise.

This is the first Opposition Supply day for six months, and it is my pleasure to bring a motion to the House on lifting the public sector pay cap. In the past 24 hours, the Government have been briefing that the pay cap has ended. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury has said that Ministers now have “flexibility” when setting pay above 1%. If—and it is a big “if”—that flexibility means lifting the cap for the whole public sector and giving public sector workers a fair pay rise above inflation, which stood at 2.9% yesterday, that will be a victory for the Labour party, for the Leader of the Opposition, for the Royal Colleges, for the trade union movement, for the MPs of all parties who signed the early-day motion and, above all, for the millions of public sector workers who have campaigned for fair pay. That flexibility that the Chief Secretary to the Treasury has talked about must mean giving NHS staff fair pay as well.

What a climbdown this represents for the Prime Minister! The House will recall that, in the general election campaign, she showed the deftness of touch that has come to characterise her dismal, beleaguered premiership by dismissing the heartfelt concerns of a nurse, saying that there was no “magic money tree”. It is funny that the money was there when the Conservatives needed the votes, though.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): May I tell my hon. Friend about Neil Thompson, a district nurse from Eastwood in my constituency? He has told me:

“I didn’t expect, after 40 years in the NHS, to be as poor now as when I first started out.”

How can that be just?

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend is right to raise that point. It is not just, which is why the Labour party has consistently campaigned to get rid of the cap. The Conservatives have voted against getting rid of it when we have brought motions on this issue to the House.

Given that the Government are now briefing that the cap is being abandoned, I trust that they will accept the motion in the name of the Leader of Opposition and myself and not divide the House later today. If they are indeed abandoning the cap, let us put them on notice that it must apply to the whole public sector, including the 55% of workers not covered by pay review bodies. We also put them on warning that we will not accept a divide-and-rule approach that plays one set of public workers off against another. Nor will we let Ministers

get away with presenting below-inflation pay offers as amounting to a fair pay rise when that is still, in effect, a pay cut.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent beginning to his speech. What is his view of the impact of this crucial question on recruitment and retention in our hospital trusts?

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend is right to raise that point. I shall go on to explain that the pay cap is at the heart of the recruitment and retention crisis that is now facing the national health service.

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share the shock of GPs and NHS staff when they learned that, while frontline staff were limited to a 1% pay rise, the governing body of the Liverpool clinical commissioning group gave themselves rises of between 15% and 81%? None of the regulators noticed this, including NHS England and NHS Improvement, and it all took place under the nose of the Government. This shows that there is one rule for the bosses and another for the workers.

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. She has been determined in her pursuit of this issue and I know that that will continue.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con) *rose—*

James Heapey (Wells) (Con) *rose—*

Jonathan Ashworth: I will make a little progress now, if I may. I promise I will take more interventions later.

I say directly to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, who will be responding to the debate later, that if Ministers are given flexibility to set pay rates, and if the pay cap has indeed been abandoned, she also needs to grant the NHS the funding that it needs. The NHS is underfunded and it is going through the biggest financial squeeze in its history. On the published figures, head-for-head NHS spending will fall in the next year. Hospitals are in deficit, waiting lists are at 4 million, the A&E target is never met and the 18-week target has been abandoned. Hospital bosses are warning that there will not be enough beds this winter. Last winter, hospitals were overcrowded, ambulances were backed up and social care was at a tipping point. Some even characterised it as a humanitarian crisis. It is not good enough for the Chief Secretary to the Treasury just to grant “flexibility” and expect hospitals to fund a staff pay increase from existing budgets.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): If the hon. Gentleman does not get the increases he would like, will he support co-ordinated illegal action?

Jonathan Ashworth: The Labour party supports people taking legal industrial action, and if the hon. Lady supports public sector workers, she should be joining us in the Division Lobby later.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the pay restraint over the past few years has been uncomfortable but necessary, in order to bring Government spending—
[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Helen Whately: None of us would want anyone to be paid any less, but it has been difficult but necessary, in order to control the overspending by Government and put right the financial mess that the country was left in after the last time the hon. Gentleman's party was in government.

Jonathan Ashworth: I agreed with the hon. Lady's comments at the time of the debate on the Gracious Speech, when she said:

"I'm of the view we need to look at public sector pay in the light of increasing inflation."

If those were her comments then, she should be joining us in the Division Lobby this afternoon.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Jonathan Ashworth: I will let the hon. Member for Wells (James Heapey) in because he has been very persistent, but first let me make some progress.

It is not good enough for the Chief Secretary to grant the Secretary of State flexibility and not grant him the funding that the NHS needs. Overcrowded, overstretched hospital trusts cannot be expected to absorb pay rises from existing budgets. We need extra investment now to give the staff the fair pay they deserve.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Jonathan Ashworth: Let me make a little bit of progress, and then I will give way.

Over the past seven years, a public sector worker on the median public sector wage has seen the value of their wage drop by £3,875. That is more than the cost of feeding the average family for a year. Given what we know about inflation, on the figures published yesterday and on the Treasury's own inflation forecast, if this cap was to remain in place until the end of the Parliament, a public sector worker on the median wage since 2016 will have seen their pay drop by at least another £2,200.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): It is not true.

Jonathan Ashworth: The Chief Secretary says it is not true. These amounts are based on her own Treasury figures.

James Heapey: The shadow Minister has been very generous in giving way. May I be helpful and invite him perhaps to revise his earlier statement that the pay rise should be universal across the public sector? Surely that would advantage those in more senior, management positions, who would disproportionately benefit from such a pay rise, and perhaps actually the Government's position of offering Ministers flexibility to increase pay where there is a clear need is a much better proposal than the universal pay rise that would only benefit fat cat managers.

Jonathan Ashworth: There we have it—the Conservative party playing one part of the public sector off against the other. We believe the whole of the public sector deserves a pay rise.

Ellie Reeves: In my constituency, NHS staff are having to rely on food banks in order to be able to eat. A constituent, an ambulance technician who transports critically ill children across the country, told me that she does not have nearly enough money to live on. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is a disgrace?

Jonathan Ashworth: It is a shocking disgrace, which is why the Labour party has consistently campaigned to get rid of the pay cap; it is why, in our manifesto, which we took to the British people a few months ago, we said we would get rid of the pay cap, and why it is absolutely disgraceful that Conservative Members stood on a manifesto to keep the pay cap.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Mandy McKeown's son Liam died seven times. He survived, thanks to the dedicated work of neonatal intensive care nurses. Tracey, who came to Parliament last week, spoke of having suffered a 14% cut in pay, two-thirds of her fellow nurses taking second jobs and a haemorrhage of nurses from the profession that they love. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is utterly shameful to treat those to whom we owe the difference between the life and death of sick babies in this way?

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend has spoken incredibly powerfully about that case and he is quite right to say it is shameful.

Chris Philp *rose*—

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con) *rose*—

Jonathan Ashworth: The hon. Lady has often spoken out on this matter, so I feel I should take her intervention, but then I will make progress, if the House will indulge me.

Maria Caulfield: It is generous of the hon. Gentleman to give way. As he says, I support the lifting of the pay cap and I am pleased that the Government are moving on this. My concern about supporting this motion is that Labour do not seem to have learned the lessons from crashing the economy in the first place. Could he outline what level of pay rise the Labour party is proposing for public sector workers—1.5%, 2% or 3%—and how it will be paid for? That is crucial to influencing the voting intentions of Members like me.

Jonathan Ashworth: I have a huge amount of respect for the hon. Lady; we have had conversations outside the rough and tumble of this Chamber, and I know she takes these matters extremely seriously. I would ever so gently say to her that she has been telling newspapers that she supports getting rid of the cap; she has been hosting nurses in Parliament, saying that she would get rid of the cap; well, this evening she has an opportunity to take a stance, ignore the Tory Whips and vote for getting rid of the cap.

Maria Caulfield: In this debate, we must be honest with the British public about how we are going pay for the lifting of the pay cap. If Labour wants to lift the pay cap, can the hon. Gentleman explain how the Labour party will pay for it? Will it be through increased taxation or more public borrowing, or will Labour shift spending priorities? We need to know the detail in order to be able to support this policy.

Jonathan Ashworth: I hope the hon. Lady made those points at the rally last week, when she was talking to nurses. But I would say to her that the Government have found an extra £1 billion or so for Northern Ireland. We do not begrudge Northern Ireland that, but the Government have found more money for Northern Ireland. Also, the Government are giving away billions and billions in corporation tax cuts. They have given away £1 billion in inheritance tax cuts. Government is indeed about making choices. We would make a different set of choices, but if the hon. Lady is genuine, as I believe she is, and sincere, as I believe she is, in wanting to get rid of this cap, she needs to send a message to the Chancellor, not the Tory Whips, and vote for our motion.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way on this very important issue, and I must say that I and my colleagues are minded to support the motion that he has put before the House. But it would be appropriate if true sincerity was shown by all Members of this House—if they stopped attacking the Government for giving Northern Ireland that £1 billion, so that we can alleviate the costs that would allow us to make that pay gap narrow.

Jonathan Ashworth: I did say I did not begrudge Northern Ireland the money; I was just making the point that the Government have found the money, when they keep telling us that there is no money for anything else. But we are grateful that the Democratic Unionist party has signed the early-day motion in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), and we are aware that the DUP has said consistently that it supports getting rid of the pay cap for public sector workers. We would be very happy for the party to join us in the Division Lobby this evening.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I am really pleased to hear what the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) has said today, but I want to put it on the record that DUP Members did have an earlier opportunity to support the removal of the pay cap but actually voted against that—all 10 of them—in the debate on the Queen's Speech. An amendment was tabled by the colleagues of the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), and the DUP voted it down, but we always welcome repentance.

Jonathan Ashworth: I am grateful to the hon. Lady and I am grateful that she also signed the early-day motion. This issue may be debated further as hon. Members make their speeches today.

As we know, according to the Office for National Statistics, many public sector workers regularly work an average of 7.8 hours' unpaid overtime a week, worth £11 billion to the economy. With the pay cap, the Government have effectively been asking them to do more and more on less and less. That is unfair.

Lucy Frazer *rose*—

Jonathan Ashworth: I will make progress, if I may.

MPs on both sides of the House have spoken out against this pay cap. We would hope that they will join us in the Division Lobby, including the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley). I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North for tabling

early-day motion 132, which calls for an end to the NHS pay cap, and which we have picked up and adopted as our motion today.

I know there are many who have sympathy for getting rid of the pay cap. The reason that many in the House have sympathy for getting rid of the pay cap is that in all our constituencies we have met nurses, very directly at our advice surgeries, or indeed in lobbies at Parliament, who have told us that the cap has meant they have seen a 40% real-terms drop in their earnings since 2011.

Ms Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab) *rose*—

Jonathan Ashworth: I want to make progress; but I will try to let in as many hon. Members as possible.

We have all read reports of nurses on their way home from a shift stopping off at food banks. The Royal College of Nursing tells us that two-thirds of its members are forced to undertake bank and agency work to help make ends meet. Is that not an example of how self-defeating the pay cap is, because it is driving an agency bill of £3.7 billion in the NHS?

We have all read surveys showing that more and more NHS staff are turning to payday loan companies and pawning their possessions, and we will have heard from the RCN lobby recently of the huge hardship that our nurses are facing. Many nurses have been in touch with us.

Let me give the House the story of Rebecca, who got in touch with my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams). Her story brings into sharp focus the impact of the pay cap, particularly when it is combined with the severe social security cuts that the Government are pushing through. Rebecca is a single parent. She was originally on working tax credit, but she was transferred to universal credit last year, with her payments falling as a result. As a consequence of that reduction and of the ongoing cap on her wages, which have lost their value, she has accrued rent arrears of over £800. Her landlord has now issued her with an eviction notice. There we have it: nurses are turning to food banks, pawning their possessions, and even being issued with eviction notices. Is that not shameful in 21st-century Britain? What a depressing human consequence of Tory economics.

Ms Karen Lee: I am a nurse and I believe in fairness. This is not just about paying nurses properly; it is about the porters, the housekeepers, the cooks, the cleaners and the admin staff, because they all do a good job. This is about not just healthcare workers but the whole public sector, because if the Government can find £1 billion for the DUP, they can pay the public sector properly.

Jonathan Ashworth: What a pleasure it is to see a Labour MP in Lincoln, Mr Speaker. My hon. Friend is a former nurse—

Ms Lee: Still a nurse!

Jonathan Ashworth: She is still a nurse—I do beg her pardon—and she makes her case powerfully.

Chris Philp *rose*—

Jonathan Ashworth: I will give way to the hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) because he has been so persistent, but I will then try to get on with my speech.

Chris Philp: It is kind of the shadow Minister to give way. Of course our hearts go out to the people in the stories he is relaying to the House, but we need to consider the whole picture. In its March report, the NHS Pay Review Body said:

“We do not see significant short-term nationwide recruitment and retention issues that are linked to pay.”

The pay review body itself says that pay is not causing retention issues, so should the House not take account of that?

Jonathan Ashworth: Perhaps we really should, but I think the hon. Gentleman, who is an enthusiastic supporter of his Front-Bench team, is quoting selectively from the report, which I will move on to in a few moments.

Today’s motion is not just about doing what is right for NHS staff; it is about doing what is right for patients, too. I remind the House that we are significantly short of GPs and that we are short of 3,500 midwives. According to the Royal College of Nursing, we are also short of 40,000 nurses, with one in 10 nursing posts remaining vacant. Nearly 40% of the full-time vacancies advertised on NHS Jobs earlier this year were in nursing, and the Opposition know that Brexit is having an impact through nurses leaving the UK. The Nursing and Midwifery Council shows an increase in the numbers of nurses and midwives leaving its register. The average midwife has seen the value of their pay drop by over £6,000 since 2010, and we are significantly short of numbers, with 80% of midwives intending to leave the profession in the next two years as a result of the pay cap.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Jonathan Ashworth: May I make a little progress?

The hon. Member for Croydon South said that pay does not affect retention and recruitment, but the Opposition say that the pay cap is at the heart of the retention and recruitment crisis. Earlier this year, NHS Providers, which represents hospital trusts, warned that low pay is causing staff to leave the NHS to stack shelves in supermarkets. Chris Hopson said:

“Years of pay restraint and stressful working conditions are taking their toll. Pay is becoming uncompetitive. Significant numbers of trusts say lower paid staff are leaving to stack shelves in supermarkets rather than carry on working in the NHS.”

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman appreciate that anybody listening to his speech would take away from it a story of gloom and doom about our NHS? While there are difficulties and challenges, every day millions of people overwhelmingly enjoy one of the finest health services anywhere in the world, and I and many others are sick and tired of Labour talking it down.

Jonathan Ashworth: The right hon. Lady says that we are talking the NHS down. We are not talking it down; this Tory Government are running it down. She seemed concerned about public sector pay in the NHS a few months ago when she tweeted:

“The important retention & recruitment of public sector workers is about working conditions (esp in NHS) as well as pay”.

If she stands by that tweet, she should join us in the Lobby this evening.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, but I thank him even more for coming to Eastham in my constituency, where our precious walk-in centre is closing owing to staff shortages at our A&E, which is in crisis. The Tories says that we are talking down the NHS and lowering morale, but does he agree that it is not words that matter but action, and that is why we need action on pay?

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend is right. A popular, successful walk-in centre in her constituency has had to close to shift the staff to fill vacancies at the local A&E at Arrowe Park hospital, because the pay cap and other Government decisions have led to a staffing crisis in the wider NHS.

Mr Jim Cunningham *rose*—

Jonathan Ashworth: I did promise my hon. Friend that I would give way, but I will take no more interventions afterwards.

Mr Cunningham: Has my hon. Friend noticed that the Government do not necessarily have to abide by the pay reviews? In other words, they could give an increase that goes further than what the pay review body recommends. The Tories are wrecking the national health service. They should put their money where their mouth is. If they really appreciate NHS and its staff, they should vote with us tonight.

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Tories have been running the NHS for seven years now. It is going through the biggest financial squeeze in its history and we have some of the worst waiting times on record.

The hon. Member for Croydon South should note that the NHS Pay Review Body’s March report said that

“public sector pay policy is coming under stress. There are significant supply shortages in a number of staff groups and geographical areas. There are widespread concerns about recruitment, retention and motivation that are shared by employers and staff side alike.”

Again, NHS Providers said that

“seven years of NHS pay restraint is now preventing them from recruiting and retaining the staff they need to provide safe, high-quality patient care. The NHS can’t carry on failing to reflect the contribution of our staff through fair and competitive pay for five more years.”

We agree. Addressing NHS pay and lifting the pay cap are crucial to addressing the retention and recruitment crisis now facing the NHS.

Lucy Frazer: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jonathan Ashworth: I have given way to the hon. Lady once and I have been generous, so I hope she will forgive me if I do not give way again.

We have heard several examples of what vacancies in the NHS mean for services. We have heard about the walk-in centre in Wirral, but Macmillan Cancer Support warned last week that bigger workloads and vacancies in key roles are creating “unrelenting pressure” on the cancer care workforce and that some cancer patients are attending A&E because they cannot get help elsewhere. I have mentioned midwifery, and this summer we revealed that almost half of maternity units closed their doors to patients at some point in 2016, with understaffing often used as the justification. Earlier this year, I revealed

FOI requests that showed a rising number of cancelled children's operations, with 38% of trusts citing workforce shortages as the reason for those cancelled operations. Visit any hospital and doctors will talk about rota gaps, and the latest NHS staff survey reveals that 47% of staff view current staffing levels as insufficient to allow them to do their job properly.

Not only is the pay cap unfair on hard-working staff who are struggling to make ends meet, but it is unfair on patients, who suffer the direct consequences of understaffed, overstretched services. We look forward to the Health Secretary telling us how he will use his newfound flexibility. We look forward to his telling us what remit he will set for the NHS Pay Review Body in the coming days. He has had all summer to think through his response to these demands. I know that he got into a big argument with Professor Stephen Hawking, but we will leave that there. The Health Secretary sets the remit—he tells the pay review body what it is able to provide—so we look to him to tell us what he is going to ask it to provide. We want him to tell us today when he will publish the remit letter.

Helen Whately: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jonathan Ashworth: I have been very generous to Government Members, and the hon. Lady has already had a chance.

The pay cap must be scrapped, and it must be done by giving the NHS extra investment. The self-defeating nature of this policy means that we are already spending £3 billion on agency workers, and the Government have found billions for corporation tax and inheritance tax giveaways, so this new flexibility must mean more investment. We will not tolerate hospital bosses being forced to cut services to find these funds.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Jonathan Ashworth: I have been very generous, and I want to wrap up because a huge number of Members want to speak in the debate.

As the Government are briefing that the pay cap has gone, we expect the Health Secretary or, if he cannot do it, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to tell us what extra investment will be made available to the national health service in the coming year to get rid of this pay cap. If they are not prepared to put the extra investment in the health service to get rid of this pay cap, we can quite rightly conclude that the consequence will be further cuts to services at the frontline.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jonathan Ashworth: I have been extremely generous, and I will now wrap up.

If the Government are genuine and sincere about getting rid of the pay cap, I see no reason why they should seek to divide the House today. If they do seek to divide the House, I say directly to all those Conservative MPs who went to the Royal College of Nursing rally last week, to all those Conservative MPs who have tweeted that they support getting rid of the pay cap, but just not on this occasion, and to all those Conservative

MPs who have responded to constituents by telling them that they have their sympathy and that they want to get rid of the pay cap: this is not a time to sit on your hands. I know Conservative MPs will be reconciling the pressures of wanting to be loyal to the Treasury Bench and to their Whip, but 1 million NHS staff, nurses and their constituents are looking to this House to show some leadership and take a stand by giving our NHS staff the fair pay they deserve.

I commend our motion to the House.

1.31 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): I thank the shadow Health Secretary for introducing this debate. NHS staff are doing a superb job in tough circumstances, and it is right for this House to debate whether we are giving them an appropriate level of support.

I start by addressing the areas on which we agree with the Opposition. First, it is incredibly important to have motivated staff, simply because motivated staff give better care to patients. It is critical for patient safety that we have enough staff in our NHS and social care system, so recruitment and retention matter. It is also true that, right now, it is very tough on the frontline for NHS staff as they cope with the pressures of an ageing population, of financial constraints that have not been as tough in many years, and of changing consumer expectations of what the NHS should deliver. We agree on all that, but there are some fundamental disagreements that I also need to surface.

The shadow Health Secretary talks about the former 1% cap and the pay restraint that we have indeed had for the last seven years, which his party frequently characterises as austerity—some ideological mission by the Conservatives to reduce the size of the state. [*Interruption.*] I can see some nods, but it is absolute nonsense.

I remind Labour Members that in 2010 we inherited the worst financial crisis in our history and the worst recession since the great depression. The shadow Health Secretary was an adviser to Gordon Brown in 2010—he does not talk about that very much—and he knows just how serious the crisis was. He uses the phrase “Tory economics,” but the 2010 Labour manifesto, which he may well have had a hand in drafting, wanted to cut the NHS budget. The Health Secretary at the time, Andy Burnham, said that it would be “irresponsible” not to cut the NHS budget.

In 2015, five years on from that terrible crisis, the Labour party wanted to put £5.5 billion less into the NHS than the Conservative party did. In short, the austerity that the shadow Health Secretary criticises today is austerity that Labour wanted to go much further with when it comes to the NHS. Labour needs to recognise that if we had followed its advice we would not even have been able to honour a 1% pay rise, we would not have been able to recruit 12,000 more nurses for our wards, we would not have record numbers of doctors and we would not have record funding for the NHS.

Catherine West: Will the Health Secretary apologise for the current dreadful state? We have thousands and thousands of nurse places, and hospital trusts are having to go as far as the Philippines to recruit student nurses.

[Catherine West]

Student nurses are coming out of university with £56,000 fees. NHS recruitment and retention is in a deep crisis. Will he apologise?

Mr Hunt: What I will not apologise for is the dreadful short staffing on NHS hospital wards that we inherited in 2010, which led directly to the problems of Mid Staffs. Nor will I apologise for sorting that out and making sure that we have 12,000 more nurses on our hospital wards today than we had in 2010.

Alison McGovern: The Secretary of State is repeating words that the Tories have used to excuse their cuts for years but that have not dealt with the deficit, which is still with us. My constituents do not care about that; they care about Eastham walk-in centre, which is closed because of staff shortages. Will he answer this simple question? When will Eastham walk-in centre reopen?

Mr Hunt: What the hon. Lady's constituents care about is that today we announced the lowest unemployment level since 1975, which is a massive benefit to her constituents. She says that we have been repeating our reasons for this terrible financial discipline, which has been so difficult. I am not someone who says that the entire responsibility for the recession in 2010 is the Labour party's. I recognise that it was a global crash, but what Labour cannot deny is that the recession we faced here was far, far worse than in other countries. Why is that? What did the Governor of the Bank of England say at the time?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Hunt: Hang on. I think it is important to listen to what the Governor of the Bank of England said. Sir Mervyn King said:

"we came into this crisis with fiscal policy along a path that was not...sustainable and a correction was needed."

What was he talking about in 2010? The Government borrowed £1 in every £4 that they spent. The deficit was 10.2%, the highest since records began. The reason that, say, Germany did not have to go through austerity is not because a German equivalent of the Leader of the Opposition was throwing prudence to the wind but because Germany did not allow its public finances to get recklessly out of control, which is what happened under the Labour Government.

Ms Karen Lee: This is a genuine question. I am a nurse, and I see the situation at first hand. I go to work once a month—I still do bank shifts—and the situation is truly awful. We are so understaffed that it is unbelievable. I looked after 10 patients on my last shift. That is not for the audience; it is the truth. The NHS is in that sort of state. Lincoln's walk-in centre is threatened with closure. All that is going on. I take the Secretary of State's point about paying for it, but the Conservative party talks about cutting corporation tax and it is paying the Democratic Unionist party more than £1 billion. While that is happening, he cannot talk to us about austerity and say that we cannot have decent NHS services. I am sorry, but he should listen to what I am saying. The NHS really is in crisis.

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her work in the NHS. I am honoured that we have nurses on both sides of the House who do a fantastic job. I agree that we need more nurses. We needed more nurses when I became Health Secretary—the NHS was planning to lose nurses, and I stopped that—and we still need more nurses. I will explain exactly how we will get those nurses.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Hunt: I will give way to some Conservative Members.

Helen Whately: Opposition Members are raising concerns about staff shortages and about recruiting staff from overseas. I am sure we all have hospitals serving our constituents that have had to go overseas to recruit. We do not want to see that; we want to see nurses trained in the UK and British nurses. I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State has taken action to remove the cap on nurses in training so that we can train more home-grown nurses.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is right about that, because at the heart of this problem is getting the training of nurses right and making sure we train enough nurses.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for the huge and strong support he has given to Princess Alexandra hospital in Harlow and to our campaign for a new hospital. I welcome the moves the Government are making on the pay cap and I look forward to announcements in the coming weeks. May I urge him to do even more than the Government are doing on nursing apprenticeships, because they are one key way forward? These apprentices do not have any loans and they can do nursing. Finally, let me make the wider point that one of the best ways of helping lower-paid nurses, and everyone in the public and private sectors, is by continuing to do what the Government are doing by cutting taxes for lower earners and acting through the national living wage.

Mr Hunt: No one in this House has championed lower-paid workers as much as my right hon. Friend does, and he is absolutely right in what he says. I want to talk about the recruitment issues.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Hunt: I am going to make some progress and then I will give way further. I want to talk about the recruitment issues raised by the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) and others, but I wish to conclude on the point about financial discipline, of which Opposition Members are so critical. The consequences for a Government of losing financial discipline are not just pay freezes and 1% caps, but 1 million people unemployed—as a result of that recession post-2008. Every Labour Government in modern times has left office with unemployment higher than when they arrived. That is why this afternoon's motion is so bogus, because the difference between the Government and the Opposition is not about a desire to invest in public services; it is about the ability to deliver a strong economy so that we can make that investment.

Alison McGovern *rose*—

Mr Hunt: I want to make some progress on the recruitment issues, which a number of hon. Members have raised. The argument we seem to be hearing from the shadow Health Secretary is that Labour's policies would mean more nurses for the NHS and better care for patients, but nothing is further from the truth. Let us look at Labour's policies at the last election. What did the independent Institute for Fiscal Studies say then about Labour's spending plans? It said there was a black hole of up to £29 billion, which made even Gordon Brown look like the paragon of prudence that he never was. How can a black hole like that be filled? There are only two ways of doing it. The first is by raising taxes on ordinary people—this is what the IFS said would be one of the biggest tax increases in the past 30 years, equivalent to a 7% increase in income tax. For a nurse on average earnings, this would be a £1,400 tax hike every year. Alternatively, the hole could be filled by increasing borrowing, but that simply passes on debts to future generations in a con as explicit as the con of telling students before an election that their debt will be waived only to cancel the promise after the election.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): My right hon. Friend does not even need to cite the IFS to see what things would be like with Labour in charge of the UK NHS—he just needs to look to Wales, where the NHS has been cut by 10% and one in seven people are on the NHS waiting list. That is Labour in action.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about that. The whole problem with the tone of the argument made by the shadow Health Secretary is that he is saying that the difference between the Government and Labour is about our support for public sector workers, but we all agree, in all parts of the House, that they do a fantastic job. I see that in the NHS every week. The difference between us and Labour is about knowing what harms public sector workers the most; it is between ignoring and repeating the mistakes of the 2008 crash, as Labour Members are, and what we think, which is that we need to learn from those mistakes and not repeat them.

James Heapey: Does my right hon. Friend agree that Labour was not the only party with an irresponsible policy at the general election on funding health and social care, and that although the Liberal Democrats can muster only one MP to debate this important subject today, their 1p on income tax gimmick would have gone nowhere far enough to funding the properly increased services they promised?

Mr Hunt: I will allow the Liberal Democrats to speak for themselves, but suffice it to say that even one MP is quite a large proportion of the Liberal Democrat parliamentary party and we are grateful that it does have some representation here this afternoon.

Lady Hermon: Will the Health Secretary take a few moments to address the serious issue of staff morale in the NHS? In Northern Ireland, we have no Assembly and, thus, no Health Minister, so there is no mechanism by which to give our nurses any pay increase. He needs to speak to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland,

as a start, and to address the crucial and concerning issue of staff morale, which is affected by low pay and the pay cap.

Mr Hunt: I will happily address those issues in some comments that I am coming on to, but I totally agree with the hon. Lady that this is crucial.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Hunt: I will make some progress now, because I know that lots of people want to speak in this debate.

The other completely bogus claim we have heard this afternoon is that somehow the financial discipline of pay restraint that we have had to have has been deliberately targeted at ordinary people. Again, that is absolute nonsense, as we see when we look at what has happened. Despite the recession and the pressures on public finance, this Government have taken 4 million of the lowest-paid people out of income tax altogether. At the same time, the top 1% are paying more and the top 20% are paying more, and we have gone further, introducing the national living wage, which since its introduction in April has increased the pay of people at that level of pay by £1,400 per annum. The record overall—this is where we see the most obnoxious untruth spread by the story on austerity—shows that over the past seven years we have seen 600,000 fewer people in absolute poverty and 200,000 fewer children in absolute poverty. Income inequality has reduced to its lowest level for 30 years. Why is it that this apparently evil Tory Government have reduced inequality? It is because we have done what Labour never does, which is grow the economy, with 1 million new businesses, 3 million new jobs and unemployment at its lowest since 1975. Today, youth unemployment is below 5% for the first time and there has been a 40% drop since 2010.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Hunt: I am going to make some progress, because I want to deal with the issue of morale, and then I will give way for a final round of interventions.

A lot of comments have been made about the NHS being at breaking point, at a tipping point and so on. There is huge pressure on the NHS, but, as has been said by my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), who is no longer present, that is not the whole picture. What the shadow Health Secretary did not say is that 7,000 people are alive today who would not have been had we stayed at the cancer survival rates of just four years ago. We are having probably the biggest expansion of mental health treatment in Europe, and an independent NHS England report says that for most major conditions outcomes have dramatically improved over the past three, five or 10 years.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I feel that as the sole Liberal Democrat present it is my duty to intervene. Does the Secretary of State accept, as a principle, that ultimately we cannot sustain the NHS on the back of real-terms cuts to people's pay within the NHS and that that would be unconscionable year after year? Does he also accept that as the difference between public and private sector pay narrows so much, people will just vote with their feet and leave? Therefore, not only is this morally wrong, but it will not work ultimately.

Mr Hunt: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that when deciding policy on pay we absolutely have to look at the impact on recruitment and retention, and that if we are going to deal with the pressures of an ageing population in the way that he and I would both want, we are going to need to recruit many more doctors and nurses for the NHS over the years ahead.

The progress that we have made in the NHS in improving outcomes for patients, despite the huge pressure on the frontline, is possible because of the brilliant staff we have in the NHS. I want to recognise that pay restraint has been extremely challenging, which is why yesterday my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury announced a new policy, allowing Departments flexibility where there are recruitment and retention issues, and where productivity savings can be found. We will also honour the commitment we made prior to yesterday's announcement, which was that before we take any decisions we will listen to the independent advice of the pay-review bodies.

To value staff also means to look at non-pay issues as well. It means we should look at making sure that we are training enough staff, so that when hospitals have the budgets to employ staff, they are there for them to employ; it means we should look at flexible working—on which, frankly, the NHS can do a lot better—if we are to tackle the agency bill that the shadow Health Secretary spoke about; it means we should put in place measures to encourage nurses to return to practice, which is why Health Education England is increasing the number of return-to-practice training places to 1,250 from 2019-20; it means we should look at new support roles for nurses, such as the 2,000 nurse associates who are starting training this year; and it means we should look at new routes into nursing, such as the nurse apprentice route that we are opening this year.

Catherine West *rose*—

Rachel Maclean *rose*—

Mr Hunt: I am going to wind up my comments now, because lots of people wish to speak. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] Okay, the House has persuaded me. I shall give way first to the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) and then to my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean).

Catherine West: I thank the Secretary of State for his generosity in giving way to me twice. Will he look again at the issue of student bursaries? It is such mistake.

Mr Hunt: I assure the hon. Lady that we are making reforms because we want to train more nurses and to fund more nurse training places. There has been a dip in the number of people taking up nurse training places this year, as there was when the higher education reforms were introduced in 2012, but it recovered soon after that and we now see in other parts of higher education record numbers of students from poorer backgrounds going to university.

Rachel Maclean: On my right hon. Friend's earlier point about the recruitment and retention of staff, one problem, which I know from having spoken to the Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust and the

Alex Hospital in my constituency, is the constant negative messaging the public receive. Members from all parties deeply back NHS workers, appreciate and respect how hard they work, and recognise the challenges. If Opposition Members really care about easing the recruitment and retention crisis, I call on them to join us in talking about some of the good news and the good messages that are coming out of the NHS. Those are the things that get through to the public's mind and that encourage nurses to join the profession, and that is why we have twice the number of applicants for nursing places this year.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. From some of the debates we have in this House, a person would never know that in July, for the second time running, an independent American think-tank looked at health systems in all the world's major countries, compared us with the United States, Germany, France, Australia and others, and said that the NHS was top—the best healthcare system of any major country. We have a huge amount to be proud of.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Hunt: I am going to conclude my comments by asking three questions. First, who is the real friend of public sector workers—the party that wrecked the economy, leading to massive cuts, or the party that turned the economy around with 3 million new jobs? Who is the real champion of public services—the party that did not only wreck the public finances but wants to do so all over again, or the party that is restoring discipline to the public finances so that we can start to invest more in our public services? Who is the real friend of the NHS—the party that has delivered more doctors, nurses and funding than ever before in its history, or the party that plays politics with the NHS in election after election, despite doing it so much harm?

1.54 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): We have had many debates on the NHS in the House, and as I have said previously, the workforce is one of our biggest challenges, which is why it is so important to get this right. The debate is focused on NHS staff, but we are discussing all public sector workers. We are talking about all workers within the NHS: we must not only consider those at different grades, but not allow a separation between frontline and back-of-house staff. As a surgeon, if I turn up at a clinic and there are no case sheets and the patient has not been informed of their appointment, it is a totally pointless exercise. We need to realise that the NHS is a team, and if we do not look after the team, it will not work.

Obviously this all started with the crash. I will defend Members further along the Opposition Benches, because I get really bored with the Labour party being given responsibility for the crash. Labour did not have that degree of world domination. It was a world crash. At the time of the crash, it was right to look at public sector pay, because it is a big outlay. The reason given at the time was to avoid redundancies and keep people in their jobs. However, although in Scotland we have had no compulsory redundancies, there have been 20,000 NHS redundancies over the past seven years and more than 40,000 compulsory redundancies among public sector

workers. That means that people in England had a pay freeze for three years and then a pay cap, but they still lost colleagues.

I still work in the NHS and, until the recent campaign, I would have heard comments from nursing colleagues about not money but staffing—people being on shifts and feeling thinly spread, unable to care, anxious about the danger to their patients. I would say that that is the No. 1 concern, but people in England have had a double whammy: they have had the pay freeze and the pay cap, yet they have still had redundancies. From what we read, there could be a lot more to come from the sustainability and transformation plans, and that is just plain wrong.

In Scotland, we focused what money we had in a different way. The people on less than £21,000 got 3% rises every year, with an absolute minimum in 2010 of £250, which has now risen to £400. If we focused only on percentages, a consultant like me would be sitting on a great pay rise, while the person who is cleaning the bedpans and making the beds would get a pitiful rise, so it is important that more of the money is pushed lower down. In Scotland, we pay the real living wage, not what we Scottish National party Members call the pretend living wage—the national living wage. A living wage should be a wage on which someone can live. It is as simple as that. Our public sector workers demand no less than that.

Ian Paisley: I appreciate the points the hon. Lady makes. She has creatively reflected on how the Scottish Government have directed resources differently, which is exactly what we and the Northern Ireland Executive want to do with the £1 billion resource. It will allow us to direct resources differently so that we can then address the other critical issues. Does she agree that people who begrudge Northern Ireland's getting that money are actually begrudging public sector workers their rights?

Dr Whitford: I do not begrudge people in Northern Ireland the money that they have gained from that deal. All that the rest of us are asking for is to have something similar elsewhere. Nurses in Scotland, Wales and England are struggling as much as those in Northern Ireland. To be honest, it is a distraction to keep focusing on that deal. I disapprove of it, but not because people in Northern Ireland are getting a bit more of the help that the rest of us would be glad to receive.

We had the pay freeze and then the pay cap, but there have even been times when the pay review bodies' recommendations have not been carried through. That has resulted in a band 5 nurse in England being paid £300 less a year than a band 5 nurse in Scotland. We have pushed the money down the way, so for a healthcare assistant or nursing auxiliary, the difference is more than £1,100 a year. However, it is not just a matter of the people at the bottom. In a way, the people who have experienced the freeze the most are those at the top of their grade who are not getting any more increments and are not changing grades. In actual fact, their pay has not moved for several years, and then it has moved by only 1%. Other people's pay has gone up by increments, so at least they have seen a change in their pay. Earlier, a Labour Back Bencher was talking about a senior nurse. Such senior staff, who are within 10 years of retiring and who carry the experience of the NHS, are looking

at other jobs in which that kind of life experience would be much more highly rewarded, and they are thinking, "Can I even afford to stay in this job if I am to look after my family?" In Scotland and elsewhere, we have tried to tackle this appalling issue of low-paid staff in a caring public service such as the NHS, but now we must realise that, for people higher up the grades, the time is over.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Following Audit Scotland's report, which pointed out that in Scotland one third of NHS staff are over 50; that we have a vacancy rate of more than 4.5% for nurses and just under 7.5% for consultants; and that we have a Government in Scotland who put forward a 1% rise to the pay review body, does the hon. Lady agree that now is the time to say that the cap should go? The cap itself and the attitude towards it is driving people away from the NHS and out of the NHS, and it is doing a great disservice to our population on both sides of the border.

Dr Whitford: If the hon. Gentleman had been following what has been happening in Scotland over the summer, he would know that, following the debate in May, the Cabinet Secretary in Scotland had open discussions with NHS staff side. In June, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Constitution said that our Budget at the end of this year would be looking to get rid of the pay cap. It did not just happen the other week when the programme for Government was announced; it has actually been there all summer. The vacancy rate in Scotland may be 4.5%, but, as the shadow Secretary of State said, it is more than twice that in England. We should be focusing on the fact that nurses and other NHS staff in England are getting almost the rawest deal, which is not right, because they are working just as hard as others.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is also extremely important that, if we are to achieve parity between physical and mental health services, we address this issue, particularly for specialist mental health staff—nurses and allied health professionals—who want to work in the service but for whom the work is just not cost effective, as they then seek employment elsewhere?

Dr Whitford: That was exactly the point I made at the start of my speech. Although the Royal College of Nursing led the campaign and the image has been of nurses, the issue affects everyone. I echo what the hon. Member for Lincoln (Ms Lee) said—[*Interruption.*] Well, it was the RCN out at the front.

Ms Lee: Unison were a part of it.

Dr Whitford: Okay—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I appreciate that the hon. Member for Lincoln (Ms Lee) is new to the House, but Members do not make interventions while they are sitting down. If you wish to intervene, you must stand up to do it. I have noticed this happening quite a lot. This is not a general discussion, but a debate.

Dr Whitford: It is very important that people recognise the role that everyone plays, but for nurses in particular this is not just a matter of pay. Last year, we spent a lot

[Dr Whitford]

of time debating changes to working tax credits, which can leave a lone parent nurse very much worse off. We also spent a lot of time debating the imposition of tuition fees and the removal of the nursing bursary. The nursing bursary still exists in Scotland. It is a non-means tested bursary of £6,500, potentially with a caring supplement of £3,500. We know that the average age to take up nursing study is at the end of the 20s, which means that people often have family commitments. Such people will receive approximately £10,000 a year so that, at the end, they will not face what future nurses in England will face, which is a debt of more than £50,000. The repayment on that kicks in immediately, because graduate nurses start at around £22,000, which is over the limit. At the lower end of band 5, that is another £400 a year off. By the time a nurse gets to the top of band 5, it is another £1,000 a year off. They will never manage to pay off that £50,000 to £60,000, which means that their salary will be reduced by that amount throughout their careers.

Norman Lamb: Does the hon. Lady agree that what appears to be happening is that many of the mature students who previously went into nursing often do not want to take on that debt? That means that we are losing people who seek to transfer from other professions, which is really damaging.

Dr Whitford: I totally thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. That is absolutely the case. It has never been a negative—in fact it has always been a benefit—that we have attracted people who were a bit older to the role of student nurse. Perhaps they had another degree or a student loan to pay off, but they always had a bit more life experience under their belt.

As a very junior doctor in my first year, I remember what it was like when my hours alternated between 132 and 175, and I had no life that did not involve people who were dying or ill or who had been hit by a car. That is very difficult for a person who has just come out of uni, and who is used to going out for a pint and having parties. There is real advantage in training people who may have had a family and who have lived a bit of life. As the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) said, there are people who are attracted to nursing but who will not take it up because they will not put their family through it. We have seen that already with a 23% drop in applications.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): As a fellow NHS consultant, I entirely agreed with the hon. Lady when she said that this was about not just the nurses, but the NHS as a team and the value of the whole package of care. One cannot work effectively without the other. Yes, there is a debt accrued in doing a nursing career, but the Health Secretary has proposed a new technical route into nursing, which will mean that people can get an apprenticeship in nursing, allowing them to work and earn throughout their training. Therefore, nurses will be able to qualify while working and supporting their families without accruing any debt.

Dr Whitford: I welcome the hon. Lady's intervention. I definitely welcome other routes into nursing. Of course when I was a wee doctor, we had two routes: the enrolled

nurse and the degree nurse. That disappeared with Nursing 2000, but we are now coming back to that discussion. I have no problem with that, but we will need degree nurses. We have nurses in very advanced practitioner roles, which means that they require a more academic design—a more balanced and weighing-up-the-evidence kind of approach. It is important that we do not make it that the only route most people can afford to follow is the healthcare assistant route. I welcome it, but I certainly would not like to see people limited by it. The Secretary of State tells us that this is not an issue, because we still have more applicants than places—as yet, according to the universities, the number of places has not expanded by very much—but what we do not know is the talent that exists among that 23%. It may be fine numerically, but if we are excluding people who might have been absolute leaders in the nursing profession and in the NHS then we are the poorer for it.

We know that 40,000 vacancies need filling, and the pay cap is definitely making it harder to fill them. Brexit is not exactly helping either. Everyone here knows that my other half is a German GP in our NHS who, 15 months on, still has no idea what our rights and opportunities will be. The pay cap is definitely contributing to that problem and it is time for it to go, but it must be funded, or else it will mean a cut in services, which will hurt not just patients, but staff, who will feel that they are damaging the very service in which they work, and they will feel guilty about that. As that service is cut and contracts, their working day and working life will get worse.

The Government often talk as if spending on public service staff is money wasted. It is as if we cannot afford that money because we need to get the debt down, but in actual fact money that is put out by public sector workers is irrigating the economy—the money is spent. Some of it comes back in income tax—20% of everything all of us spend comes back. Money disappears when it is pushed at the top. It goes into banks and offshore, and is therefore outside our economy. Money that is in our economy encouraging commerce and business is helping us to recover.

After the tragedies of this summer—from the terrorist attacks to Grenfell—people right across this Chamber have quite rightly praised NHS staff and emergency workers. Now is the time for us to show not just what we think of them, but how we value them.

2.9 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford). I pay tribute to her for her work on the Select Committee on Health in the previous Parliament. That work was inevitably full of expertise and always constructive; I thank her for that. I agree with her that the NHS is a team, but that team should also include the wider social care staff because we cannot continue to look at the two systems in isolation. I echo her point, thanking all our NHS and care staff for the contribution they make not just to our wider economy, but—most importantly—to patients. Those are the people we should keep at the heart of this debate.

I welcome this debate. I also welcome the relaxation of the cap because we need to give the NHS Pay Review Body greater flexibility to make recommendations about

what we need to put in place for our NHS staff. I agree with the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire that we should look at the impact of pay on morale, recruitment and retention—this is an international workforce, as well as a national one—but we also need to look at pay across regions and within specialties because there is great variation. We should focus our efforts on ensuring that we are looking at the situation from the patients' perspective by, for example, looking at the greatest areas of deprivation, which very often have the lowest ratios of NHS and care staff and who are under the greater pressure.

Seven years of sustained pressure on NHS pay is taking a toll. Nobody anticipated that it would go on for this long, so it is time to relax the cap. We should look not just at the issue of pay, but at the wider pressures within the NHS. I am delighted to announce that the Health Committee, which held its first meeting just before Prime Minister's Question Time, has agreed that its first inquiry of the Parliament will be on the nursing workforce. We will look not just at pay, but at the wider workforce pressures, including the increased workload that comes from increasing demand across the system, morale and all the other non-pay issues that contribute to the pressures on nurses. We will also look at bursaries and the new routes into nursing, and at their impact on people entering the nursing workforce. We have heard about that already today. For example, we know that those who drop out of nursing courses are more likely to be in the younger age groups, whereas those who go into nursing as mature students are much more likely to stay. We need to look at all those wider impacts.

Maria Caulfield: I really welcome the news that the Select Committee is going to do a review of nursing. Will the Committee look into pay structure? The current Agenda for Change structure is being used by some trusts, in hospitals and communities, as a way of downgrading nursing roles. For example, a senior sister in one place may be paid a band 7 salary, whereas someone in the same role somewhere not too far down the road may be paid a band 5 salary. There is inequity in the current system.

Dr Wollaston: That is an important point. I very much hope that my hon. Friend will contribute to the Committee's inquiry. As well as looking at the new routes into nursing, we will look at the skills mix, roles within health and social care more widely, the impact of Brexit and language testing, workload and morale. We will be seeking contributions from hon. Members across the House and from people outside.

As I said, we will miss something if we just look at the issue as one of pay. Pay restraint is estimated to contribute between £3.3 billion and £3.5 billion of the five year forward view efficiency savings up to 2019-20. If that goes, what will fill the gap? We have to be careful that there is no loss of services or losses in the workforce, because workforce pressures—probably more than any other issue—contribute to nursing staff leaving the profession. We have to look at the bigger picture.

Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): I have been a nurse for 40 years, but this is not just about nursing. There are other groups as well, including

occupational therapists and physiotherapists, who are also registered professionals. Along with everybody else, they are just as important as nurses.

Dr Wollaston: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Look, for example, at the applications for nursing courses. Even though the number of applicants has gone down, it may not ultimately result in a loss of numbers entering nursing. Some of the applicants from that overall drop in numbers might have gone on to other courses, so we need to look at the bigger picture. In opting to look at the nursing workforce, the Health Committee is not saying in any way that other parts of the workforce are not important. The NHS is a team, but it would be difficult for us to report within a certain timeframe if we looked at the entire workforce. I have no doubt that we will look at other aspects of the workforce over the course of this Parliament. I assure the hon. Lady that we will not lose sight of the bigger picture and I hope that she will contribute to the inquiry.

We need to look at the big picture regarding the total budget for health and social care. The right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) has long made this point, and we have both made it clear that it is time for us to take a cross-party approach to sustainable funding for health and social care in the long term. I look forward to working with him on that over the course of this Parliament.

Norman Lamb: I totally agree with the hon. Lady and I am keen to continue working with her. Did she see the Independent Age survey that showed that well over 80% of Members of Parliament on both sides of the House agree that there needs to be a cross-party settlement for the future of the NHS and the care system?

Dr Wollaston: I welcome that and I look forward to working with the right hon. Gentleman over the coming months to try to encourage colleagues on both sides of the House, including the Front Benches, to agree to the idea. Next year is the 70th anniversary of the NHS, and I cannot think of anything more constructive we could do than to work across political parties in order to deliver sustainable long-term funding for health and social care.

I will bring my remarks to a close because I know that many hon. Members wish to speak. I look forward to hearing suggestions from colleagues in the House and outside this place about the points they would like the Health Committee's inquiry into the nursing workforce to cover.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): It will be obvious to the House that a great many people wish to speak this afternoon. We have a limited time for this debate, which will probably finish at around 4.30 pm. Therefore, after the next speaker, I will impose an initial time limit of five minutes, which might be reduced further depending on how many people still wish to speak. There will, however, be no time limit on the next speaker as I call Mr Stephen Morgan to make his maiden speech.

2.18 pm

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to give my maiden speech in today's debate. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston).

[Stephen Morgan]

Today's debate on public sector pay is about the sort of people who ensure that this Fratton boy had the sort of opportunity and aspiration that I want every single young person in Portsmouth to have. Public sector workers and Pompey people are key to delivering this ambition for my constituency. I will say more about that later.

First, I am grateful to those who have made it possible for me to make this maiden speech today—the people of Portsmouth South, who put their trust in me at the election. I promise that, as long as I have the privilege of serving in this place, I will be an active local campaigner and a strong national voice for Portsmouth, across every single community. I would like to thank my family and friends for also putting me here in this place, and the good employers of Basingstoke Voluntary Action for allowing me some holiday to fight the election.

I pay tribute to my immediate predecessor, Flick Drummond. While only in this place for two years, she served it well and was an advocate for women's and transgender rights. I wish her well as the new deputy police and crime commissioner for Hampshire—a task, sadly, made harder by cuts to police in Portsmouth.

In my lifetime, the constituency has cycled through representatives from the SDP, the Liberal Democrats, the Tories and now Labour. I hope that it has now settled on a choice it can stick with.

My first job in Portsmouth was as a playworker, serving the most deprived parts of the city—a city where, even today, too many families are still living in poverty, and where too many are still being held back. Coming from a working-class family with a background in public services—my father, a former youth worker, and my mother, a hospital cleaner—I have learned the value of good public services, of meeting local needs and of working hard to help others.

Proud to be Portsmouth through and through, it is my great city I now want to talk about. The home of Dickens, Kipling, Conan Doyle, Brunel and Amanda Holden, Portsmouth is a city of many firsts: the first to hold a football league game under floodlights, the home of the first person to use an umbrella, the first to open free clinics for the treatment of venereal disease, and the first co-operative set up by dockyard workers.

It is an honour to be the first ever Labour MP for this historic constituency, in a city that, throughout its history, has punched above its weight. It is the home of the Royal Navy and our nation's new carriers, and the birthplace of British authors, world-leading engineers, the greatest football club in the land, in my opinion, and the occasional Labour Prime Minister—but one step at a time.

The constituency is made up of communities united by a sense of pride in Portsmouth. It is the home of world-class businesses built on the tradition of creativity and innovation that drove Britain's industrial revolution. Portsmouth's success gave Britain a competitive advantage that has persisted into the modern era. We are a city of doers and a city of makers. Indeed, I would go as far as to say that the success of the UK has been intrinsically linked to the success of my great city.

The spirit of this innovation is driving success in Portsmouth's modern economy. Through my conversations with business leaders, I know that there is the potential to build an economy that creates well-paid jobs for the many, not just the few.

Portsmouth continues to leave an imprint on our world. We welcome hundreds of thousands of visitors each year, who take with them an understanding of British naval history and an affection for a modern British city that has an unrivalled waterfront and world-class events.

Maybe it is our military reserve that means the people of Portsmouth do not shout about our military success; they just get on with the job. It is this spirit that has fortified the city in the most testing of times. During wars and emergencies, my city has gone and done the job. In the two world wars, it played a key role in delivering victory and winning the peace we all enjoy today. My own family, like millions of other families across our nation, played a role in the second world war, fighting against tyranny—my grandfather leaving Southsea seafront on his 17th birthday to liberate mainland Europe on D-day. I am hugely proud of the strength and courage shown by all communities across Portsmouth during Europe's darkest hour. The city has a spirit and a determination that is second to none, and that is why I love it.

The sadness for me, though, is that far too many people in Portsmouth are continuing to fight their own battles, whether it is the daily battle to earn enough money to make ends meet, the battle to find a good school for their child or the battle for a property they can call their home. These are the challenges, plus so many more, that people up and down this land face every day. I want Portsmouth and our nation to tackle these individual challenges head-on. I want our society and our economy to be vibrant and diverse, so that we can tackle these individual battles that ordinary people are facing, and make it our collective responsibility to resolve them together.

I want to help create a future that is better than the present, where hope replaces division, and where everyone—and I mean everyone—is better off. We know from our history that there is no challenge that we cannot face by working together, so this is my call to every Member of this House: unite to tackle the everyday challenges of the many. If we do this, I know that Portsmouth's and Britain's best is yet to come.

Most disturbing for me, though, is that the generation that literally fought for our country is now facing new battles. With adult social care and our NHS in crisis, the elderly are uncertain in their old age. This is not the world that we promised them. We promised them homes fit for heroes, and we are letting them down. We are not providing them with the level of public services they deserve, due to the current funding and staffing crisis, where years of pay freezes have created challenges for recruitment and retention.

I want the people who keep our communities safe, who educate our children, who defend our great nation and who save lives to be shown that people in this place understand, value and respect them. That is why I was proud to stand with Portsmouth nurses last week in the lobby of Parliament, and why I am particularly pleased to be making my maiden speech in today's debate.

My own sister will be relying on the care of these nurses at my local hospital, the Queen Alexandra, in the next few days. She will be giving birth to her first child. Sadly, she cannot be here today, but I am personally delighted, because I fear she may give birth in this place—not another first I would want to see.

As I said at the start of my speech, it was public sector workers who gave me hope and who taught me never to accept it when someone said to a Pompey boy, “You can’t do that.” What motivates me now is one simple notion: to ensure that the opportunities of a good education, a good home or a job are not limited to the privileged few, but can be enjoyed by all our citizens, regardless of where they are born.

For as long as I continue to enjoy the privilege of representing the people of Portsmouth South, I will fight for a future in which power, wealth and opportunity are in the hands of the many, not just the privileged few. Every day, when I—a Fratton lad—arrive in this grand place, I will not forget who sent me here. I will be a local campaigner and a strong national voice committed to serving their interests.

So, to all those young people growing up in Portsmouth, as I once did, my message today is this: aim high and work hard, and you will achieve. Never, ever accept anyone telling you that you cannot achieve.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as my fellow Fratton Park attendees say, “Play up Pompey!”

2.28 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan) on a polished maiden speech, and we all wish him the very best in his time in this House.

Conservative Members agree with what the hon. Gentleman said about the wonderful work that public sector workers do, not least in our NHS. The NHS saved my life when I was 24. I have two children heading to work in the NHS, one of whom worked as a healthcare assistant over the summer. Members of my family are also frequent users of the NHS.

Over the last few months, I have had the pleasure of spending a day at the Bassett Road GP practice in Leighton Buzzard, and I am full of admiration for the doctors and practice nurses I saw working there. I also spent time at my local hospital, the Luton and Dunstable, which has the best accident and emergency service in the country, and we are learning lessons from it all around the country, which are being spread by the Department of Health. Really importantly, I have also spent time with the social care staff of Central Bedfordshire Council and elsewhere, and seen the independent living schemes that will be key to the sustainability and transformation plans in my area.

In these debates, we seem to focus entirely on the top line of departmental budgets. In 2016-17, the Department of Health had a departmental expenditure limit of £120.6 billion and annually managed expenditure of £16.2 billion—£136 billion in total. We need to reflect on the words of Jon Thompson, a permanent under-secretary at the Ministry of Defence, speaking to the Institute of Government recently about the attitude, often, of Select Committee members from across this House:

“They seem to live in a resource unconstrained world...in the end I’ve got a limited amount of money and I have to prioritise.” Those are words we need to hear.

There is another way to free up money within that £136 billion and improve outcomes for patients that could lead to our having more money for NHS staff—that is, to focus on improving quality, something that hardly ever gets a look-in in this House. If we look at the work that the Government are doing with the Getting It Right First Time programme, we see a 25-fold variation in infection rates for patients. Not only is going through that a deeply unpleasant experience for a patient, but the cost of surgical infections can vary from £75,000 to £100,000. If we get this right, not only do we treat patients better but there is more money to put into staff pay.

It goes on and on. Many hospitals are not using the right hip implants—they are using more expensive non-cemented hip implants. We get better outcomes with cemented implants that actually cost less.

Dr Whitford: It is really important that we are very careful about things that will be implanted permanently in a patient. We have had debates about mesh in this place, and we will be having debates about Essure, which is designed to obstruct the fallopian tubes and is also causing problems. Non-cemented implants are for younger people who may need another implant later on. I would be very careful—think of the PIP breast implants scandal—about cutting the quality of what is left in a patient.

Andrew Selous: I am talking about the data available in the national registry, now, for the first time ever, being properly compiled in every hospital. We should follow the evidence and look at the clinical outcomes, as the hon. Lady has done herself on the Health Committee.

Forty-five per cent. of surgeons are doing five or fewer complex hip and knee revisions, yet we know that clinical outcomes are better where surgeons do 35 or more a year. As a result of doing only a few operations with worse outcomes, which cost more, they also have to hire in expensive loan kits. Hospitals are spending, on average, some £200,000 a year on loan kits—some hospitals, £750,000 a year. Professor Tim Briggs, with whom I have had the honour of working over the past nine years on the Getting It Right First Time programme, said that

“there is no way right now I would ask for more money for the NHS. The waste and variation out there is unbelievable and we have got to get our act together across all the specialties to improve quality and unwarranted variation and complications. And it is not just orthopaedics.”

We are now, for the first time ever, looking at variations in litigation rates—huge amounts of money go out on litigation—in infection rates, and in revision rates. We are making progress, because litigation rates, which went up by 8% in orthopaedics in 2013-14, are down by 5% in 2014-15 and down by 8% in 2015-16.

This is a really powerful way to get better outcomes for patients and make sure that there is more money for NHS staff. That is exactly what the sustainability and transformation plans are there to do. As Simon Stevens has said, this is

“the biggest national move to integrating care of any major western country.”

[Andrew Selous]

If we can end our fragmented, silo-ed care through a massive expansion of out-of-hospital care, we will get better outcomes, save money, prioritise prevention, and keep patients out of hospital. If we do that, we will free up precious budget in order to pay NHS staff the decent rates we all want to pay them.

2.34 pm

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan) on an excellent maiden speech. Modesty prevented him from telling the House that he more than doubled the Labour vote, going from third to first and winning the seat for Labour for the first time since the seat's creation in 1918. He has a bright future in the House, I think, and I look forward to him being joined by many, many more Labour MPs from the south of England after the next election.

I should declare an interest in speaking in this debate, not registerable but important none the less, which is that generations of my family have worked in the national health service. My grandmother, great-aunts, aunts and cousins were and are nurses and midwives, and my mother has worked in the NHS for over 30 years.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): Is modesty perhaps preventing my hon. Friend from mentioning that he himself has, at times, acted as a midwife?

Conor McGinn: I am very rarely accused of modesty, so I shall certainly take that compliment. I did have one occasion to act as midwife when our daughter arrived slightly more quickly than expected. As I said to her godmother, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), it is not something that I intend to repeat, and I certainly would not recommend it to the untrained.

It was in tribute to my own family's NHS pedigree, but most importantly out of necessity to properly value the nurses and midwives of today, that I tabled an early-day motion to end the public sector pay cap in the NHS. I thank the 67 hon. Members from every Opposition party—and indeed from the Government party on the Opposition side of the House, represented by the hon. Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly)—who signed the motion to scrap the cap. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), who has relentlessly campaigned on the issue of fair pay for NHS staff, and who has brought this motion before the House today.

In my local NHS trust, St Helens and Knowsley Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust, there are over 1,000 nurses who do a magnificent job caring for patients in often incredibly difficult circumstances. I am very proud that the trust has been recognised as the best NHS acute trust in England in the latest patient-led assessments, achieving top marks in the country in every area of inspection.

The context in which NHS staff are showing such dedication and commitment to providing high-quality care makes it all the more remarkable. As we have heard, while working hard to meet increasing demands, nurses have seen seven years' worth of frozen or capped

pay. The rate of inflation has exceeded the pay cap of 1% in five of those seven years. That means less money at the end of the month for nurses—a 14% pay cut in real terms since 2010, according to the Royal College of Nursing, which has campaigned with great tenacity and passion on this issue, alongside many other organisations, including my colleagues in Unison.

For seven long years, Ministers have refused to introduce a fair pay package for nurses that reflects the skill set and dedication in the profession. They ignored the clarion call for the pay cap to be scrapped—until last night. In an act of cynicism, knowing they faced defeat in the House today, Ministers appear to have suddenly changed their minds—not because the Conservative party suddenly believed the pay cap was wrong, but because the Government might lose a vote in Parliament. What a morally and intellectually bankrupt Government this is, and what a disgraceful way to treat NHS staff—as a tool for seven years of ideologically driven austerity, and now as a tool of political expediency.

The announcement that the pay cap is to be scrapped is long overdue. Anyone in this House who believes that it should go needs to vote with us tonight, if indeed the Government decide to divide the House. But it is not enough: we need to see action. Thousands of nurses and NHS staff will be waiting eagerly to see what the Government offer above 1%, and millions more people across the country will be waiting to see when this Government are finally going to end their cuts to our public services and start properly funding our NHS.

2.39 pm

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): I join other Members in congratulating the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan) on his maiden speech. I am sure that he will make many fine contributions to this House, and I look forward to debating with him in the months to come.

I think we agree across the House that doctors, nurses and all NHS staff are fundamental to the foundation of the NHS, which the Secretary of State referred to as a world-class health system. It is, on a number of measures, such a system. Since 2010, the Government have been determined, despite the pressures we have faced, to maintain and increase funding for the NHS. We made a commitment in 2010—we could have made a different choice, given all the difficult choices we had to make—to continue funding our NHS, and we pledged in the 2015 election campaign to increase NHS funding further.

I know the vital work that frontline staff do in the hospitals that serve my constituency, such as Russells Hall hospital, Sandwell general hospital and Rowley Regis hospital, where the staff work extraordinary hours and do exceptional work for my constituents. Of course, pay is an important part of incentivising a high-performance workforce, and I welcome the Treasury's announcement on public sector pay, which indicates that we will look at giving Departments more flexibility. I think that that is important.

I want to highlight one aspect of the workforce challenge that the NHS faces. I have campaigned on mental health for the last decade or more. Over the summer, Government announced their ambition to increase the workforce for mental health by 20,000 by 2020. There are particular challenges around the recruitment

and retention of those who work in mental health in the NHS. If the Government are to have any chance of delivering on their aspirations and objectives as outlined in the five year forward view, which they have committed to implementing, they have to get the workforce challenge right. Not enough people want to go into psychiatry or mental health nursing, and we need to find ways of incentivising people to fill those positions. The stretch ambition to get 20,000 additional people working in mental health is a considerable challenge.

I welcome the announcement about flexibility, because I think it will open up opportunities to address the particular skill challenge that we face in mental health. We must try to find innovative ways to incentivise people to come into the NHS to work in mental health, whether it is in psychiatry or psychological therapies, to fill that skills gap. Unless we address those issues, there is no way that we will be able to build the kind of mental health services that we desperately need in our NHS. We have made a lot of progress, but this particular workforce challenge lends itself to innovative thinking about pay and incentives.

I hope that the flexibility that the Government have announced will allow the Department of Health to look at its workforce plan and think in even more detail about how it might develop the incentives necessary to create the mental health workforce that we desperately need. That might mean looking at pay and incentive structures as well as training and other ways of getting people into the profession. I very much welcome the Government's decision to allow Departments more flexibility on public sector pay. It has been a long road, and the decisions that we had to make at the beginning of 2010 about public spending have meant sacrifices for public sector workers. Everybody agrees that we have particular challenges in the NHS workforce, and we need to find innovative and flexible ways to deliver that workforce, particularly in mental health.

2.44 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): I must take the time to declare an interest: I am a junior doctor at St George's hospital in Tooting.

When the Conservative Government began their programme of ideological austerity, they imposed the pay cap to secure our nation's finances. It quite simply has not worked. We were told that the Government could not increase public sector pay beyond 1% because to do so would harm our financial security, but capping public sector pay has harmed us. It has put stress fractures in the foundations of our society—our public services. After seven years of austerity, this Government have borrowed more than all other Labour Governments in history combined. The Government have not paid off the budget deficit, and they lack any credible economic direction. Instead, they are attempting to drive our economy off the Brexit cliff like a lemming.

A decade on from a global financial crisis and seven years after the Government's austerity programme began, our nurses, refuse collectors and teaching assistants are still paying the price. The stability of our society—the foundation on which we live our lives—depends on these vital services, from healthcare to our security, our children's education and our local government. Since 2010, our nurses have suffered a real-terms pay cut of 14%. A hospital porter is £7,000 worse off, and a

midwife has been left £18,000 short. These real-terms pay cuts have hit so hard that some of those who choose to stay in the profession are forced to use food banks, take on a second job and rack up personal debt, all because public sector pay rises have consistently failed to keep up with the rising cost of living.

The bravery of our emergency service personnel has been highlighted in recent months, following some truly tragic events, but when the media spotlight goes away they perform the very same duties, at the same risk and with the same courage. The Government absolutely do not value the people who put their lives on the line every single day to save ours.

Anna Soubry: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way, but I think she should take back what she has just said. Whatever divides us when it comes to pay and financing, the one thing that cannot be said about any hon. or right hon. Member of this House, whichever party they may support, is that they do not care about the workers in the NHS. We certainly do, and we value and respect them.

Dr Allin-Khan: I thank the right hon. Lady for her intervention, but I have to say that a future Labour Government will not just talk the talk; we will walk the walk. A Labour Government will be on the side of ordinary people—those serving on Britain's frontline. It is not right that in 2017 Britain, those at the top of our civil service can receive golden handshakes, taking home more than a quarter of a million pounds a year, while those on the frontline are stuck on the breadline.

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): In response to the comments from the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), does my hon. Friend agree that instead of just saying that we respect our public sector workers, we want to show them that respect? The cap has affected morale and retention. To say otherwise, when we can see that what is being done is harming people, is to be much like the people in the story of the emperor's new clothes who said to the emperor, "You are not naked."

Dr Allin-Khan: I agree 100% with my hon. Friend's argument, which was most eloquently put. While those on the frontline work so hard, they are on the breadline. Our firefighters, teaching assistants, council officers, nurses, policemen and women, prison guards and hospital porters—the list is endless—are the glue that binds our country together. The services in which they work are vital, because they allow people in every part of the country to live their lives, feel safe and have opportunity. Those workers—I have the pleasure of working alongside many of them at St George's hospital in Tooting—do not seek recognition; they serve our country selflessly on a daily basis. They are simply seeking a decent day's pay for a decent, hard day's work. That is why the Labour party would scrap the NHS pay cap and give our hard-working NHS staff pay that recognises the skill and dedication that they bring to their working lives.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr Allin-Khan: No, I am going to make some progress.

The quality of NHS services depends on the skill and talent of the people in them. Those in our NHS facing the everyday challenge of treating our most vulnerable

[*Dr Allin-Khan*]

should not be worrying about how they will put food on the table for their children—the very children who are having to accompany them to food banks.

Let us be clear: lifting the pay cap is not about recognition. It is about removing a cap that actively degrades our public services, weakening the foundations under our feet. Let us stop this demonisation of a workforce who hold this country together. We need an independent pay body to negotiate public service pay. Our services have been gutted by seven years of ideological austerity.

Simon Hoare: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr Allin-Khan: I will give way—this will be interesting.

Simon Hoare: I will let you work out whether it is an interesting intervention, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I am listening carefully to what the hon. Lady says. She speaks with passion and from chalk-face experience. I was interested to hear her make an open-ended pledge that her party would raise public sector pay in the national health service, but she has not said by how much, at what rate, on what timetable or how it would be funded. Can we have some detail?

Dr Allin-Khan: The hon. Gentleman heard the eloquent contribution from the Opposition spokesman today, and I would ask him where the £350 million a week is that we expected to see as a result of leaving the European Union. If his party has its way, we will have even less money for the NHS, so we will not only lose our valuable workforce who have come here from Europe but we will be further underfunded.

Lifting the public service pay cap would enhance the capacity and skill of each of our public services. In such high-pressure, stressful places of work, we demand that our nurses, police officers and firefighters make life or death decisions with a clear mind. How will they do that if, at the back of their mind they are worrying about how they will be able to feed their children or care for their parents? They will burn out—it is a recipe for disaster, and we are already seeing it happen. How long do we expect those public sector workers to carry on like that?

There are times when we in the House divide and times when we unite. This debate reaches far beyond a percentage increase on a payslip. It is about not just pay but the knock-on effect on lives. I implore the Government to look at the issue again and pay our public service heroes a decent wage.

2.52 pm

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate. West Cumberland Hospital in my constituency has faced significant challenges over many decades in recruiting and retaining enough doctors and nurses. It was because of those challenges that our midwifery unit was under threat of losing 24-hour, seven-day-a-week consultant-led maternity care. In a rural area such as mine, abundant with farms—I am proud to support the National Farmers Union's Back British Farming Day today—that could mean a two-hour journey on a single-carriageway road up to Carlisle hospital, often being held up by slow-moving

vehicles. Having been through four childbirths myself, I simply cannot agree that having to travel an extra 40 miles is an acceptable modern-day service, especially if the mother experiences complications.

I was pleased that the Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), came to West Cumberland Hospital to see the challenges for himself, and that the Secretary of State came to the hospital in Carlisle, Cumberland Infirmary, to hear for himself the concerns of clinicians. Not one mentioned the 1% pay cap, but concerns were expressed about morale, recruitment and retention, and how to ensure that enough doctors and nurses join the health sector. In my role on the Education Committee, I look forward to considering how we can recruit doctors and nurses through technical and academic routes. I am really pleased by the huge investment that has been made in our hospital and our NHS trust.

Dr Whitford: The hon. Lady mentioned recruiting doctors and nurses through a technical route. Do she or the Government really propose that route into medicine, without a degree?

Trudy Harrison: I thank the hon. Lady; I should have been clearer in saying that I support technical and academic routes into all employment in the health sector, because I understand that it is a team effort.

Over the past seven years, more than £90 million has been spent on the brand-new hospital in Whitehaven—more investment than ever before. I am delighted that we have been awarded more than £40 million of extra capital investment to refurbish and rebuild parts of the hospital estate, to bring it up to date and improve the experience of patients and staff. The funding will help to deliver faster diagnosis of conditions including cancer, easier access to mental health services and an expansion of our A&E department, leading to shorter waiting times for operations and more services in GP surgeries. There has been huge progress in improving patient care, and the funding will help to secure the highest-quality, most compassionate patient care anywhere in the world. Some £30 million of new funding will be invested across south Cumbria to modernise mental health facilities and improve A&E facilities at our hospitals, and nearly £10 million of the new capital funding has been earmarked for modernising mental health in-patient services.

Ensuring that we have a full complement of doctors, nurses and other staff on wards is essential. We simply cannot run wards without the appropriate staff. Our public sector workers, including nurses and other healthcare staff, are some of the most talented and hard-working people in the UK. Like everyone else, they deserve to have fulfilling jobs that are fairly rewarded in their take-home pay. We now have 12,000 more nurses working in our hospital wards than we did under the Labour Government, and retaining hard-working nurses and doctors is vital to maintain the service that we all appreciate. I am pleased that yesterday the Treasury decided to remove the 1% pay cap across the board.

One point I would like to draw attention to is the need to assist our talented, highly qualified medical clinicians to be able to do what they are trained to do and experienced in practising. From speaking to midwives both at my local hospital and elsewhere in our trust, I know that they are regularly spending up to three hours

of their eight-hour shifts ploughing through administration work, stuck at a computer screen, rather than being out on the wards doing the work that they are trained to do—assisting mothers in labour and delivering children safely. I ask Ministers to look at innovative ways in which our trained staff can use the skills that they have.

It is the 42-year record low unemployment rate and our seven-year track record on deficit reduction that have made the end to the pay freeze possible.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that with the Labour years having led to far less recruitment and training of nurses and doctors than the country needed, we are now in an international labour market for those important workers? It is therefore important that pay rates are high enough to attract them to this country.

Trudy Harrison: Indeed; I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for that intervention.

I end by commending the Treasury for yesterday's decision to remove the 1% pay cap.

2.59 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I start by acknowledging just how long the constraints on pay in the NHS and across the public sector more generally have applied, and I say that fully recognising that I was a member of the coalition Government. I understood and accepted the reason why constraint was necessary at that time, because public sector pay had run quite a long way ahead of private sector pay, but the situation is very different now. Ultimately, we cannot justify year-on-year real-terms pay cuts for workers in the public sector as a way of sustaining our vital public services, but that is what they are facing and we have to face up to it.

Alongside the moral case is the fact that the cap simply will not work. The Royal College of Nursing says that the NHS in England is some 40,000 nurses short, and that has consequences. Among the doctor workforce, rota gaps are endemic—I suspect the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) recognises that. It is particularly bad in some parts of the country and in some specialties. The hon. Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris) spoke about psychiatry. According to the survey published by the Royal College of Psychiatrists earlier this week, the numbers of psychiatrists vary significantly around the country, with some areas disturbingly short.

We often talk about doctors and nurses in this House, but so many other people work in the NHS. Allied health professionals, caretakers, orderlies and all sorts of other people are affected by the cap, many of whom are on very low pay. I want to give a particular shout-out to paramedics in the east of England, many of whom regularly work very long shifts and often get home utterly exhausted after dealing with traumatic events. I pay particular tribute to the 70 staff from the East of England Ambulance Service NHS Trust who have signed up to become blue light champions to highlight the importance of mental health among that organisation's workforce. That has been done with the support of Unison and the involvement of Mind, which does really important work with frontline workers.

When we talk about pay levels in the NHS, we should also think about pay levels in social care. Non-payment of the minimum wage is endemic in many parts of the social care system, which is intolerable. Too many workers who provide care in people's homes are still not properly paid for travel time. Information I got from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs recently showed that millions of pounds of unpaid wages had been recovered following an exercise in social care. When we talk about the need for a fair deal for NHS workers, we also need to talk about a fair deal for people working in social care, who do often very unattractive but vital work.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman mentioned public sector workers more widely. In Scotland, despite voting not to scrap the cap in May, the Scottish National party Government have now listened and done so. However, public sector workers in UK bodies in my constituency and across Scotland are still left out, and will continue to be left out by the recent Tory announcement to lift the cap selectively. Will he join me in urging the Government to value and properly pay all public sector workers across the UK and ensure that none is left behind?

Norman Lamb: I agree that we have to treat people with justice across the public sector to ensure that they are not unfairly and unreasonably left behind.

On the comments made by the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), behind this issue is the inescapable question of the amount of money that we are putting into health and care services, because that ultimately determines how much we can pay and how many people we can employ. The bottom line is that we cannot carry on as we are; it is not sustainable. We are not being honest with the British people. The truth is that, at the last election, none of the political parties had a solution for the NHS and the care system. I was challenged earlier about the fact that the Lib Dems argued for a 1p increase in income tax. I absolutely acknowledge that that is not a panacea and would not solve all the problems, but it would provide an immediate £6 billion, which would have a big impact on the sustainability of the system.

The bottom line is that we need to work together across the party divide. If we do not, we will be letting down the people of this country. We can continue to shout at each other, but that does not help the family whose loved one is let down by failures of care because the NHS and the care system do not have sufficient resources. More than 1 million older people have care needs that are not being met because of the underfunding in social care. As the Independent Age UK survey showed, well over 80% of Members of Parliament, on both sides of the House, agree that we need to work together to come up with a long-term, sustainable solution. Please, Government, get on with it.

3.6 pm

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): It is a great honour to have been called in this serious debate. I am pleased by the way in which it has been conducted, as we have heard some very good speeches, in particular the maiden speech by the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan). It was an amusing, entertaining, heartfelt and serious speech, and I have no doubt that the hon. Gentleman will make valuable contributions

[*Kwasi Kwarteng*]

in this Parliament and in years to come. It was a salutary speech because it gave one faith in the House of Commons.

Having been a Member for seven years, I have seen many debates—and some yah-boo politics—in which people apportioned blame for the crisis. Labour says that the Tories cut too much and that it was all the bankers' fault that we had a deficit of £160 billion—the largest peace-time deficit in our history. The right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who was a Front-Bench member of the coalition Government for their full five years, will remember clearly the context in which we came up with the difficult policy of the pay cap. It was not a whimsy, and we did not do it for the hell of it to put people under pressure. The pay cap was a serious response to a difficult and chronic problem—the deficit.

I do not want to apportion blame, and I echo my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in recognising that the global crash was not entirely Labour's fault—I am willing to give it that—but the history of the public finances from 2001, eight years before the financial crisis happened, shows that we ran a deficit in every single one of those years. To borrow a phrase—a mantra—from a departed colleague, Labour did not fix the roof while the sun was shining. The Labour party had a record of fiscal incompetence, and it was against that backdrop that public sector pay restraint became an issue. It is important to look at the history to explain why the pay cap was instituted in 2011.

Eleanor Smith: The hon. Gentleman talks about eight years, but Andrew Lansley's Bill basically destroyed the NHS. That is why we are in this state with the pay cap. I think the hon. Gentleman has forgotten about that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I would like to allow the hon. Lady to speak early on, and there is nothing wrong with intervening, but we do need short interventions. That would be great. I need to know if Members will be giving way, too. I would like to get all speakers in, but the more interventions we have the less chance there is that I will be able to do that.

Kwasi Kwarteng: That was a fair intervention, but I completely disagree with the hon. Lady's point. The deficit had nothing to do with the then Secretary of State for Health. It was not the previous Secretary of State for Health who caused the £160 billion deficit the Government inherited in 2010. Naturally, when running a huge deficit—I think it was something like 12% of GDP—one has to find savings in the budget. The question I pose to Labour Members is, how would they find the extra money? There are only two ways to do that: the Government can either raise the money through taxation, or the Chancellor has to borrow the money. It is very unclear to me what the Labour party proposes to do to increase the pay of public sector workers. No doubt it will have a plan to increase it by 5% or 10%—I do not know by exactly how much it wants to put up public sector pay—but it would have to fund that. I looked at the Labour election manifesto and I think it spent the tax on people earning over £80,000 about 10 times over to fund their various projects and policies.

We cannot go on kidding ourselves and kidding the British people. I very much like the point made by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk about the fact that we have to be serious about how we are going to fund the NHS and social care provision. He described the current model as—his word—unsustainable. I do not share that view—I think we can fund the NHS adequately for the rest of the Parliament—but his general message was right. It does not make any sense for Labour Members to scream, holler and shout about Tory cuts without having a serious proposal.

Norman Lamb: To work together in a constructive, rational and mature way requires the Government to agree to do it. We are still waiting. I met the Prime Minister in February. Please make a decision.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am not privy to the conversations the right hon. Gentleman has had with the Prime Minister—that is something he might wish to take up with her—but this is a serious debate. As he said, we cannot be honest with people on this issue if we are simply screaming and shouting across the Dispatch Box.

Conservative and Opposition Members have made the point that we have extremely impressive professionals across the public services. The level of public service provision here in Britain is right at the top of the global rankings. I have spent time in Europe, Africa and across the middle east. The public services we have in Britain are really world class and we must never lose sight of that in these discussions. The nature of the debate has been very fruitful and we have had a measure of courtesy, but it does not make sense simply to holler "Tory cuts." That is what I have heard in seven years of trying to address what are very serious problems.

3.14 pm

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I start by saying it was a joy to be in the Chamber to listen to the maiden speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan). I am confident he will be a strong advocate for his area. I would also like to take this opportunity to recognise my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth). NHS workers must take some reassurance in knowing that they have a champion in him.

As I have mentioned many times in this House, my constituency lies between two hospitals: Dewsbury and District hospital, which has recently seen a significant downgrade; and Huddersfield Royal Infirmary, which is earmarked for future downgrade and closure. Sadly, and probably as a consequence of these NHS cuts, I receive a large number of hospital complaints from constituents covering a variety of different issues. There is, however, one common theme in all the letters and emails: no one wants to point the finger of blame at NHS staff, because they can see how hard they are working, often in unsafe conditions mainly due to chronic understaffing.

In March this year, it was reported that there were over 30,000 vacant full-time positions across the NHS. There are nearly 200 vacancies at just one of my local hospital trusts alone. This means that in many hospital wards across the country, staff are having to do the work of two or even three people. We have all heard the stories of NHS staff working 12 hour shifts without

food, water or even toilet breaks, where staff are close to breaking point mentally because of the undue stresses of their everyday working life. Yet they are consistently ignored when they ask for what should be their basic right: a decent pay rise to reflect the work that they put in on a daily basis in circumstances some of us in this House can only imagine in our worst nightmares. They are, frankly, heroes.

As we have heard from many of my colleagues today, NHS workers have reported having to: cut back on food shopping; miss meals in order to feed their children; use debt services, taking out payday loans or even approaching loan sharks; and even resort to food banks when the money runs out at the end of the month. Many are leaving the profession to take alternative work in different sectors. Some tell me they choose to work in supermarkets, where the pay is broadly similar but without the stresses and strains of working in a stretched industry where many workers are left feeling undervalued and burnt out from trying to keep up with the unprecedented demand for care. Many worry about the future of their registration, given the pressures they are having to work under.

By undervaluing our NHS workers to this extent, the Government are presiding over what could be the worst staffing crisis ever seen in the NHS since its inception in 1948. NHS bursaries have been slashed, and we hear that nurse staff recruitment from EU countries is down 96% on last year, mainly because of uncertainty over Brexit. In addition, a huge proportion of the existing workforce is due for retirement in the early 2020s. Instead of looking for solutions to this problem, the Government have chosen to inflict a seven-year, real-terms pay cut on our NHS staff. Yesterday, they came out and offered nothing more than a sticking plaster, with no offer of new money, saying that one group of public sector workers were more valued than another, and a vague promise that maybe in the future there could be a little bit more money made available, but no details on for whom or how much.

Those of us on the Labour Benches know how those on the Government Benches feel about our public sector heroes. We heard that loud and clear in June this year when they voted to keep the public sector pay cap and then cheered in celebration at their “triumph”. That will stay with me for the rest of my life. These are people who often put their lives on hold for us and put their lives at risk for us. They clearly deserve a pay rise to reflect their dedication and commitment.

3.18 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I declare an interest as a nurse who has worked for over 20 years in the NHS, and who still works as a nurse on my hospital bank. I worked through 2010 to 2015, when the pay freeze and then the pay cap was introduced, so I know exactly how difficult it is to manage on a nurse’s wage and not see an increase. Inflation is now close to 3%, so it is becoming increasingly difficult. Seven years is enough for anyone to have lived with a pay cap or a pay freeze, so I support the RCN’s campaign to scrap the cap.

No political party comes out of this unscathed. There was a recognition among colleagues back in 2010 that we in the public sector had to tighten our belt if we were to protect jobs and frontline services. We recognised

that we had to step up to the plate and play our part, and we did. However, we were promised by those on the Government Benches that that would be for roughly a five-year period. The Government have to take responsibility for not having tackled the deficit completely and for keeping the pay cap going. It is not fair on frontline staff that they are the ones still picking up the pieces of the mess the last Labour Government left the country in.

It is time now to scrap the cap. Nursing has changed dramatically over the last 20 years. It is now a graduate-only-entry profession. Nurses are taking more advanced roles, including nurse prescribing, and extended roles, such as biopsies and minor ops. Today is National Sepsis day. In A&E, it is often a nurse who sees a patient and, if they suspect sepsis, cannulates, takes blood, does the blood cultures and, if they have done their prescribing course, starts the first line antibiotics. That is done long before the doctor ever sees the patient. That is not because nurses are becoming mini-doctors; it is because they are extending their role, improving outcomes for patients and improving patient experience.

I want to send a message to Ministers: there are two myths doing the rounds at the moment about nurses’ wages. The first is that nurses are on an average of £43,000 or even £37,000. That is completely untrue. Most nurses are in bands 5 or 6, the average wage for which is £27,000—for an experienced nurse—and the starting salary roughly £21,000. The banding system is used to downgrade nurses and pay them as little as possible. When I do a hospital bank shift, I am on the lowest band 5 wage—after 20 years of working as an experienced cancer nurse who is chemo and intravenous-trained.

The incremental rise we hear about is also a myth. The banding system is used to start nurses on the lowest-possible salary. They have to wait seven years—each year going up a little bit—till they reach the top of their banding. In no other profession would that happen. We do not see MPs in the 2017 intake being paid less than those in the 2015 intake because they are less experienced or new to the role, but that is exactly what we do to nurses, and then we tell them they should be grateful for that incremental rise. They should be paid what is due for that job, not wait seven years to get the actual pay the job is worth. We do not say to the editor of the *Evening Standard*, “You’ve never been a journalist before, so you should be paid less than any other journalist in this country.”

This is about fair pay for a fair day’s work. We are asking people to save lives or put their own lives on the line to save the lives of others. The time has come to end the public sector pay cap, and I welcome the moves by the Government. As for the motion, I hear that the Labour party wants to scrap the cap, but there is not the money to do it across the board, although there are ways to give nurses, public sector workers and other NHS staff a pay rise. If we focus that pay rise on bands 1 to 7 and help those in high-cost areas with high-cost living allowances, we can make a difference, but using this as a political football will not score any goals. It is incumbent on all of us from all parties to work together.

When Ministers stand up at the Dispatch Box and say, “More schools than ever are good or outstanding”, “More patients are being treated than ever before” or

[*Maria Caulfield*]

“There is less crime than ever before”, they should remember it is because of the hard work of public sector workers. We need to reward them for their hard work and effort.

3.22 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): As the Member of Parliament with the highest percentage of workers in public sector employment in the UK, I will be supporting the motion today in the name of the shadow Front-Bench team.

The Government’s public sector pay policy can best be described by the Glasgow word “guddle”. Translation: a tangled mess. The Government, seeking to deflect criticism, and no doubt as a direct result of tricky doorstep conversations in the election, yesterday announced a policy that was spun as ending the public sector pay cap. It was no such thing, however, and instantly attracted criticism from the very set of workers they were hoping to silence. The Prison Officers Association correctly pointed out that the so-called increase on offer would amount to a real-terms pay cut since inflation had just hit 2.9 %.

The title of this Opposition day debate is “NHS Pay”, and it is right that today there is a focus on a vital set of workers providing life-saving services, but I feel that the whole subject of public sector pay cannot be debated in a silo and in the context of one particular set of workers without reference to others. This week at the TUC conference, all the public sector unions came together in a collective call for parity and fairness in pay awards, not selective cherry picking.

I come from a public sector background and a trade union, Unison, that has always recognised that not rewarding and supporting public service workers properly is a political choice. It is a choice that the Government are trying to avoid being called out on, as from time to time token efforts are made to imply they understand and value public service. The Prime Minister told the Tory party conference last year:

“Our economy should work for everyone, but if your pay has stagnated for several years in a row and fixed items of spending keep going up, it doesn’t feel like it’s working for you.”

That sounds good, but it is at odds with the very heart of Conservatism and the shareholder mentality that puts pounds and profits before a public sector ethos. The privatisation of public services is a case in point. Turning public assets into private shareholdings, rather than investing in quality, and targeting public sector pay for quick savings is a hallmark of every Tory Government. I was a public sector worker under John Major’s Government when they, too, had a public sector pay cap.

We would not be having this debate if the Government really valued public service workers and recognised that although many could earn more in the private sector, they have chosen to contribute their skills to helping others. The systematic punishment inflicted on them year on year by a Government who have chosen to make public sector workers pay the price for the failings of the private sector when the economy crashed in 2008 is morally unjust and unfair and has tested their patience to the limit.

I strongly believe that cuts to public sector pay is an issue that affects everyone—not just the workers, their families and service users but the wider community and local businesses. Local economies suffer when wages are held down and jobs are lost, and given the scale of the money involved, this is also a national economic issue. The TUC has produced an excellent report, “Lift the Cap”, that outlines in detail the knock-on economic impact on local economies through wages being systematically depressed.

How can the national economic picture be anything other than bleak if hundreds of thousands of people are on a low-pay subsistence existence and struggling to afford the basics, never mind boost consumer spending, without plunging even further into debt? All the time the cost of living is rising and hitting low-paid workers hardest, especially on energy and transport costs. The question is not: can we afford it? I advocate turning that miserable ideological argument on its head to say that we cannot not afford it. Paying public sector workers properly works for everyone: it generates tax revenues, reduces social security spending and creates jobs in the private and voluntary sectors.

I am concerned about the Government’s direction of travel in making announcements on police and prison officer pay over that of other public sector jobs. There is a danger that they are targeting professions dominated by men and not dealing with those public services where employment is dominated by women. I would like to hear from the Minister how they plan to tackle that issue. There is a risk of the gender pay gap increasing if the Government do not get their public sector pay policy correct.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I agree with the hon. Gentleman’s comments about the Government seeking to divide public services between those with more men and those with more women. That said, regarding the increase in police pay, an officer in my constituency wrote to me that it was only a 1% increase with a 1% bonus and that they did not get it on their overtime or shift allowances, and that it felt like another kick in the teeth, because it was being sold as 2%.

Chris Stephens: That is a fair point. Two years ago, three months after I was elected, I received a 10% pay increase followed by another uplift of 1.3% last year. As a trade unionist, I believe in a rate for the job and in accepting independent pay review processes, so I donated to local charities following the pay rise. It sticks in my craw, however, that there appears to be one rule for MPs and another for public servants. How much more must it offend my constituents?

Every Member who has spoken today against raising public sector pay while having accepted their own increase must have a different set of values, and they are entitled to their views. Equally, however, their low-paid public sector constituents are entitled to pass judgement on them, and no doubt they will draw their own conclusions. I say: lift the cap, lift it now and fund it properly.

3.29 pm

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to address the House on the subject of NHS pay. Let me start by praising the excellent work that nurses and other NHS staff perform on a day-to-day

basis. In my constituency, the excellent Southport Hospital, part of the Southport and Ormskirk Hospital NHS Trust, is a shining example of how a hospital that has had difficulties can turn itself around with the right leadership. It was commended for being the most improved hospital in the first quarter of this year, and I was grateful to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for visiting it, talking to staff and listening to their concerns.

The Government have continued to listen to the public sector pay boards' recommendations, and I am particularly pleased that they have announced this level of flexibility, which I hope they will extend to those at the lower end of the pay scale. Opposition Members, who did not sort out our economy when they had the opportunity to do so, should bear in mind that we did not introduce the pay cap to penalise nurses; we did it because of the economic situation that existed at the time. For many years, because of the Labour Government's policies, the economy was like a patient itself—it was sick, and yes, there was some bitter medicine to take—but now, thankfully, the patient is on the road to recovery.

We know that the only route towards the building of strong public services is through the building of a strong economy, and that is exactly what the Government are doing. The Opposition have made some egregious claims about the situation of NHS staff, and have even tried to claim that there is a nurse recruitment crisis owing to poor pay, although the NHS Pay Review Body recently emphasised that that was not the case, stating:

“We do not see significant short-term nationwide recruitment and retention issues that are linked to pay”.

I urge the Opposition to welcome the fact that 52,000 nurses are currently in training, and to celebrate the recent announcement that funds have been set aside for a further 10,000 training places by 2020.

Let me conclude by making a recommendation to Labour Members. If they are genuinely serious about raising public sector pay, they should consider supporting sensible economic policies that will lead to the nation's increased prosperity and to rising wages for everyone, not just those in the NHS.

3.32 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Let me join in the congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan) on his maiden speech. He was able to demonstrate what Parliament is at its very best, when members of communities come here to give a voice to those communities. It was a fantastic speech.

I also pay tribute to the members of our Front Bench for the fight that they have put up today, and, indeed, before today. They have ensured that the case has been made—for instance, when representatives of the Royal College of Nursing were across the road campaigning for the cap to be scrapped.

There is no doubt that we are still in very difficult times. The economy has not grown in the way that people intended; despite the setting of repeated targets, every one of them has been missed, and tax revenues have not been coming in. But, of course, there is always money for priorities, and this situation comes down to that question of priorities. Is the Government's priority to give money to the wealthiest through corporation tax

cuts and personal tax advantages, or is it to establish a foundation of decent public services? Collectively we know that if we are to achieve the type of society that we want, grassroots investment is vital.

Tomorrow is quite an important day for our country. It will be a decade since the financial crisis began, and queues of Northern Rock customers were forming at the cash machines. Now, our doctors and nurses are experiencing a real-terms pay cut. That is where the axe has fallen. Let us consider the Royal Bank of Scotland, a majority public institution, 73% of which is owned by the taxpayer. Last year it made a £2 billion loss. Let us forget the casino banking that brought our country to its financial knees. A majority publicly owned bank in which the Government had a significant interest, and which had made a £2 billion loss, managed to pay £17 million worth of bonuses. Where is the pay restraint when it matters? It is OK to be tough when that means talking down our doctors, nurses and other public sector workers. Where is that toughness when it comes to sticking it to the banks? The people who caused the financial crisis in 2010 have been allowed to get away with it, and the stress and the strain have fallen on our public sector workers.

The NHS does not sit in isolation. It is part of a very delicate public service ecosystem. It relies on other public sector agencies to be strong, robust and well resourced to ensure that that pressure is managed. In the north-west, more than 100,000 workers have been taken away from our local authorities and other public sector bodies, which means that there is more pressure on the NHS to deal with matters that ought to be dealt with in the community. Social services departments are under such strain that some are nearly falling over, but rather than dealing with that by paying people a decent amount for a hard day's work, the Government seem to want to put their fingers in their ears, hum to themselves, and believe that everything is OK.

I am not fooled, and I do not believe that Conservative Back Benchers are fooled. When they stand up to defend their Government, there is a veneer of support because they have to toe the party line, but they know—they absolutely know—the real impact that their Government are having. [*Interruption.*] That is the truth. Listen: I know my feelings about the NHS, and they are not just about words. This is about action, about deeds, and about showing genuine support.

We are sent here to represent our constituents. Can any Conservative Members tell me how continuing to suppress the pay of hard-working public sector workers is to the benefit of any one of their constituents, when at the same time a publicly owned bank is getting away with paying £17 million in bonuses? Let them tell me where the pay restraint is when it really comes to it. Words are one thing, but facts—evidence—another thing entirely.

This comes down to stark choices. The choice on our side means having decent public services there when they are needed. The choice on the other side means sticking up for the rich at the cost of public services.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I want to get everyone in, so I shall have to drop the speaking limit to four minutes because of the earlier interventions.

3.37 pm

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I was going to say that it was a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), but I truly struggle to do so. If we are to do our job as politicians, the first thing that we must do is drop the rhetoric, drop the slogans and stop the insults. They do not help, they do not achieve anything, and they are insulting. Let me tell the hon. Gentleman, and other Opposition Members, that some of us on this side of the House are getting a little sick and tired of, one, the way that the Labour party continues to run down our NHS, and two, the perpetuation of the stereotype that we do not use it, and, indeed, that we do not have families. In fact, our families have long roots in the NHS.

I am very proud of four generations of Soubrys all of whom are working, or have worked, in the NHS. My niece is training to be a paramedic, and I am sure that my mentioning that in Parliament in the presence of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will advance her career. Of course it will not! Her mother, my sister-in-law, works in a GP's surgery, and my brother Charlie works at the Queen's Medical Centre in Nottingham. My mother was a radiographer all her working life; she proudly worked in the NHS for 40 years, finally retiring, long after she should have done, at Doncaster Royal Infirmary. Her mother-in-law—my grandmother—was a nurse, as was my great aunt. I am therefore one of many Members on this side of the House with long, firm roots in the NHS. We get it, we love it, we have a passion for it, and that is why we continue to support it and fund it.

What the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton just does not understand, like, sadly, so many of his colleagues, is that the way we achieve the great public services we all agree we want is to have a good, firm, sound economy, and we achieve that through the sort of sensible Conservative policies that we on these Benches have advocated, and have achieved—or we wreck it and destroy that strong economy with the sort of socialism that strangles our economy now being advocated by Labour's current Front-Bench. The choice for the British people is absolutely clear: if they want a strong NHS delivering those fantastic services, they should support the Conservative party, because it is us who deliver the economy to pay for those services.

I also take grave exception to anybody telling me that I follow the party line; I can think of a few on the Conservative Benches who would take grave issue with that. I make it very clear that there are undoubtedly problems and huge challenges, and all is not well within our great NHS, but, please, we must not talk it down in the way we have done.

By way of example, a very dear friend of mine died only the other week; he had a terminal illness. Even in her deepest grief, my friend, Dick Benson's widow, when she called to tell me of his demise, told me of the remarkable care that he had had thanks to the GP in Nottingham who had provided his end-of-life care support. That is just one example of the hundreds of thousands of people who are receiving world-class treatment every day, thanks to our NHS.

As I have said, however, all is not well. Too many of our NHS workers are working overly long shifts with short breaks. I know of consultant friends of mine

having to pay for their lanyards when they are broken at Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust, and there are many other examples.

Finally, let me give an outstanding example from my clinical commissioning group, Nottingham West. It has said that six of the 12 GP surgeries are outstanding. There is much more to be done, but make no mistake: the way we achieve a great NHS and make it even better is to have the strong economy that only the Conservatives can deliver.

3.41 pm

Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry).

As a nurse of 40 years, I can say that the issue we are debating today is close to my heart. I, like many other NHS staff, struggled to make ends meet with the 1% pay cap, which acted as a pay cut. Since 2010, NHS staff who have decided to stay in the profession have experienced a real-terms pay cut of 14%. They are overstretched and undervalued, which is making patient care in the NHS a real concern. The 1% cap is forcing many experienced staff out of the profession, putting strain on those left. Others are pushed into the arms of agencies where they could earn many times their normal hourly rate, and others pursue a second job to make ends meet, working extra hours to increase their earnings. This puts a strain not only on their financial life, but on their family too.

In my constituency of Wolverhampton South West, I have constituents who work as nurses telling me they are leaving the NHS because of increasing workloads, which has caused them great stress, and years of pay restraint that has left them feeling undervalued and demoralised. Many hard-working nurses are turning to food banks, facing missing meals and struggling to pay their bills. Pay has not increased, but utility and grocery bills have. The Royal Wolverhampton NHS Trust employs over 8,000, and 7,297 are non-medical staff. Another constituent who is a ward manager at a local rehabilitation hospital in Wolverhampton contacted me explaining how she had been fortunate to train with an NHS bursary and to then be employed there as a staff nurse since 2001.

In response to a recent question by my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), the relevant Health Minister said that the Government changed the funding system for pre-registration tuition and bursaries to the standard student support system. This change means we have moved away from centrally imposed number controls and financial limitations, and therefore the artificial cap has been removed. That is not the case, as the latest UCAS figures show that applications for midwifery and nursing have fallen by 23% this year as health students are put off under this Government. Under this Government, it is difficult to train and to make a living as a nurse. That is why I am proud to have stood and been elected in the 2017 general election on Labour's pledge, in a fully costed manifesto, to scrap the NHS pay cap and reinstate bursaries—unlike the Tories, who have given out massive tax giveaways worth £70 billion over five years.

3.44 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I will not try to compete with my right hon. Friend the Member for

Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), but one reason why I am speaking today—and why I often speak on healthcare matters in this place—is that I, too, come from a family of doctors and nurses who work in the NHS. It was wanting to make the NHS better that first got me involved in politics, and I care very deeply about our national health service.

I welcome the Government's decision to lift the pay cap, and to do it in a responsible way, but it has served a purpose. Back in 2010, the pay cap was necessary. Indeed, there was a pay cap in the Labour party's 2010 manifesto as well. Labour also recognised that a level of pay restraint was necessary because of the financial situation in which the country found itself. Pay restraint was urgently needed, because wages are a significant driver of costs in the NHS and the wider public sector, and the public finances were running totally out of control. The pay cap was part of the restoration of financial discipline, of confidence in our economy and of growth, which we are now enjoying. Thanks to that growth, millions more people are now in work.

It is right to lift the pay cap now, but it must be done with caution because this country still has a sizeable deficit and increasing levels of debt. We are still paying off large amounts of debt interest. We therefore have to be responsible in the way we make commitments on public sector spending. I am very concerned about Labour's plans for the pay increases that they would be willing to fund. They seem to involve an open promise and a potentially bottomless pit. Labour Members will not tell us how much the pay increases would be, but we know that the proposals in their manifesto would have cost between £6 billion and £9 billion extra. It was not clear where that money was to come from. Time and again, we heard that it would come from corporation tax, but we know that when we put up corporation tax we reduce the tax take, so that policy would not have funded the increases. I am concerned that Labour Members are making an irresponsible promise that they would not be able to deliver, were they in a position to try.

I welcome the more responsible approach taken by this Government. It will not involve a blanket pay rise; rather, it will draw on the guidance of the next pay review body for the health service and make pay rises where they are most necessary. In my constituency in the south-east, for example, I am aware that the high cost of living affects the people on the lowest pay in the public sector, and I hope that they will be recognised in the pay review. We should definitely draw on the expertise of that body when making proposals for public sector pay, rather than just trying to score debating points and get the right headlines.

In my experience of about a decade working in many parts of the NHS, including hospitals, and as an MP, I have spoken to people working in the NHS and found that pay is rarely, if ever, the No. 1 concern. The issues that come up much more frequently include having time to care—

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady for allowing me to intervene. She clearly wishes to champion nurses and their selfless desire to serve the public, but does she acknowledge that nurses in my constituency have to visit a food bank after a long shift at the hospital? Should not their selflessness in

wanting to serve the public be recognised by their being paid what they deserve so that they can fund their families and their livelihoods?

Helen Whately: I genuinely believe that all members of the public sector should be paid a fair amount, and that is exactly what the pay review body will report on in its next report.

I was making the important point that pay has not been the No. 1 issue among nurses and other healthcare professionals when I have asked them what worries them most. Instead, they mentioned having time to care; being part of a stable team rather than having a high turnover of staff and lots of temporary staff; being listened to by the people they work with, particularly the senior people in the institution; and being valued. Being valued is not all to do with pay; it is much more to do with the way they are treated. In fact, I remember very well talking to one nurse whose line manager had not talked to her since the previous appraisal. To me, that is an extraordinary way of not valuing a member of staff; everyone should have regular conversations with their manager about how they are progressing.

Part of the problem in some NHS institutions is, therefore, in my view, not good enough management practices. If they were improved, we would have a much better environment for staff to work in, and I would very much like to see more attention paid to creating the right environment for healthcare workers, as well as ensuring that there is a fair and sensible pay settlement.

3.50 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I have already alluded to the fact that I am delighted that the Labour party secured this afternoon's debate. We will support the motion if this matter goes to a vote tonight, but it will be interesting to see whether we actually reach that point. Maybe the House will agree that the points that have been raised today are such that we should send out a clarion call from this House that we agree with what has been said on both sides of the Chamber today, despite some of the party political divisions that might have informed some of the debate.

I too declare that, like many Members, I have members of the family in the health service. My wife was a nurse in the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast, my daughter is a nurse in the Craigavon Area Hospital, my niece is a junior doctor in a hospital in Belfast, and my nephew is a trainee doctor. Many of us therefore see at first hand and hear about the needs of our health service from our relatives. From time to time we hear churlish points made to the effect that people do not care. I think all Members throughout the House know that at any moment they will know someone who works for or is being cared for in the NHS, and it is important to state that it is a brilliant service and that that service needs to be supported.

I want to raise two points. The first relates to the number of nursing staff vacancies that currently pertain in the NHS. I quote from a letter from Janice Smyth, a director of the Royal College of Nursing in Northern Ireland, in which she has indicated to me:

"The use of agency staff in Northern Ireland and associated agency costs have almost doubled"

over the past few years, and that of course puts significant pressure on budgets. Also, it is unfair on regular staff in the service when they see the difference in pay that

[*Ian Paisley*]

sometimes accrues. That is not to deny bank staff their right to that pay, but it does have an impact on people's morale.

We have 1,300 vacant posts for nurses in Northern Ireland, and about the same again in the private sector. That needs to be addressed, and Northern Ireland has tried to address it by way of ensuring that the bursary remains in place. I believe that has been beneficial, but that is not the only answer. I also believe that the pay difference in Northern Ireland is dramatic and significant. It is important that I put this on the record. A care assistant in Northern Ireland earns about £17,500. Without the pay cap, they would be earning almost £20,000. A newly qualified nurse earns about £21,000. Without the pay cap, they would be earning about £25,000—a shortfall of £3,500 per year. For an experienced staff nurse, there is a significant difference: whereas they currently earn about £28,500, without the pay cap they would be earning £32,000—a shortfall of over £4,000 per annum. A highly qualified, experienced specialist nurse in Northern Ireland earns about £41,000; without the pay cap they should be earning £47,500—a shortfall of a staggering £6,500. That gap must be addressed, and addressed radically if we are to change things.

I would say to those members of the Labour party who chide us about the £1 billion deal: your party would have quite happily covered a deal that would probably have been better for us—those are the discussions we had in advance of the last election. In chiding us, you only hurt the public servants in Northern Ireland who are benefiting from that £1 billion deal that will allow us to allocate this money to relieve these costs.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I am sorry to say this, but we are going to have to go down to three minutes. I still want to try and get everybody in.

3.54 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I will not take that personally, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I thank the Labour party for giving the Conservative side of the House, and me in particular, the opportunity to put on the record the grateful thanks of all our constituents to public sector workers for their fantastic work in hospitals in places such as Blandford, Shaftesbury, Poole, Dorchester, Salisbury, Southampton and Bournemouth, all of which will have served my constituents over the years. We are all grateful to them.

I want to make two points to the Labour party. I entirely endorse what my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) had to say, because this is not a bidding war over which party loves the NHS more; it is about all of us trying to come together to ensure that the NHS is fit for purpose for the next 70 years, delivering quality care that is free at the point of use in the face of ever-increasing demand in the ever-more competitive space of medical advancement. At the heart of that, I am afraid to say, is cruelty from the Labour party, which makes huge promises about raising this, doing that or scrapping the other without saying how, by how much, or how it is going to be paid for. Labour raises expectations only for them to be dashed, as always, on the rocks of what would ultimately

be the folly of a Labour Government. Labour's childish approach to economic management defines what it is to be a Conservative. Broadly, being a Conservative in public life is to be the man or woman with the bucket, the brush and the shovel following behind the horse of Labour Government and picking up the mess.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman is aware of how his Government are reducing supply in the national health service, creating demand for private healthcare. People outside the Chamber are fully aware of the Conservative Government's privatisation agenda and their agenda of selling off buildings—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. It is not normal to intervene just after coming into the Chamber. The fact is that Members who have been here all day are desperate to get in, and I am worried that they may not.

Simon Hoare: The hon. Lady has burnished her reselection credentials among the Corbynistas in Momentum as Labour approaches its party conference, and she will be grateful for that.

There is another great elephant that needs to be put out of its misery. It has been perpetuated by socialists down the decades, usually at public meetings and the like, that my party wants to privatise the national health service. Let me say in all candour that the Labour party misses the fundamental fact that the Conservatives have been in government for longer than Labour during the existence of the NHS. We have had majorities in three figures and two figures and we have had minorities, so if it was a deep-rooted Tory secret that we wanted to privatise the NHS, having privatised everything else we would have jolly well done it by now. We have no intention of doing so. I was born in an NHS hospital, as were my three daughters.

Anna Soubry: Will my hon. Friend confirm that the biggest increase in NHS privatisation—5%—occurred under a Labour Government? The Conservatives' record is 1%.

Simon Hoare: My right hon. Friend is correct, but the Labour party does not like truth spoken unto opposition. Let us hope that we never have to speak truth unto Labour in power, because that would be even worse.

There is a false debate where GPs and pharmacists are in essence private businesses delivering healthcare and advice to our constituents free at the point of use. I think the mindset in the national debate has moved on beyond the cosy intellectual rigour of north Islington, and most people are just keen to enjoy a quality service that is delivered by motivated people in a safe and secure environment. That is at the heart of our policies. There is clearly fluidity and movement on the pay cap, which is welcome. I used the word "cruelty" a moment ago. When its economy came under pressure, Ireland coped with the management of its health budget by making a vast number of health service workers unemployed. That is one way of dealing with it, but it is not the right way. We have done it the right way, and we are grateful for the forbearance of those at the sharp end. It has not been done out of cruelty or out of intellectual or ideological purity; it has been done out of financial and economic necessity.

As our economy grows, so will the pay packets of those working in our vital public services. I know it is boring, and I know it is an inconvenient truth for the Opposition, but without a strong economy, without people in work, without business confidence and without people paying taxes, it would be an absolute sham to continue funding unsustainable pay increases and the like through borrowing, because that would just lead to cuts and further ruin.

4.1 pm

Ms Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): I am pleased to speak in this Opposition day debate on the public sector pay cap. I was elected as a Labour MP for Lincoln on a fully costed manifesto, and I am proud to be a member of the shadow Treasury team.

Our NHS is chronically understaffed, and there are not enough nurses, doctors, midwives, healthcare support workers, housekeepers, occupational therapists or physios—I could go on and on. Taking a leaf out of Jeremy's book, I spoke to some of my colleagues. I spoke to Rachel, a senior occupational therapist. OTs focus on how to support and enable people to live well at home. They empower people to be as independent as possible and to access jobs and education. We simply do not have enough OTs in our hospitals, which might be a clue as to why we have such long waiting lists for social care assessments and why we have delayed discharges.

I also spoke to Sue and Maz, who are both healthcare support workers. They wash our patients, take them to the toilet and give them back their dignity when they feel at their lowest ebb, and much, much more. Nurses cannot deliver holistic patient care without the support of a healthcare support worker. Maz told me that her family have had to cut back considerably because her wages have not gone up with the cost of living. She is on leave in a couple of weeks, and she will be working bank shifts to pay for basic household items that she cannot afford out of her regular wages. Her son is at university, and he gets a grant because the family are on a low income despite both Maz and her husband having jobs. Her son's grant is not enough, so he is working part time alongside his studies. Next year, Maz and her husband will have to help to support him so that he can cut back on the hours he works so that he is able to study more in his final year at uni.

Another healthcare support worker, Sue, with whom I worked for 12 years, told me that she has had to cut back on her spending every single day. After working for the NHS for 20 years, her hourly rate is £1.75 above the current legal minimum wage. Again, both she and her husband have jobs and cannot make ends meet.

Gail is a housekeeper, and she told me that she has to work extra bank shifts just to make ends meet. She has not had a holiday since 2009 and, after paying her bills, she has £20 left each month. She has to do bank shifts if she wants to buy anything for her grandchildren or take them out. Again, she and her husband both have jobs.

Those women, like me, are in their 50s and will not be able to retire until they are 67. The one thing that they all told me is that they love their job. They love the patients and the people they work with, and they would not do anything else. I used to be part of that team, and I know that nurses feel the same. The trouble is that this Government have taken advantage of that hard work and loyalty for far too long, and some people just

cannot afford to stay in the NHS. People cannot afford to train without a bursary, let alone stay in the NHS. To quote Gail:

“You can earn more...at Lidl than I get.”

The Government simply must pay all public sector workers what they are worth and what they deserve. They must reinstate bursaries—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. It is so unfortunate that time has run out.

4.4 pm

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Like everyone who has spoken, I completely welcome the hard work that is done by NHS staff up and down the country, but please let me bring some context to the debate. In representing Walsall North, I represent the 31st most deprived constituency in the country and the 17th most deprived in England by income. The average income in my constituency is £440 a week, which is approximately £23,000 a year. Across Willenhall and Bloxwich in my constituency the average property price is £122,000. My constituency is the complete embodiment of the hard-working, just about managing, and the people there, after 38 years, decided to elect a Conservative MP to advocate on their behalf. I intend to advocate on behalf of all my constituents, not just those who work in the public sector. Why is that? Well, the average salary in my constituency is £23,000, which is about the same as a qualified nurse starts on in the NHS.

Many workers in my constituency are employed as hairdressers, plumbers or carpenters, and what pay rise do they get every year on an incremental basis? They do not get one. They have had to work hard every year for their pay, and when we make the comparison using other factors, such as pension schemes, we see that in order to earn the same sort of pension a plumber would need to be putting away 43% of their salary. What have this Government done instead? Since 2010, we have increased the national minimum wage from £5.93 to £7.50, an increase of 26%; and we have increased the basic rate above which people pay tax from £6,500 to £11,500, putting an extra £1,000 in the pay packets of the people in my constituency. When the average salary is £23,000 a year, that money goes a long way to helping them buy a property. So, yes, I completely endorse the arguments I have heard and, yes, we value the public sector in this country, but the Conservatives value all the workers in this country, which is why I will be advocating that we continue with a Conservative Government in the future.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Unfortunately, we have time for only one more speaker.

4.7 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The first order of business should be congratulating the Scottish Government on removing the cap on public sector pay rises. We should note, too, that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) said, Scotland's nurses get paid more than England's, by between £300 and £1,100 each, and that wages for nurses in Wales and in Northern Ireland are even lower than in England. It is time that the English, Welsh and Northern Irish Governments opened up the cash tin and started paying nurses more—

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Deidre Brock: No.

Those Governments must give nurses the cash to bridge that gap with Scottish nurses and then match the pay rises from the Scottish Government—and make it new money. This has to be new investment, not current resources and not freed-up efficiency savings—those infamous, mythical beasts. It must be new money that is put into the service to keep it viable. Squeezing current resources simply starves the whole service. Please, let us also have no more of the pretence that paying workers a decent wage would bankrupt the economy or that a couple of per cent. on the wages of the lowest-paid would be some sort of spiral of economic doom.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Will the hon. Lady join me in asking why the Welsh Labour Government have not raised the pay cap where they could in Wales? That would have cost £60 million and would have relieved the situation for 30,000 nurses.

Deidre Brock: I thank the hon. lady for that important intervention. Austerity, wage cuts and in-work poverty are political choices—this is policy not necessity. The poverty facing public sector workers, including NHS workers, is a choice made by the Government—a choice made by millionaires, making ordinary workers poorer. An “increase” of 1% in someone’s wage while Brexit takes food prices through the roof, heating bills rocket, public transport fares are up by a quarter—more in some cases—the costs of childcare grow faster than the children, and rents soar is simply a pay cut. That makes the effects of the Government’s inhumane austerity policy worse. These workers are suffering the effects of cuts to public services.

In the Tory’s June manifesto, the Prime Minister wrote that she would deliver a
“Britain in which work pays”
and a mental health Bill
“to put parity of esteem at the heart of treatment”.

Last year, the Mental Health Foundation found a causal link between poverty and poor mental health, just like dozens of studies have shown before. That means that Tory Government austerity is increasing the incidence of mental health problems while promising to make it better. That increases the pressure on the NHS and betrays the patients who need the help. We cannot solve the problem in England’s NHS with new laws; it needs new cash. A responsible Government would be finding that new cash and funnelling it into the NHS and other public services.

English police forces have been saying that they cannot afford pay rises without additional funding. Some forces have clearly already reached and exceeded capacity, judging by the stories of crimes being ignored because no officers are available. For some unfathomable reason, the Government have let police numbers drop by around 20,000 since 2010. That is not a public service in a serviceable condition; that is a public sector breaking down.

If austerity continues, England’s public sector will cannibalise itself, and when that happens, Scotland’s public services will be damaged as well. Tied to this

place, Scotland gets damaged time and again, but public services in England have reached fracture-point and are disintegrating. At this point, England’s NHS is not struggling but dying, and it is being helped on its merry way by Ministers who would rather it was gone. Breaking down the fabric of public services renders them irreparable, and breaking down the workers who deliver them does the same. Decent pay for decent work is not an outrageous demand, and decent funding for society’s infrastructure is a matter of respecting one’s own self-interest as well.

4.11 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): Regrettably, I do not have much time to go through Members’ speeches, but I want to draw attention to the maiden speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan)—a Pompey boy. There are two victories in Portsmouth: HMS Victory and my hon. Friend’s victory, for which I thank him. He mentioned Arthur Conan Doyle’s time as a doctor in Southsea; if the Tories had their way, this country would be going back to Victorian times.

Some 5.4 million people work in the public sector—including members of my family; my wife and daughter work in the NHS, as I did for many years—and they provide services that are crucial to the good running and, literally, the order of the country. They provide the armed services that protect our country and the protection that this House enjoys day in, day out; they provide the services that educate and look after our children; and they provide the services that care for our disabled citizens and senior citizens. They provide services that we barely notice until things go wrong, such as traffic problems, floods, weather damage, public health emergencies and much more. Some 1.6 million of those people work in the NHS, providing the services that look after the physical and mental health of our—yes, our—constituents.

Lucy Frazer: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Dowd: I will come back to the hon. Lady in a moment.

NHS workers are the subject of today’s debate, but we must not forget workers in the rest of the public sector. In fact, I believe that NHS workers would be dismayed if we focused only on their pay situation. Why would they be? Because they spend their professional lives looking after others. I take NHS workers’ commitment incredibly seriously, unlike that hon. Member on the Government Benches who laughs at nurses, doctors and allied professionals. That is the sort of thing we get from the Tories.

Simon Hoare: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Anna Soubry: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Dowd: No, I will not.

I know that NHS workers take that view because I have spoken to them.

Anna Soubry: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for an hon. Member to point randomly across the Chamber and insult another Member, without even having the courtesy to name them and thereby give them the right of reply?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): If we were to take that as an example, I could give many other examples of people on both sides pointing and certainly not being courteous to Members in the way one would expect. The right hon. Lady has a good track record of being able to give a bit out; she ought to be able to take it.

Peter Dowd: I say again that I know for a fact that NHS workers take the view that this debate is not just about them but about the public sector generally. In proxy terms, this debate is about all public sector workers. Many of the arguments about the health sector apply to other parts of the public sector as well.

Anna Soubry: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Dowd: No, I will not.

This debate has come at a stark time for our public sector workers. We have had the hardest summer that many of us can remember—our emergency workers and other public sector workers have faced the horror of terror attacks and the outrage of Grenfell.

Anna Soubry: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Dowd: No, I will not.

As the country suffered, those workers stepped forward. Will we step forward for them? Labour says, yes, it will. We know what those workers provide for our communities and for our country. What do we provide for them—or, rather, what do the Tories provide for them? First, they provide huge amounts of patronising claptrap—we have seen loads of that today—backslapping and warm words. Those workers do not need our tributes; they need our action. The Tories tell them how much they are valued and what a great job they do. The Prime Minister tells us virtually on a daily basis how wonderful our public services are—it usually happens after a national emergency in which people are murdered, maimed or, in the case of Grenfell, asphyxiated or burned to death. Yes, in the week of the Grenfell public inquiry, it is as stark as that, so let us not shilly-shally around this issue.

Those public sector workers are the people we turn to when no one else is available. They are the people who save lives, help to bring life into the world and are there when we leave the world. While they gave their all for us over these hard months, they knew that the Conservative Government remained committed to capping their pay and to continuing with the real-terms pay cut they have faced since 2010. Ever since the election, they have faced mixed messages about their pay from the Conservatives.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The problem is not just about pay, but about the funding of the NHS. York's hospitals are in this capped expenditure process due to the debts they have accrued because of massive underfunding. Can we ensure that this money comes from the Treasury and not out of the coffers of the NHS?

Peter Dowd: I will come to that point in a minute.

In the election, Labour promised to end the public sector pay cap and to free the pay review bodies to do their work properly without the artificial encumbrance of a 1% cap. Meanwhile, the Tories have spent the period since the election putting the heads of public

sector workers in a spin—will they or won't they. Yesterday, No. 10 was briefing that the pay cap was over. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury was on the radio announcing derisory offers to police and prison staff, rather than coming to this House to explain what was going on. We had to have this debate today to get the Government here to explain their actions. Members on the Government Front Bench would do well to remember these words of wisdom:

“It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay.”

We will hold them to that. When the reality of this supposed U-turn emerged, there was nothing tangible. In the case of the police, it was just an unconsolidated 1% bonus on top of what they were due to get. Prison officers were offered just 1.7%. In effect, less than 4% of public sector workers were covered by the proposals announced yesterday. In the meantime, the other 96% can whistle. The nasty party simply cannot help itself. What is its tactic? It is the same old one, regurgitated time and again, of divide and rule. As ever, it tries to pit one group of workers against the other—the public sector against the private sector, doctor against manager, admin against manual workers, British workers against foreign workers, and the north against the south. Yes, it is the same old hackneyed tactic, but this time it has not worked. If the Government had focused on dealing with this matter and on sorting out the tax dodgers, we might not have been in this situation in the first place.

This is over. Even as the Government conceded the need for a thaw in the pay cap, Tory Front-Bench Members were briefing the media to raise the issue of wonderful contracts and pensions in the public sector. The Prime Minister attacked our public servants for having progression pay as they gain experience. The Government just could not accept that fairness required a change in direction. They still had to have that streak of resentment when they were announcing the policy change. As Anne Bronte said:

“There is always a ‘but’ in this imperfect world”.

With the Tories, it is always an industrial-sized ‘but’, visible from space.

The police and prison officers will have to pay for their pay rise themselves. There is no new money and no new resource. It is an announcement without substance. If and when the public sector pay cap is lifted across the rest of the public sector—namely the other 96% I referred to earlier and, in particular, the NHS—will the Minister be asking them to pay for their own pay rise by sacking more NHS staff? Will she provide new resources? Does she expect waiting times to get longer, and operations to be delayed or deferred? Who will be first on the sacking list—the porter, the radiographer, the medical secretary, the nurse, the doctor or an allied professional? Perhaps none of these redundancies will be needed because jobs in nursing, medicine and other allied health professions cannot be filled in large parts of the country.

This is a betrayal of public sector workers and it has to end. The Tories do have something in common with nurses and doctors, but for wholly different reasons. Nurses and doctors in the medical profession stitch people up for the benefit of the patient. The Tories stitch people up for their own benefit.

4.20 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss):

We have had an important debate, in which it is fair to say that both sides of the House have recognised the importance and hard work of workers across the NHS. I saw this hard work in action on the Becket ward of Worthing Hospital a few weeks ago, where deputy sister, Sue Grace, and her team were in an improvement huddle, where every day they look at how they can make life better for their patients. That goes on right across our NHS. Because of the hard work of NHS workers across the country, there have been 1 million more operations and cancer clear-up rates have improved.

The Health Secretary recognised in his opening comments that there are challenges to address. We need to ensure that we retain those hard-working staff, that we can recruit the next generation into the service and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) pointed out, that we are able to recruit people in specialisms. We need to look at making jobs more flexible so that people have a good work-life balance and we need to look at banding, as my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) pointed out. That is why the Government announced yesterday that we are moving from a blanket approach of having a 1% public sector pay cap to greater flexibility in each workforce across the public sector.

Just to be clear—because there seems to be some confusion on the part of Opposition Members—the prison officers and police settlements were for 2017-18. Our new policy is for 2018-19. There is already a clear process in place for that. The Health Secretary will submit evidence to the independent pay review body. It will look at issues such as recruitment, retention and affordability, and will then come back with a recommendation. That is the way we should do it; we should look at the evidence. Rather than shouting out numbers in the debate, we need to look at the circumstances. We need to ensure that pay is fair for people in the NHS, but that it is also fair for the taxpayers who fund those services.

OECD figures show that we spend 9.8% of our GDP on health and social care. That is above the European Union average of 8.6%. We are able to do that because we have run a strong economy. Today we announced record levels of employment. We have not heard any concrete proposals from Labour Members this afternoon. We have just heard reckless pledges that they will spend more money without looking at how they are spending it. As my hon. Friends the Members for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) and for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) pointed out, the Conservatives do not just spend more money. We actually make sure that the money goes to the frontline, that it helps and empowers people there to do their jobs, and that it makes those jobs more fulfilling.

It is not just about spending more money; it is also about the way we spend it. If we followed the Labour party's advice, we would end up crashing our economy in exactly the same way the Greeks did with their

economy. What was the result of that? They ended up cutting health service spending by 36%.

We have recognised that there are challenges in the national health service and in other parts of our public sector, and this policy applies right across the public sector. We have reflected on that situation, and we have moved to a more flexible policy that looks at issues of recruitment and retention.

However, it is important, as my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) pointed out in an excellent speech, that we also look at fairness for the people who pay for our public services. It is only by having a strong economy and by being disciplined in our approach to debt that we can get the great public services that we all want.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes that in 2017-18 NHS pay rises have been capped at one per cent and that this represents another below-inflation pay settlement; further notes that applications for nursing degrees have fallen 23 per cent this year; notes that the number of nurses and midwives joining the Nursing and Midwifery Council register has been in decline since March 2016 and that in 2016-17 45 per cent more UK registrants left the register than joined it; and calls on the Government to end the public sector pay cap in the NHS and give NHS workers a fair pay rise.

Jonathan Ashworth: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it not now clear that the House has been unanimous in saying that we should end the pay cap in the NHS and give health workers a fair pay rise? Is it not also clear that the reason the Government did not divide on this motion is that they knew they would lose?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): The point of order is well made. It is not for me to judge, but I am sure many people will make a judgment, whatever side of the House they may be on.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. You may be aware of press reports that have circulated during the day that the Government are abandoning their manifesto commitment to ensure that private schools take concrete steps to earn their charitable status. Once again, this appears to be an announcement made to the media rather than this House, and with only one sitting day remaining for us to pursue it. One of the ways you may advise us that we can do that is through an urgent question, but given that the Secretary of State should be here for the next debate, would it be helpful to you and the House for her to respond to this point of order, clarifying whether these reports are accurate and whether we can expect a statement to be made?

Mr Deputy Speaker: What I can say is that Mr Speaker has always made it very clear that any announcements should be made to this House first. That is a clear line that is still held, and nothing has changed from that. I am sure that Ministers will have taken that on board, and the point is well made.

Higher Education (England) Regulations

4.28 pm

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

That the Higher Education (Higher Amount) (England) Regulations 2016 (S.I., 2016, No. 1206) and the Higher Education (Basic Amount) (England) Regulations 2016 (S.I., 2016, No. 1205), both dated 13 December 2016, copies of which were laid before this House on 15 December 2016, in the last Session of Parliament, be revoked.

It has taken a long time to get to today's debate. The Government first snuck out this fee rise in a written statement on the last day before the summer recess, and they tabled the regulations we are debating the day before the Christmas recess. The Opposition tabled a prayer against the regulations on the first sitting day after that, but it took some time until the Government eventually allowed a vote, which was scheduled for 18 April—only for the Prime Minister to dissolve Parliament before that vote could even be held. It was almost as if the Government did not want to discuss their plans to raise tuition fees again during an election. And judging by the way young people voted in that general election, we can see why. Perhaps it is not surprising that the Government have been even more desperate to avoid votes in this House since the election result.

Let me remind Ministers of what the then Leader of the House, now the Justice Secretary, said from the Dispatch Box when he granted us a vote:

"The Government have delivered on the convention, and slots have been provided for debates on the prayers against the statutory instruments concerning tuition fees and the personal independence payment. The Opposition will get their opportunity to debate those after the recess. The Government will act, as all Governments do, on the basis of what Parliament decides."—[*Official Report*, 30 March 2017; Vol. 624, c. 409.]

That was a commitment made by a Minister to this House. Perhaps the Ministers here today can tell us why they are breaking it—because, of course, we were not given those debates. We had to secure an emergency debate on the regulations, and even then the Minister refused to allow a vote. In fact, Mr Speaker, it was during that debate that you yourself had to intervene and tell the House:

"I had thought there was an expectation of a debate and a vote, and that the Opposition had done what was necessary".—[*Official Report*, 19 July 2017; Vol. 627, c. 895.]

But eventually we have had to provide Opposition time on an Opposition motion that we are voting on today.

Today's discussion goes beyond policy choices on tuition fees, although that is extremely important: it goes to the role of this House and our democracy. We have heard a lot about parliamentary sovereignty from Conservative Members, and we have heard a lot from Ministers about how they can be trusted with delegated powers such as those in the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. Unfortunately, the Ministers here today have shown by their behaviour that they will now go to unprecedented lengths to deny this House a vote on a serious legislative decision made using delegated powers. Frankly, their attitude would put Sir Humphrey to shame. They refused a vote on annulment within 40 days, despite the clear convention that we were entitled to one. They then provided a vote, only to dissolve Parliament before it

could even be held. Then, after the election, they delayed even longer, and when we called a debate they said it was too late.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Is the shadow Secretary of State suggesting that the reason we had an election was to stop this measure?

Angela Rayner: I hope that the hon. Lady notes that after having to bring this Government to the House to discuss this really important issue time and again, we have had to do this in Opposition time. I hope that Conservative Members who promised the electorate that they were against rises in tuition fees will take that on board today and support the Opposition's motion.

Ministers seem to have found a parliamentary Catch-22 which, in effect, makes it impossible for this House to have a say on regulations like these if they decide that they do not want to grant one. They refuse a vote within the time limit, and then afterwards say that the deadline has passed. Even more incredibly, they seem to be suggesting that they would simply ignore this House if we voted the wrong way on today's motion—that is, of course, if they allow us even to have a vote. In the space of this week they have gone from Henry VIII to King Charles I. Let me be clear that so far as we are concerned, it is unthinkable that this House would pass a substantive motion and that the Government would refuse to honour it.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I do not wish to behead the hon. Lady's argument, but she is labouring this point of process. I wonder whether that is to mask her lack of policy; let me be charitable and suggest that it is not. When we will we hear what her policy is on this important issue?

Angela Rayner: First of all, let me say that my husband would have been Charles I; I probably would have been a Cromwell. On the important point about our policy on tuition fees, we were clear in our manifesto that we would abolish tuition fees. I think the general public absolutely were clear on our policy on that. [*Interruption.*] The Secretary of State says, from a sedentary position, "What about Wales?" In Wales, we have a policy, despite this Government, of giving maintenance grants. What will the Secretary of State do for the students in England who need maintenance grants? The Government still refuse to give that support to students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Angela Rayner: I will make some progress. The intention of the parent Act, the Higher Education Act 2004, was clear. It allows any such regulations to be annulled. The then Minister, the former Member for Hull West and Hessle, assured the House that

"any change to the fee cap must be made by the affirmative resolution procedure, not the negative procedure. Although we cannot do it in legislation—if we could, we would—we give an undertaking that if Labour is in government, the statutory instrument dealing with the matter will not be taken in a Committee but on the Floor of both Houses. That will ensure that all Members have the opportunity to speak if called, and they will all have the right to vote on the matter."—[*Official Report, Higher Education Public Bill Committee*, 26 February 2004; c. 323.]

[Angela Rayner]

He gave that assurance to a Conservative Member who demanded it. That Member is now the Transport Secretary in a Government who are doing completely the opposite.

The job of a legislator is to legislate. If we are not allowed to do that, our role will be reduced to turning up every five years, voting in the Government and letting them rule by decree, which is what they are attempting to do on tuition fees. If the Government act in this way on matters such as tuition fees, Members from across the House will have to ask themselves whether we can trust the Government with the powers that they are seeking to grant themselves in the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. It is ironic that just this week, the Brexit Secretary was keen to assure us that no such thing could happen. He told the House:

“Secondary legislation is still subject to parliamentary oversight and well established procedures. In no way does it provide unchecked unilateral powers to the Government.”—[*Official Report*, 7 September 2017; Vol. 628, c. 357.]

Even as he was saying that, the Ministers opposite me were busy proving him wrong by refusing to follow these procedures, rejecting parliamentary oversight and adopting exactly those unchecked unilateral powers to force this through. Of course, the Brexit Secretary has some other disagreements with the Education Secretary on this matter. I remember him saying that he had always been against fees. He said:

“In 2005 our policy was abolition and I was one of the drivers behind that”,

and that he was prepared to be “a rebellion of one”. Let us see whether he beats that figure today. He was right that the Conservative party’s policy used to be the abolition of fees entirely. A former Conservative shadow Education Secretary once said that the party would

“show we care about the student who wants to go to university, but can’t afford tuition fees.”

She is now the Prime Minister, but her past promises seem to have been thrown in the bin along with Nick and Fiona.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): If we are talking about promises broken, I seem to remember my daughters who are still at university being promised free tuition fees by the Labour party. I then remember the hon. Lady saying on the Marr show that that was nothing more than an ambition, largely because it was going to cost £89 billion.

Angela Rayner: I presume that the hon. Lady is slightly confused by the diktat from the Conservative Whips, which says something about student debt and tuition fees. We have been absolutely clear on both issues. We would not even be having this debate if the Labour party had won the general election, because we would have abolished tuition fees, as promised. The Conservative party already trebled tuition fees in 2010 to £9,000 a year, and that is what we are debating today. They have abolished the nurses’ bursary and scrapped maintenance grants for students from low and middle-income backgrounds, and ignored the fact that the drop-out rate among disadvantaged students reached a five-year high afterwards. They have also imposed interest rates of 6.1% and frozen the repayment threshold at

£21,000 a year, despite Conservative Ministers in the coalition Government promising that it would rise in line with earnings.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that there is now evidence that students from less well-off families are graduating with significantly more debt than those from wealthier families, which is a direct threat to social mobility?

Angela Rayner: I absolutely agree, and the points that I have just made show that the Government could progressively do something about that. The interest rates are scandalous, and the income threshold has been frozen despite the Government’s promises that they would not do that. They also still refuse to bring back maintenance grants. Shame on this Government—they do not care about social mobility.

Anna Soubry: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Angela Rayner: Only this morning, the director of the Conservative think-tank Bright Blue echoed a point that we have been making for months, writing:

“What would make a real difference is increasing the salary threshold of £21,000 for repaying student loans.”

That is one of the—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The shadow Secretary of State is clearly not giving way at the moment. [*Interruption.*] Order. She is not giving way, and there is a long-standing convention that Members do not consistently harangue and barrack when their request to intervene has not been granted. [*Interruption.*] Order. After a reasonable period, which people use their judgment to decide on, they can try again. What they are not entitled to do is rant incessantly from a sedentary position. Let me be absolutely clear that it is not going to happen from either side of the House, and that is the end of that matter.

Angela Rayner: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

As I said, only this morning the director of the Conservative think-tank Bright Blue echoed a point that we have been making for months about increasing the salary threshold. That is one of many options that we have told the Government time and again they need to look at.

I had a group of young air cadets from my constituency down here yesterday, and I hope that they are watching today even though the debate is a bit later than I told them it would be. It makes me so angry to think of the opportunities that the Government are denying those young people and others across my constituency. Through their policies, they have left graduates in England with the highest level of debt in the world. Students will now graduate with an average debt of £50,000, and those from the poorest backgrounds will have debts in excess of £57,000.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I have two universities in my constituency, and further education colleges. As my hon. Friend knows, not only have the Government abolished the education maintenance allowance, but more importantly, they have been trying to sell off the Student Loans Company. Interest levels will go higher if that goes through.

Angela Rayner: I thank my hon. Friend for that important point. We are trying to highlight a number of things that the Government have done in both further education and higher education that have genuinely damaged the opportunity for our young people to get on and get by in life. Today, they have an opportunity at least to do what some Government Members promised at the general election by refusing to raise tuition fees again, taking them beyond £9,000 a year.

Anna Soubry: The hon. Lady will no doubt recall that it was her party that promised not to introduce tuition fees and then, when in government, went on to do that. Does she accept that application rates among disadvantaged English 18-year-olds and black and minority ethnic 18-year-olds are at an all-time record high?

Angela Rayner: The hon. Lady makes two important points, but she fails to recognise two important things that have happened alongside that. Lord Adonis made it clear that the Frankenstein that the Government have created with tuition fees is completely unsustainable, so Conservative Members cannot hide behind that if they think it limits their responsibility for trebling tuition fees. They are now trying to justify increasing them.

Our young people need that opportunity, but the Government feel that tuition fees need to rise again. When we last debated this issue, I said that Conservative Members might disagree with our desire to reduce tuition fees but it was wrong to deny the House the right to make the choice. Today, despite the Government's best efforts, the House can make that choice, and I know that our constituents will remember the choice each of us makes.

Conor Burns (Bournemouth West) (Con): The £9,000 limit was introduced more than five years ago, but given inflation over that period, in real terms it is £8,500 today, and by 2020 it will be £8,000. Is it not the case that the direct consequence of the perfectly honourable position that the hon. Lady advocates is that less money will go into higher education?

Angela Rayner: I am at a loss about how to answer the hon. Gentleman. Our young people know the reality of the debt they take on today. I have just spoken about many different ways in which the Government could alleviate our students' debt: there is the interest rate, the income threshold, and even maintenance grants if they really cared about students from poorer and disadvantaged backgrounds. Despite what the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) said, part-time and mature students are dropping out at record levels, and students are deterred from going to university.

We could debate this issue for many hours, but the motion that Members of this House can vote on tonight is clear. It is not about the debt or whether we abolish the £9,000 tuition fees; it is about whether the Government hike fees by another £250 a year—more than £1,000 over the lifetime of a course—making them unsustainable and completely unfair for students. That is the choice that Members have to make today. If they decide not to support this motion, they will have to answer to the students in their constituency.

4.47 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): Today's debate is about student finance—an issue on which, as we have just seen, the Opposition put rhetoric ahead of results, spin ahead of substance, and self-interest ahead of students. As we have just heard reconfirmed, Labour's policy is to have no tuition fees, but no fees means fewer students at worse universities. Labour's policy is an anti-social mobility policy writ large. It is a disgrace.

Let me talk about how far we have come in recent years. We have made extraordinary strides in higher education since the Government took office. More people are at university than ever before, including record numbers of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. That is not a hypothesis but a simple fact. In 2016, disadvantaged 18-year-olds were 43% more likely to go to university than in 2009.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Justine Greening: I am happy to take an intervention from anyone on the Opposition Benches who thinks that is a bad thing and wants to justify not continuing with a policy that has led to more disadvantaged young people going to university.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): Over the summer I received a heartbreaking email from a young lady who was a student at Keele University in Newcastle-under-Lyme:

"Starting in September both my brother and I will be hoping to go off to university...My parents are having great difficulty trying to work out how they are going to support both of us and have suggested that I drop out of university as they can only support one of us financially. Last year I got the minimum loan from student finance and will be getting the minimum loan again".

I ask the Secretary of State to consider that this is not just about rising tuition fees or turning maintenance grants into loans, but costs and support for students, in particular for what some people like to call the squeezed middle. Is it not time that the Government looked at this seriously, in the round, for the sake of students from all families in the country?

Justine Greening: First of all, there has never been more funding available to enable students to go to university. Secondly, the facts simply do not bear out the hon. Gentleman's point. If what he says is correct, we would see fewer and fewer students going to university, but the exact opposite has happened. [*Interruption.*] We can hear Labour Members' faux anger about how much debt students have, but the bottom line is that they do not want to even engage with the fact that there have never been more young people getting the opportunity to go to university. I was the first person in my family to get the chance to go to university. If Labour ever has the chance to bring in its policy there will be fewer people from backgrounds like mine who will have the chance to go to university. That is a statistical fact.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Justine Greening: Let me just make some progress and I will give way to my right hon. Friend in a second.

[*Justine Greening*]

What would a policy of no fees mean? It would mean an emergency cap on student numbers, going back to the days when we had to limit the number of young people who went to university. That is because if we are not willing to fund the system, there can be fewer people in it. It has to be paid for.

Sir Desmond Swayne: I recently returned to my alma mater in Scotland, some 30 years after leaving. I was surprised to discover that Scottish students were capped at 20% of the student body. It is a disadvantage for all students if there are no fees, because universities cannot afford to educate them.

Justine Greening: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. There are two groups of people who miss out in Scotland. We know what no fees would mean; we only have to look north of the border. In the interests of evidence-based policy, I encourage Labour Members and the Labour party to actually look at the impact of what they are proposing. Go to Scotland. See whether disadvantaged young people from the poorest families have more or less chance to go university in a country where there are no fees. They have less chance. In fact, young people overall have less chance of going to university in Scotland. I am not putting some kind of hypothesis before the House; this is a simple fact. It is a consequence of the Labour party policy of no fees.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Justine Greening: I will give way to the hon. Lady. Unlike Labour Members, I am quite happy to take interventions.

Emma Hardy: In the interests of providing evidence and discussing evidence-based education policy, which I am very keen to do, I have to ask the right hon. Lady whether she agrees that we have seen a reduction in the number of part-time students attending university and a reduction in the number of mature students. Part-time and mature students predominantly come from more economically deprived backgrounds, so they are missing out on their chance to attend university.

Justine Greening: I am pleased the hon. Lady accepts that there are more young people going to university. A number of different factors are involved when it comes to mature students. We will be providing more support for mature students, but part of the decline is due to the fact that more young people are going to university in the first place, so there is simply a smaller cohort of mature students.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend please never cease to remind people, as there is sometimes a risk that we are losing the PR war on this, that we are doing more for disadvantaged students, courtesy of the tuition fees—in particularly with the element of support above £6,000—than many previous Governments? That is why south of the border participation rates by poorer students, relative to students as a whole, are so much higher than they are in the north. We need to keep drilling that message home, because it is one of the best aspects of tuition fees.

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend has made the point brilliantly, and of course it is not just about making sure that university is open to young people from disadvantaged families—although it is about that too; actually there is much greater diversity among the young people now able to get to university for the first time, particularly among black, Asian and minority ethnic groups across our country. That is something that we should welcome and be proud of. Moreover, through the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, we are doing more to ensure that once people get to university they stay and complete their courses.

I want to finish my point about Scotland. In that country, which has no fees, as Labour is proposing for England, there are fewer young people going to university. Research by the Sutton Trust found that last year in Scotland the gap between the number of people from the most and least advantaged areas going to university was the highest of any of the home nations of the UK. Disadvantaged young people are less likely to go to university in Scotland than they are here. Labour cannot want to see that happen here, yet under its policy the better-off would still go to university and the worse-off would lose out.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Is it not worse than that? Under Labour, upon leaving university and entering the world of work, people will have fewer job opportunities because when Labour wrecks the economy, much of the recent job growth will be obliterated.

Justine Greening: Of course my hon. Friend is absolutely right. The last Labour Government left youth unemployment 30% to 50% higher than when they came in. The ultimate opportunity destroyer in our country is a Labour Government running our economy.

I shall add a further reason why disadvantaged young people would lose out under Labour's policy: who would pay for those people who did get to university to go to university? It would be some of those disadvantaged young people who had missed out, it would be their families, it would be pensioners—we would all be paying for the cohort of young people most likely to become higher-rate taxpayers to get a degree.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I think what most of us taking part in this debate want is the right balance. I was the Chair of the Education and Skills Select Committee when we introduced the £3,000 fees, and the balance then was between what the employers paid, what the individual who benefited paid, what the taxpayer paid and the good to the community. The problem is that the cost has been ratcheted up to £9,000 with an unacceptable level of interest. Is it not time we had some moderation and a balance that is fair to students?

Mr Speaker: We are grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his speech.

Justine Greening: The hon. Gentleman should direct that question to his own Front-Bench team. It is they who are proposing a policy of zero balance by saying we should go from our current structure to no tuition fees at all. As I have said, the big losers would be the most disadvantaged young people in our country. Labour has proposed a policy for the moneyed, not the few. Whereas no cap on students means more students in

England, no fees means fewer students. As we know from Scotland, no fees also harms quality, because it means a return to the past for our universities—a past that saw them starved of cash.

Paul Farrelly *rose*—

Justine Greening: I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman again.

In the decades before tuition fees, per-student funding plummeted by 40%. When Labour first introduced fees, it was against a backdrop of an underfunded higher education system. There was a chorus of voices clamouring for change so that we could ensure that our world-class universities could have the funds that they needed.

We now have the highest GDP spending per student in the OECD. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has shown that the 2010 reforms increased the resources being invested in our students by universities by 25% in real terms since 2012. That is why the OECD says that our system is sustainable, unlike the unsustainable, underfunded university systems that we see on the continent. I had a chance to discuss the issue with Andreas Schleicher yesterday, and he made that very point.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Justine Greening: I give way to the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood).

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): We already know that 75% of students will not pay back their loans, or will not be able to do so. How can the Secretary of State say that the system is sustainable? And what about the young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who increasingly drop out of university because they cannot afford to stay? Is not the removal of maintenance grants part of what is disadvantaging those young people, and they cannot maintain their places at university even if they are fortunate enough to win one?

Justine Greening: The facts simply do not support the point that the hon. Lady has made. The facts are that more disadvantaged young people are making the decision to go to university, which I think is hugely welcomed and hugely important.

If Labour is able to pursue its catastrophic policy, our higher education system will be much more broadly at risk. It will not be just a case of students missing out. We have universities that are among the best in the world, but being the best in the world requires continued investment, and a no-fees policy would undo all that success. Funds for universities would dry up, and within a few years there would be a big funding crisis all over again.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The Secretary of State did not actually address the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood). What is she going to do about the fact that drop-out rates among disadvantaged young students have gone up, what is she going to do about the fact that part-time and mature applications are in free fall, and what is she going to do about the fact that students are

increasingly struggling with maintenance costs? Her statement reeks of complacency; perhaps she will address the challenges ahead.

Justine Greening: Complacency is pushing ahead with a policy that we know will mean fewer disadvantaged young people going to university. As for the hon. Gentleman's question about drop-out rates, they are lower now than they were in 2009-10, so there has been progress. However, he is right to say that we should continue to work on that issue and make progress. He will welcome the fact that the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 amends the Office for Students so that, as I have said, it focuses increasingly not just on access to universities but, critically, on participation and ensuring that young people finish the degree courses on which they embark.

I was talking about just how catastrophic Labour's policy would be for continued funding for universities, which would simply dry up. Our world-class universities would wither on the vine. No fees—which is what Labour wants—would mean fewer students, in worse-funded universities. I think it is now time for Labour to admit that it will have to cap student numbers as well.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): Let me take the Secretary of State back to her earlier point about the sustainability of funding. As was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), we know that 75% of students will not pay back their loans, and that all the Government are doing is saddling a future Government with having to pay off the huge debt that will remain unpaid, which will place a burden on the young people who have that debt now. The funding is not sustainable in any way. When will the Secretary of State address that?

Justine Greening: Our approach means that students make a time-limited contribution, and that the students who are earning the most pay the most. That is how the system works. The bottom line is that if the Labour party is saying that we should have no fees and that this system does not work, and people getting degrees should not have to pay for them, the only way to avoid this outcome is, presumably, although I would welcome any clarification from the Opposition, to place a huge burden on everyone else—on the majority of people who never went to university.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The Secretary of State has referred to the policy of no fees quite a few times now. Can she confirm that in 2005 she stood on a manifesto commitment—and campaigned and won her seat—on precisely that policy of no fees?

Justine Greening: The hon. Lady just needs to travel down the M4 to Wales to see her own party having two policies simultaneously on the same issue. I will take absolutely no lectures from the Labour party.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Justine Greening: I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Suella Fernandes) and then make some progress.

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): Will the Secretary of State confirm that the estimated cost of cancelling tuition fees and writing off debt will be £100 billion, a price to be paid by all taxpayers, many of whom will not

[*Suella Fernandes*]

have gone to university, and many of whom will not be earning as much as the graduates who benefit from that? Does she think that that is fair?

Justine Greening: Actually, we do not, but the Labour party clearly does. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is very unseemly gesticulation and what I can only describe as noisy chuntering from a sedentary position on both sides of the Chamber; chuntering from one side and what I will call eccentric gesticulation on the other. I do not wish to be the umpire as to which is the less desirable of these two undesirable behaviours.

Justine Greening: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I did not see the gesticulating, but am pleased that you are on top of keeping the House in order.

What we are having here now is a real debate, because I am prepared to take interventions from Labour Members and to engage in a debate. The hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) took just one, or perhaps two, interventions from Conservative Members.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Justine Greening: I will give way. Come on! The more the merrier, frankly. We know what our policy is. Labour's policy is utterly flawed.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for taking interventions. She is making a very spirited—albeit, in my opinion, flawed—argument that somehow because tuition fees went up at the same as time student numbers went up, one is linked to the other. How does she square that interpretation of the facts with the situation in my constituency, which has a nursing school where the conversion from bursary to tuition fees has seen a reduction in numbers of 33%, and nationally it has fallen by a quarter? If the Secretary of State is correct, surely the increase in tuition fees for nurses should have led to the number of applications skyrocketing?

Justine Greening: The hon. Gentleman is trying to make a case that is fundamentally flawed. He is desperately scrabbling around, trying to find some alternative facts to cover up, with a little fact fig leaf, the reality that more disadvantaged young people are going to university, and more young people are going to university.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Justine Greening: I am now going to make some progress, as I have allowed Opposition Members to make enough interventions, but none of them has any alternative facts of any real worth.

I want to conclude by saying that the only other way to maintain the £12 billion a year investment is for taxpayers to foot the bill under Labour's policy. They would ask us taxpayers to pay £12 billion now and even more in the future. Indeed, the Institute for Fiscal Studies said that even those sums were not right: it said there was a £2 billion black hole in Labour's spending plans. Of course, that would mean immediate cuts—the equivalent of 40,000 lecturers losing their jobs and 160,000 students without a university place because of

this black hole. Indeed, the cap on numbers would mean universities taking fewer students and closing courses. Some institutions would even become unviable. It would be the equivalent of closing several Russell Group universities.

I have to ask whether Labour Members really mean to have this policy. Have they understood the impact it would have? It has been confused and unclear at every turn, and most of all we have seen confusion over what they plan to do about the existing stock of student debt, which amounts to more than £100 billion, or 5% of GDP.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Earlier, the Secretary of State tantalisingly referred to the situation in Wales. Might it help Opposition Members if she were to explain exactly what is going on in Wales with regard to tuition fees?

Justine Greening: The Labour party is increasing them. It is doing the very thing that Labour Members are expressing faux anger at in the Chamber today. I will come on to that in a second, because I have not quite finished—

Angela Rayner *rose*—

Justine Greening: No thank you. I have taken lots of interventions.

During the election, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) said that he would “deal with” student debt. I think he meant that taxpayers would deal with it. Then he ditched that promise after the election. It was snake oil populism at its worst. I have to say, however, that this debate represents a new low in Labour's integrity-free politics. The hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne stands here today and opposes a fee increase in line with inflation, yet this is a core part of the fee regime that Labour put in place in 2004. Frankly, it is laughable that they are trying to be taken seriously on this. It is also an insult to everyone's intelligence.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): The Leader of the Opposition reneged on his clear pledge to deal with historic debt. Does the Secretary of State agree that that policy would have meant graduates repaying not only their own debt but the future debts of others?

Justine Greening: Indeed. The Labour party has a confused, muddled, counterproductive and anti-social mobility policy on student fees and student debt that would put at risk much of our higher education sector. It would be absolutely disastrous.

The bottom line is that, even now, across the border in Wales, the Labour colleagues of the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne are implementing the very increases, in line with inflation, that she is opposing here today. That shows a level of hypocrisy that is becoming a hallmark of the current Labour Front Bench. The bottom line is that they are in—[*Interruption.*] I am taking no lectures from the hon. Lady about taking interventions when she was scared to take more than two. The bottom line is that Labour's student finance policy is a cold, calculating con trick on young people. It is shameless politics.

I have three serious questions for the Opposition on the policy of no fees, and they are questions that they need to answer. How many of the poorest children in

this country are they going to prevent from going to university under that policy? How many world-class universities will shut down because they run out of money? If highly paid graduates do not have to pay to go to university to get their degrees, who is going to pay the bill? Those questions have never been answered. The Opposition have no answers, because having a sensible approach that has the best interests of students, universities and taxpayers at its heart is not their objective, is it? Driving social mobility is not Labour's objective. Enabling more disadvantaged young people to go to university is not their objective. Properly funded universities are not their objective. It is just a cynical con trick. That is Labour's objective. Far from Labour being the friend of students and universities, its policy would destroy opportunity and destroy our world-class universities. This House should see straight through it. Frankly, the motion is not even worth the paper it is written on.

5.14 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the Secretary of State's myth-spinning about Scottish universities. She would have us believe that our universities are not world-class. I am sure it would be of great interest to the 19 higher education institutions in Scotland, many of which are in the top 200 in the world, to hear her comments today. I thank the Secretary of State for that.

As legislators, we must ask ourselves why it is that we educate. Is it for self-enhancement, or is it for the benefit of society? I would say that for young people, as they set out considering tertiary education, it would probably be the former—get a decent job, a nice house and a decent education. However, for legislators there should be a clear distinction. First, of course, we are concerned about the individual and their future life chances, but we must take a wider view of the purpose of education and it must include our vision for society. To talk about “burdening” society with fees, as the Secretary of State just did, is to fail to take into account the benefits gained from having a well-educated population and a well-educated workforce. As we move ever closer to Brexit, with the cliff edge looming, key skills shortages in healthcare, education, digital and IT mean that graduates are needed now more than ever to ensure that the UK remains competitive in a post-Brexit environment. When that is considered, fees for tertiary education—fees that young people pay simply so they can fuel economic growth—become nonsensical.

We can clearly see the effects of that ludicrous policy when we consider the abolition of nursing bursaries. The steep decline of 20% in those choosing to study nursing should be a warning to us all. That, coupled with the devastating 96% drop in EU nurses registering to work in the UK, should be a wake-up call to the Government and their damaging policies.

It is a fundamental principle of the SNP that education should be based on the ability to learn and never the ability to pay.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Would the hon. Lady be willing to inform the House about the effect of the Scottish policy on the abolition of fees on disadvantaged students? To quote the Sutton Trust,

“the Scottish...policy of avoiding tuition fees meant that it was obliged to cap university places...with particularly negative consequences for less advantaged students”.

Carol Monaghan: First, the Scottish Government abolished fees, but secondly, since we came to power in 2007 there has been a 12% increase in Scottish-domiciled students going to university. We have a strong and principled record of opposing increases in tuition fees in England and Wales, and we will reject any legislation that seeks to increase the financial burden on students.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con) *rose*—

Carol Monaghan: I will not give way.

The fact that such a sweeping change to fee structures can be brought in by stealth as a statutory instrument—or that such an attempt can be made—is an indication of how low the present Government are willing to stoop, and how scared they are of putting this brutal policy to the test.

That is not the only attack on English students. The interest on tuition fees has risen sharply from 4.6% to 6.1%. Maintenance grants have been scrapped. Now we hear that debt on completion of course has reached an astronomical £50,000 for students in England, which will leave many young graduates saddled with debt throughout their entire working life. I wonder how many hon. Members would have trooped willingly through the Lobby in 2010 to support the policy that, seven years on, has left so many of our young people financially crippled.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Does the hon. Lady think that the quality of education that students receive is important? An audit in Scotland found that 22% of Scottish university estates are now poor or very poor. The quality of education must come first.

Carol Monaghan: In Scotland, we take a holistic view of education that is not simply about higher education. In fact, I have referred to “tertiary education” several times already because the distinction between further education and higher education is fluid in Scotland. The Secretary of State suggested that fewer young people from disadvantaged backgrounds enter higher education in Scotland than other parts of the UK, but let me quote what UCAS has to say:

“For people living in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, UCAS covers the overwhelming majority of full-time undergraduate provision. Therefore, the statistics on acceptances or entry rates can be taken as being very close to all recruitment to full-time undergraduate higher education. In Scotland there is a substantial section of provision that is not included in UCAS' figures. This is mostly full-time higher education provided in further education colleges, which represents around one third of young, full-time undergraduate study in Scotland... Accordingly, the statistics on UCAS entry rates and acceptances in these... charts reflect only that... undergraduate study that uses UCAS.”

To put that simply, UCAS only considers direct entry from school to university and takes no account of higher education provided in our FE sector or, indeed, of young people who enter university having completed an access or college course. To talk down the interactions between FE and HE in getting young people from disadvantaged backgrounds into tertiary education does a great disservice to the institutions and the young people served by them.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Will my hon. Friend join me in welcoming the fact that youth unemployment is at its lowest level in Scotland for nearly 20 years? At 8%—7% in my constituency—it is one of the lowest rates across the EU and is significantly lower than across the UK.

Carol Monaghan: I thank my hon. Friend. In Scotland, we tailor courses to meet the needs of our economy, meaning that we have jobs for our young people to go into.

Our free tuition policy benefits 120,000 undergraduate students every year, saving them from accruing the massive debt seen in other parts of the UK. Even taking into consideration my previous comments about tertiary education, the number of students from Scotland's most deprived areas entering university has increased by 19% in just two years. We are clearly ahead in supporting those young people to ensure that they remain in education and do not drop out, which we have heard about from several hon. Members.

This debate is also about the kind of nation that we want to build. Scotland values free access to higher education and so do many young people across these islands. We saw that in the general election both through their interaction and in the results. Many young people came out to vote against damaging Tory policies.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that many of us on the SNP Benches would not even be here today were it not for the SNP's policy of scrapping tuition fees? Does she also agree that the Government could learn some lessons from Scotland?

Carol Monaghan: The Government struggle to look north. They use statistics to their advantage and to spin their particular story, but the facts in Scotland are quite different. We have the most educated population in Europe—only Luxembourg is ahead of us. We value education, and we are fully committed to ensuring fair access to higher education so that every child, no matter their background, has an equal chance of going to university.

Education is not an industry to be opened up to free market practices. This is a sector that operates for the common good. I was interested to see how DUP Members would vote today. Would they be happy to continue with their support for high fees in England while getting their £1 billion bribe? Unfortunately, it appears that they have all headed to the airport. What of the Liberal Democrats, who worked in coalition with the Tories in 2010 to impose this crippling debt on our young people?

Ideologically I am opposed to fees in education; as an educator I am opposed to fees in education; and, as we teeter towards the Brexit cliff edge, societally I am opposed to fees in education.

5.25 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate. The Labour party bears a responsibility. There is no doubt in my mind that, in my constituency of Harlow, young people thought Labour was going to scrap student debt. [HON. MEMBERS: "No, they didn't."] They did. The leader of the Labour party said it was going to "deal with" student debt. Whatever the small print said, the impression was given.

We have problems enough with trust in politics in our country. I urge Labour Members not to repeat that exercise.

On the general subject, I am not against student fees because, as the Secretary of State said, we have a clear duty of fairness to the taxpayer and to those who do not go to university. The taxpayer should not shoulder the burden alone. A number of principles need to be clear when it comes to tuition fees, the most important of which is value for money.

What does value for money mean in terms of a university education? Why can universities charge the same high fees when there is such variation in both the quality of education and the jobs secured on graduation? Surely the time has come to consider the level of fees compared with graduate destinations. People go to university to climb the ladder of opportunity to prosperity and to improve the productivity of our nation. I was amazed when one vice-chancellor said that I am wrong to say universities are about people getting jobs at the end of it, and also that universities are really more about the experience. If people want an experience, they can go to Alton Towers. Between a fifth and a third of graduates end up in non-graduate jobs. If they are paying £9,250 a year and coming out with a good, well-paid job, the university has done the right thing. If they are not, what is the £50,000 debt for?

I welcome the new longitudinal education outcomes data that the Government have introduced and the opportunity they provide to look at graduate outcomes and earnings after one, three and five years. Closer monitoring of graduate outcomes is essential to this debate and to the conversation on value for money. It is encouraging to hear that the Government are considering linking tuition fees to graduate outcomes, one of which should be a university's success with degree apprenticeships. The Minister with responsibility for apprenticeships, my right hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Anne Milton), who is on the Front Bench, has done a huge amount of work on that issue.

Yesterday, the Chancellor said there is a significant difference between leaving university with debt but with a good degree and employment prospects, and leaving with the same debt but with a poorer qualification and no job. I strongly support those words, and I am aware that the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation, my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson) is actively working to support these measures.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman talks about the need to use both university access and degree-level apprenticeships, and we worked together on this when he was in his former post. The issue of accessing degree-level apprenticeships is fundamental. Does he agree that some sort of UCAS system to help people move between those two things, to advance opportunities for young people, is a good policy to pursue?

Robert Halfon: The hon. Lady is absolutely right on that, and I was pleased to visit her excellent local college when I was in my previous role. Of course she is right to say that we need a UCAS for apprenticeships and the skills system. That was in the Conservative manifesto and I believe the Government are working hard to achieve it.

Over the summer, the issue of vice-chancellors' pay has consistently been in the headlines, and we need to examine the salaries of the senior management of universities. It cannot be right that 55 universities are paying their vice-chancellors more than £300,000 and yet a recent survey found that just 35% of students believe their higher education experience represented "good" or "very good" value for money. I am worried about the seemingly Marie Antoinette approach taken by some vice-chancellors, who are living in their gilded palaces and saying, "Let the students eat cake", as they receive almost obscene amounts of pay.

Emma Hardy: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the salaries of not only some vice-chancellors, but some chief executive officers of academy chains and multi-academy trusts in this country are obscene, at a time when our education system is seeing so many cuts and schools are struggling so badly? Does he agree that we should also be looking at the obscene rates of pay in these academy chains?

Robert Halfon: We need to look at this across the board to make sure that salaries are related to performance and are seen as fair. I am not against high salaries, but what we have seen with some of these vice-chancellors, although not all, is pretty awful. As I say, their Marie Antoinette response to this just shows that they are completely out of touch with what is going on with a struggling economy, struggling students and so on. That is why I support the recent comments by the Universities Minister on pay and the restrictions the Government have proposed.

In my role as Chair of the Education Committee, I look forward to bringing greater scrutiny to the issue of pay and the wider value-for-money question. The hon. Lady is a new, valued member of the Committee, and I am pleased that one of the first areas the Committee will look at is the extent to which students are gaining a high-quality education and accessing graduate-level jobs. We will look at the evidence on how universities are currently spending the £9,000 and how an extra £250 would improve—or not—the experiences and outcomes of students.

Value for money must also be linked to interest rates. Not only are students graduating from university with greater debt than ever before, but they are facing substantially more interest on their loans. The interest rate of 6.1% is just too high; with the increase it will be more than 24 times the official Bank of England base rate. It has to be reviewed and it must be lowered, and it should be much more comparable to what happens in other countries. As the OECD highlights, our interest rate is one of the highest in western Europe, overburdening our students.

Kevin Hollinrake: Does my right hon. Friend accept that lowering the interest rate would give a greater advantage to wealthier students, because they are more likely to pay off their debt than the more disadvantaged students or the lower earners? This would probably have the reverse consequence of what he intends to deliver.

Robert Halfon: I have heard that argument, but the wealthier students are the most likely to be able to pay off the current interest rate. A member of my office

staff, who is not paid huge amounts of money and whom I would love to pay more, has £60,000 to pay. I just find that unacceptable—

Mr Speaker: Order. The erudition of the right hon. Gentleman's speech is matched only by his readiness to engage with colleagues and take interventions. That is a hallmark of his service in the House and it is very much appreciated. However, may I just advise the House and him that there is a large number of would-be contributors and there will have to be a tight time limit? Therefore, I feel cautiously optimistic that he is approaching his peroration.

Robert Halfon: Not only am I nearly finished, Mr Speaker, but I shall not take any more interventions.

We need to assess the impact of tuition fees on part-time learners—an issue that has already been raised in the debate. The number of part-time learners peaked at almost 590,000 in 2008-09, but it is now down to 310,000—a fall of 47%—and we know that they are more likely to be older, to be from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and to be women. We may be able to link the apprenticeship policy to those people who are falling off from the higher education system. A decline in access to part-time education removes the opportunity for thousands of workers to upskill or reskill, which would increase their earning capacity and thereby create a higher-skilled workforce. We need to be sure that any rise in tuition fees will not deter such learners and deny them access to higher education.

Any extra rises in tuition fees should be linked to evidence on strong outcomes for graduates, and universities that are failing their students must neither be paying vice-chancellors enormous salaries nor increasing their students' debts. I hope that the Education Committee can make a useful contribution on such issues in the coming weeks.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. After the next speaker, who will be a maiden speaker and accorded the privileges thereof, I am afraid there will have to be a five-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches, and I am sorry to have to give the House this notice, but it is unavoidable that some people will be disappointed this afternoon. That is just the reality of the numbers. To give her maiden speech, I call Preet Kaur Gill.

5.36 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to deliver my maiden speech during this important debate. It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon).

It is such an honour and privilege to have been elected as the Member of Parliament for Birmingham, Edgbaston, a constituency that has returned a female MP in every election since 1953. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] The most recent was my predecessor, Gisela Stuart. Before being selected as the Labour candidate for Edgbaston, I knew of and respected Gisela from afar. I may not have agreed with her on every single issue, but she was passionate, gutsy and a fierce defender of Labour values. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, Hear!"] By the

[Preet Kaur Gill]

end of my first campaign session, when almost every house on whose door I knocked seemed to have a story about how Gisela had helped them, I knew just what a brilliant constituency MP I was following. Gisela's contribution to Edgbaston will never be forgotten by the thousands of constituents she helped in ways both big and small.

It is also an honour to be the first female Sikh to sit on these Benches and to be here alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), the first turban-wearing Sikh MP. Being the first Sikh female MP comes with a huge sense of responsibility. I and many others will be asked to raise difficult issues in the House on behalf of Sikhs, on matters such as hate crime, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, Sikh ethnic monitoring in the 2021 census and an independent public inquiry into UK involvement in the 1984 Sikh genocide.

For many decades, Sikhs have lived in this country, paid their taxes, fought in world wars and contributed to society in every way imaginable. It is an historic moment for Sikhs in this country because Parliament is beginning to look more like the people it serves. Sophia Duleep Singh, the granddaughter of Maharaja Ranjit Singh—the ruler of the formidable Sikh empire from 1801 to 1839—and the goddaughter of Queen Victoria, would have been immensely proud that the United Kingdom had elected its first female Sikh MP some 100 years after she, a prominent suffragette, had fought for women in this country to have the right to vote.

Having been born and bred in one of the most diverse cities in the United Kingdom, I am so proud of the vibrant and exciting multicultural society that we live in today. I walk through Birmingham and see Caribbean restaurants next to Indian dress shops, gurdwaras and mosques down the road from Catholic schools, Polish accents, Irish accents and even the occasional exotic twang of an, "Alright, bab" from one of our neighbours from the Black Country.

Brummies, whether first or 30th generation, live and work together to make Birmingham the unique and fascinating city it is today. I am delighted at the prospect of this great city hosting the Commonwealth games in 2022.

People are what makes a place special, and Edgbaston is certainly special. The constituency is made up of four diverse wards: Bartley Green, Quinton, Harborne and Edgbaston. Parts of my constituency are very affluent, but, equally, there are areas of deprivation. My constituency is home to the very beautiful botanical gardens, a silver sweep of reservoir, the University Hospitals Birmingham Trust, the very prestigious Birmingham University, the ever-growing Newman University, many excellent schools, the two towers that inspired JRR Tolkien to write "The Lord of the Rings", an influential chamber of commerce and a world-famous cricket ground.

The University Hospitals Trust and Birmingham University are two of the biggest employers in my constituency, which is why today's debates on the public sector pay cap and tuition fees are so important. The Government's public sector pay cap has caused chaos for the NHS. The cap on pay has seen wages fall 14% below inflation since 2010. Nurses in my constituency are being forced to use food banks to make ends meet. The Government have created a workforce crisis in the

NHS, which is causing misery for patients. Hospital wards and GP surgeries in parts of my constituency are chronically understaffed and the knock-on effect is waiting lists, which are spiralling out of control. For seven years, Ministers have balanced the books on the backs of NHS staff.

I spent a day in Birmingham's children's hospital this summer after an unfortunate incident involving my daughter and a trampoline. As ever, I was bowled over by the skill, courage, and dedication that NHS staff bring to their working lives.

On the rise of tuition fees, I am concerned that young people and their families are impacted by the hikes in these fees, which will further increase student debt. For a young person in my constituency to go to university to study a three-year course, it will cost £30,000. A five-year medicine course is £50,000, and that is not to mention the living costs. For young people growing up in normal households in my constituency where money can be tight, this is an astronomical and intimidating sum of money. Graduate wages are stagnating and student debt will only rise further. Everyone in society benefits from our graduates—they are our engineers, our doctors, and our social workers of the future. That is why, today, I will vote to revoke a rise in tuition fees.

Like all of us in this House, behind the history and the records sits an ordinary story of simple values. For more than 20 years, my father drove the No. 11 bus around the constituency that I now represent. He worked every hour he could to make sure that my siblings and I had the best possible start in life. My mother and father provided my brothers and sisters and I with a simple set of values. Those values permeated through every aspect of our upbringing, and that is what brings me here today. First, that we all had to work to build something with our lives. The hours my father spent driving that bus, delivering community projects as the president of our local gurdwara, or resolving yet another squabble between us kids was never lost on me. It was simple dedication, hard work and a belief that he could make things better not only for us, but for all communities. He certainly achieved that and much more.

Secondly, my parents taught us that we should not forget about the people around us who were less fortunate. My parents both knew what it was like to start completely afresh, and to feel new, alone and lost. Ever since, I have passionately believed that one of the most important things we can all commit to is a simple act of kindness, whether it is a sympathetic ear or a hand-up to somebody desperate for a break. It is this last point that I would like to draw upon in making my maiden speech.

Issues around mental health and emotional wellbeing can make a person feel alone, confused, lonely, hopeless and lost. Such issues are cruel and indiscriminate; they can affect any one of us at any time. My constituency has a high proportion of young people. I have heard about the teenage girl suffering anxiety about her body image after seeing too many photo-shopped images on social media, the middle-aged man suffering from depression so overwhelming that he finds it impossible to make it out of the house in the morning, and the older person living alone, so worried about making ends meet that they cannot sleep at night.

The new "#StatusOfMind" report by the Royal Society for Public Health shows that

“identified rates of anxiety and depression in young people have increased by 70% over the past 25 years.”

That is nearly 80,000 children and young people in the UK suffering from severe depression. The report also states that nearly nine in 10 girls are unhappy with their body shape, that

“Seven in 10 young people have experienced cyberbullying”, and that no action was taken in 91% of cases in which cyber-bullying was reported.

As a parent of two girls, aged seven and six, this terrifies me. We need to do so much more to stop these trends and to make sure that our children are able to fulfil their potential. We should ensure that schools are given the time, opportunity and resources to make personal, social and health and economic education lessons a priority, not an afterthought, and we should work with social media platforms to identify users who could be suffering from mental health problems and signposting them to help. We need to support families to make sense of heart-breaking issues their children could be facing so that they can build a level of resilience.

For many people suffering with mental health and emotional wellbeing issues, these can both cause and, indeed, be caused by additional issues such as substance and alcohol misuse. The Reach Addiction centre at the Church of the Redeemer in my constituency does amazing work supporting people who, without it, would be completely lost and adrift from society. St. John’s church in Harborne and St. Boniface church in Quinton provide food banks and support to those suffering from homelessness and mental health issues. I recognise the vital support that these faith organisations, along with public sector workers in my constituency, provide. One of Britain’s finest hours was the creation of the NHS and the welfare state in 1946—a safety net for those who fell on hard times. To tackle issues such as alcohol and substance misuse, we need to rethink this safety net to make sure that emotional help and support is there for anyone who needs it, whenever they need it. It is time we treated the cause of these issues, rather than just the symptoms.

Finally, for those growing old in our country, retirement should mean a well-earned rest from a lifetime of hard work—an opportunity to put their feet up and focus on the things they are passionate about, rather than a destination to be dreaded. Unfortunately for some residents in my constituency, this stage of life is about trying to make ends meet and worrying about whether their pension will stretch to cover the whole month. They feel more and more isolated in their homes as more local community facilities are closed, and they are left counting the days since they spoke to someone who was not the checkout assistant at their local supermarket. The recent Channel 4 documentary, “Old People’s Home for 4 Year Olds”, was a wonderful reminder of the amazing ability we all have to make a difference to the people around us essentially by bringing people together. This will be my mission as the Member of Parliament for Birmingham, Edgbaston. Whenever I walk into this Chamber, I will be here to fight for funding for the services doing incredible work supporting my constituents who are facing these and many other issues. I will speak up for the young people in my constituency whose voices need to be heard more loudly in this House. I will work with colleagues from all parties to bring all our communities and constituents closer together.

I will also be thinking back to my dad, driving that same No. 11 route—day in, day out. Through hard work, he was building the platform and opportunities for me and my siblings to succeed. It is that spirit which I will bring to this role. I am so grateful to the people of Edgbaston, and I will be restless in working and fighting for every single one of them.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The Speaker, unfortunately, had to leave, but he did ask me to pass on his congratulations and, I am sure, those of all of us, for that excellent and thoughtful speech.

5.50 pm

Conor Burns (Bournemouth West) (Con): It is a genuine pleasure to follow the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill). Many Members in this House will have incredibly fond memories of her predecessor, who was not only a lady of incredible principle, but a lady with an irrepressible and irreverent sense of fun. She will be greatly missed on both sides of the House. The hon. Lady said her predecessor was a great advocate of Labour values, but I have to say that she was also a great advocate for national independence and the role of this Chamber in our national life. For those reasons, she will be missed especially by many of us on the Government side of the House.

When the hon. Lady was speaking, I was thinking whether I could possibly find any linkage between my south coast constituency of Bournemouth West and her midlands constituency of Birmingham Edgbaston, but then she mentioned J. R. R. Tolkien and something in her constituency that inspired him to write. Of course, Tolkien did much of his best writing from the Miramar hotel in my constituency, and I hope that that has established some sort of link between us.

I also pay tribute to the hon. Lady for what she said on mental health, something that is profoundly important to many of us in the House, and particularly those of us who have had family members who have been severely affected by different mental health conditions over the decades. If the hon. Lady carries on in the vein in which she began this afternoon, she will find a warm hand to meet hers across the aisle in this Chamber. She made an excellent maiden speech, and she has shown early promise that she will be a worthy successor to Gisela Stuart.

I have two universities in my constituency, Bournemouth University and the Arts University Bournemouth. They add enormously to the area I serve. They provide economic growth and social enrichment, as well as personal development for those who attend them. They are at the heart of the constituency I serve. Only last night, I had the vice-chancellor of Bournemouth University and Professor Keith Brown from the National Centre for Post Qualifying Social Work downstairs in the Churchill Room, doing an event to highlight the financial scamming of vulnerable people. In a week’s time, I will be going to the Bournemouth visual effects conference, to which people will come from around the world—people from Disney and others—to see the projects undertaken by young people in the competition there.

[Conor Burns]

Bournemouth University is absolutely at the core of my constituency, and I have been in touch over all the years I have been a Member of Parliament with all the different presidents of the students union—Toby Horner, Murray Simpson, Chloe Schendel-Wilson and Daniel Asaya, and on behalf of the students, they have told me—as have many of the students I have met—of their concerns about our policy on higher education and particularly on student finance.

However, this is an Opposition day, and this is an Opposition day motion, so it is appropriate that we scrutinise the Opposition. There has been a lot of talk about what was said during the election, so I have dug it out. The Leader of the Opposition, in his now famous interview, said:

“Yes, there is a block of those that currently have a massive debt, and I’m looking at ways that we could reduce that, ameliorate that, lengthen the period of paying it off, or some other means of reducing that debt burden.

I don’t have the simple answer for it yet—I don’t think anybody would expect me to, because this election was called unexpectedly... And 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 heard loud and clear by students in Bournemouth and elsewhere.

Then the shadow Secretary of State, in her outburst of candour on “The Andrew Marr Show”, said:

“It’s a huge amount; it’s £100 billion... It’s a huge amount of money. It’s a big abacus that I’m working on with that. But we’ve got to start dealing with this debt”.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): My hon. Friend highlights the words of the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Secretary of State, but is it not a fact that it was not just students in his university town who interpreted the Leader of the Opposition’s comments as a debt write-off? Two shadow Ministers broadcast their interpretation that this would be a 100% write-off of student debt.

Conor Burns: My hon. Friend has pre-empted what I was about to come on to. There was a lot of shouting going on when the students heard that the Labour party was going to get rid of their debts, abolish their fees, and deal with historical debt.

Let me quote what a Labour candidate—a Member in the current and previous Parliaments—said to camera. The hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), surrounded by primary school children, looked to camera and said:

“Just this morning Jeremy Corbyn has announced that the tuition fees will be abolished straight away from September if there’s a Labour government, and that we will bring back immediately EMA”,

education maintenance allowance,

“and also”—

this is critical—

“that every existing student will have all their debts wiped off.”

He ended:

“That’s fantastic news, isn’t it guys?”

Well, it turned out not to be such fantastic news because it turned out not to be true. They were the first Opposition in history to U-turn on a manifesto without the burden of actually having to get elected into office. The reason it was not implementable is the enormous burden it would have added to the public finances—5% on GDP. It was an absolute betrayal of our electorate and students to promise them that we could do that.

We have seen the greatest expansion of student numbers in this country, from a mere 4,357 in 1920 to 73,163 in 1990.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): My hon. Friend is talking about the expansion of student numbers, and that is right, but is it not also right that the proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds has gone up as well—not just the number but the proportion?

Conor Burns: My hon. Friend and neighbour is absolutely correct. Some of the people who in previous generations, when I was at university, could not have dreamed about getting into university are getting in and getting these life chances under this Government, and, in fairness, the Labour Government before this lot took over as the Opposition.

In 1990, only 77,163 people completed their first degree. That was the year that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I began at Southampton University. By 2015, that number was almost 400,000. There are now five times more people enjoying the benefit of a university education than when I was at university. One could say, to coin a phrase, that we on these Benches are the party for many, not just the few.

I have a serious warning to the Opposition. I sat in hustings on campus at Bournemouth University in the 2010 election, when the Liberal candidate was cheered to the rafters. In 2015, the Labour party was cheered to the rafters. If Labour Members look to their left—not metaphorically but literally—they will see the consequences of making promises to students that they know they cannot deliver. It is wrong to do so.

5.57 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate, and, in particular, to speak after my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), who made a very powerful and eloquent maiden speech. I concur with her tribute to her predecessor, my good friend Gisela Stuart. An extraordinary lesson that we can learn from Edgbaston is that it has elected women Members of Parliament since 1953—long may that continue. I particularly congratulate my hon. Friend as the first Sikh woman Member of Parliament.

I pay tribute to the new Chair of the Education Committee, the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), for the tone and content of his speech. We are at a point where we need to have a serious debate that looks at the evidence about what is happening in our higher education system. My starting point is that surely the current scale of student and graduate debt must worry us all, whichever party we are a member of.

I want to focus on three things: first, student satisfaction levels and value for money; secondly, part-time students; and thirdly, interest rates. The student academic experience

survey conducted this year showed a significant shift in students' perceptions that should concern us all, and I hope the Minister will address it in his closing remarks. Five years ago, the majority of students—53%—rated their university experience as good or very good. That figure had fallen to 35%, and the number of those who rated it poor or very poor had doubled in that five-year period. The figures for England were worse than those for Scotland and Wales—that must surely be a cause for concern.

Other colleagues have spoken about the impact on part-time students. In Russell Group universities this year, the number of first-year students studying part time is 44% lower than it was in 2011. In other higher education institutions, the fall is even greater. In certain subjects, the fall is dramatic: in languages, that figure has fallen from 16,000 to just over 6,000; and in computer sciences, it has fallen from almost 6,000 to just over 3,500. Surely that must be a matter of concern.

Then there is the question of interest rates. When Labour introduced tuition fees, the interest payable on loans was either the Bank of England base rate plus 1% or the retail prices index, whichever was the lower. Interest rates could be expected, in that period, to be as low as 1.3%. Because of the changes that this Government have made, some students are leaving university having already incurred £6,000 in interest. Surely that is something that we have to look at, and it is a matter of concern.

Let us have a serious debate about this subject. I welcome the fact that the Select Committee will be doing so under the chairmanship of the right hon. Member for Harlow. I absolutely accept that access to higher education is about more than just student fees and graduate debt. Schools and colleges have a vital role to play in raising aspirations and providing support for students. As the Secretary of State has said, some progress has been made on access for some disadvantaged groups, particularly some—not all—black and minority ethnic groups, and that is very welcome, but there is a big challenge for white working-class kids, particularly those from the poorest backgrounds.

I represent a constituency that is predominantly white working class, and one aspect of the challenge is access to our top universities. That is why two years ago I established a programme with eight secondary schools serving my constituency that we have called the Liverpool to Oxbridge Collaborative, which supports the most academic students to consider applying to Oxford or Cambridge. I am delighted to say that five students, from West Derby, Broughton Hall and Cardinal Heenan schools, have gained places at Oxford and Cambridge, starting this autumn. The programme is starting to make a difference. The aspiration of the young people and their parents, and the support that they have had from those schools, has been amazing. I want that level of support for the most academic students to be as commonplace in state schools as it is the top private schools. If it is not, we will not address our fundamental problems of social mobility and inequality.

Further increases in tuition fees risk undermining the progress that is being made in many of our schools and colleges. That is why we need a rethink, and I welcome the investigation that the Select Committee Chair has said that his Committee will undertake. I think that the

motion, which would revoke the latest increase in tuition fees, is a step in the right direction towards achieving that rethink.

6.2 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak after the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), and it was an even greater pleasure to listen to the fine maiden speech from the new hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill). She spoke of some touching and superb family values, which we all look for in our families. Her parents, whom she spoke of, must be very proud of her performance in the House today. I welcome her to the Chamber.

There are many spending commitments that we might wish for, and free tuition would be a wonderful commitment if we could afford to make it. That would be wonderful for me, because I have four children, all of whom may at some point enter the realms of higher education. But there are many other competing pressures, such as the pension system, the police forces, our armed forces, help for disabled people, the NHS and public sector pay. During the general election campaign when I talked to voters on the doorstep about some of the Opposition's spending promises, the key question that I was asked many times was, "How are they going to pay for it?" The reality is that if students do not pay for tuition, the taxpayer will have to pick up the bill.

Of course, the Opposition will say that they have a fully costed manifesto to deal with the problem, but it is right that we look at the detail of that manifesto. *[Interruption.]* I am very happy to take an intervention if Labour Members would like me to. The reality is that there was £250 billion of extra spending commitments in that manifesto, on top of the fact that this country already spends about £50 billion a year more than it receives in taxes. The Institute for Fiscal Studies said that there was a £45 billion hole in Labour's extra spending commitments, which included £125 billion in extra infrastructure spending, roughly £125 billion to nationalise our utilities and railways, and £100 billion to wipe off past student tuition fees—that was a commitment, whether or not it was a manifesto promise.

The reality is that spending commitments can only be made in a strategic way. We cannot simply use cheap party politics and a short-term, kneejerk approach to funding the finances of this country.

Angela Rayner: May I ask the hon. Gentleman whether he actually read our manifesto and looked at our costings, and where in his party's manifesto the DUP deal was?

Kevin Hollinrake: We are talking about tuition fees, on which the Leader of the Opposition made a clear commitment to deal with past debt as well as future fees. The reality is that we have to find the money to pay for the commitments that we make, and there was a huge gaping hole in the funding for the Opposition's commitments. Such a gaping hole was why this country ended up £1.7 trillion in debt, and the Conservative party had to deal with inheriting a £153 billion deficit on the back of uncosted spending commitments. Of the 13 years for which Labour was in power, it did not balance the books in nine of them. Its public spending

[Kevin Hollinrake]

was greater than its tax receipts. We need an end to this short-term party politicking and gesture politics. We need properly costed manifestos and properly costed public spending. We simply cannot wipe out tuition fees without finding the money to pay for it.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), the Chair of the Education Committee, made some good points about how we should look at reforming tuition fees by making sure that they are performance-related so that universities are held to account for providing a good education that provides a return on investment for students. We also need a more flexible approach so that students can have lower debt by taking modular courses, for example.

Jo Churchill: May I draw my hon. Friend's attention to the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, which took just that approach by ensuring that universities can offer two-year degrees, which will save students money? They can also offer lifelong learning opportunities and so on, all of which helps more than the Opposition's approach would.

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Taking a university course in two years rather than three or four makes perfect sense for someone wanting to reduce their debt. So does attending a local university, and we should move towards modular courses to ensure that students have ways around accumulating large debts, which nobody wants to see.

Opposition Members will say that we need to make the spending commitments that they are suggesting today, but they miss the point. There are huge ticking time bombs in our public expenditure for the coming decades, including our health and welfare spending. There is no strategic element to their spending plans. It is simply gesture politics.

Carol Monaghan: I am interested to hear the hon. Gentleman talk about a ticking time bomb in healthcare spending. Would he like to explain where new nurses are going to come from?

Kevin Hollinrake: I am sorry, I misheard the hon. Lady's final point—I am very happy for her to make it again.

Carol Monaghan: I was asking the hon. Gentleman where new nurses are going to come from.

Kevin Hollinrake: There are 12,000 more nurses on our wards in the UK than there were in 2010. More money is going into the NHS, and there is a commitment to spend another £8 billion by 2020. We are investing in the health service, but there is no doubt that those commitments will be very significant in future years. Of course we need to invest in our public services wherever we can, but we need to do so strategically without cheap party politicking. A piecemeal approach to our expenditure would have catastrophic consequences for our future debt. We need the strategic approach taken by the Conservative party.

6.10 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I should start by declaring an interest: I am still paying off my student loans. Student fees will always be

an emotive issue, but I believe that everybody on both sides of the House wants the same outcome. We all want an education system that allows every child to reach their potential and equips citizens for life and work in our country.

Some Members argued that the staggering debt that students leave university with is notional, but considering that I have been paying mine off for 15 years, I can assure them that it does not feel notional. It feels very real indeed, and I am sure it feels very real for everybody else in the UK who is still paying off their student debt in the same situation.

I am mindful that we are discussing heaping debt on people who might never earn enough money to pay it off, yet every one of us earns nearly three times the national average salary. During my two maternity leaves, I saw my student debt increase each year because the interest kept being added while I was not earning enough money to pay it off. For people who have not been on maternity leave, I can tell them that it is financially difficult, and people can struggle. It is incredibly demotivating and demoralising to see a debt from going to university and trying to get on in life constantly increasing. I assure the House that my constituents, too, feel demoralised at seeing their debt increase. Members might say, "It doesn't matter. If they don't earn more than £21,000, so what? They will never pay it off," but if they got a statement each month telling them that the money they owed was going up and up, that would make them feel demoralised, dejected and fed up with their life.

I am looking forward to working with the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), who is unfortunately no longer in his place, on the Education Committee, and I agree with him that the interest rates are appalling. How can it be justifiable that they are so much higher than the Bank of England base rate? To show that the unfairness of the high interest rates is even worse than that, someone contacted me the other day and said, "Do you realise that they start adding interest to student loans from the moment you start university?" Students' debts increase while they are still studying at university—they have not even graduated. How is that fair or justifiable?

One of the best things we can do to help universities with funding—I hope the Minister takes this on board—is to encourage overseas students to come to our country and pay for our university education. I hope the reality of our universities' funding problems will break through Conservative Members' ideological aversion to overseas students coming here.

I am concerned about the reduction in the number of part-time and mature students. I believe in lifelong learning. I think everybody should have the opportunity to go to university at a time that suits them. Let us be honest: it is often women with caring responsibilities who study part-time at university. They will miss out, and I think that is a travesty. We should look at that issue.

I am sorry, but I do not buy the idea that more people from deprived backgrounds are going to university and we have tuition fees, so having tuition fees mean that more people from deprived backgrounds go to university. That is rubbish; that is correlation, not causation. The Government cannot say that increasing

tuition fees means that more people from deprived backgrounds go to university. That is total nonsense.

Let us be honest: the current model of ever-increasing tuition fees and student loans does not work for students or our universities. Because so little is repaid, I do not believe it works for the Treasury either. It is time to consign tuition fees to the same bin the Government dumped their election manifesto in.

6.14 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy). It was also a pleasure to have been in the Chamber to listen to the maiden speech of a fellow west midlands MP, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill). She gave an absolutely delightful maiden speech setting out some of her family values and her community values, which are shared by so many of us across the House. I do not know whether I am supposed to say this of someone from the Opposition Benches, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I wish her well in her parliamentary career.

I would imagine that many Members in the Chamber went to university. Some will have paid their own fees, which were introduced by Labour in 1998. Some will not have paid fees, because they are a little bit older and a different system was in place. Some will have been educated in Scotland. There will be others who, like me, did not go to university. At 18, I chose to go straight into the workplace and to study later. I went to the institution that the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) knows very well, the Open University. As he will know, students at the Open University pay as they go along. I was paying and working throughout taking that education route. In the end—it may have taken me some time—I did get my master's degree.

I passionately believe in choice in education, whether university, technical or apprenticeships. The Government have an excellent track record on apprenticeships. In my constituency, there is an excellent apprenticeship provider, In-Comm training, which is at the heart of developing the skills required not just for today's employers, but for those in the future. The point is about choice and providing a fair deal for students whichever route they choose, while at the same time ensuring our universities are properly and sustainably financed. It is about funding. Whatever the choice, it has to be paid for, either by the individual or the Government, or by a combination of the two. What really matters is that the education system is accessible.

The student funding system removes financial barriers for anyone hoping to study. It is backed by the taxpayer, and, as we know, any outstanding debt is paid off after 30 years. To those on the Opposition Benches who say that increases in tuition fees will reduce access to university for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, we have heard today that the figures do not bear that out. Recent figures show that in the academic year 2016-17 the entry rate for 18-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds is at a record high: 19.5% in 2016 compared to 13.6% in 2009.

I appreciate, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I do not have many minutes left in which to speak. That is the disadvantage of speaking towards the end of a debate of this nature.

I struggle with the definition of a disadvantaged background. The figures bear out that one can come from a disadvantaged background and still receive a good education, increasingly so through the university route. At the heart of that is choice and availability of places. Whatever the educational route, the education system is about merit, not background. It should be a system that is based on hard work and aspiration, and I believe the Conservative party is the party of aspiration and hard work.

6.19 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): As I have probably pointed out before, I represent more students than any other Member, by a long way, and on their behalf I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), the shadow Secretary of State, for securing this debate. She has fought as hard to ensure that Parliament is involved in key decisions on student funding as the Secretary of State has fought to avoid it.

It is not as if the Government do not know the system is at breaking point. They clearly do. In July, after Labour's commitment in the recent election put the abolition of tuition fees at the centre of the political agenda, the First Secretary of State, the Prime Minister's deputy, called for a national debate on the issue, and only yesterday the Chancellor of the Exchequer apparently told the Economic Affairs Committee of the House of Lords that the Government were carefully considering a review because—this is the reason he gave—the system had not worked out as originally expected. A bit of an understatement!

Why are the Government ploughing ahead regardless with the fees increase? It is important that we not only reject this increase but look to make fundamental change. According to reports, the Government are considering some change. As the Chair of the Education Select Committee did, they are floating the idea of reducing the interest charged on student debt. Clearly the rate is too high—I have argued against it previously and action should be taken—but of all the changes to make it is perhaps the least important. It is probably attractive to the Government for the reason that the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) pointed out: because it will primarily assist higher earners. It will not help those most in need, however, from the poorest families who will, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, face the greatest debt burden.

What should the Government do then? They should start by reintroducing maintenance grants for students from lower-income households. They were central to the 2012 settlement. The House would not have agreed to the £9,000 fees without those grants, and the fact that the Government got rid of them at the first opportunity when they formed a Conservative Administration on their own says an awful lot about their priorities. They should reconsider and reverse that decision.

Before cutting interest rates, the Government should think about the retrospective changes to repayment terms. Obviously everybody understands that they got their calculations badly wrong on the unrepayable debt. Its measure, the resource accounting and budgeting charge, rose relentlessly from the introduction of the new system in 2012. People make mistakes, but what was wrong was for the Government to make graduates pay for the consequences—to make them pay for the

[Paul Blomfield]

Government's miscalculation by changing the terms of the deal to which they had signed up. Before the 2015 general election, I asked Ministers for assurances that they would not make those changes, and I was told that they had no plans to do so, but no sooner were the votes counted than those plans were rolled out in the 2015 Budget. Unfreezing the repayment threshold—making graduates pay more than was in the contract they signed up to—is frankly fraudulent. It undermines confidence in the student loans system and trust in democracy, and it should be reversed.

Finally, the Government should reconsider the decision to scrap bursaries and introduce fees and loans for nursing, midwifery and allied health courses, as a number of people have mentioned. Back in January 2016, when we debated the issue in Westminster Hall, the then Health Minister, Ben Gummer, told Members—this is a good one, wait for it—that the move would lead to an increase in applications. Now we know how wrong they were. In my city, there has been a drop of 22% in applications to Sheffield Hallam University, but it did slightly better than the rest of the country, because across the UK the drop is estimated to be 26%.

On issue after issue in relation to student funding, the Government have got it wrong. Today they can start to get it right. They can agree with us in ruling out this increase and, beyond that, they can revert to their 2005 manifesto commitment and join us in committing to abolish tuition fees.

6.24 pm

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): I join other Members on both sides of the House in congratulating the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) on her election and her excellent maiden speech. I think that her election—along with that of the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), who is no longer in the Chamber—is testimony to the ongoing success and strength of the Sikh community in this country, and I wish her well for her time in the House.

Like the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston, I support local schools throughout my constituency, and I encourage young people to pursue higher education, as I did. Going to university has a number of benefits, such as life chances, salary uplifts and skills. However, I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) that those who advocate an entirely free system are simply living in the past. They forget that if that system were allowed to persist, very few people would be able to go to university.

In 2002, having benefited from an assisted place myself, I became the first member of my family to go to university. I was also one of the first to pay tuition fees, which had been introduced by the Labour party in 1998 and increased in 2001. Even as recently as 2002, it was not commonplace for people from my background to go to university, which is why, when the Conservatives came to power, we opened up the higher education system to make it more accessible and increased student numbers by lifting the cap.

That had two benefits, which I want to highlight in the short time that I have in which to speak. First, universities finally had the resources that they needed in order to give all their students a high-quality, world-class

education. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns), the £9,000 cap that was set in 2012 is now worth £8,500 in real terms, and, if left unchanged, will be worth only £8,000 by 2020. If our higher education system is to have the resources that it needs to be sustainable and maintain its world-class reputation for excellence, it must be financed properly and the quality of teaching must be maintained. Only by giving our universities those resources can we maintain our world-class standing in science, the arts, the humanities, and all the other disciplines that are needed to ensure that our country is globally competitive in the years ahead.

I welcomed a recent report from the Institute for Fiscal Studies which states that, on a per-student basis, our universities are better funded than they have been for the last 30 years. That represents an incredible opportunity for universities on the south coast, including those in my constituency, but also for universities throughout the country.

The other benefit of our 2011 reforms was our ability to lift the cap on student numbers to ensure that all those who were qualified to go to university had the opportunity to do so. They also gave people from disadvantaged backgrounds and minority-ethnic communities a greater opportunity to go to university, and I am pleased that other Members have mentioned that record numbers now do so.

In the final two minutes left to me, I want to highlight the Opposition's record, given that this is an Opposition day. Others have pointed out that the proposals and policies articulated during the election were unrealistic, but I want to explain why they were unaffordable as well. It has been mentioned that writing off student debt was an important element of Labour's proposals, and I am sure the whole House will acknowledge that it would increase our national debt by about 5% of GDP.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Alan Mak: I will not, because of the shortage of time. I want to make some more progress.

Writing off student debt would also add at least £3,500 to the household budget of every family in the country. I will now give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle *indicated dissent.*

Wes Streeting: He has finished.

Alan Mak: If the hon. Gentleman does not want to intervene, I will continue.

As I was saying, the policies articulated at the time of the election were not only unrealistic but unaffordable. They would have added to the national debt and burdened future generations with their own debts, but they would also have choked off our higher education system from the essential funding that it needs. That is why I support the regulations. They are reasonable, they bring extra resources into the higher education system, and they sensibly and reasonably allow fees to be increased in line with inflation to ensure that, in real terms, the system is protected. Students and their parents, employers and universities want a fair and reasonable system that provides both wide access and sustainable funding, and I therefore urge the House to support the regulations.

6.29 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): In a few short weeks' time, students up and down the country, including at the University of West London in my seat, will be going back for a new term. This is supposed to be an exciting time, but it is also an anxious one, because the fee regime they have been subjected to is continually changing by stealth. I am not just talking about the trebling since 2010; even since I have been an MP in the last two years we have seen many shady changes. This week, people have been discussing Henry VIII powers—the things done by shady Committees upstairs, rather than on the Floor of the House—but we have seen that in what has happened to student fees since 2015 as well, with the convenient cover of the teaching excellence framework, which seems to be another way to inflate fees. The worsening terms people are on means their repayments have gone up since they took out these loans; that is moving the goalposts after the game has started, which is very odd.

This £250 increase might look small, but, as has been pointed out, that is for three years, so we times that by three. There is also the monstrous interest rate of 6.1%. So if we add that up, we are looking at increases of thousands and thousands over a lifetime. Even if there is no upfront payment, our fees in this country are higher than those of any of our near neighbours. In France, across the channel, the fee is only a couple of hundred euros, while those in Norway, Denmark and Austria pay nothing at all.

We are seeing £9,000 turn into £9,250; when is it going to be £10,000? It seems that with this Government the sky is the limit. It is no wonder that the Institute for Fiscal Studies puts the average student debt at £50,000—we have heard a figure of up to £58,000, and 75% of it is never going to be paid back.

Proponents of fees often say that this is something for the future and is not paid back until the person is earning £21,000, and that there is a 30-year period so that it can be written off and never paid back, but this is affecting students now. There has been a fivefold increase in 10 years in students presenting with mental health problems, and a record number of suicides. The reasons people give are exorbitant housing costs and debt.

When we reduce everything to a cost-benefit analysis, we take out those kind of human stories and the greater good that education can do. People always say that graduates will earn more over their lifetime, but matters beyond the cost-benefit analysis are frozen out of the figures. When we just look at bald admission figures, we neglect to look at the number of dropouts, which is rocketing, and we neglect to look at the number of non-traditional students, which is going down. There are 61% fewer part-time students since 2010, and 39% fewer mature students. If we want to democratise our education, we are going in the wrong direction.

How this has been done is all wrong as well. If the Student Loans Company was a normal lender, it could be referred to the Financial Conduct Authority for mis-selling because these retrospective changes to terms and conditions would not be allowed for any normal lender—we know that the SLC is not a normal lender. Again, we heard all the arguments on Monday about Henry VIII powers and shady processes by statutory instrument, but that is precisely how these things were

done in 2015; I remember that my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and I were present.

It has been said that overview and scrutiny have been sacrificed. As it is now, the sector is reeling from Brexit, with the effect on the number of EU students and staffs and access to the grants regime, and all the funding is going. The same process by which that was rammed through this House earlier this week has been followed here. It was smuggled in, too, in the 2015 autumn statement. All students should have been told properly—*[Interruption.]*—in the small print, exactly, like the WASPI women; this reminds me of those valiant 1950s women who were never informed and things kept changing. I have just seen that I have only 47 seconds left—no way.

The Democratic Unionist party used to have an anti-fees policy, and even the current Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), has said that he worries about this. In 2010, he joined us on this side—I was not here then. He said that he was worried about what this would do to student mobility. I urge all right-minded people on the Conservative Benches to join us in the Lobby. The election has changed everything, and the Government need to think again.

6.34 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I should like to add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) on a fine maiden speech. Many of us remember her predecessor with much fondness.

Like the Secretary of State, I was the first in my family to go to university, thanks largely to Conservative Governments in the 1980s and '90s raising participation rates from about one in eight to about one in three. That is why, by the mid-1990s, I found myself campaigning against proposals to introduce tuition fees for the students who would come after me. I feared that prospective students from disadvantaged and lower income backgrounds would be put off from going to university and prevented from having the opportunities that I was enjoying. Indeed, I was so convinced of this that I even voted for the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) in at least one of his bids to become president of the National Union of Students.

However, it soon became clear to me that those fears, however genuinely held they were at the time, were wrong. I am pleased that they were wrong. It is great that we have seen increasing levels of participation and an increasing proportion of students from lower income families and other disadvantaged backgrounds going to university. We saw the same fears being expressed in 2004 when Tony Blair's Government trebled tuition fees, and again in 2011 and 2012. They have again been proven wrong. Young people from our poorest areas are something like 43% more likely to go to university than they were seven years ago. The hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) referred to drop-out rates, but those rates have fallen in the past few years, following years of increases. Similar figures apply to those from other disadvantaged backgrounds. Part of the reason for this is that the new system means that new graduates in particular are paying back less at a time when they

[Mike Wood]

are trying to set up a home, get a mortgage and start a family. Their repayments might be £45 a month, or £540 a year, lower than they would otherwise be paying. Measured on affordability, mortgages therefore become more, rather than less, affordable.

We are prone to having world-class universities, and we have many universities around the country that are doing genuinely innovative research and promoting first-class teaching in many areas. However, those universities and that teaching must be paid for. If we accept that, it is surely right that those who benefit the most from higher education should also contribute the most. Statistics show that a male graduate is likely to be about £170,000 better off over the course of their career; the figure for a female graduate is around £250,000. We can see that the people who benefit by far the most are the graduates themselves. Under the present system, people contribute more towards the cost of their education as they earn more. Indeed, those who are right at the top of the scale are contributing more to the cost of other people's university education. That is a rather progressive measure that, in other circumstances, the Opposition might actually be tempted by.

Without the measures in the statutory instruments, the value of the funding going to universities would be reduced from £9,000 in 2012 to just under £8,500 now and to £8,000 by the end of this Parliament. That would be a big loss to our universities. If funding were to become available, and given that the extra £250 would be paid only by those on the very highest incomes—those currently paying the full loan repayment—it would surely be better to consider repayment thresholds.

6.39 pm

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): It is my pleasure to speak in this important debate and follow the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) on her excellent maiden speech.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I have been in the Chamber for over seven hours now. I wanted to speak in the earlier important debate on NHS pay and did not get a chance due to the shortage of time and the number of interventions. I have one and a half minutes at the moment, so I do not know how much I can say, but there is plenty that I wanted to say.

Since 2010, under successive spans of Tory rule, students have repeatedly been held back by Government policy. It was a Conservative-led Government who trebled tuition fees to £9,000 in 2012, with the help of the Liberal Democrats. It is a Conservative Government who have frozen the student loan repayment threshold at £21,000; a Conservative Government who introduced the extortionate 6.1% interest rate on student loans; a Conservative Government who abolished the maintenance grants that were a lifeline for many of the poorest students. And most recently, of course, it was a Conservative Government who snuck out a written statement on the final day before summer recess which allowed universities to further raise tuition fees to £9,250 per year.

Thank you for letting me speak, Madam Deputy Speaker.

6.40 pm

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): We have had a very good debate with some excellent contributions from both sides of the House. Obviously, I want to single out one or two of the contributions—my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Paul Farrelly) said we had to look at student support in the round; and my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods), spoke about the way in which Government were saddling people with debt.

I had to agree with the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), who made the important point that there was no sense of public space or public good in anything the Secretary of State said in her speech. There was no sense of the contribution made to the local economies that people work in or the ideas and productivity they develop.

The right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), the Chair of the Education Committee, in a characteristically thoughtful speech echoed the concerns that we have had about graduate outcomes and some of the issues around vice-chancellors' fees.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), in a superb speech, emphasised not just her pride in her Sikh heritage but the multi-ethnic pride in both place and context of her constituency in Birmingham. She spoke movingly about the concerns of the NHS and specifically addressed the issues of student debt and graduates' sense of public duty.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) was right to focus on the evidence base, especially the academic evidence in respect of the lower numbers of part-time students in the Russell Group. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) reminded us that debt was incurred from day one. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), who did superb work on the Higher Education and Research Bill with me and my other colleagues, said that when we had our Opposition Day debate in 2016 we were right to focus on maintenance grants.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) spoke about the statistics failing to convey—indeed, freezing out—the human stories of the results of the pressure of debt. My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid), who stoically stayed all the way through both of today's debates, reminded us that it was the Conservatives who had systematically stripped away many of the benefits that were given from 2012.

I want to make brief comments—they will be brief because, unfortunately, I see the Secretary of State is not in her place. She equivocated on an emergency cap on student numbers—another policy that exists only in the minds of the Government. In fact, she said,

“if we are not willing to fund the system, there can be fewer people in it.”

But the Secretary of State ignores the fact that we would be replacing, pound for pound, the actual outlay of the Student Loans Company. Also, when talking about so-called record numbers of students in our universities, she ignored the fact that UCAS figures showed applications actually down 4%.

The context of the debate and all the Government's procedural shenanigans were eloquently explained by my colleague the shadow Secretary of State, in a superb speech. She also made the point that the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation, the hon. Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), who spoke in the Standing Order 24 debate in July, did not take account of what his namesake, Alan Johnson—there the comparisons end—the Minister in 2004, said about what we should be doing. The effect of annulling the fee increase would do something immediately. For reasons that I will go into, we know that the Government have already performed twists and turns over where they think they might be going, but the fact is that the cumulative effect of Tory Ministers' actions since the tripling of tuition fees in 2012 has been socially and economically destructive.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gordon Marsden: Owing to the time left, I will not.

Two recent reports from OFFA and the Social Market Foundation point to growing drop-out rates, especially among students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The most recent Sutton Trust survey shows the poorest stats on school students planning for HE in eight years. The Government have not hobbled just one generation. The tumbrel of ever-rising fees has hit not only the young, but people of the second age and even the third age. I warmed to the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) for her positive words about her Open University experience, but the fees were a fraction of what they are today when I was teaching and when she was studying. The Open University has been badly hit by this process.

We must also remember mid-life issues, which is why the University and College Union's 20 July report suggested that things would get radically worse with the ninefold increase in inflation. Who knows where we are going from the 6.1% interest rate? None of this exactly hangs out a welcome sign to young people who have a place at or hope to go to university. The interest rates are linked to inflation and are set to rise by about a third from 4.6% to up to 6.1%. Throw in the disastrous decline in the number of part-time and mature students and we get a sense of how the nudge factor, so beloved of Tory theorists such as the Universities Minister, is now working to push would-be students away from HE. On the other hand, people have the opportunity to do apprenticeships with top employers, removing the debt factor.

This problem is not just an English thing; it is a British problem, affecting not only English students, but students from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland who have chosen to study in England. They, too, will be hit by this unjustified and regressive increase. In 2015-16, 28,730 Welsh students were studying in the UK, alongside 9,505 Scottish students and 11,745 Northern Irish students.

Rising fees might have been a coherent defence but, as MillionPlus has said, there has been no direct grant available for university courses in so many subjects since 2014-15. There is an alternative, however. It that was outlined by the Labour party at the last general election, but I will not repeat the eloquent pledges of my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State. Instead of reversing the changes on grants, the Government have just ploughed on regardless. They are wedded to

an outdated market-driven Thatcherism that is stuck in the late 20th century. They do not understand the changes of the 21st century or issues relating to our international competitors. In that respect, the Universities Minister has shown a degree of arrogance and complacency in failing to adjust. He pins his hopes on an explosion of new private providers while the threats to our existing world-class HE system are piling up all around him. That system, local economies and the UK economy will suffer if there is no change in this Government's addiction to these dangerously outdated models.

The Government are now panicking. A recent YouGov poll found that only 9% of 18 to 24-year-olds trust the Tories on education. As we have heard, the Chancellor and various others are tearing their hair out and scurrying around, trying to find quick fixes. Rachel Sylvester said in *The Times* this week:

"The Tories have smothered their own charm offensive at birth. It is the sense that their future is being stolen from them that has really fuelled the youthful rage against the ascent of the gerontocracy."

That reminds me that the Government Chief Whip's tarantula is called Cronus. Cronus is identified in Roman mythology as Saturn, who devoured his own children, so it is appropriate that that should apply to the Chief Whip and the Front-Bench team.

As I said, the tumbrel of ever-rising fees has hit everybody. This Minister and his colleagues are so besotted with the mantras and clapped-out ideologies of late Thatcherism that they have failed to see that nudging has become throttling for graduates. The list of their supportive groupies is shrinking and the evidence of dysfunction and short-termism is there to see. There is no narrative or strategy except the cobbling together of a minority Government of diminished expectations and little vision outside the coteries of private advantage. They have traditionally praised Benjamin Disraeli's one-nation Conservatism. Perhaps they should remember what he said about Gladstone's Ministers the year before they were defeated in a general election:

"behold a range of exhausted volcanoes. Not a flame flickers on a single pallid crest."

Well, there they sit, the 21st-century Theresa May versions of Disraeli's exhausted volcanoes.

We see that all around. We have set the vision. We have raised the parity of esteem. We have proposed a national education service. We have put those things forward. We are acting anew when the Government are stuck in the past. Acting anew means acting today to move past this ridiculous situation and to cut the fees, as we have proposed. I urge the House to approve the motion this evening.

6.50 pm

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): We have heard many excellent speeches this afternoon, particularly a splendid maiden speech by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill). That she is the first Sikh woman MP, and that she represents the constituency in which her father once drove the number 11 bus, is a powerful demonstration of the social mobility that all Members of this House want actively to promote. That theme of social mobility goes to the heart of this debate.

The Government aim to achieve an outstanding system of higher education that is open to all who have ability to learn and to benefit from it, and one that is

[Joseph Johnson]

fair to those taxpayers who do not directly benefit from higher education yet who are asked to contribute to its costs.

Going to university, as we have heard from many Members this afternoon, is a truly transformational step for young people, which is why this Government are truly proud of our record on increasing participation in higher education. We are ensuring that more people from disadvantaged backgrounds can share in those life-changing benefits than ever before. The entry rates of young people, including the disadvantaged, have reached record levels. Those are the foundations for improving social mobility, and the Government are committed to continuing that positive trend.

The regulations that the Labour party seeks to oppose are essential to the financial sustainability of our universities. They will help our universities deal with the erosion of their fee income brought about by inflation. Fees have been frozen in cash terms since 2012 and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns) said, £9,000 in 2012 will be worth just £8,000 in 2020. Clearly fees cannot be frozen forever. We cannot come back here in 10 or 15 years' time with fees still frozen at the current rate, not if we want a sustainable university sector that delivers on social mobility and other economic outcomes.

Indeed, the principle of preserving the real-terms value of university fees was central to the fee regime that the Labour party introduced in 2004, which allowed for regular increases to keep pace with inflation. This Government remain committed to a funding system that provides a fair deal to students while ensuring that universities are sustainably and properly financed, which is why, under these regulations, we are allowing providers to maintain their fees in line with inflation only if they can demonstrate that they are providing high-quality teaching and student outcomes. We are therefore imposing a higher standard and a greater degree of conditionality on universities than the Labour party put in place more than a decade ago.

Wes Streeting: If everything is so bright and rosy, why have we had an entire summer of parents and students complaining about fees going up when they have not had a better service? They are concerned that, although the Minister argues that inflation has kept funding down, vice-chancellors' pay has rocketed. How can we shake him out of that complacency?

Joseph Johnson: We are determined to secure good value for money for students and taxpayers who are investing in the system. That has been at the heart of our reforms. As the hon. Gentleman knows from being a dedicated member of Committees that have scrutinised our reforms in various ways, we are securing the value for money that will ensure that students and taxpayers feel the system is delivering for them and for their needs.

The sector has made it clear that an inflation-linked fee cap is essential for our universities to maintain and improve on their current high standards and to prosper in the long term. Gordon McKenzie, the chief executive of GuildHE, made that clear recently when he said 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."

The Government's policy is that fee caps should be linked to the quality of teaching, as we are doing in these regulations, and it is counter to Government policy for fee caps to rise in any other circumstances.

Wendy Morton: As the Minister will be aware, the OECD has said that the UK is

"one of the very few countries that has figured out a sustainable approach to higher education financing".

Does he agree that Labour's approach risks undermining that sustainability?

Joseph Johnson: Yes, I certainly do. To see that, we only need see what the OECD said yesterday in its latest report on global education systems. Andreas Schleicher, its eminent director, once again gave a ringing endorsement of the sustainability of our higher education system and pointed out that the way we have been successful in sharing the costs of funding the system between individual students and the general taxpayer has enabled us to meet rising demand for higher education and to lift the student number controls, which have been holding back young people from disadvantaged backgrounds for so long.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way—he has more courtesy than the Secretary of State. I am not arguing with what he is saying, but I wish briefly to talk about the Welsh system. What the Government are ignoring is the grant system the Welsh Government are introducing. It is a shame the Secretary of State could not have taken my intervention—I think this was something to do with being cowardly and ignoring the statement of what the Welsh Government are doing.

Joseph Johnson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the issue of the Welsh model. Interestingly, it is a Labour Government in Wales who now have the highest tuition fees of any part of the United Kingdom; the Welsh Government will be having fees in the next academic year of almost £9,300, as compared with the £9,250 we are proposing. He mentioned grants, so let us turn to that issue. The cost of mapping over the Welsh system to England would be more than £5 billion, so I challenge Labour Members to say exactly where they are going to find that extra £5 billion, on top of the £12 billion they are already going to be spending to abolish tuition fees and the £100 billion they are going to need to find to wipe off the student debt. So let us perhaps not hear any more about the Welsh model.

Let us turn to widening participation, which has been one of the signal achievements of our reforms. Alongside incentivising improvements in teaching, the Government's policies on student fees have allowed us to lift the student number cap, which is allowing more people than ever to benefit from a university education. The Leader of the Opposition, who has just joined us, stated in July:

"Fewer working-class young people are applying to university."

I invite him to intervene if he wants to stick by that statement. Apparently, he does not. It was outrageous and false, and it is a disgrace that he has not corrected himself. In 2016, disadvantaged 18-year-olds were 43% more likely to go to university than they were in 2009 and they were 52% more likely to go to a high-tariff university.

So his suggestion that young people are being held back if they are from disadvantaged backgrounds is patently untrue. The latest provisional data for 2017 show that the entry rate for disadvantaged 18-year-olds has increased again, to 20%, a new record high—

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Drop-out rates—

Joseph Johnson: The Leader of the Opposition asks about drop-out rates, so he will be interested to know that across all categories—young, mature, disadvantaged, and black and minority ethnic—those are lower now than they were in 2009 and 2010. He should look at the statistics before he challenges the Government's record on widening the participation and attainment of people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Labour's proposal to remove fees—

Mr Alan Campbell (Tynemouth) (Lab) *claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).*

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Main Question put accordingly.

Question agreed to.

Angela Rayner: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The vote we just had reflects that it is the will of this House that the increase in tuition fees be reversed. As was mentioned in the debate, it has taken far too long for the House to have the opportunity to vote on this issue. Now that it has, more than eight months since a motion to annul the regulations when they were first tabled, it has voted unanimously to revoke them. I seek your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker, as to how I may secure an undertaking from the Secretary of State that she will immediately give effect to the will of the House and reverse the rise in tuition fees. We have a constitutional crisis because the Government are running scared and not allowing votes in this House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Obviously, the House has expressed a view in support of the motion. However, it is an issue for the Secretary of State, who is present now and has been for much of the debate. I am sure that she will wish to reflect on the view of the House and decide how to proceed. It is not a matter for the Chair; it is a matter for the Secretary of State.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Unless I was totally mistaken, we just had a vote. I heard the vote and you decided it on acclamation. The hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) is wrong to say that there has not been a vote.

Madam Deputy Speaker: As I said, the House has expressed a view. The Secretary of State has been in the Chamber and heard the expression of the view of the House. It is now up to the Secretary of State to decide how to take forward the view of the House.

Wes Streeting: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Earlier this week, I raised a point of order, because I believed that in Education questions the shadow Minister of State, Department for Education,

the right hon. Member for Guildford (Anne Milton), who is present in the Chamber, made an inaccurate statement—

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): The Minister.

Wes Streeting: Excuse me; it was wishful thinking. In response to my question in Education questions, the Minister of State made what I believe to be a factually inaccurate, possibly inadvertently misleading statement, when she said that Learndirect would no longer be providing apprenticeships. The following day, I rather forensically set out that that was not the case. As she is present, perhaps she might take this opportunity to correct the record and give us some reassurance that Ministers have an idea about what they are doing.

Madam Deputy Speaker: As the hon. Gentleman said, the Minister is here and has heard his point of order. I am sure she will consider how to respond to it.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. It could be argued that the first motion that was agreed to this afternoon was a general statement of the House's opinion, but the second motion, which has just been agreed to, revokes legislation. It states that the regulations should be revoked. If the House agrees to a motion that revokes legislation, how can the Government just carry on as though nothing has happened?

Madam Deputy Speaker: As I have said, the situation this evening is that the House has expressed a view about the regulations, and, as I have said, it is up to the Secretary of State to decide how to proceed. The hon. Gentleman might wish to pursue the matter in business questions tomorrow.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Some reports on social media say that it is the Government's intention not to participate in any Divisions on Opposition day motions for the rest of this Parliament. Would it be possible under the normal voice and vote provisions of "Erskine May" for hon. Members of this House to vote no in an acclamation, but to vote in the opposite Division Lobby should there then be a Division, thereby enabling the House to see the opinions of everybody present? My understanding is that that would be possible if the Government continued with that line.

Madam Deputy Speaker: It is not a matter for the Chair how Members individually or collectively choose to vote. At the moment, this is rather a hypothetical question. However, this is something that hon. and right hon. Members might like to raise at business questions tomorrow.

PETITIONS

Bangor-on-Dee Post Office

7.5 pm

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): I rise to present this petition about Bangor-on-Dee Post Office. I really hope that the Government and the Post Office will take note of what is happening here and in other rural communities right around the country.

[Susan Elan Jones]

The petition states:

The Petition of residents of Clwyd South,

Declares that Bangor-on-Dee Post Office is a central part of the community and that the services it offers are invaluable; and further that its closure will mean the loss of vital Post Office and banking services which will have a catastrophic effect on the rural community currently served by Bangor-on-Dee Post Office. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make provisions to ensure that Bangor-On-Dee Post Office remains open and available for use by the community.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002056]

Development In Kings Langley

7.7 pm

Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I wish to present a petition that was put together by the community in Kings Langley in my constituency. Even though we have had to slightly amend the wording for parliamentary rules, 1,200-plus of my constituents signed the petition against the inappropriate development proposed in Kings Langley.

The petition states:

The Petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that the proposal to cram 40 retirement homes on the edge of a conservation area on a site between the lower common and Hempstead Road, where currently there are four houses, would lead to over-development, threaten wildlife, damage the character of the conservation area, exacerbate parking problems, place a burden on local services and accelerate Kings Langley's drift towards becoming a built up, urban area. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Kings Langley's Parish Council and Dacorum Borough Council to

reject the proposal to cram 40 retirement homes on the edge of a conservation area on a site between the lower common and Hempstead Road.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002057]

The Redwell fields, Wellingborough

7.8 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I rise to present a petition on behalf of the Save our Park campaign. It has more than 800 signatures. My role in this is to present the petition on behalf of my constituents to get their voice heard. The body deciding the issue is the borough council of Wellingborough and I would not want to express my own personal opinion on the issue. The petition is presented by Anne Coles, Suzanne Saunders and Jeremy Gold.

The petition states:

The Petition of residents of Wellingborough,

Declares that the petitioners strongly object to the building of a 3G sports pitch on Redwell Field open 8am until 10pm weekdays and 8am until 8pm weekends; further that the location is wrong; further that our field is for recreation, dog walking, wildlife, free football and cricket, running and other sports; further that it is a place where families relax in a quiet pleasant residential area; further that the planned 3G sports pitch will mean that the petitioners' children have nowhere to play; further that the residents will suffer noise, traffic, light pollution and other inconvenience; further that the pitch will spoil the character of the area; and further that the park should not be spoiled. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to urge Wellingborough Council to reject the planning application of a 3G sports pitch on Redwell Field.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002058]

Employment Tribunals

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

7.10 pm

Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I will raise the case of a constituent that has far-reaching concerns for those across the House. I have been joined by my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), who will probably intervene. The subject of the debate is an unfair dismissal tribunal.

My constituent Anna Hardie came to see me at my surgery. Her husband had been ill for some time. She was very worried because he was really stressed at work—I will not, in any way during this short debate, say who would have been right and who would have been wrong should the case have got to a tribunal for unfair dismissal—so they eventually decided as a family that he would leave that employment.

The family had financial commitments so Anna's husband, Gordon, first wanted to get back into work. Then, Anna told me, they wanted to claim for unfair dismissal. Anna believed that they had actually submitted a case for unfair dismissal. It was a difficult time as her husband was very stressed and unwell when he came home from work, but she thought that that had happened. Gordon was 40 years of age. In January, he died of a heart condition, which Anna and some of the specialists feel was exacerbated by the stress.

Anna has a family and, as I am sure the Minister can imagine, it must have been an enormously stressful time for them. First they were worried about their finances and Gordon finding a new job, although he then found a new job. But they were still also worried about the tribunal. Then, of course, came the terrible situation of Gordon passing away at 40, which must have been absolutely appalling for the family. The autopsy clearly showed that he had an underlying condition, which is why he had been so tired and stressed when he came home from work.

Once Anna got her affairs together, she wanted to proceed with a constructive dismissal claim on behalf of her deceased husband. But when she went to the preliminary hearings, not only was she cross-examined by the company's legal team—asking why she did not come forward earlier, whether her husband had really wanted to go for constructive dismissal and so on—at a time when she was still mourning and under a great deal of stress, but the judge also ruled that she was out of time. The time-barred rule had come in because the three-month limit had passed.

The judge did have a degree of ability to decide that the case could be heard and moved on to a tribunal because of the exceptional circumstances. However, I have learned that one of the problems is that there are different rules on exceptional circumstances rulings for judges at different tribunals, even those under the same Department. I would argue that, in natural justice—or just in humanity—someone who had been through such a traumatic time and lost their husband at such a young age would surely fit the criteria. But the judge ruled that Anna could not bring a claim, and the case was dismissed—without the judge hearing any evidence about what could have brought on some of the problems that led to Anna's situation.

I am not going to say whether Anna would have won or lost if she had got to the tribunal—that is not for us to decide in this House. What we are looking for for our constituents is natural justice, and what Anna wants is not just natural justice for her, although we would like to meet the Minister to see whether there is an opportunity to take her claim forward. She can appeal the decision, but if the appeal is based on the same criteria, and possibly in front of the same judge she was in front of in the first place, the logic is that she will not be successful.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a compelling case for his constituent about the importance of access to justice. However, the case he makes about the time limit on accessing justice involves other groups of people as well, and particularly women who may be subject to discrimination at work and who may need to seek redress through a tribunal, but who have only three months to do that, when they may well be pregnant or have very small children. Does he agree that reviewing the three-month period could be an important thing for the Government to do?

Mike Penning: Absolutely. My right hon. Friend touches on exactly what I am coming to.

Because the different tribunals have different rules, it is really difficult to find out whether someone's exceptional circumstances will be accepted. One thing Anna and I discussed in my surgery is what would happen if someone had had a nervous breakdown, had been sectioned or had been in a road traffic accident and was not well enough to make a claim in time. Would the judge rule that those were exceptional circumstances, or would the person be time-barred?

One thing the Minister should look at is simplifying the process—I had a preliminary conversation with her earlier, and she was very generous with her time with me. We should ask why there are so many different rules on this. I was lucky enough to be a Minister in the Justice Department and the Department for Work and Pensions—I have been a Minister in lots of Departments, although not now—and there are different tribunals in each of them. I thought this was an issue for the Justice Department when I discussed it with my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke, but it has ended up with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, because that is the right place for it to be.

However, if we are going to have tribunals and natural justice, and if we are going to get this right, we should move from three months to six months so that people have time to mourn or to get well before they have to bring a claim. Then we should give the judges proper, simple guidance about what the exceptional circumstances would be if someone needed to appeal outside that time.

Six months would limit things quite a bit. I know there are arguments that people might forget what went on or that the company would be left in abeyance, but that is not going to happen a huge amount of times. What we are looking for is fairness and natural justice, and our constituents have the right to feel that justice has fitted them. I am not saying that Anna would have won or lost, but she never had the opportunity to stand up for her husband, and now she wants to stand up for others. I hope the Minister will spend some more time with me after the debate so that I can introduce her to Anna.

[Mike Penning]

More importantly, I hope the Minister can try to change the system. I know how difficult it is to change the system. I have been a Minister—my right hon. Friend was a Secretary of State—and I know how many brick walls will come up. The Chinese walls and everything will come up, and there will be a million and one reasons why we cannot resolve this, but there is one reason why we should—and that is Gordon Hardie, Anna's husband.

7.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mike Penning) on securing today's important debate, and I extend my heartfelt condolences to Mrs Hardie for the loss of her husband.

I am aware of the *Law Society Gazette* article on my hon. Friend's constituency case relating to unfair dismissal and how the judge treated the matter of discretion. Although I cannot comment on the detail, I am very sympathetic to the position in which Mrs Hardie finds herself, and, of course, I am very happy to meet her with my hon. Friend.

I can confirm that the "just and equitable" test is wider than the "reasonably practicable" test. A tribunal can extend time for bringing a discrimination claim forward where it considers it just and equitable to do so. For unfair dismissal cases, the claimant must demonstrate that it was not reasonably practicable to bring the claim within three months for the tribunals to extend the time and to allow the claim to proceed. Case law has established that demonstrating that it was not reasonably practicable is a more demanding test than establishing that it is just and equitable for the claim to proceed. This is what Parliament has set out in legislation. The time limit in both cases is stipulated in the relevant Act. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing this issue to my attention, because I was not aware of the impact that the difference in wording can have in cases such as that of his constituent.

Mike Penning: One of things that was so distressing to Anna was that she was cross-examined about whether she had had conversations with her husband and asked where was the proof. There is no proof that I proposed to my wife. It was a very personal thing between me and her—there is no written evidence about the proposal. To say in a cross-examination that she had no proof that her husband wanted to do this, even though Anna had clearly discussed it with him, is abhorrent. She was cross-examined at a time that was enormously distressing for her.

Margot James: Although I said I could not comment on the details of the case, I must say, given what my hon. Friend says, that there are situations in which the law itself is insufficient to guide the behaviour of barristers in their work. I find myself very sympathetic to the concern and horror expressed by my hon. Friend.

Mike Penning: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Margot James: Yes, I would be delighted. I wanted to refer to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), but before I do so I will give way to my hon. Friend.

Mike Penning: Can I just say that I have had the honour of kissing the Queen, so I am a right hon. Member? That might give the Minister a bit of time to find the right page. It is sometimes hard to do that; it has happened to me on more than one occasion. It was a great pleasure to have kissed the Queen's hand.

Margot James: I do apologise to my right hon. Friend—and indeed to my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke. Towards the end of the day, one forgets these terms, but they are important.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke raised the issue of pregnant women or women who have just given birth and the time limit in respect of bringing cases to employment tribunals. She and I have discussed this in the past, and I am aware of the recommendations of her Select Committee, the Women and Equalities Committee, on this point. I can confirm that we are reviewing whether we need stronger protection against redundancy for pregnant women and women returning from maternity leave. We will consult on options in due course, and we would very much welcome her views during that process.

Mrs Miller: I warmly welcome my hon. Friend's announcement, which will draw very positive comments from well beyond these walls. Could that review perhaps be extended to cover the points raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mike Penning), who has made a most compelling case for people who are in the particular circumstances that his constituent found herself?

Margot James: I thank my right hon. Friend, who makes a sensible proposal. I hesitate to make too much of a commitment based on one case, no matter how harrowing it is. I think I must first meet Anna, if I may call her by her first name, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead. However, I will certainly take the suggestion by my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke into consideration, as we are indeed reviewing the position with regard to pregnant women and women returning from maternity leave.

I have not said much about bringing cases to employment tribunals, but the first step, of course, is for people to refer themselves to the arbitration service ACAS. The Government are committed to encouraging people to resolve their workplace disputes without the stress and cost of an employment tribunal. I reiterate that I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead for bringing this harrowing case to my attention. Although I have had to reserve my position regarding whether to include the situation in which his constituent finds herself—

Mike Penning *rose*—

Margot James: Was that a request for another intervention? Of course I will give way to my right hon. Friend.

Mike Penning: I thank the Minister for agreeing to meet my constituent. She has opened a Pandora's box, because she has quite rightly said that she wants to see other evidence to show that this is not a one-off. I took advice, as she probably saw from the article in the *Law Society Gazette*, from eminent lawyers, including Kerry Underwood from Underwoods Solicitors, who is a specialist

in this area. She will find that not one, not two, but lots and lots of cases like this have been time-barred, when common sense and natural justice might have suggested that they should be allowed to go through.

Margot James: In the case that there turns out to be a substantial body of evidence, as my right hon. Friend has indicated, I am sure that it will be very persuasive. I suggest that he invites the relevant Minister from the

Ministry of Justice to join our meeting, because responsibility for this matter is shared across two Departments. With that, I conclude my remarks and thank my right hon. Friend again for bringing this matter to the attention of the House.

Question put and agreed to.

7.26 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 13 September 2017

[MR GEORGE HOWARTH *in the Chair*]

Autism Diagnosis

9.30 am

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered a waiting time standard for autism diagnosis.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. During the last general election campaign, I attended a hustings in Enfield, Southgate organised by the local branch of the National Autistic Society. Following that meeting, and after further discussions with constituents and others on issues related to autism, I decided to request a debate on the matter. During this debate, I will briefly describe the effects of autism and explain the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence's diagnostic assessment standard. I will also question why that standard is not being adhered to, explain the impact of late diagnosis and propose a way forward to the Minister.

As some people may be aware, autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with and relates to others and makes sense of the world around them. It is a spectrum condition and affects individuals to varying degrees.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): All my constituents who contacted me about this issue are very concerned about the time taken for diagnosis. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important to have a consistent approach right across the country—like in Wales, where last year the Welsh Government introduced a national autism strategy?

Bambos Charalambous: My hon. Friend makes a valid point: consistency is required across the range.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman talked about diagnosis times. In Northern Ireland, we fall foul of the 13-week standard, with some times peaking at 22 months. We have a vast shortage of psychologists. Does he agree that a massive recruitment drive is needed to reduce those times and achieve the standard?

Bambos Charalambous: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point; I will refer to the requirement of additional resources later.

Autism usually first manifests itself in young children: four to five years old is the average age at which it is diagnosed, with girls being diagnosed later and less frequently than boys. Some people are not diagnosed until they are adults, after which they are then able to make better sense of things. Some of the early signs of autism include underdeveloped communication and attention skills, such as not establishing eye contact or responding to one's name. It is widely acknowledged that autism can be reliably diagnosed at age two, and that early diagnosis is absolutely critical to allow parents and carers to receive the support they need so that they

can give their child the best start in life that they can. It is safe to say that everyone supporting a child with autism benefits from early diagnosis.

Before looking at the NICE guidelines, I will reference the primary piece of legislation that covers autism: the Autism Act 2009, introduced as a private Member's Bill by the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan). It was adopted by the Labour Government of the day and became law. Section 1 of the Act states that the Secretary of State must publish an autism strategy by April 2010, and must keep that strategy under review. In March 2010, an autism strategy was drawn up, and it covered: increasing awareness; developing a consistent pathway for diagnosis; improving access to services; helping adults with autism into work; and enabling local partners to plan and develop local services. Section 2 deals with guidance about implementing the autism strategy, with subsection (5) stating that that must include guidance about diagnosing autism, identifying adults with autism and assessing their needs.

Following the granting of Royal Assent to the Autism Act and the drawing up of the autism strategy, NICE acknowledged the need for early diagnosis. In paragraph 1.5.1 of its "Autism spectrum disorder in under 19s: recognition, referral and diagnosis" guidance, under the heading "Autism diagnostic assessment for children and young people", it states that autism diagnostic assessment should start

"within 3 months of the referral to the autism team."

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that there needs to be support for the whole family of children with autism, especially when they are waiting so long for diagnosis? Will he also join me in celebrating a local charity in my constituency called Aim Higher, which supports and empowers children and parents with autism, and in congratulating it on being named Sainsbury's local charity of the year?

Bambos Charalambous: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about the need to support families and carers, and it sounds as though Aim Higher is doing a fantastic job in her constituency. I congratulate it on doing a much-needed job.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Returning to support for families, is it not right that the functional needs of the child and the support for parents trying to address those functional needs could be addressed immediately, even without a diagnosis? That needs to be put into the system now.

Bambos Charalambous: Support early on is very much needed, and I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. In the early years, when parents and carers are trying to make sense of the situation, it is essential that they get the support they need from other agencies and that that is provided for.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The private Member's Bill—later, the 2009 Act—was vital, but it has been too long since that time. We need action now. I chair the Westminster Commission on Autism, and a member of my family is on the autism spectrum.

[Mr Barry Sheerman]

It is time to act now, to make the service universal for every child and to support every family. I hope that everyone's interest will be regenerated today so that we can carry on the battle.

Bambos Charalambous: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. One of the areas I referred to previously was the need for the 2009 Act to be reviewed by the Secretary of State. Perhaps that is the way forward, but I await the Minister's response.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): We are entering the period of reviewing the implementation of the 2009 Act. It will shortly be the 10th anniversary of the Act as well, so it is important that that is followed through on a cross-party basis. I assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government will certainly be, and are already being, held to account.

Bambos Charalambous: I thank the right hon. Lady for that helpful intervention; we look forward to seeing how that progresses.

The autism diagnostic assessment should start within three months of referral to the autistic team. That standard was set by independent experts, and for good reason. It is a fact that autistic people who are not diagnosed early enough are also highly likely to develop other neurodevelopmental conditions, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder—ADHD—dyslexia or dyspraxia. Early diagnosis and intervention could help to reduce the prevalence of those additional conditions.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Does he agree that the NICE guidelines he alluded to are not figures simply plucked out of the air, but are carefully considered? What is vital is that if they are implemented people can get the support and assistance that they often need for this condition.

Bambos Charalambous: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. The NICE guidelines are drawn up by experts who are qualified in their field, and it is only with the collaboration of the experts that the guidelines are set. They are set by experts and should be strictly adhered to.

The delay between referral and diagnosis not only causes more potential harm to children, but leads to untold stress and anxiety for parents and carers who cannot understand their child. If the delay was a matter of weeks, that would be bad enough, but thanks to research done by Dr Laura Crane at Goldsmiths, University of London we now know that in a sample of 1,047 parents who were surveyed, the average delay from referral by a health professional to diagnosis was three and a half years. The delay was more than four years for children diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome.

The delay is alarming, and I have had difficulty corroborating it with any Government data. That is because data on the length of time from referral to diagnosis of autism are not collected by NHS trusts or clinical commissioning groups, so there is no way of holding the NHS to account for that failing. Since this debate was made public, I have had numerous tweets

and emails, as have colleagues, that support the findings of Dr Laura Crane's study and suggest that the delay in diagnosis is taking years, not months.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that NICE needs to look at reviewing its guidance? It is not just about the first appointment. There is a risk that there is gaming of the system. People get their first appointment, but then it is stretched out to three and a half years, as we know. Getting the diagnosis is the critical thing.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. Before I call Bambos Charalambous, I should say that those seeking to make a speech in the debate may consider it unnecessary to make an intervention, enabling those who for one reason or another cannot make a speech to make a short intervention. I say that in an advisory sense; it is up to the hon. Gentleman whether he accepts any interventions. As they glance around the Chamber, Members will become aware that it will be difficult to get everyone in.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): The right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) makes a good point about the need for proper assessment of when the final diagnosis is actually made. It may not be at the first appointment; more than one appointment may be needed before the final diagnosis is established. It is absolutely vital that these diagnoses are made as soon as possible.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech in a timely debate. In light of this debate, a constituent contacted me and shared her very distressing experience of the five long years she waited for a diagnosis for her son. He requires support in every aspect of life and has suffered academically and socially while waiting for that diagnosis. Does my hon. Friend agree that waiting times are far too long? The damaging effects are long-lasting and a poor economic outcome for the country.

Bambos Charalambous: My hon. Friend makes the excellent point that the delay in diagnosing autism leads to further economic and social concerns that may have an adverse impact on society in general. That point was very well made.

NICE also has a quality standard for adults with autism, which again recommends that people should have a diagnostic assessment within three months of referral. NICE's rationale for that states:

"It is important that the assessment is conducted as soon as possible so that appropriate health and social care interventions, advice and support can be offered."

In my constituency of Enfield, Southgate there is currently no local diagnostic pathway. That means that an adult looking for assessment and a possible diagnosis could not have it done at North Middlesex hospital or Chase Farm hospital—or even Barnet General or the Royal Free, which are within the trust. Instead, they would have to be referred to the Maudsley hospital in south London—a distance of more than 23 miles. While I respect the excellent work that the Maudsley hospital does in mental health, I find it staggering that my constituents not only have to wait three years before

getting an appointment for diagnosis, but then have to travel 23 miles to access the services. I suspect the distances may be longer for colleagues in other parts of the country.

Some parents and carers cannot bear the long wait and so feel compelled to pay privately to have their child diagnosed, putting them under extra unnecessary financial pressure in an already stressful situation. Once correctly diagnosed, a child will receive the support they need in schooling and wellbeing via a specifically designed local education, health and care plan, which could have life-changing effects.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): On that point, a constituent, Zoe, explained to me how the diagnostic procedures are outdated. Some children are not being diagnosed as autistic because they can do things such as make eye contact, and then that diagnosis is proved to be wrong. She also said:

“If you become desperate and obtain a private diagnosis with an expert in the field, you are made to feel that you have bought the result and it is not seen as valid by schools and other SEN professionals. I think that the worst thing is the treatment of parents who are trying to help their child under what are extremely stressful and upsetting circumstances. Your parenting skills and your mental health are questioned regularly.”

Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a problem?

Bambos Charalambous: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Sometimes the private assessment is not recognised by the local CCG, so referral does not take place as planned, leading to more stress on families and children. I have enormous sympathy with her constituent who has faced that situation.

We all know that the early years of a child's life are so vital for their long-term development. If a child does not get a good start, it is always hard to catch up. Research conducted by the charity Autistica has found that a programme of parent-led video therapy delivered during the early years of an autistic child's life could significantly improve their communication and social interaction skills. People who are not diagnosed until adulthood can experience depression and have suicidal thoughts.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that Autistica's research also indicates that people with an autism diagnosis, once they get it, can have an increased risk of mental health conditions? In fact, such young people are 28 times more likely to consider suicide than other young people, and that affects adults who do not receive a diagnosis, too. People who have autism have an increased risk of suicide.

Bambos Charalambous: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Other additional conditions can develop, and suicidal tendencies are one of them. Other mental health conditions can similarly manifest themselves in young people in particular. I congratulate her on looking at that research.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is being very generous in giving way. He is making such an important speech, and I congratulate him on calling this debate. One of my constituents wrote to me about how she was diagnosed as autistic in her 40s and the struggle she had in getting past her doctor. She said that once she had that diagnosis, it was life-changing, because she could understand that she

was not lazy, weird or anything else; she was autistic. She wrote to me to say that she believes there is a need for greater training of GPs to spot the signs of autism. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Bambos Charalambous: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Sometimes the behaviours for autism in women and girls are not picked up as much as they are in boys, because they do not always display the behaviours that would lead someone to detect autism. I wish her constituent well for the future.

The lengthy delay in diagnosis can lead not only to the development of further secondary conditions to autism, but will invariably end up costing the NHS more money for more GP appointments, emergency admissions and reliance on mental health services at a time of crisis. In addition, delayed diagnosis has a disproportionate effect on women. Girls are often diagnosed late as they do not always display the same classic behaviour associated with autism as boys do.

How can the situation be remedied? I urge the Minister to consider implementing three things. First, we need to ensure that the NHS collects and publishes data for each NHS trust or CCG from the date that a child is referred to them until the date of diagnosis. At present there is no such requirement, so such a database should be cemented in the NHS accountability frameworks and should be held by the CCGs in their improvement and assurance frameworks. CCGs and the NHS trusts should be measured by how they perform on referrals and diagnoses.

Secondly, we need more investment in the NHS. To miss a standard set by NICE by more than three years leads me to believe that the Government are not really trying hard enough when it comes to ensuring that the children are seen and properly diagnosed within a timely period. It is scandalous that children's futures are put at risk in such a way. Although the Minister may say that the three months is only a guideline and not mandatory, I believe the guideline should be strictly adhered to. The guidance is there for a reason.

We also need more specialist units to deal with diagnosing autism. We have in recent months heard some bold promises from the Government about funding for mental health, but we have yet to see any sign of firm action. We need investment in the NHS and we need it now.

Finally, we need to ensure that the improved record-keeping of autism diagnosis helps to identify where there are gaps, and that work can begin to tackle the health inequalities we face. I wish to thank the National Autistic Society and Autistica, and also the House of Commons Library for its excellent briefings on this matter. I await the Minister's response.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I should point out that many people wish to contribute, so there will be a time limit of three minutes starting from when the next speaker sits down. I apologise for that, but it is the only way we can try to get everybody in. Even then, it is unlikely that everybody who is down to speak will be called.

9.51 am

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I will try not to take up too much time.

[Mrs Cheryl Gillan]

I welcome the Minister to her place and look forward to hearing how she responds to the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous). I add my congratulations, which I am sure will be echoed around this Chamber, to him on securing this important debate.

I am proud to be chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on autism, which has a wide membership across all parties. I like to think that this is one subject about which we do not need to be party political; we can all work together to try to secure better outcomes for people with autism and their families. I hope that the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate and other new Members will join the APPG. Forgive me for the advertisement, but if they ring my office we will put them on the list and let them know what we are up to.

May I also welcome a very unusual appearance in this Chamber? I see that the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), is here. We do not often see a Minister from another Department who is not called upon to speak coming in to listen to a debate. I am encouraged by that and I thank her for being here, because it shows how seriously we take this matter.

If I remember correctly, the last time we were in this Chamber to debate autism was in a debate secured by the late Jo Cox. We all acknowledge that she was a great Member of Parliament, and she had also begun to champion autism in a major way. We are grateful for her contribution, which will long be remembered in this House. It is worth looking back at that debate to see how far we have come since then and what measures are being put in place to bring down diagnosis waiting times, because all of us, including the Government, were in agreement that people are waiting too long for diagnosis—that is a given.

Last year I had the honour of chairing a well-attended APPG public meeting on this issue. Those who were there might remember hearing from Melanie, whose son Sam had waited nine years to receive a formal diagnosis. Concerns were first raised only two weeks after he started school. She was passed from agency to agency until finally, at age 14, her son was given a formal diagnosis.

Melanie told us how frustrated she was at the number of missed opportunities to pick up on Sam's basically hidden needs. It meant that she could not put in place vital support to help him when he was young, which she believes has had a significant impact on his development and, as one of the interventions alluded to, on the subsequent mental health problems he faced. It is sad to say, but she now regrets having pushed her son to fit in and socialise, because that caused him an enormous amount of stress. Although a nine-year wait is an extreme example, the stories that our constituents tell us clearly show that we need to do more to reduce waiting times.

Let me touch once more on the importance of ensuring that we properly record diagnosis waiting times and break down the data by local area. The National Autistic Society has asked that diagnosis waiting times for children and adults become part of the mental health services data set and that measures are developed so that waiting times for diagnosis become part of the NHS's accountability

frameworks. I think that we could all agree on that. If those recommendations were taken forward in full, that would allow Members here to assess how well their local area was doing and to be assured that diagnosis waiting times were being prioritised locally, while supporting constituents to hold their local services to account. After all, that is what we are here for.

The Government have indicated previously that they are working towards a better methodology for recording autism diagnosis, but it would help if the Minister could put on the record the work that the Government are doing in this area and when Members can expect to start seeing the data, which will help us all.

I also want to highlight the data that should currently exist for diagnosis waiting times for adults. The Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), is no doubt aware that a report on the results of the autism self-assessment framework was published in June. The self-assessment framework is a survey that is sent regularly to top-tier local councils in England to ask them to report on local implementation of the Autism Act 2009, which I introduced. Although the overview of the results across England was published in June, the Government still have not published the local area breakdowns on which it was based. That omission has meant that Members here are unable to scrutinise how their own local areas are performing. For example, we are aware that one local authority is reporting a 125-week waiting time. I am sure that the Members who represent that currently unnamed local area will want to know that information as soon as possible—I certainly would.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Lady for stating that this issue is not party political. Although the UK Government have introduced an Autism Act, it does not include children and has no funding attached to it, whereas the Welsh Government are investing millions in an innovative national integrated service. As well as investing millions in neurodevelopmental assessment services for children, they have introduced a 26-week waiting time target from referral to first appointment. Does the right hon. Lady think that patients in England would benefit from the Government looking at good practice in the devolved nations to improve services in England?

Mrs Gillan: As a former Secretary of State for Wales, I welcome all the initiatives taken in Wales on this matter. An earlier intervention indicated that Wales had only recently introduced an autism strategy, but in fact Wales introduced an autism strategy back in 2008, before the Bill was introduced, so they are to be congratulated on taking that original initiative—I am not proud; I will learn from any quarter where we can improve our services.

My memory of introducing the Autism Bill is not a pleasant one. The Government of the day opposed it, but we defeated them on Second Reading of a private Member's Bill on a Friday. That was why they decided to allow their draftsmen to work with me to produce a piece of legislation that they would accept. I decided that it was better to get that on to the statute book at the time, rather than to try to broaden the scope of the legislation. However, the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) is right. I was disappointed, but that is what I was able to get through at the time, and I felt that it was important.

Can the Minister commit to looking into the local area waiting times and publishing the breakdown as soon as possible? It is worth noting that concerns have been expressed about the waiting times data provided by the self-assessment framework. Some have described it as local areas marking their own homework, with little oversight, which does none of us any good. Including data on autism diagnosis in the mental health services data set, as I have outlined already, would help make sure that data are recorded properly and accurately.

Before I sit down, I want to touch quickly on the issue of mental health and autism, which has already been alluded to in interventions. Autism is not a mental health condition in itself, but research indicates that as many as 70% of autistic people may develop mental health problems. The lack of a timely diagnosis contributes to that and can mean that autistic children and adults develop mental health problems. A diagnosis can help to unlock the right types of support for autistic people and their families, which can prevent the development of problems further down the line.

In addition, autistic people diagnosed as adults frequently report how transformational that diagnosis is in helping explain years—in some cases, decades—of feeling different. More than 60% of respondents to a National Autistic Society survey describe getting their diagnosis as a great relief. In some of the most serious cases, autistic adults have reported that prior to their diagnosis they have not only experienced serious mental health problems, but even had suicidal thoughts, as the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) mentioned earlier.

Research from Sweden suggests that suicide rates are significantly higher among autistic people than the rest of the general public. The Swedish study, which I recommend that Members read, showed that autistic people who did not have a learning disability were nine times more likely to commit suicide than the general population. It is worth remembering that the Swedish healthcare system is different from ours. However, given the seriousness of those findings, it is vital to find out whether that also applies to the UK and, if so, to understand the reasons for that. I hope that the Minister will commit to investigating issues of mortality and autism, and highlight what proposals the Government might have more widely to ensure that autistic people's mental health problems are better dealt with by the NHS.

I welcome this opportunity to get an update from the Government on how we are progressing in this vital area. The stories of the time that it has taken for families to get the right support in place are truly heartbreaking. From looking at the latest statistics, we see that every Member of this House will have at least 1,000 constituents who are affected by autism, so this is not just a problem for one; it is a problem for all.

I have an aim. I feel passionately that we should ensure that every single public-facing person employed by the Government or the state—whether a teacher, a nurse or a fireman—at some stage during their training has a module on autism, so that the wider state can really understand the needs of people and their families, and respond accordingly. I look forward to continuing to work with the Government not only on how we can get the waiting times down, but on how we can broaden the quality of the services that we offer to people with

autism and their families. Once again, I congratulate the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate on initiating this debate.

10.2 am

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) on securing the debate.

Like many other Members here, I have met constituents who have talked to me not only about the difficulty of diagnosis, but the importance of getting a diagnosis. I have also heard of the difficulty that both children and adults face when trying to access the services required to support their everyday lives. I stand here today as someone who has worked as an advocate for people with disabilities since 1999—in my previous life—and in our family, my brother and sister-in-law are full-time carers to a young man who is autistic, and the father of my children continues to provide respite for two young men who are autistic, so I am very familiar with the issue of autism.

The story I really want to share today is that of young Mustafa, who will be five years old in October. His parents, Aweis Asghar and Neela Fawad, have had many conversations about the fact that Mustafa was recently diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder. It took 12 months for that diagnosis and a further six months to have an education, health and care plan assessment by the local authority. At a time when young parents should be enjoying spending time with their only child—getting him to school and doing all the normal things—a diagnosis of autism has a massive impact not only on that family, but on the wider family unit: their work life, home life and everything. They are trying to understand something unique to their child. No two children on the spectrum are the same, and no parents will ever feel the same; they all handle things differently.

Aweis told me this morning that in America an assessor comes to the parents' house, offers advice and guidance on the world of autism, and understands their child as an individual. Here, parents are left to their own devices. Not everybody has the level of education or the time, because of work pressures, required to do what it takes to get their child the support they need. When they get that support, it is usually from local charities, local support groups and other parents, as opposed to statutory services, which is where the ownership for making those interventions and supporting families should lie. Aweis also told me—we have talked extensively about this—that there are no clear pathways anywhere and that we do not follow the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines.

I want to ask the Government for a few things today. First, we need to revisit the NICE guidelines and ensure that we put in place the right pathways. We need to understand that every child is an individual and create their care packages individually. Secondly, the Government need to have a consistent approach across the country for every child.

10.5 am

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) on securing the debate, and I

[Helen Whately]

am pleased to see so many people in the Chamber; it reflects the level of concern about the waiting times for autism diagnosis.

First, I welcome the efforts that clearly are being taken by Governments and local authorities to provide more support for children and adults with autism. Just last week, the doubling of the number of health visitors since 2010 was brought to my attention in my constituency. That has had benefits in supporting young families and, in particular, parents, when their child is not behaving as they expected. There are good things going on, but I want to talk briefly about the gap between the NICE guidelines on waiting times and what appears to be happening on the ground.

When I talk to parents in my constituency, it is clear that their experience does not involve a three-month waiting time. I have several accounts from parents who have experienced much longer waits. For example, one set of parents raised concerns when their child was four. That child is now 10 and they still do not have a diagnosis, despite many professionals seeing the child and indicating that they think that they are on the autism spectrum. In another family, the mother raised concerns when her son was 15 months old and the child was nearly four before she got a diagnosis. During that period, not only did the child regress and go, for instance, from talking to not talking and communicating to not communicating, but a lot of concern was raised about the mother's mental health. Rather than her being given support to look after the child, it was all about whether she had mental health problems. She went for all the support that she could get, but it very much felt like the focus was not on supporting the child. I have a whole raft of such stories.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Helen Whately: We are very short of time, so I had best press on.

I draw on examples in part because we do not have regional data on waiting times. I asked the local clinical commissioning group and was told that it does not have easy access to those data, so I do not know what the waiting times are—I just have stories that make it clear that they are extraordinarily long. My first request is therefore for more transparency about the data, as well as addressing the problem of parents saying that they are waiting to wait—that is, that they are being passed from one list to another. Let us have transparency. Let us have people who are waiting getting seen sooner and then, following the diagnosis, let us have really good support services, because the story is very patchy in that area, too.

10.8 am

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) on securing this important debate.

Waiting frustrates us all. Waiting for a bus, one might have expected it in just 10 minutes or so, and it is frustrating to have to wait a bit longer. Waiting to speak in a debate, it sometimes takes many hours to be called

—thankfully, not today. But how long should a parent wait if their child is not making friends, has difficulty communicating their needs, avoids eye contact and likes lining things up, and if they think that that child might have autism?

I mentioned on social media last week that I was going to speak in this debate. I have had more than 500 responses from people, each one telling me their story. Nichola has been told that she has to wait three years for her son to be assessed; Eleanor has been told she will have to wait four years for her daughter. Jodie-Marie said that that for her son it was two years, for Louise it was two years and for Janine it was three years. Leigh has a child who was referred last year and been given a first diagnostic appointment in June 2019.

Delays leave many families unable to obtain the education and social support they need, and mean that during the crucial years of child development children are not receiving optimal care. Stuart Dexter leads autism support charity Daisy Chain in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) and is in the Public Gallery today. He lives and breathes such stories of frustration every day.

Stuart told me that parents cannot understand why in Middlesbrough assessment takes four months to begin but in Stockton, the town next door, it takes three or four years. The two towns are next to each other and work with the same mental health trust, but have two completely different experiences of care. I can tell those parents why: there is no central leadership of the process, no measurement and no targets, and responsibility is fragmented. Local authorities and CCGs are not working together properly, and the staff delivering assessments work for four different organisations.

On behalf of hundreds of people in Stockton South living with autism, I will ask the Minister two questions. We all come into politics to make a difference and they are not party political. Will she include indicators on diagnosis waiting times in the mental health services data set, to measure how long it takes for people to get diagnosed? Will she commit to introducing a waiting time standard for autism diagnosis and to including it in the CCG improvement and assessment framework, setting a target for maximum waiting times? Those actions might seem small but they could be a huge and welcome leap forward in creating a diagnosis process that is fit for purpose. If they were included in the NHS mandate for 2018-19, we could make a massive difference for thousands of families.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. It might be helpful to announce that the three Front Benchers have generously agreed to cut their speeches to give us an additional six minutes. I will therefore be calling the Front Benchers from 10.36 am. Do the maths and try to accommodate all of your colleagues.

10.11 am

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) on securing the debate. I also congratulate the new Minister.

I have learned a lot about this issue from my local and national charity in Harlow, PACT for Autism, which does remarkable work for families. It has been made clear to me that, although there is help out there, as described today, the diagnosis process is incredibly complicated and goes on for years. A case in Harlow sums up everything that has been described:

“My son is 7 and we are going through the very slow and frustrating process of getting a diagnosis for ASD. We are a year into the process and...we have had 1 appointment with a paediatrician who confirmed he had High Functioning ASD and told us that she would see us in a few months to complete the background and then he would be diagnosed. She then backtracked and he has been put on a waiting list (9-12 months) for CDAC—I don't even know what this is and I'm assuming that after this we will be put on a waiting list for ADOS which we have been told is a minimum of a year. My husband spoke to her yesterday because we have been waiting for over a month for the outcome letter from our appointment. She told my husband that we would be better getting a private diagnosis and then the NHS would rubber stamp it. I am feeling a bit lost—there seems to be no clear process and I am not sure what I need to be asking the NHS for.”

The average waiting time for an autism diagnosis has been described as being between 2.5 and 3.5 years for children and 2.5 years for adults, which is far too long. It hurts parents, who are incredibly anxious to support their children; it hurts schools, which will not be receiving the funding they need to help their students reach full potential; and it hurts the children themselves, whose struggle to understand themselves and their autism may lead to mental health difficulties.

We need to recognise that some individuals with autism do not get a diagnosis until they are adults. I understand from PACT for Autism that it is seeing an increase in contact from adults seeking support because local GPs seem unaware of the diagnostic pathway for adults and are “reluctant” to refer patients. It is also important to consider the support and guidance available to individuals and families during and after diagnosis. The diagnosis process can be complicated, sometimes with no follow-ups from the NHS.

On a positive note, however, in Harlow we are lucky to have some fantastic support in schools such as Milwards primary and Passmores secondary, which have specialist autism units. Recently, I went to the opening of the renewed Milwards autism hub: what is being done there is extraordinary. I pay tribute to head teacher Katherine Henson.

I ask the Government what resources are being put in place to implement and enforce fair waiting times for autism diagnosis, and what guidelines can be put in place to ensure that individuals with autism and their families receive the support they need during and after the diagnosis process. Furthermore, I urge the Minister to visit PACT for Autism in Harlow.

10.15 am

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) on securing the debate and all the parents and voluntary groups who have clearly been galvanised and got so many Members to be in the Chamber this morning. That is a real tribute to them.

I will write to the Minister with my local examples of families with difficulties, but I want to bring the particular attention of the House and the Minister to a decision of

my mental health trust, South West London and St George's, and of the Merton CCG. Under pressure from the doubling of the number of referrals for autism assessment, the trusts decided simply to restrict the ability to refer. To combat the demand for diagnosis, they suggested that only those children displaying mental health problems would begin the diagnostic process. As we have learned in the debate, however, 30% of autistic children develop no further mental health problems. Girls in particular do not display autism until much later.

If the proposal goes ahead, therefore, a large number of my constituents will be living with undiagnosed autism. On 21 September, the five CCGs—Merton, Sutton, Wandsworth, Kingston and Richmond—will meet to decide whether a formal public consultation is needed. I ask the Minister directly to work with my local mental health trust and CCG to ensure that all those with autism in my constituency are given the diagnosis they need to receive support. They should certainly be involved in any consultation on changing procedures. Furthermore, those procedures should not change in a way that would mean that girls are less likely to receive a diagnosis.

A reduction in the diagnosis of autism in Merton would leave so many of my constituents without the specialist support they need. Such a reduction would be in the interests of no one, whether the individual or the state.

10.17 am

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I was asked to speak in this debate by one of my constituents, Nichola, who has a three-year-old son called Thomas. My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams) referred to them.

This is a very personal story but, before I get into it, I add my tribute to Daisy Chain, the charity based only a few hundred yards from my home in Stockton North that supports children with autism and their parents. I am pleased that the great Daisy Chain team are represented here today.

Thomas has many autistic traits, such as communications difficulties and limited speech, and is behind in all areas of development, including having sensory issues. He will have to wait more than three years for a formal autism diagnosis. That is simply not good enough, and the consequences could follow Thomas through the rest of his life. He has been refused an education, health and care plan; the very fact that he does not have an official diagnosis of autism means that it is harder for him to get one, so Thomas is at severe risk of falling even further behind his peers.

High-quality and appropriate early years education is critical for all children. I am sure that we are all aware of how important those years are in the development and future opportunities of a child, and yet we are in danger of denying that high-quality and appropriate education to Thomas and many children like him.

Thomas struggles in busy, loud environments, and he can lash out as a result. He needs special attention, extra care and that education, health and care plan. He attends a mainstream nursery that has gone beyond what it needs to do for Thomas, ensuring that he has a one-to-one staff member with him at all times.

[Alex Cunningham]

However, that has cost implications for the nursery, and it is not fair on Thomas or the other children. He needs a place in a specialist nursery—again, that takes us back to the education, health and care plan, and the official autism diagnosis. What a vicious circle!

Nichola has to begin applying for schools for Thomas to attend next September, but there is no education, health and care plan—I keep having to say that—so the process will be all the harder. At the moment, he is facing the prospect of mainstream school, which would not be suitable. Thomas is still in nappies and does not have the self-awareness that other children his age have.

I have already mentioned the Daisy Chain Project. It was founded in 2003 and serves as a haven for families across the Tees valley. Nichola speaks highly of the support that they get there. It provides a respite service but, again, without an official diagnosis, Nichola cannot access that support. I worry that young children such as Thomas will be left behind while their peers flourish. I worry that parents do not and will not have the support they need.

Families and education providers up and down the country are doing their best to cope, but they should be able to do so much more than just cope. We need a specific strategy for young people to secure early diagnosis and we need appropriate plans to support them. I hope that the Minister will tell us how we can do so much better.

10.20 am

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): What is so powerful about this debate is that we have heard similar stories from all over the country of what feels like a completely dysfunctional system—stories of families fighting against the system for help for their children. I am always left thinking, “What about those families who don’t have the wherewithal to fight the system and don’t know about contacting their MP for help?” When we get involved, sometimes we can help those families, but what about the families who do not get in touch and do not know how to battle against the system?

One of my constituents is a 14-year-old boy who will wait so long that he will have left school by the time he has a diagnosis. Another is a 12-year-girl who has been pushed from pillar to post between a mental health trust and a community trust because autism diagnosis and mental healthcare are dealt with by two different trusts, for goodness’ sake. I also have a family who paid—with great difficulty—for a diagnosis, but felt dreadful because they knew that many other families are not able to do that.

The need for action is absolutely acute. Why is it so important? We know that early diagnosis and intervention can make a massive difference to life chances. It can give an individual the chance of a happy, good and fulfilled life, and it can significantly improve employment prospects. The employment rate for people with autism is horribly low, yet many have the potential to be great in the workplace, with some help and understanding. A more enlightened approach would save the state a fortune.

When I was the Minister responsible for mental health and autism, I embarked on a process of introducing maximum waiting time standards. We introduced maximum waiting time standards for early intervention in psychosis

and for access to psychological therapies. I wanted those standards to be comprehensive across mental health so that there was an equilibrium between mental health and physical health. The need is just as great with autism. As the hon. Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams) said, the Government have an absolute obligation to set a national maximum waiting time standard—not for the first appointment but for achieving a diagnosis—to give families hope. If we do that, we will end the awful postcode lottery and ensure that every child, wherever they live in the country, has the right to an early diagnosis. That would have a massive impact on their life chances and would save the state a fortune.

10.23 am

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) on his speech and on calling this important debate. The things that he and others said about diagnosis and data, and the personal stories we have heard, are powerful and make a very good case.

When I go knocking on doors in Croydon, it is unusual not to meet somebody who has a child with autism—diagnosed or undiagnosed—and who is struggling to get the support they need. Since I have been an MP, several people have come to my surgeries or written to me to ask for help. People with autism face a raft of challenges; as one mother told me on the doorstep, nearly in tears about her struggle to get support for her son, “It just shouldn’t have to be this difficult.” Like the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), I fear for the people who do not have the wherewithal to seek out the services that they need.

We have heard about the unacceptable delays people face in securing a diagnosis and the impact that has on them. Parents have told me of the huge relief of getting a final diagnosis and the impact that has on their family. We have all seen the Public Health England survey that found that the median waiting time between referral and first appointment is 16 weeks, but in some areas it is far higher. In one local authority, the average wait is 125 weeks. Something clearly needs to change. I welcome calls for a commitment on NHS recording of diagnosis waiting times, and I hope that the Minister is able to make that commitment.

Early diagnosis is clearly vital, but diagnosis must be accompanied by a comprehensive set of early-stage services and proper funding. Three problems are impeding my constituents. The first is funding. The Government of course have the job of deciding how resources are distributed to local authorities, the NHS and other agencies. Croydon Council’s funding will be cut by 75% between 2010 and 2020, and it will have to make cuts of £45 million in the next few years. The impact of those cuts cannot be overstated. Croydon is doing what it can. Councillor Andrew Rendle, who is here today, is the council’s autism champion and chairs the autism partnership board. There is joint commissioning between the CCG and the council, which work in the same building. That has allowed them to address some of the challenges they face, but it would be wrong to say that funding is not a problem.

The second issue is education. Croydon has a high number of autistic children. Schools will continue to be the primary point of contact, yet several years after the

introduction of a new special educational needs and disability system, the National Autistic Society reports that 74% of parents nationally have struggled to get the educational support that their child needs. There are worrying signs in my constituency that some academies are increasingly excluding children rather than engaging in the support that they need.

The final issue, which has been brought to me several times, is access to benefits for people who are unable to work. I have heard from several families who were refused personal independence payment but appealed and won their cases at tribunal. Constituents point to inefficiencies and lack of communication between agencies. I welcome this debate and I hope that the Minister will take action.

10.26 am

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Howarth, for giving me the chance to say a few words about this important matter. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) for calling this debate. I have a personal interest in this issue: my eldest son has autism, which I have had to learn about, live with and adapt to throughout my life as a parent. My first ever Westminster Hall debate, back in 2010, was on this very subject. From there, I got involved in the all-party group on autism, which is now ably chaired by the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan). I also thank the hon. and learned Member for South Swindon (Robert Buckland). He is now the Solicitor General and cannot participate in the debate, but he has been a great champion and friend on these issues.

This is an absolutely crucial issue. People reach out to me all the time because they know that I am a parent of an autistic child—they have seen things in the media or they have looked up the work of the all-party group. People from outside my constituency have even turned up to my surgeries to try to talk to someone who they think can help and can try to guide them through the process, which is extremely difficult for a great many people. A child being diagnosed with autism is just the beginning of a difficult journey—people in that position have to cope with a whole range of things—but diagnosis is crucial. It is the pathway to intervention and help, and so many children have co-occurring mental health problems alongside autism that, to have any hope of addressing those, we must surely begin with the process of diagnosing autism.

We have all seen the figures. People are simply waiting too long—an average of three and a half years for children and two years for adults. Until recently, people in my constituency told me that they had to travel to Sheffield for an appointment for an adult autism diagnosis. I find that incredible, given the service provision that we should have in an area the size of Greater Manchester.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) said extremely well, all that contributes to a culture of making parents fight for the support that they need. It creates warrior parents, who have to struggle against the system when the system should be there to support them. The Government aspired to change that through education, health and care plans, but I cannot say with any honesty that they have succeeded. We have not yet achieved that cultural shift. I do not say

that with any partisanship; I know that a great many colleagues want to work towards that. I had a lot of time for the former Minister, Edward Timpson—he lost his seat in the election—because of his work on this issue. We really must address it, and people on both sides of the House have that aspiration.

My hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate called for a primary care register. That absolutely should be the starting point, but I am clear that I want minimum national waiting times for diagnosis for autism, which a couple of Members have already mentioned. That is the only place we need the policy framework to get to, and given the support we have heard today, which parents like me up and down the country will sincerely appreciate, I believe we can get it there.

10.29 am

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) for bringing this important debate here today. Like many others, I have many constituents who have contacted me and highlighted the effect that delays in diagnosis can have. The process is often a long and confusing experience for the child and a source of great stress for parents, carers and family members. My work with children and young people during my previous role within the local authority has given me a really good understanding and great insight into the huge gaps that children and families face. Delays in obtaining diagnosis vary widely from child to child and from area to area.

As others have done, I will read out a statement from a constituent; she has two autistic children. Debates such as this are for hearing directly from those affected. This is Katy, who said:

“My first child had a reasonably short period of assessment lasting 12 months, but my youngest son is just beginning the process and we have been advised that it could take up to three years. As he is nearly three, he would be expected to go onto a school place and as such could potentially struggle and fall behind.”

They will not get access to an education, health and care plan, and

“he will not be accepted into a SEN school without this diagnosis.”

How is it right for her and her son to go through the agony of not receiving appropriate care due to the assessment process? That process has a huge impact on children being able to access the schooling environment and support they need.

Mike Amesbury: I want to illustrate this. A constituent has a son, Sam, who is seven years of age. They have been waiting a considerable length of time—months and months—and no longer know what to do or how long to wait. They came to me in frustration. With no diagnosis, there is no EHCP, which means no provision, as hon. Members from across the Chamber have said. They must battle on and on.

Jo Platt: That is exactly the point that we have all been raising. As mentioned by many here, people have gone through their entire lives without being diagnosed. In some cases, that does not present a real issue, but for others it presents decades of being misunderstood and misdiagnosed with other conditions.

[Jo Platt]

Dawn is another woman in my constituency. She had spent all of her life being treated differently and feeling ill at ease with all that went on around her. This year, she was diagnosed with autism at the age of 46. She said to me that now that she understands her condition, the world makes sense. Dawn and many like her are determined to make a difference. She is exploring ways in which she can help and support other adults in the same situation and to advocate for better understanding of the condition. I applaud Wigan Council, because it understands the gaps and wants to bridge communities, businesses and other public services to create that better understanding for people affected.

I urge the Minister to ensure that the process of diagnosing and supporting people with autism is consistent across the country, with that process informing and supporting all public services and the wider community, and that the latest recommendations and resources are allocated at the earliest opportunity to support the individual's needs and promote better outcomes for all.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. I will be calling the Front-Bench Members at 10.36 am. I call Jim Shannon.

10.33 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous). When I think of families who deal daily with children who need that little bit more attention, I often wonder just how they do it. Many are doing it alone, with no help or coping strategies available to them as they await diagnosis.

Minister, we are stating facts, not pointing the finger, but the National Autistic Society highlighted that diagnosis can be a critical milestone for people on the autism spectrum. Of those who responded to its survey, 61% said that they were relieved to get a diagnosis, and 58% said that they got new or more support. It is therefore important that people with suspected autism are able to access timely diagnosis, wherever they are in the country, and that they get appropriate post-diagnosis support.

My knowledge of autism comes directly from contact with my constituents, based on benefit applications, the help that they need and the appeals process. I want to give an example that comes from the people—the mothers and children—whom I represent. There is an autistic boy; I will not name him or his parents. His parents do everything for him. They wash him, dress him, cook for him and feed him. They bathe him and take him to the toilet. They amuse him, they hug him and they kiss him. They love him. They do all those things, and when he is at school and they are not doing that, they wash, iron, clean, shop and find time to pay the bills. They do everything they can for their son in every part of their life, but love is not enough to get the family through the sheer exhaustion and emotional and mental strain that is part and parcel of life with someone with special needs.

As elected representatives, we in this Chamber must do more to support those people and offer them the best that society can provide, to ensure that they do not

reach the point of no return. The waiting times for diagnosis are shocking. In Northern Ireland, 2,079 children are waiting for diagnosis, and some 7,100 have been diagnosed. We have a duty to ensure that the mechanisms for diagnosis and support are there. At present, we are failing, and in this timely debate there is an opportunity for all of us to take a fresh look at how we can do things differently and more effectively.

10.36 am

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I will rattle through this to give others a better chance to speak. I should mention that I have been on Twitter, talking to someone in Scotland who is watching the debate with great interest because she has four children with autism. I congratulate the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) on obtaining the debate and congratulate everyone who has spoken so well and passionately during it.

In 2011, the Scottish National party Scottish Government launched a national strategy for autism, and they updated it in 2015. Some of the work done has included working with the Autism Achieve Alliance to produce action research that provides evidence to address waiting times for diagnosis. Things are not perfect in Scotland, but we have some advantages in being a smaller country. There are also plans to provide leadership for an improvement programme across NHS Scotland to improve diagnostic capacity, which we all agree is vital.

Scottish Autism worked in partnership with the Government to develop a web-based autism toolbox to improve accessibility to resource in schools across Scotland. Crucially, it also piloted one-stop shops for autism across Scotland. That is where I got involved. There was one in my constituency and, when the pilot programme ended, the local authority did not continue the work, so many families in my constituency were left bereft, with a much less comprehensive programme and much less support for families and people with autism.

I should pay tribute to the Minister for Childcare and Early Years in Scotland. He has a son with autism. He has done a lot of work, which has led to a number of things, such as Aberdeenshire Council's national recognition for autism friendliness. He has piloted film and theatre programmes and shopping nights in shopping malls especially for people with autism, all of which help to improve the quality of life of those affected and their families.

In Scotland, as I have said, we have seen excellent work. We really want to make all people with autism live as independent lives as possible. As has been said repeatedly, diagnosis is vital for that. It gives such comfort to people with autism to know what is "wrong" with them. Once they know that, that allows them to see life in a different way, through their own eyes. I saw that when I taught in further education colleges.

The See Me initiative in Scotland has been important in showing people to look at people, not at conditions. I commend the Scottish Government for that initiative, on which they spend £1 million a year. That programme, which helps people to look at others and understand that they have issues—it is not that there is anything wrong but that they have difficulties in normal life—is mainly linked to mental health issues, but it helps people with autism as well.

There is still much work to be done, and the Scottish Government are trying to move towards better joined-up mental health. I know, and it has been said already in the debate, that autism is not a mental health issue, but it can foster mental health issues, so we need to look at how services in Scotland are joined up, and the transition from child to adult mental health issues.

Finally, I congratulate everyone who spoke so well and passionately in the debate. I would never have known anything about this subject had I not been forced to listen to constituents who lost their one-stop shop and the support that they so heavily depended on. They have other support, but they tell me that it is not nearly as good.

10.40 am

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): It is an honour to speak with you in the Chair, Mr Howarth. I very much congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) on securing the debate. It is an important one because, as we have heard, diagnosis is the vital first step towards getting support for people with autism.

For children with autism, and their parents, getting a diagnosis is the first hurdle that they need to get over, to secure the support and education to which they are entitled. As my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate mentioned, the NICE quality standard on autism recommends that people should wait no longer than three months once they are referred for their first diagnostic appointment. It is clear that people have to wait too long for a diagnosis of autism and that the waiting time can be gamed by delaying later appointments. Waiting to wait is not acceptable.

We heard that research has shown that waits can be two years for adults and three and a half years for children, but we have also heard of examples where things have taken much longer. We touched earlier on the Public Health England survey and the fact that in one local authority it is admitted that there are waits of 125 weeks. Hon. Members have spoken powerfully about long waiting times and their constituents' experiences—and their own, in the case of my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds).

I was contacted by one of my hon. Friends who could not take part in the debate, and want briefly to refer to the experience of one of her constituents. When her son was 18 months old, he suddenly stopped talking. That was raised with the health visitor at the child's two-year review. The health visitor almost did not make a referral to a speech and language therapist, saying that the criterion for referral was that a child could say fewer than 10 words. At that time, the little boy could say only one word: "No". It took a nine-month wait to get a first appointment with a speech and language therapist. At the second appointment, six months later, she said she would refer the child to a paediatrician. In the end, it took almost two years to get a diagnosis of autistic spectrum disorder from the paediatrician and the speech and language therapist working together.

Since then, the child has been discharged from speech and language therapy, despite the fact that he is still not speaking. His parents have had to get therapy for him privately, paid for with his disability living allowance

money. The child spent half his young lifetime—from age two to age four—without the support that he needed to help his development. The mother says she felt

"let down by the system",

but also that their family was one of the lucky ones, because, as we have heard, other parents had to wait longer to get a diagnosis. The issue for her was

"the lack of availability of professionals...had we seen professionals when appointments were due I think it would halve the time to get a diagnosis".

Delays in diagnosis can hinder the implementation of effective support and intervention strategies, but they can also—understandably—lead to parents losing confidence in healthcare professionals, particularly if they feel that appointments and waiting times are being gamed in the ways we have heard about. By contrast, surveys have shown that a positive diagnostic experience is associated with lower levels of stress and more effective coping strategies, which is what we are talking about giving to families, if waiting times for diagnosis can be cut. For adults with autism, a diagnosis can end years of feeling misunderstood and isolated. We have heard about an increased risk of suicide.

A number of Members raised the point that autism diagnosis waiting times are not currently collected as part of the mental health services data set. I understand that the National Autistic Society has worked with the Government on proposals to collect those data. Will the Minister confirm to the House today that the Government plan to commit to the routine recording of diagnosis waiting times from April 2018 and, importantly, tell us what plans they have to speed up the diagnosis process? NHS England does not currently collect data on the number of diagnoses or who is being diagnosed with autism. That makes it difficult to determine where there are gaps in diagnosis. The National Autistic Society says that between 75% and 80% of people who use their adult services are male. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate said, there is concern that there is under-diagnosis of women and girls, who are not getting the support they need.

Likewise, the first generation of people diagnosed with autism are now reaching middle age. That means there is a generation of people for whom autism was not a diagnosable condition during their youth. There could be significant gaps in autism diagnosis among older people. We heard in the debate of a lady diagnosed only in her 40s, and it is important that our focus should not always be on children. I find it heart-rending to think about cases such as the one I outlined, but it can also be difficult for people get a diagnosis when they are older. NICE recently recommended the creation of an autism register so that we can identify areas where autism may be under-diagnosed. Does the Minister agree that such a register might help more autistic people get the diagnosis and the support that they are entitled to? Are there likely to be moves to create one?

An early diagnosis is important. Mental health conditions are more prevalent among people with autism than among the general population. A diagnosis can provide an understanding of why a child finds things difficult and, as in the case that I talked about, suddenly stops speaking. If there are signs of mental health issues or other problems, a diagnosis can make family and friends aware and open access to proper support. However, post-diagnosis support is not always there. A survey of

[Barbara Keeley]

parents with autistic children found that many are left with no support during and after the diagnostic process, and many are not signposted to other advice and help. That is clearly important; there is a feeling of their being warrior parents and battling parents. Let us stop their having to do that. Some are even left without a written report of their child's diagnosis.

In the example that I outlined, the four-year-old child is still not speaking but has been discharged already from speech and language therapy services, and his parents can obtain therapy for him only privately. What plans are in place to ensure that people who receive a diagnosis have access to the services to which they are entitled, and which their children need? Let us, from now, help the warrior parents and battling parents, and all the people who need a diagnosis to move ahead with their lives.

10.47 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Howarth. Thank you for giving so many Members the opportunity to speak, because the debate has been extremely valuable. I congratulate the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) on securing it. The discussion was highly informed and showed how important Members consider the issue to be. That is to be celebrated, given the 2009 starting point that my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) mentioned.

There have been significant advances in the treatment of people with autism, notwithstanding the serious issues raised today. I will not pretend that things are as they should be, because clearly they are not. Our ambition is for people to receive a timely autism diagnosis, but the cases that hon. Members have raised today make it clear that the standards that families deserve, and that they have a right to expect, are not being met. All Members who said that we need to do more are right. I give the House an assurance that I am determined about our need to do better.

I look forward to cross-party work with the all-party parliamentary group, and to the review of where we have reached since the Autism Act 2009. I welcome the input of all Members, because only by understanding the real-life experiences can we make everything work better. In Government we tend to work through such things as targets and processes, which ignore the fact that we are dealing with real people. When we are dealing with people who have conditions such as autism, the processes can leave them behind. It is down to all of us to be the conscience and to ensure that all our public services work better in this field. We do have a sense of urgency on this.

I want to deal with some of the common points that have been raised. Many Members wished to know when the autism data will be published. Our intention is that the data will start to be collected from next April, with a view to publication in 2019. That is hugely important, because it will enable us to see which local areas are doing the job and which are not. There is nothing like

transparency to hold people to account and to ensure that we get the consistency and delivery of service so that nobody is left behind.

The Care Quality Commission and Ofsted are currently undertaking a five-year rolling programme of inspections, looking at how things are being implemented in local areas, how health services are working and how education authorities are dealing with education, health and care plans, which were mentioned in earlier contributions. We all know, and have witnessed, that so much is dependent on local leadership. If we can highlight good practice and where things are going well, as well as where things are not, we will be able to generate the pressure to increase performance across the board.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham mentioned mortality rates for people with autism. I know that the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), shares my concern that people with autism and learning disabilities tend to get left behind when it comes to employment and access to health, which has an impact on mortality rates. She and I are very much prioritising that. I look forward to engaging with the all-party parliamentary group on those issues too, because we will have much to learn from its expertise.

The hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) specifically asked whether we would commit to including autism in the primary care register. We have said that we expect GPs to do that and that we want to spread that good practice. We will be working with NHS Digital to do exactly that. Again, I am open to any suggestions in that space.

With regard to access to further services following a diagnosis, that is very much the space of local commissioners, but the inspections by the Care Quality Commission will enable us to hold local commissioners to account on exactly that.

Alex Cunningham: The Minister knows how frustrated parents are by the delay in getting an official diagnosis, but it is the knock-on effect on other assessments, such as education support plans, that really adds to their burden. Will she give any advice to local authorities and CCGs to look beyond the official diagnosis, to make some of those other things happen?

Jackie Doyle-Price: We very much send the message that parents of children with autism are entitled to good services and that is what they should expect. We need to spread that good practice and collect those data, in order to highlight exactly where it is not happening. When we look at the work that the Care Quality Commission has done to highlight good practice, we should be able to get some messages. We are looking for transparency to drive performance and to have those conversations. The NHS mandate for 2017-18 sets a priority for the NHS to reduce health inequalities for autistic people, so that is very much part of NHS England's conversations with local CCGs.

Siobhain McDonagh: On that point, will the Minister refer to the issue of South West London and St George's Mental Health NHS Trust and the five CCGs in south-west London?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I was just coming on to that. I have to say that I was very concerned by the issues that the hon. Lady raised. It occurs to me that there is a real risk that what they are suggesting could be seen as discriminatory. Certainly what she suggested should not be undertaken without real consultation with the local community and illumination of the issues concerned. She mentioned that she was going to write to me about that, so I look forward to considering it with a bit more reflection and then coming back with a response.

Mrs Gillan: While the Minister is discussing correspondence, she may not have the answer to what, for me, is a crucial question—the detail of the self-assessment framework that is sent to the top-tier councils. She will remember me mentioning that we know that one local authority has a 125-week waiting time. I appreciate that she will not have the detail here, but will she undertake to write to me in the next week and let me know when she will publish that detail, so that we can all access the information?

Jackie Doyle-Price: There is a good argument for being very open about this generally. The self-assessment framework obviously requires local authorities to mark their own homework, and even then we are not seeing the increase in performance that we would like to see. One of my main messages is that we can all learn from good practice elsewhere, and bad practice can also be a learning experience. The more sunlight we can bring to what is happening, the better. I am happy to write to my right hon. Friend on that.

That brings me to the results of the most recent self-assessment exercise, which show that only 22% of local authorities are meeting the recommendation of a maximum three months between referral and first appointment for an assessment. That is obviously not good enough. On the plus side, a further 23% said that they anticipated meeting recommended waiting times by March this year and that they would be able to sustain that, but that is still only half. Although the direction of travel is positive, there is a lot more work to do.

Norman Lamb: The Minister may be coming on to this, but will the Government consider introducing a national maximum waiting time standard for diagnosis, rather than for first appointment, so that every child knows that they will get that within a specified time?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I fully appreciate the right hon. Gentleman's point. I am slightly uncomfortable about this, because often it can take a considerable amount of time for a proper assessment between first appointment and diagnosis, but perhaps we need to look at other

measures. Generally, the more data we have in this area, the better we can measure performance. Clearly we need to ensure that we have sufficient specialists who are able to undertake these assessments and diagnoses. Sometimes that can be a challenge, so we need to ensure that local commissioners have access to those specialists.

Jonathan Reynolds: Many of us are flexible about how we will get to the system we want to see, and capacity is definitely an issue when it comes to specialists. On the point just made by the former Minister, the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), the problem is that at an initial assessment people are told, "You don't need to go and have the official diagnosis yet. Try to persevere in mainstream school. See how the child develops." The problem, as other Members have said, is that in the early stages of life, each month of development is so important, and we get to a point where, frankly, even if a diagnosis is given, so much has already been lost. That is the purpose of a national maximum diagnosis waiting time.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I hear the hon. Gentleman's point, but the wraparound support and care will do more than any finite target time. I am happy to look at that.

We are running short of time and I really need to give the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate time to respond. We have had a very constructive discussion today, and I look forward to engaging with all hon. Members on these issues.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Before the hon. Gentleman responds, may I thank all Members who contributed today, and particularly those on the Front Benches? It was very difficult to get everybody in, but we managed it in the end—certainly all those who had applied to speak. I call Bambos Charalambous to respond.

10.58 am

Bambos Charalambous: I very much welcome the Minister's admission that things are not as they should be and that these are real issues affecting real people. The data are very much to be welcomed and we look forward to their publication in 2019. Transparency and consistency are absolutely vital in this service. I am also very interested in the findings of any inspections by the CQC and Ofsted. Commissioners need to be held to account. We need to recognise that specialists include educational psychologists, speech therapists, psychiatrists and child psychologists. If a maximum waiting time standard is not possible, we should consider putting as much pressure as we can to ensure that diagnosis is made as soon as possible.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Future of RAF Northolt

11 am

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of RAF Northolt.

I want to ask the Minister a number of substantive questions about an issue of concern to many of my constituents. What are the Ministry of Defence's ambitions for the future of RAF Northolt? Do Ministers envisage, as their consultants scoped out, that RAF Northolt could become an alternative to London City airport, in north-west London? When will local residents have the chance to be consulted about this airport's future? Can the Minister confirm that RAF Northolt will be brought into line with civilian safety requirements as a result of the up to £45 million-worth of runway works planned for next year? Those substantive questions are exercising the minds of many of my constituents in Harrow on the Hill and in south Harrow who are directly under the flight path into RAF Northolt.

I should say at the outset that RAF Northolt has a very proud history in the defence of our nation, and local residents feel a unique affection for it. RAF Northolt is still the Queen's airport, and the military squadron based there has played a crucial role in many of the conflicts in which British servicemen and women continue to play an important role.

However, it is clear that the important military function is dwindling at RAF Northolt. To those who live under its flight path, it is increasingly apparent that RAF Northolt is a commercial airport in all but name, and as a result it is having a major impact on local quality of life, with an increase in noise, concerns about safety and increasing concerns about the impact on air quality of all the extra flights.

I sought this debate specifically because the Ministry of Defence is about to undertake a £45 million renovation of RAF Northolt without any consultation with my constituents under the flight path or with other local residents. They are concerned that we might be about to see yet another escalation of commercial activity at RAF Northolt by the back door.

Official documents have revealed that RAF Northolt's capacity could be up to 50,000 commercial flights a year, and regional airlines such as Flybe have been lobbying for access to use Northolt, so local residents' concerns are legitimate and should be properly addressed by the Ministry of Defence. This is not "scaremongering", as the Tory leader of Hillingdon Council recently put it.

The process of commercialisation at RAF Northolt started back in 2012, when Ministers decided to raise the annual limit for the number of commercial flights to 12,000 a year. Again, there was no direct consultation with local residents and certainly not with any of my constituents in Harrow who live under the flight path just 4 miles away. The Ministry of Defence did not even consult the then Conservative Mayor of London—now the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson)—who publicly opposed the plans on the grounds of air quality and traffic.

At about the same time, the Ministry of Defence commissioned a report by Ernst and Young to explore the commercial possibilities at Northolt. "Project Ark"

laid out strategies to increase the number of commercial flights initially to 20,000 and ultimately to 50,000 a year, under a series of scenarios. It laid out a vision of Northolt as

"an alternative to London City Airport"

whose existing runway configuration could accommodate "small" types

"of regional jets (up to approximately 100 seats)".

It also stated that Northolt could become

"the UK regions' key access airport for...Heathrow."

Perhaps the most concerning element of a linked report by Mott MacDonald involved the safety implications of expanding the number of commercial flights. Its work assessed whether Northolt would be eligible for a licence under Civil Aviation Authority regulations. Owing to a "substantial number of obstacles" on all runway approaches, it concluded that RAF Northolt "could not be licensed" by the CAA "in its current form." Those obstacles, numbering in the hundreds, include the petrol station at the bottom of the runway, a three-storey block of flats nearby and the spire of St Mary's church in Harrow on the Hill in my constituency.

The most serious safety flaws relate to the close proximity of Northolt's runway to the A40 and surrounding homes and residents. Indeed, in 1996, a business jet overshot the runway and crashed through the barrier into oncoming traffic. The brutal truth, I am told, is that most aircraft accidents occur on either take-off or landing. That is why we have regulations insisting on minimum clearances between an aircraft and obstacles on the ground—so that if an aircraft does get into difficulty, it has every chance of clearing them and landing safely.

The report by Mott MacDonald stated that although some changes could be made, the permanent nature of the obstacles meant that Northolt would never be up to the safety standards required for civilian flights. It could not have been clearer in its recommendation: future expansion of commercial flights would not be allowable under CAA guidelines.

Despite the warning, commercial flights continue to operate from RAF Northolt every single day. I do not need to remind anyone of the consequences of an accident at Northolt, given the proximity of a petrol station, hundreds of homes and that major travel route, the A40. And surely I do not need to remind anyone of what happens when a public authority ignores repeated safety warnings. I want to put those safety concerns on the record and ask directly why Ministers, knowing what they have known since 2012, allow any commercial flights from RAF Northolt at all. The current Civil Aviation Authority line is basically to say that it is up to pilots to decide whether Northolt is safe. It is no wonder that the Ministry of Defence did not release either the "Project Ark" report or the Mott MacDonald report until 2015. Even now, parts remain redacted.

Now we are told that RAF Northolt will close for eight months next year for the runway to be resurfaced and safety changes to be made. Last year alone, there were more than 10,000 commercial flights, compared with just 3,800 military ones.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I apologise profusely to you, Mr Howarth, and to the Minister for not being able to stay to the end of the debate, as I have

to be on the Front Bench in the main Chamber for Northern Ireland questions. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) talked about the history of RAF Northolt, which after all precedes and predates the existence of the RAF, but he did not mention the glorious history of the Polish squadrons there. In addition, you will know, Mr Howarth, as a former Northern Ireland Minister, about the secure transportation from RAF Northolt, not just for the Queen's Flight but for ministerial flights. My constituents living in the Northolt area are horrified by the prospect of the skies darkening over UB5 and RAF Northolt becoming either a Heathrow hub or a "City Airport West". Will my hon. Friend accept my assurance that my part of the world, which borders his, views the whole scheme with horror? We want to keep RAF Northolt and its history as it is.

Gareth Thomas: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's intervention. I know that his constituency also has concerns about the future of RAF Northolt, and why shouldn't it? There was a substantial increase in the number of commercial flights just five years ago. Now, Government-commissioned reports suggest a big increase to 50,000 commercial flights into RAF Northolt, and up to £45 million-worth of renovation works being done to the runway. It is not hard to understand why my hon. Friend's constituents and mine are worried about where this is all leading.

When I first asked Ministers to reveal the cost of the renovation works at RAF Northolt, they refused to do so. That was despite the MOD revealing, in EU tender documents, a contract for the runway renovation works worth up to £45 million. I am no engineering expert, but that figure looks awfully high compared with the cost of resurfacing runways at similar sized airports. One thinks of the £21 million it cost to renew the runway at Manchester airport. Even RAF Waddington is managing it for some £35 million, albeit with a runway almost twice as long and a much longer projected shelf life.

I would like to ask the Minister for clarity on what the money—up to £45 million—is actually being spent on. Thus far, the official MOD line has been that it is installing modern safety equipment at the runway ends. To be fair, that was one of the recommendations of the "Project Ark" report. Can the Minister confirm whether that relates specifically to arrestor beds, and if so, whether EMAS—engineered materials arrestor system—beds will be installed. This is an important point, because EMAS beds are a necessary precondition for accepting larger jets. If arrestor beds of any type are to be installed, can the Minister confirm that that means that the Government have accepted that RAF Northolt falls short of civilian safety standards? If that is the case, what does the Minister intend to do about the petrol station nearby, identified by "Project Ark" as a significant safety risk?

The Ministry of Defence argues that it is financially prudent to use what it terms "irreducible spare capacity" at Northolt for commercial flights. In layman's terms that means keeping RAF personnel busy with servicing commercial flights, given the relatively small number of military flights. If the Government are to spend £45 million on renovations, how do they intend to make that money back for the taxpayer? It is one thing

generating revenue from the time paid for anyway; it is quite another making a new multimillion-pound investment, in these times of austerity, in order to generate further revenue. Can the Minister confirm how much revenue 12,000 commercial flights a year generate, and whether that will be enough to recoup the £45 million investment over a period of time? If that revenue is not enough to recoup the investment, will the number of commercial flights need to increase? Or does the MOD intend to increase the number of military flights—on which grounds public investment on this scale could, in my view, be justified?

Either way, my constituents and all those living near Northolt face a detrimental impact to their living standards. Surely the Government need to come clean on their long-term intentions for the airport's future. As I understand it, the Ministry of Defence has also argued that the runway is too short for larger commercial jets. However, the "Project Ark" report directly contradicts that view, stating that the current runway can receive 100-seater jets of the type used by commercial airlines such as Flybe. Can the Minister confirm whether the runway, post-renovation, will still be a code 3 runway with a landing distance of 1,354 metres? Or will that configuration be changed? If so, in what way? Will the Minister also acknowledge that there is a difference between transcontinental airliners, which Northolt cannot accommodate, and regional jets, which it currently can? Fifty thousand flights of 100-seater aircraft are just as noisy and detrimental to air quality as a jumbo jet.

It is clear that at every turn the Government have sought to hide what is happening at Northolt from my constituents and those of other hon. Members, by using its military status as a smokescreen. That has meant a gradual worsening of quality of life and that an important discussion about safety has been swept under the carpet. The simple fact of the matter is that Northolt is no longer, in practical terms, a military airport. The vast majority of flights there are now commercial.

If this were any other airport, it would have to go through the planning system to make the kinds of changes we have seen over the past few years and that Ministers envisage over the next 12 months. It would also have had to carry out environmental impact assessments and consideration of noise controls. Again, the "Project Ark" report, commissioned by the MOD, confirms that, but RAF Northolt is not seeing any of those assessments, because it is designated under military airport regulations, as opposed to civilian airport regulations. In these circumstances, my constituents and other nearby residents have a right to be consulted on RAF Northolt's future, before £45 million is spent on renovations, which would seem to continue the relentless march towards a full commercial operation at the Northolt aerodrome.

If all that is not enough, it appears that major regeneration projects are at risk because of questions about the future of RAF Northolt. The Ministry of Defence objected to the proposed redevelopment of the Grange Farm estate in my constituency—a project vital for creating more good quality social housing. To be fair, the MOD commissioned specialist aeronautical assessments, to verify the proposed effect of the redevelopment on RAF Northolt's air traffic movements. Those assessments concluded that there would be no impact, yet the MOD has not withdrawn its objection

[Gareth Thomas]

to the Grange Farm redevelopment going ahead. Why not? That is the obvious question, and my constituents and council would like to know the answer. Will the Minister agree to meet me and a deputation from my local council, to discuss that specific concern about RAF Northolt?

In conclusion, it is time for some transparency about the future of RAF Northolt. If Ministers intend to extract greater commercial revenue from commercial flights at Northolt, that is clearly within their rights under current military aircraft regulations, but they should be open about that intention, and the people most affected in the area should have a say about the airport's future. There should be a debate, not just in this House but in the communities affected. It is not right to continue to hide behind the military status of the airport, making small changes each time that in the long term add up to a significant change to the way in which RAF Northolt operates. I ask the Minister today to recognise those genuine concerns and grant my constituents and other nearby residents a full and open consultation on the future of RAF Northolt, before the runway redevelopment works commence.

11.17 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): Thank you for the opportunity to respond to this important debate, Mr Howarth; I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) on securing it. I have prepared some remarks in response to where I think he would like me to go, but I will write to him in due course about a number of specific issues that he raised, if I do not cover them in my remarks today.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman that transparency is very helpful. If consultations and studies are taking place, they have to go through the course of those actions before any results can come forward. Once those are there, they should absolutely be shared. I will be delighted to meet him and representatives of his council in due course, once he has taken stock of what I have to say today.

I begin, as the hon. Gentleman did, by paying tribute to those who are connected with RAF Northolt—the community around RAF Northolt, who for many years have been so supportive of the aerodrome, and the personnel of RAF Northolt. It is not just an aerodrome, but a vibrant, core military station, with over 1,800 personnel based across 33 diverse units, from all three of the armed services and wider Government. Alongside 32 (The Royal) Squadron undertaking VIP and operational command support flying, there are many other major units at the station in ground roles. An Army bomb disposal squadron, the British forces post office, the Service Prosecution Authority, an aeronautical publication and mapping centre, two RAF bands and an operational RAF regiment unit, which also encompasses the ceremonial Queen's Colour Squadron, are all based at the aerodrome.

I turn to the aerodrome itself. As the hon. Member for Harrow West has highlighted, it is used and needed by the military every single day. It is true that for a number of decades it has been underutilised in that role. Since the 1980s, RAF Northolt has accepted up to

7,000 business aviation movements per year, but that was done under stringent terms and conditions to utilise the spare capacity. For that very reason, from 2011 to 2013 we conducted an extensive value-for-money evaluation of RAF Northolt's future utilisation. Wide-ranging options were considered, including selling the aerodrome off as a civilian licensed airport, devising shared civilian and military usage to better maximise revenue, and retaining the aerodrome in military hands—although that would leave an irreducible spare capacity. I impress on the Chamber that those were simply options that were considered.

While the review was going on in 2012, the Ministry of Defence commissioned a series of reports under Project Ark and Project Noah. Those reports were not designed simply to open the floodgates—no pun intended—to civil movements at the station, but rather to analyse the various available options. Other evidence was also analysed. The benefit of spare military capacity at RAF Northolt's aerodrome was ably demonstrated in 2012, when it played a vital role in the security of the London Olympics. RAF Typhoon and military helicopters were able to seamlessly deploy to the station as part of the multilayered deterrence and defence of Olympic sites. That could not have been achieved at a civilian-operated site.

Gareth Thomas: The Minister describes the work that the Ministry of Defence undertook between 2011 and 2013. Does he acknowledge that it was an error not to share that assessment with local residents, and not to involve them in a full consultation process about the decisions that the Ministry was weighing up?

Mr Ellwood: I am willing to meet councillors and other residents. I very much want to share the information we have, but we have to allow the Ministry of Defence to conduct its own studies in due course and share them as is deemed pertinent, as decisions and options are considered.

As I said, other evidence was analysed and the benefit of the aerodrome was demonstrated in its use during the Olympics, but military movements will always have priority at RAF Northolt. If necessary, civil business aviation movements can be fully stopped from using the station at any point. Ministers took those final decisions in the value-for-money review in 2013 and decided that the firm benefit was in retaining the aerodrome as a military aerodrome. It is still used by the military every day on vital operational tasks. We also retained the same stringent civilian operating terms and conditions, which exclude schedule airlines.

I make it clear that the whole review had nothing to do with Government options on the future of Heathrow; it was purely about the future of RAF Northolt. Our decision means that the aerodrome, although vital, will remain underutilised by the military for a large proportion of the time, but also that it has capacity to accept military contingency requirements that displace civil movements whenever required for the national benefit.

The review seeks to ensure that taxpayers' money is used properly, so we still need value for money from that spare capacity when the military are not using the aerodrome. Further consideration was given to one "Project Ark" option that had the potential to increase civil use of the military aerodrome to up to 20,000

movements, to generate additional revenue from the underutilised spare capacity. That, in turn, would benefit taxpayers by offsetting the costs to the taxpaying public of the station's military operation. However, Ministers took the final decision to increase the self-imposed cap on civil movements to only 12,000 movements per year. That was implemented in April 2013, as the hon. Gentleman knows. I firmly assure hon. Members that there are no plans to revisit that decision.

Following the review decision, the "Project Ark" report and other review documents were archived and the project's other options remained hypothetical. I assure the hon. Gentleman and residents of the area that no current active planning is looking at any further changes to that 2013 decision about the cap or the operating terms and conditions. The unchanged, stringent terms and conditions that have been in place for civil movements for many years mean that in future we will not attract any aircraft larger than those that we have accepted for decades.

It was against these terms and conditions, which were reaffirmed in 2013, that Flybe made an unsolicited bid in 2015. No meetings about RAF Northolt have been held with any commercial airlines, but in late 2015 and early 2016, Ministers corresponded twice with the chief executive of Flybe to inform him that his bid was not being considered further.

The hon. Gentleman asked why there was no public consultation. In 2013, the decision was for a relatively modest increase; the terms and conditions of use remained unchanged, as I have stressed, and the existing infrastructure had the spare capacity to absorb the increase. No formal regulatory action was therefore required in any form, but the station did undertake extensive community engagement to keep residents informed once the decision had been taken. I will be delighted to continue that process, as the hon. Gentleman requests.

On the aviation regulatory and safety structure, the Military Aviation Authority is the single independent regulatory body for all defence aviation activity, and regulates Government aerodromes. The Civil Aviation Authority is responsible for the safety regulation oversight of civil aviation activity at Government aerodromes and sets out the requirements for civil operators that wish to use them. The robust oversight relationship between both regulators is formalised in a memorandum of understanding that demonstrates constant dialogue and joint audit and assurance activity where appropriate.

There is close stakeholder engagement with the CAA on changes related to air safety that may have an impact on civil aviation operations at RAF Northolt and on the oversight of published aeronautical information pertaining to it. The memorandum of understanding is

reviewed annually to ensure that the MAA and the CAA continue to employ robust oversight and assurance of civil aviation activity at all Government aerodromes.

The runway resurfacing project at RAF Northolt aims to make improvements as required to upgrade existing military runway end safety features and extend the life of the main runway pavement to between 10 and 15 years. This planned life cycle replacement works in line with the safety cases for the military aircraft that operate from the station. I repeat firmly that the aim is not to accept bigger commercial aircraft, but to ensure that the runway has the strength to accept the larger military aircraft that may be required to visit the station in future. Alongside the BAe 146 military airframes based there, a number of European allies operate medium-airliner-sized military aircraft into RAF Northolt on military business. The RAF C-17 and A400M Atlas are the largest types of aircraft that visit the station.

In conclusion, RAF Northolt remains a core station with many diverse units. The aerodrome is needed by the military every day and is valuable for contingency, as we saw during the Olympics and the Ebola outbreak. A decision on its future use was taken in 2013, and we will not revisit that decision. After the military runway works are complete and the runway reopens, nothing will have changed: the same stringent terms and conditions on civil movements that have been in place for many years and that were reaffirmed in 2013 will remain in place. The MAA and the CAA continue to employ robust oversight and assurance of civil aviation activity.

Gareth Thomas: Does the Minister recognise that despite his words, there will still be widespread concern about the scale and cost of the runway works, and about what they might mean for the future? Will he commit to consulting residents to explain what that money will achieve?

Mr Ellwood: I have only a short time left, but the hon. Gentleman will be aware that we are comparing apples and pears. A runway's length, thickness and usage and an aircraft's heaviness all determine the total cost. I will write to him with more details.

Civil operating hours and numbers of passengers will remain limited, the movement cap of 12,000 that was set in 2013 will remain unchanged, and scheduled commercial operations will remain excluded. I hope that that reassures the hon. Gentleman and the communities he represents.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Parliamentary Candidates: Barriers for Women

[SIR ROGER GALE *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the barriers for women in standing for Parliament.

Sir Roger, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship and lead this debate this afternoon. Last week, I was in this Chamber discussing transparency at the BBC and expressing my disappointment at the large gender pay gap. I hope today that we can have a similarly productive conversation about the barriers facing women coming into politics.

As the 380th woman ever to be elected to this place and as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on women in Parliament, I am grateful to have secured this important debate and I am also very grateful to all the hon. Members who are here today for attending this debate, on a subject that I know we are all passionate about—getting more women into politics and interested in politics, and encouraging women to put themselves forward for election to become a Member of this House or, as importantly, to get involved at a local level.

I recognise that that is not a simple task. Let me sell the job: “It has long hours. You will be open to abuse, sexism and jeering. The pressures and responsibilities of doing the job for constituents are immense. You won’t see your family as much as you’d like. In fact,”—as has been the case this week—“you might see your sleeping bag or sofa a little bit more, because the hours for this role can run rather late. Indeed, you don’t know how pregnancy, maternity or even caring responsibilities will fit around the job—you can’t find that on the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority website.”

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The hon. Lady is making a great speech and I congratulate her on bringing this issue to the House. Does she agree that, in some respects, it was great to see no fewer than three babies in the Lobby last night? However, whether it is men or women who have had babies in recent weeks, they should not have to come into this place with their children and be breastfeeding or going through the Lobby. We should have a system, either proxy or digital, whereby people can vote remotely.

Mims Davies: I absolutely agree that it was most wonderful to see those children, because my children—several other MPs have said the same to me—would never have been that well-behaved. Clearly those children have had some experience of this place. If the demographics are changing, we must consider how we can work differently.

On paper, and in reality, the job that I have described does not sound all that appealing. However, we know the pros that come with our position: the wonderful opportunities to stand up for what is right, on issues that matter to us and to our constituents, and the fact that we are able to do something about what we care about. There is a platform to speak in this historic place. Nobody here, among all these talented colleagues, could fail to want to engage and use this opportunity for their constituents. We have a wonderful responsibility

to marry the good and the bad, to demonstrate why what we do is worthwhile and to encourage fresh talent to join us—even if they are only seven months or even seven weeks old.

I am delighted to have served on the Women and Equalities Committee previously, under the chairmanship of my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), who is here today. I hope to join the Welsh Affairs Committee, having lived and worked in Wales for a number of years, and that is the magic of this place. Members can use their position and experience to do something that will really make a difference—luckily, I might, apparently, be making up the female numbers, although that was of course not my intention.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a great case on an issue that I know she is very passionate about; I have worked with her on it before. I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on women and enterprise, and it is a big, big privilege for me to work with a really inspirational group of female entrepreneurs from across a range of businesses. Interestingly, however, virtually none of them see politics as a route forward for them. Does she agree that it is critical that we provide more role models and mentors to allow this huge untapped pool of talent to make their faces known in this place?

Mims Davies: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. In fact, I will come to that later in my speech, when I talk about the joint work of the all-party group on women in Parliament and the all-party group on women and enterprise. Unless we show that this is a worthwhile career for the other side of the country—male and female, north and south—we will absolutely be doing down the opportunities for everybody.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): My hon. Friend is making her case very passionately. She is number 380, so I beat her by one—I am the 379th woman elected to Parliament, which is something I am very proud of. Does she agree that we want to encourage women from all walks of life? We talk very much about how things fit in for young women with children or babies, but I am particularly aware that women who have had a career and brought up their children have an awful lot of expertise to offer as they get older. I do not know if I have a lot of expertise, but I put myself in that category: my youngest was 16 when I came here and has just left school. I feel that many women do not use all the knowledge and experience they have gained through their career; indeed, some of them start to wind down when they hit their 50s. Does my hon. Friend think there might be a way to encourage those women in particular to get involved?

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order. I gently suggest that interventions should be interventions, not speeches.

Mims Davies: Coming from a woman returner who freely admitted last night that she never reveals her age—I totally agree. It is my experience that has brought me here. I do not quite know where I fit in when it comes to maturity, but it does not matter; it is the mix that matters and the fact that we are all welcome here. Indeed, confidence in returning to work at any level, in any job, is so key for females.

We need to talk about the measures that the Women and Equalities Committee came up with, which address how the Government and political parties must and can increase female representation. I am sure that we all look forward to hearing the Minister's comments later, but the paper that we have seen outlines the opportunities that the Government and political parties have—and, frankly, should be taking—to increase the number of women being put forward for election. That is the starting point; indeed, they are more likely to be elected if they are on the ballot. What is the old adage? “If you're not on the ballot, you can't win”—but just be careful: if you are on the ballot, you do not know who you are going to get. Funny, that. I look forward to hearing Members' thoughts on that issue during the debate.

All of us, whether male or female Members of Parliament, have our individual stories about how we came to be here. For us, it was a little luck, or indeed a lot of luck; for others, it is a matter of “Try, try, try and try again”. Being an MP, of course, is a job like no other, in terms of the challenge in pursuing the goal of reaching Parliament. At the same time, it is really important for political parties, MPs, the Government and for us all as individuals to look at why so few women MPs overall have been elected. What can we do to improve the situation overall?

In 1918, the first woman, Constance Markievicz of Sinn Féin, was elected to this place, and we look forward to celebrating the centenary of that event in 2018. The following year, Nancy Astor was the first woman to take her seat in the House of Commons Chamber. Since then, 487 women in total have been elected to Parliament. That is something to celebrate, but it is also worth remembering that we have only just exceeded the number of men who were elected to the Commons in just one election in 2015.

I was elected in 2015, as one of the 191 women elected in that year. That was hailed at the time as a momentous step forward for the representation of women in our Parliament, given that there was a jump of almost a third compared with the number of women MPs in 2010. In June, we witnessed a further leap forward, with that number increasing to 208—sadly, on our side we lost some of our fantastic female colleagues, which was a disappointment to us all.

Our progress must be welcomed, and I am grateful to all of those who have put so much effort into supporting women in politics, certainly in our party. Some of our male colleagues have been active in movements such as Women2Win—I see some of them here in the Chamber today—as well as the Conservative Women's Organisation, which offers a kind of soft landing within the party. I applaud the female and male Conservative MPs who are mentoring and supporting our future Conservative MPs and councillors. Their work is absolutely making a difference; we see that in the numbers.

In the light of that progress, I remain mindful—it is easy to lose sight of this—that although women make up half the population, they make up less than a third of the MPs in this place. We must not rest on our laurels, because there is so much more to be done. As MPs, we need to challenge and change the public perception of our role as MPs to make it more attractive for women to join us.

Coming from a family with no political links and no political passion, there was a time when the thought of becoming an MP would have seemed somewhat out of reach or rather unsuitable, but after two years in this place, I have realised that my assumptions of what makes an appropriate parliamentarian have changed. Actually, women are very much suited to decision-making processes. We urgently need to reach out into our communities and tear down the perceived barriers to this and other jobs. Where women can rise to the top, we need to ensure that our would-be colleagues feel that that is achievable for them.

Sadly, it takes a huge amount of courage these days for women to stand to be MPs, because we are often scrutinised through a different lens from our male colleagues. Interest in our personal lives, how we raise our children and how we look—what we wear, what our shoes look like and so on—is still interesting to people. We have not quite gone beyond that. Over the pond, a presidential candidate and former Secretary of State—we know who we are talking about—was branded a “nasty woman” during the presidential election. When a boy or a man asserts himself and considers himself a leader, that is okay, but we are still in the realm of women being seen as bossy when they want to be leaders. That issue was bravely addressed by the shadow Home Secretary when she spoke out about the sexist and racist abuse she received through social media. Sadly, we know that she is not an isolated example. As was revealed back in January this year, almost two thirds of respondents to a BBC survey on the mistreatment of female MPs said that they had received sexist comments from fellow workers and fellow MPs.

I chose to cut my hair and have a political haircut to look more like a politician. I got here and decided to throw that book out the window. I have certainly looked at parliamentary procedures and processes and how we actually do things, and I know, having spoken to former trailblazing women MPs, that there was a certain look and style that we were supposed to conform to in order to fit in. I am delighted that we all know that we do not have to do that anymore. When we put ourselves out there to stand up for our communities, we feel incredibly vulnerable about how we look and what we do. New MPs enter a whole new world where inflection and inference is under a level of public scrutiny that cannot be believed. Every single word we utter—I have already been speaking for some time—will never go away. *Hansard* has a lot to answer for. We have to be ready for that scrutiny, whether we are male or female.

Not only is there pressure for women to be here, but we need to be extraordinarily effective, both at home and at work. We all have to be superwomen now. It is not only that we as MPs have to look perfect and be perfect; there is a danger in all society that those participating and putting themselves in the public eye have to do everything brilliantly. I have heard that from some of our new female MPs. They have the pressure of not mucking up, not drawing attention to themselves once they get here—it is really difficult—and matching our experienced male colleagues. It is about justifying our female presence here and messing up the status quo in Westminster. All parliamentarians have the responsibility to demonstrate that the Westminster bubble is broader, more welcoming and better than it is perceived to be. It is more inclusive and the outdated notions are on their way out, and we have a part to play in that.

[Mims Davies]

Dare I point out the obvious? We have a female Prime Minister. We also have a female Home Secretary. The Leader of the House is female. The Secretaries of State for Education, for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and for International Development are all of the so-called fairer sex, but frankly they are just powerful women. In my party, we acknowledge that diversity in the Opposition and other parties is extremely strong. We should not be navel-gazing about whether we are getting things right; public perception of what it is to be a woman making a decision must be tackled, whether it is here or in any top job. Through that, we can ensure that hidden female talent, whether it is political or in any other role, is found, supported, mentored and encouraged, so that we all feel that we can stand for election.

I am really proud of the women in Parliament all-party parliamentary group and in particular the mentoring scheme we are developing with Lloyds Banking Group. That scheme gives insights into getting those top jobs to young women across the country. That includes not only the realities of being an MP, but the opportunities that exist in the workplace, and I am delighted to be bringing the scheme forward. There are so many all-party parliamentary groups focused on female, family, health and community issues, and I am proud of all the work that has been done by men and women on those groups.

The women and enterprise all-party group, led by my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey), is to be applauded, as is the work on baby loss done by my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach). We are working on a cross-party basis—male and female—championing heart-breaking and difficult causes. Having more women here in Parliament gives us the opportunity as parliamentarians to champion and tackle those difficult and often unspoken challenges. It was shocking and poignant to hear that, until International Men's Day last year, this House had simply not discussed or understood male suicide. We should be out in our communities highlighting and explaining that work to our constituents. I applaud the fact I have been given the opportunity to have this debate.

There should be a focus on specifically promoting this job to women who have never considered standing for election, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire. As the Women and Equalities Committee report made clear, we cannot take it for granted that the number of women MPs will just carry on increasing. We are meant to push to be world leaders in women's representation, so we need to be working closer to home. If we do not agree on targets, why are we so afraid of setting goals?

I started my journey into politics as a non-political local parish councillor, co-opted in after complaining about the local play facilities. Then I was elected on to a town and district council. Now I have the honour of serving the constituency of Eastleigh as its first female MP; some of the previous male incumbents had some complications, so my constituents turned to a woman.

Given my personal experience, I am so delighted to be here as an advocate for local government and an access point to politics and to Parliament, but efforts

must be made to develop the pipeline of female councillors so that they can learn the challenges of local government and be able to enter a political career at a less intimidating point. Councils are less political and are community-led—surely a more attractive place for someone to be, if they find they have time on their hands. Women must be welcomed into parties. They must be given the opportunity to stand for winnable seats and have a realistic route to political success. I welcome the fact that in 2017, my party actively looked to field women as candidates in 50% of the retirement seats, which were winnable.

If we cannot set targets or goals, how on earth can we get people to fill out the application forms? I spent four years toying with the opportunity to become a candidate to be a Member of Parliament. The timing was not right for my career; I felt I needed time to gather my experiences and personal confidence before taking the plunge. Carers and women returners will know that—this resonates beyond politics—as men and women we must support our loved ones on their next employment step. We all have a lot to give.

Incidentally, one of the recommendations in the Women and Equalities Committee report called on the Government to take action by supporting all-women shortlists. I must say I am not massively in favour of such shortlists, even though I ended up on one myself. I must admit that the last man standing stepped down due to life-changing issues, so I was called in. On reflection, I am not totally certain that I would have wished to have been the token female candidate, added to the list for diversity's sake. After all that dithering on my application form, I was finally there to be counted.

Hannah Bardell: Does the hon. Lady agree that all-female shortlists should be a temporary measure, until we strike the right gender balance? Of course, nobody wants to be on an all-female shortlist, but has anybody in this House who has been elected from one ever had that thrown back at them? To be fair to the media, I do not believe that they have.

Mims Davies: I absolutely agree—once someone is here and doing the job, how the heck does it matter how they got here? Perhaps we do need to have a good look at that. I am not a fan of all-female shortlists, but if we want to make change happen, perhaps we have to be bold. We do not want to fill the Chamber with women just because they are women; we want all our Members of Parliament, from whatever party, to bring experience and ability to the table.

My speaking notes are telling me to move on to motherhood—I was going to call that “the elephant in the room”, but I am not sure that is terribly flattering. I want to talk about balancing politics with motherhood. I am really grateful to those, both in the room and elsewhere on the parliamentary estate, who help me juggle my commitments. I know that everyone here with caring responsibilities feels exactly the same. Our duties in Westminster and to our constituents are very much helped by the support that we get from our families. None of us takes that at all for granted. I have had a wealth of support from colleagues, staff and my team. In fact, when I stopped bringing out my baby buggy when leafleting, people were really upset—they had nothing to put their bags on.

I am also really proud, now that I have got here, to think about how we make it easier for those with caring responsibilities. I am delighted to be on Mr Speaker's exciting diversity committee, which seeks to make a parliamentary career more appealing for everybody, not just the typical parliamentary stock. I thank Mr Speaker for his attention to making this House more accessible. Incidentally, I look forward to chairing the upcoming roundtable with the all-party parliamentary group on women in Parliament on flexible working practices and the impact of technology on women in the workplace. All our colleagues are benefiting from technology and we need to look at how it works in this place.

My experience of being a mum and juggling many metaphorical and literal balls comes in very handy as we dash around speaking and, more importantly, listening on behalf of our constituents, on issues from education to animal welfare. An ability to flip and change is really useful in this place, not to mention the practice that we, as parents, have at diplomacy. There is nothing wrong with using the constructive, supportive attitude that can come from caring for small children or loved ones to help us participate in parliamentary life. I am still very much on a learning curve, but I hope that those diplomatic skills will continue to hold me in good stead.

Those qualities and experiences are what make Members of Parliament returning to the House from maternity or parental leave really important. I hope that many women will take the advantage that motherhood can give them career-wise, both in and outside politics. A male friend of mine once said to me, "Do you know what? Don't take it for granted. You've got a chance to reassess your life and look at what suits you. Many men don't often feel that they've got that opportunity."

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and commend her for what she has done—prior to being elected here, and since—for women in politics. She has done a wonderful job. I am in awe of all my colleagues across the House who have young children. I have not got a family, and every day I am amazed at how well my female colleagues on both sides of the House are able to juggle the challenges.

Does my hon. Friend agree that having this debate and talking about so many women in politics having families shows women outside the House that having a family never stops a woman from achieving what she wants as an individual—whether in politics or in big jobs in any industry? There is no limit to what she can achieve.

Mims Davies: I wholeheartedly agree. The problem is often the job market: what job can be worked 30 weeks a year from 9 until 3, to cater for the children? What pays enough for someone not to spend that time with their children? We are really lucky here; when I say to my children, "I am so excited and busy and it's worth doing," they understand. It is not just me taking time away from them.

As many parliamentarians can see, the barriers that we have just heard about really do stop people coming to this place. The "Improving Parliament" report in 2014, which assessed the selection, retention and supply of women to this House, looked closely at the issue. It flagged up the unpredictable parliamentary calendar, the challenges of managing two geographical workplaces

and a lack of clarification for MPs with primary caring responsibilities about the impact that has on their work as major factors that influence a prospective Member of Parliament—or somebody who wants to become a parent.

Such a person might say, "I want to become a Member of Parliament, but I actually do not know what that means for my parental responsibilities, let alone my parental leave." We have a debate tomorrow about abuse of candidates—particularly abuse received by women. That is also a major player in people's lives and life decisions now. As we well know, when we are elected we are often asked, "What on earth have you done? You're putting yourself out there for major scrutiny."

There is no formal parental leave for Members of Parliament, despite the fact that since 2010, 17 babies have been born to 12 women MPs. It is bordering on ironic that we as MPs are doing so much for the wider workforce, yet are unable to look at our own working arrangements. There is currently no formal pairing and that makes options difficult for both male and female Members of Parliament. There is no voting by proxy and no flexible crèche that can cater for ad hoc childcare arrangements. In short, there are no real practicalities to assist with parenthood because, frankly, at the moment Parliament fails to set a proper example as an employer. As a result, prospective candidates commit themselves to the demands of the job, which requires a huge amount of attention, but are not officially able to look at the flexibility that a parent needs.

I have touched on the support that we all luckily receive. Frankly, if we are looking to achieve true diversity in the long term, informal arrangements are not enough to combat the huge amount of guilt, let alone the practicalities, attached to being a working parent. I am not alone in this room in saying that my priorities lie with being a parent. Given that the role of the MP is so attractive and important, I might also often not be alone in saying, why on earth would we need a requirement for maternity leave? We run our own diaries and have some level of flexibility, but we all know that this job comes first. Luckily, our families and children have thick skins and, it seems, boundless patience.

It is notable that the Danish Parliament allows an MP, male or female, up to 12 months' paid leave which, in practice, is always granted. In Sweden, the same rules for parental leave applicable to the general public apply to MPs—in fact, it is possible for them to take 480 days' parental allowance. I think we would all miss our constituencies quite a lot if we took all that off—I do not know where we would be—but it is time for us to be bold and look to update our parliamentary practices, so that we can keep up with our goal of achieving parity.

We need to recognise that this is an unstable career path. If we want people to stand, take their seat, relocate and balance their homes—the norm for an MP—we need to ask whether ordinary people can afford to become an MP and whether the current Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority is fit for purpose when it comes to facilitating a parliamentary career and a growing family. Considering the issues of disability and diversity, which come to the fore when looking at our careers, is IPSA really fit for purpose for everybody who would wish, or is able, to pursue such a career? Can we honestly say to anyone—anywhere, regardless of gender, marital status, family commitments or caring

[*Mims Davies*]

responsibilities—that they can afford to be here and are able to be here? We are looking for a big commitment from any MP, male or female, in taking on an insecure, non-guaranteed career.

We must not, of course, use such scrutiny to stop the public being able to elect and vote out their representatives in Parliament, but it is fundamental to our democracy that we ensure that we look properly at diversity. I have no desire to challenge who the electorate choose, but I want to ensure that a wide range of the most able candidates can get on the ballot paper.

Craig Tracey: My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. Does she agree that having more women in Parliament is not simply the right thing to do? Diverse company boards are more successful on every single measure, so it stands to reason that we will get even better results from a diverse Parliament.

Mims Davies: I absolutely agree. My experiences as a local councillor, before I became a Member of Parliament, were so important. Drawing people into politics with that sort of background and professionalism—not necessarily solely driven by ideology—is really important. We need to address the issue, and I hope that this debate will go some way towards that.

As politicians, we have to decide whether there is a point at which we should stand down, allowing our fresh talent to take up new issues, ideas and opportunities. Perhaps we should be prepared to give way to those whom we are mentoring, as well as offering leadership. It is all very well encouraging people in, but are we allowing space for them? How do we sell the role of MP at Westminster and get myriad applications? A lot of things come to mind, such as coming through as a police and crime commissioner or in the councillor role. Indeed, having the chance to stand as an MP should not be a leap of faith for anyone. People's families being dependent on that is a real concern, so there is juggling to do.

Many Members are waiting to speak, so I will move to my final remarks and reiterate and elaborate on exactly why this debate is so important. There is not only a shortfall in our democracy, but a crucial aspect is involved. To be here is to have a special chance—to do what matters, to be in the Chamber, to take part in the decision-making process, to tackle issues of inequality and discrimination and to develop laws, policies and programmes. It is vital to hear women's voices on women's issues, and for Parliament's perspective to benefit fully from the diverse country that we have been elected to represent.

What is more, it cannot be a coincidence that five out of the nine Select Committees chaired by women have equal or better representation of women, but only one out of the 18 Committees chaired by men has equal or better representation. I sincerely believe that when in power women should continue to empower other people in this place.

Staying on this theme of having more women leading the political charge and encouraging participation, we cannot expect young girls simply to want to engage in the modern political environment if we do not show them what they can relate to. Men are key role models

in that, as we have heard, and vice versa. I admire so many male colleagues who have done and do so much to empower all generations in politics. We must reconnect with our voters and demonstrate that Westminster does not have to be out of touch. I urge voters and the media to look more deeply at who we are: dig, and we are more interested and more diverse—honestly.

The idea that the UK can enjoy more from the “feminine touch” is faintly ridiculous. The phrase is outmoded, but the fact is that women are more linked into public office, have lower levels of corruption, are more keen on peace and reconciliation, and find it more important to promote policies that address the challenges facing disadvantaged groups. Everything is to be gained by encouraging women and breaking down the barriers: working across party, for me, is one of the most important parts of the job.

I used to work in radio, where we had a saying that provides an analogy for what I want to say today. Sometimes, radio DJs love a hit record before anyone else has heard it, and they play it incessantly—to death; they then hate it, but by that point everyone else has caught up and loves it. I have the responsibility today of playing the tune with the goal of encouraging more equality, diversity and women in Parliament. It is the responsibility of all of us in this place to ensure that others have the opportunity to follow. There have been trailblazers such as the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), my right hon. Friends the Members for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) and for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), and my hon. Friends the Members for Gosport (Caroline Dinéage) and for Devizes (Claire Perry). So many people have warmly welcomed us and given huge amounts of advice to all of us here. Without those women trailblazers, where would we all be?

We have an opportunity to achieve parity of attitudes inside and outside Parliament. If we can reflect the outside world in this House, we will be in absolutely the right place. I ask the Minister for action to be led sincerely by the Government and all political parties, so that we can increase women's representation in this place. Along with many other colleagues in the Chamber, I will welcome all the Minister's comments and action to ensure that that happens.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order. Seven Members have written in asking to speak and some others are standing who have not, but if you do the maths it does not work. I will set a time limit on speeches of three minutes, but I request a self-denying ordinance—even at three minutes, not everyone will get in. I apologise for that, but that is the way it is.

3.6 pm

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) on securing the debate and on everything she said. She told us that she dithered about filling in her application form to be the Member of Parliament for Eastleigh but, my goodness me, since she arrived here she has not dithered at all. I pay tribute to her. It is

baffling to me when I hear Conservative women Members of Parliament making a speech that I myself might have made, but I guess that shows that daughters of the women's movement are in all parts of the House. I warmly appreciate what the hon. Lady said.

The Minister for Women is now a woman; the first Minister for Women was a man, so that is progress. We have a Select Committee, a Women and Equalities Committee, which is ably chaired and pushing things forward. My goodness me, we even have women MPs from Scotland, and that is incredibly important. There used to be only two women MPs in the whole of the north, and I remember complaining to my Labour colleagues, who said, "Women in the north do not want to be MPs"—but oh yes, they did. One of my colleagues even said, "There are no women in the north," which was obviously not true.

In particular, I support what the hon. Member for Eastleigh said about having baby leave for Members of Parliament; we are not doing women any favours by letting them be in the House of Commons. It is a democratic imperative that our Parliament is representative, which means of women as well as men, and it is a fact of life that women have babies. As she said, 17 babies have been born to women MPs since 2010, and more will be on the way. We set the rules for maternity and paternity leave outside this place, but we have none for ourselves. Although Whips are much more civilised than they used to be—not entirely civilised, but more civilised—what woman or man should be beholden or grateful to the Whip for letting them have time off? We need it to be on the table, transparent and as of right.

Also, the vote of such MPs should be recorded, which is why we should have proxy votes. The constituency is entitled to have its Member voting, even one who has just had a baby. That is why I suggest a system of proxy votes, so that when we go past our wonderful Clerks with their iPad, we give not only our own name but the name of someone on whose behalf we are casting a proxy vote. The constituency will then be represented.

I agree with what the hon. Lady said about IPSA. It is chaired by someone who formerly chaired the Maternity Alliance, and I hope that IPSA will look at maternity cover, so that we can have six months' leave, as people do in the civil service. That should apply as much to men as women. Nowadays men aspire to be more involved with their children than they did in the past.

I will finish with an anecdote. I remember sitting in a Committee when one of my colleagues jumped up and said, "On a point of order, Mr Chair." He looked at his pager and said, "My wife's just had a baby." Everybody said, "Hear, hear!" and I thought, "Why on earth are you here?" That is not a good example of fatherhood or motherhood. We expect fathers to be involved with their children; women need to be with their babies; babies need to be with their mothers for the early months; and the constituency needs to be represented, but we can square that circle, not least because everyone here supports it and because we have a Speaker who, despite having arrived in the House of Commons as a Tory and still being a man, is an honorary sister on these issues. I hope that this broad-ranging debate will bring about progress, and I thank the hon. Member for Eastleigh for securing it.

3.10 pm

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I am tempted to simply say I agree with Mims and Harriet and sit down, given the quality of the debate so far. However, I will congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) on securing this debate. It is an honour to be able to participate.

When I first entered the House in 2015, somebody told me a shocking statistic. They said that there were more men in the 2015 Parliament than there had ever been female MPs. I am glad to say we have moved on from that, although not far. It was a really shocking statistic to find out, and still only 32% of Members of Parliament are women.

There is no doubt that a more diverse Parliament is beneficial. It is not only morally correct, but in my experience of Parliament the female MPs adopt a different tone and initiate a more diverse range of debates, whether we are in Westminster Hall, on the Backbench Business Committee or in all sorts of debates in this House. It is also my observation that they are more willing and able to participate in cross-party work than their male counterparts are, so there is a lot to be said for having more female MPs.

As somebody who comes from a background from which people do not normally go on to become Conservative MPs, I struggled and was intimidated by the process to become a Member of Parliament, but it is even worse for women. The abuse that MPs currently get in the digital age, particularly for some reason the female MPs, is something we really need to address, so I am glad there will be a debate tomorrow on that. In that area, the public have a role. I will state very clearly: if they want more female MPs, it is probably a good idea to stop abusing the ones they have already. It is important we consider that. We need to do our job, but the public have a responsibility as well.

Many ideas and suggestions have been put forward. In most circumstances I am the kind of person who agrees not to take anything off the table. My hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh mentioned that our party is often a little worried, not so much about targets and goals, but about quotas, which is the one area I am a little queasy about. All-women shortlists concern me and many people. I do not quite get the moral superiority of replacing one form of discrimination with another when it comes to positive discrimination. No matter how well intended it may be, on the basis of gender it prevents a capable and qualified person from having the opportunity to take a role, so we need to be careful about that. All sorts of things need to be considered, and I would support many of the options.

It is the role of all MPs, male and female, to do everything we can to encourage a more diverse Parliament. I will play my role in encouraging as many female candidates as possible, because Parliament would be a better place and our politics would be better. I call on all colleagues to do the same.

3.13 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I congratulate the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) on securing the debate today. She gave a fantastic speech.

[*Hannah Bardell*]

It is great to be in a debate where there is so much consensus on women's role in this place and in society.

In the words of Emmeline Pankhurst,

"We are here, not because we are law-breakers; we are here in our efforts to become law-makers."

Emmeline Pankhurst made those comments when she was tried for trying to break into Parliament. We are lucky that none of us here today, women or men, had to break in. We are just across the Hall from the cupboard where Emily Wilding Davison hid on the night of the census. Unfortunately, there is no public face to that memorial; you have to be a Member to get in there. Something about this building and our surroundings are in some ways exclusionary and difficult to penetrate. We have to think about the kind of Parliament and the kind of building we are in. In more modern Parliaments, in places such as Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, there is a seat for every Member and they can vote by simply pushing a button. The fact that they do not have to queue up for 20 minutes makes it more modern, open and attractive.

I am proud of what Scotland has achieved in terms of gender balance. We have one of only a handful of gender-balanced Cabinets in Scotland and we have our first female First Minister. We also had up until recently three female leaders leading the Scottish National party, the Conservatives and Labour, although sadly Kezia Dugdale has recently moved on. There is a huge amount to be said also for our predecessors and the giants on whose shoulders I and my SNP colleagues stand. Winnie Ewing was elected to this place 50 years ago and she is the only parliamentarian to have sat in the European Parliament, the House of Commons and the Scottish Parliament.

I was inspired to stand by my mother, who stood in 2010 in my Livingston constituency. Sadly, she was defeated by a man, but I got the pleasure of standing against him five years later and beating him, so I succeeded where she had failed. My opposite numbers in my constituency, Fiona Hyslop MSP and Angela Constance MSP, are both women. Neither of them came from shortlists. West Lothian and Livingston have had a proud tradition of producing female parliamentarians. I will not give away all of our secrets, but it has been about having an open and inclusive process, encouraging women from the grassroots up, and particularly encouraging young women.

What we see now in the Scottish Youth Parliament and in the UK Youth Parliament is many more young people and many more women engaged in politics and interested in standing. That is something we should all be proud of, but we have a duty in how we speak to each other in the Chamber and how we conduct our public discourse. It is very important to remember that and to do all we can to encourage more women into Parliament.

3.16 pm

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) for securing such an important debate today. As a 28 year-old female Scottish Conservative elected to this House, I bucked many trends on 8 June. I am one of the youngest MPs, I am a Scottish Conservative MP and, of course, I am

female. As the other speakers have mentioned, there has been considerable progress made to encourage females into parliamentary careers. The recent election statistics are incredibly encouraging and show the highest number of female MPs to date, at 208.

The Conservative party has an incredibly proud record on promoting women in Government. The first woman to sit in the House of Commons, Nancy Astor, was a Conservative. We were the first party in the western world to elect a female leader and Prime Minister. We have now had two female Prime Ministers and are continuing to work hard to attract female candidates in local and national elections and to participate in our party through the Women2Win movement. Back home in Scotland we have a female leader who we hope by 2021 will be the second female First Minister of Scotland.

I absolutely agree that more could be done to encourage females into a parliamentary career. Our 32% ratio of women in the House of Commons puts us at 46th in the world rankings. Of course, having fewer females in the House has an effect on our Committees, our Cabinet and other roles. Perhaps I am in a minority, but I strongly believe that I have never been disadvantaged or advantaged in life because of gender. What I have achieved in whatever area has been down to my strong will, determination and merit. In order to deliver a promising future for women in politics, we must seek to break the barriers as opposed to seeking to reach targeted quotas. Success has to be based on merit. What are those barriers and how do we break them?

Women often take on a greater support role within the home, even in days of increasing equality and less of his and hers tasks. They regularly take on the majority of tasks in the home, acting as a support for partners and their children. Careers in politics seem to have a stigma of male dominance and a public perception of an aggressive environment. The demands of the role of a Member of Parliament split the week into two locations—in my case, six hours apart. With a constantly changing diary there is little certainty and routine, which is what families and young children need.

For me, this is one of the largest obstacles in the way of a female parliamentary career: the difficulty of integrating family life into Parliament with long hours, late-night sittings and often working seven days a week with little down time. Those aspects of the role of a parliamentarian make it impossible to spend as much time at home as one might wish to. Perhaps it is therefore the responsibility of us as females in politics to reach out to the public, further promote what the role involves and remove the uncertainty and fear that surrounds it. It is demanding and it is not easy to juggle life, but it is hugely rewarding. Not one of us would deny that. We must explore in more depth further family-friendly measures, including some of those mentioned today. Studies show that the early years of a child's life are of the utmost importance in their development. The roles of a Member and a parent are not mutually exclusive.

The public perception of the role must also be addressed. Throughout—

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order. I hate doing this, but I am afraid three minutes means three minutes.

3.19 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) on her excellent speech and on raising an important issue. I am my party's spokesperson on women and equalities, and I can remember buying my parliamentary aide a fridge magnet with a quotation from the late, great Margaret Thatcher, which said:

"If you want something talked about, ask a man. If you want something done, ask a woman."

My wife, incidentally, has one on her fridge, as a constant reminder of who is in charge in my house, but that is by the way.

I took the quote to heart, and that is why five out of six of my full-time and part-time staff are female. I like to get work done. I say that tongue in cheek, but I am happy to state that I am pleased about the number of women taking their place in this Parliament, especially my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly). She was once an intern in my office, many years ago when I was a Member of the Legislative Assembly, and it is a pleasure to see her in this place, working alongside me and all of us.

More than 60% of my party's membership are women, which suggests that women are politically aware and interested. I believe in hiring people for the right reason, and for their fitness for the purpose. I believe that 50:50 recruiting in the Police Service of Northern Ireland was wrong—it was not fairness or equality. My party is led by Arlene Foster, a capable and intelligent lady who is formidable and caring. My colleague Michelle McIlveen MLA also works very hard. They are both role models for young aspiring politicians.

My parliamentary aide would say that the first step in shattering the glass ceiling needs to be taken by women themselves, who feel they cannot have it all and excel in their jobs and their home life, and that they must choose. She had tremendous difficulty in leaving her two children under the age of two—Essie and Lily—in care while she worked 12-hour days for me. That had been no problem in her drive to have a career before she had the children. A year down the line she has managed to ensure that she excels in her job, with her children no worse off. The hon. Member for Eastleigh showed in her introductory remarks that she knows about that. I like to think that I facilitated some of the flexibility that was needed; my aide says that the first step was when she realised she could do both.

I am a man who believes that every one of us is different and brings something different to the table—not because of our gender but because of our life experience. That means encouraging those who are fit for this job to stand up and put themselves forward for it, knowing that they will be supported by people who judge not by gender but by ability, heart and capability.

3.22 pm

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): I am glad to be able to speak in this debate, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) for proposing it. The right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) does not know this, but she played a large part in my coming to this place, partly because of difficulties encountered in practice at the Bar—she was the Solicitor General at the time—and

chambers rent. A percentage of rent based on a three-year average was taken from women, so if someone had to take time off for maternity leave, that had a direct impact. That caused me to explore other avenues to vent my frustrations, and it ended up with my coming here.

I wanted to speak because of my experience as a single mother. Parties need to do much more to tackle the particular struggles faced by candidates to get elected, and to give them support. I thank my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), and, indeed, the Prime Minister, for setting up Women2Win, and for the support that they gave me when I stood in 2010. Baroness Jenkin also played a vital role. That level of mentoring and support was key.

It is not just a question of getting the gender balance right; it is about the diversity of backgrounds and voices in Parliament. We come here with our life experience, which proves invaluable when we consider legislation. I am grateful to the all-party parliamentary group on women in Parliament. I have offered to mentor a single parent in my constituency and would very much like to get her involved. I say to other women, "It doesn't matter whether you are a Conservative; please get involved in politics and what you believe in. Realise that you can make changes." It is possible to make changes in this place, as we all know, as a Back Bencher. It is not necessary to be a Minister. There are myriad ways of doing it. People who are not elected can influence their MPs and get involved. I see many wonderful women in the Public Gallery: they should get involved and come into this place, because we have fantastic opportunities here.

There is a struggle over childcare and balancing family life. I urge the House authorities to consider the simple step of making recess dates fit school holidays and half terms. It is not a difficult thing to do, but such small steps would allow us to spend a bit of time with our children. I was elected to the Welsh Assembly, which is very gender-balanced, but I could not see my daughter and she had to board, aged eight. That is the difficult choice that women have to make.

3.26 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) on securing this important debate. I support all-women shortlists for a simple reason, which is that in 2001, when I was first elected to Parliament, 10 Labour MPs in safe seats stood down in Wales. Did we select five men and five women, or six men and four women? No, we selected 10 men to replace them. Before the Conservatives say that they do better, there has never been a Conservative woman MP in Wales. [*Interruption.*] There have been Conservative women in the Assembly, but not a single one elected to Parliament. All-women shortlists have made a difference to my party and it is a delight. The fact that there are more Labour women MPs has made it easier for women to get selected in other political parties as well, so the issue applies to all of us.

The biggest barrier is still financial. It is very costly to start the process of trying to get selected, and women are still paid less than men, so inevitably the barrier is worse for them than for men. Incidentally, many of the early women MPs were, of course, very posh and wealthy.

[Chris Bryant]

Countess Markievicz was elected and Nancy Astor was no pauper. Others included Lady Vera Terrington and Gwendolen Guinness, who was a member of the Guinness family. Even on the Labour side quite a lot came from wealthy families, such as the Daltons.

The second barrier is the vitriol and abuse that have already been mentioned. It goes mostly to women. Some goes to gay men and ethnic minority MPs. If someone fits into several of those categories, it is even worse. The treatment of my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) is often racist and misogynist and we can surely conduct ourselves better. I should like Facebook, Twitter and so on to end anonymity so that people are not hiding all the time. Police also need to take incidents far more seriously in relation to politicians, because we are vulnerable, and it is not long ago that one of our kin—our family—was murdered: Jo Cox, last year.

The words of George Osborne about the Prime Minister are disgraceful. He cannot say that he wants her chopped up in bags in the freezer, as he is today reported to have said. He should apologise and withdraw that statement. That kind of language is misogynist in its basis and it needs to be done away with.

I wholeheartedly agree with all the things that have been said about maternity. We need more mothers in Parliament. One of the most shocking elements here is that some nights can go on for ever.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Bryant: I do not think I can, because I am about to be cut off and it would only prevent another woman from being able to speak. It is probably better, therefore, that I shut up.

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Actually, Members who give way get injury time. I am afraid that the next speech must be the final one from the Back Benches. If anyone has not got in, they should take note that they can intervene.

3.29 pm

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I was honoured when I was asked to be co-chairman of Women2Win—and pleased, because I recognise that gender equality in this place is the responsibility of men as much as women.

I have three points to make. First, I am conscious that role models matter. I know because I am the proud owner, with my wife, of a pair of five-year-old twins, a girl and a boy. Pleasingly, our young daughter has been given all sorts of role models by books such as “Winnie Finn, Worm Farmer”, “Rosie Revere, Engineer”, “Ada Twist, Scientist” and “Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World”. One day, while describing a picture with a spacecraft in it, I referred to the spaceman being inside. I realised that we were making progress when she said to me, “Daddy, how do you know it’s a man?”

On the flip side, the responsibility of men was made clear to me when my son argued with my wife about whether there could be female bus drivers, because he had never seen one. These things matter. That is why the

education programme in this place—getting schoolchildren in to talk to them about what MPs do and who they are—is so important.

Hannah Bardell: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that gender stereotyping is, in many respects, reinforced in children’s early years by toys and books? My mum, who was a single parent, could find only one book with a single parent in it.

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Lady is absolutely right; there is certainly not enough literature and so on for young people, but the situation is better than it used to be. I recommend “Princess Smartypants” for young girls who want a good combination.

It was a real shock to come here after 16 years in London government, where politicians do not actually get a lot of abuse, and realise how much abuse female MPs take compared with male MPs. I am with the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) about getting rid of anonymity online. Women generally—not just female MPs or female journalists—get enormous amounts of abuse online compared with men, and we need to think carefully about anonymity.

I also want to mention what we project in this building. It is often said that women are put off coming here by the atmosphere: the aggression, the confrontation—all the stuff that appears in the media. In fact, 90% of our work in this place is not like that. The real picture, in Committee, in debates such as this one and elsewhere, is much more consensual and less aggressive.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend and parliamentary neighbour for giving way. It is important to say that not just political parties but the Government and Parliament need to think about ways of encouraging more women to come here. Too often we say that it is down to women themselves and the parties, but this place and the Government need to work with us to make that happen.

Kit Malthouse: I completely agree. It is incumbent on everyone—women, the Government, men and society—to present the real picture of what happens here, so that women who are put off by the principal atmosphere projected in the media realise that there are other aspects of the work beyond the yah-boo politics in the Chamber.

I am with those who suggest that we should have a proxy system. Frankly, that should be not just for Members who are on maternity leave but for those with serious illnesses. It is strange that the maths of the House can be changed—often significantly, as we might find—by someone happening to suffer an illness or by someone having a baby. I think a sensible proxy system for use in particular circumstances would be widely supported in the House and in the country as a sensible measure to enhance our democracy, as the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) said.

3.33 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) for calling this debate. While we wrangle

over Brexit and other serious matters, we often forget to highlight and address the systemic and obvious barriers in society.

I came to this place because I was inspired to create change and I wanted to tackle the everyday inequality that I saw in the houses that surrounded me on the streets that I grew up on—the everyday challenges that real people face, such as struggling to heat their homes and to eat. We are privileged to sit in this House and to have the opportunities that are afforded to us, and it is absolutely incumbent upon us to address those issues and tackle the big systemic problems in society.

I was first elected to local government when I was 24 years old. I remember at the time asking my colleagues and friends, “How did you get into politics?” Each and every one of the women I asked told me, “Well, someone asked me.” Each of the men who answered that question said, “Well, I just thought I’d be good at the job.” That probably sounds like quite a lot of my colleagues. The fact is that women often have to be encouraged and inspired, and I suspect that most of us are here only because someone encouraged and inspired us. We have a responsibility to make sure that we tackle those issues and change the gender balance of this place at the next election—whenever that may be.

We can start right here and now. The Government can address some of the barriers in the House and we can start to challenge ourselves. I watched a Member in last night’s debate look across the Chamber, gesticulate to the men—we women are invisible, of course—and ask when any of them had last been home to put their child to bed, and suggest that they should talk all night. That language just reinforces the idea that men are not responsible for their children. Some people are not privileged enough to have nannies, and some people—men and women—would love to go home and put their children to bed at night. That kind of attitude reminds us that we have so much work to do to get where we need to be.

Victoria Atkins: I was in that debate as well. In fairness to that Member, he was saying that the so-called family-friendly hours are not in fact family friendly. I do not know whether his messaging was correct, but I think he was making precisely the same point as the hon. Lady—that they are not family friendly.

Angela Crawley: I agree that that Member’s point may have been misconstrued, but the point is this: we can stand here in our privileged position and talk all day and all night, but there are not enough women in this House. We do not fully represent society. Women have to be able to afford to get here, have childcare, sit in hustings where men ask them, “What are you going to do about your children?” and experience the silly things that happen to us every day—if it has not happened to us, I am sure that we have heard about it happening to someone else. There are systemic barriers in society, barriers in this building and barriers in the fact that we did not get home until whatever time last night or the night before but we are here today.

Chris Bryant: Parenting or caring for another person often requires predictable timing, and the worst thing about Parliament is that it is so unpredictable. Whips engaging

in shenanigans, like they did yesterday, makes it much more difficult for many women—in particular mothers—to see how they could possibly operate here.

Angela Crawley: I wholeheartedly agree. I am sure that everyone agrees that this place has a negative impact on many people’s family life and work-life balance. I do not intend to cry and play a tiny fiddle on behalf of MPs, but if we cannot get it right here, how do we expect anyone to get it right elsewhere? Whether the lack of women is due to family, childcare, caring responsibilities, society, the media, our parties and their structures or our inability to challenge, we need mechanisms to get women here. I am sorry, but that is just where we are. Until we do not need them, that is what we will do. We should push for more.

I am inspired by the hon. Member for Eastleigh. I have the privilege of sitting on the Women and Equalities Committee with the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), and it is a privilege to work with the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), who has inspired me for a great many years, and with my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), to name but a few, but this place must change and action must happen. If we are to inspire the next generation of daughters and women to get here, we need to change the structure of this place, through proxy votes and by tackling attitudes and changing its unpredictability. The ridiculous need to grandstand, act macho, hold the Floor, filibuster, waste everyone’s time and ruin a lot of people’s lives is not the way to operate a business and it is not efficient.

How will the Minister ensure that this Government tackle the barriers to women standing for Parliament? Will she ensure that making this Parliament more family friendly is her priority? Will she ensure that there is a way to tackle party structures and the attitudes of this place so that women can get here in the first place and that opportunity is not just our privilege?

Hannah Bardell: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Angela Crawley: I am coming to a close, so I will continue. Will the Government commit to rise to the challenge and be world leaders? Will they make that happen? Will they take on this issue as their responsibility? Will the Minister lead and ensure that this place has the representation that we all want?

3.39 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I thank the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) for securing this important debate.

Women make up 51% of the UK population—and if it were not for them, the other 49% would not be here. It is no big ask for Parliament to be represented 50:50. I am proud that Labour has more women than all the other political parties put together, and I am really proud that Labour’s shadow Cabinet is 50:50. That is in line with our support for “50:50”, the cross-party campaign that aims to encourage and inspire support for political engagement.

I agree with almost everything that has been said in the debate. However, it is our duty in this House to ask difficult questions and highlight the uncomfortable truths

[Dawn Butler]

on barriers to women entering Parliament. Some of the solutions have been spoken about today, such as proxy votes and baby leave, and I agree with all of those things. We have also touched on abuse of women—especially on the internet; there is a debate on that tomorrow.

My hon. Friends the Members for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) and for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) penned a letter to the chair of the Conservative party, the right hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin). I want to highlight some of its points. It said:

“We are writing to express our dismay and deep concern at the vitriolic personal attacks that defined the Conservative Party’s election campaign. The Conservatives ran a negative, nasty campaign, propagating personal attacks, smears and untruths, particularly aimed at one of the most prominent women MPs, and indeed the first black woman MP, Diane Abbott.”

That campaign contributed to the awful, horrific abuse that my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) was subjected to. The Conservative party spent millions of pounds on abusive Facebook campaigns, and we in this House have a responsibility to lead by example—not just with our words, but with our actions.

Mrs Miller: What has characterised the debate so far has been consensus and the notion that this is a shared problem. I hope the hon. Lady agrees on the importance of that consensus continuing. Does she agree that what we really need is a plan, not a series of tactics, undertaken by Parliament, the Government or political parties? At the moment, we have no plan.

Dawn Butler: I agree. I am sorry to disappoint the right hon. Lady in breaking the consensus, but it is my job to talk about the uncomfortable truths on the barriers to women entering Parliament.

Victoria Atkins: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kelly Tolhurst: Will the hon. Lady Give way?

Dawn Butler: The right hon. Member for Basingstoke is right. I will come to some more solutions and ways to ensure that we make this place more acceptable and accessible to women, to which I hope the Government will respond.

Sometimes, the issue is not with women standing. Women often stand for positions but find that other barriers stop them from being selected or elected. Some of that is racism, discrimination, sexism and misogyny. As uncomfortable as it is to listen to, I am afraid we have to talk about these issues, because they are barriers to women entering Parliament.

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend will have noticed that one of the Select Committees just appointed has not a single woman on it. Would it not be a good change to our Standing Orders to say that no Committee of this House can be nominated if it has no woman on it?

Dawn Butler: That is an extremely valid point. We are a Parliament that should seek to hear the voices of all Members of this House, and that includes women. There should not be all-male Committees in this day and age.

Angela Crawley: I want to highlight something that I came across today. This is not a party political point, but it is another example. It came to my attention that one of our newly elected Members of Parliament, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Jared O’Mara), personally wrote a song, the title of which is, “I wish I were a misogynist, I’d smash her in the face”. Attitudes like that really do not help us in this place. Forgive me, but if that is an example of an MP we have in this place, I would like us to do more to tackle that behaviour. Does the hon. Lady agree that we need to do more to challenge our colleagues?

Dawn Butler: Absolutely. It can be difficult and uncomfortable, but we do have to challenge our colleagues. The other day, I challenged a Member who used a racist slur while speaking on a panel at the East India Club a few weeks ago. I found that deeply offensive—and there were other Members of Parliament on that panel who did not challenge that language. That kind of attitude is a barrier to women entering politics. It shows that certain people think they can get away with it.

Victoria Atkins: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dawn Butler: I have been very generous. Would the hon. Lady mind if I continued a little longer?

We can come to some of the solutions; I hope that when the Minister responds she will tackle some of them. In February 2016, the Law Commission published its interim report, which urged the Government to redraft electoral offences in a more modern and simple way so that they can be more readily understood and enforced by campaigners, the public and the police. It would be good to know when the Government will respond to that interim report, because I think that will go some way towards projecting what is acceptable and not acceptable and how political campaigns should be run, which would make for a friendlier environment for women entering this arena.

The hon. Member for Eastleigh asked a question about the Government’s internet strategy. I wonder when the Green Paper for that strategy will be published. According to the records of the House of Commons Library, it was due to be published in September but, as we have only a day to go before the conference recess, it is probably not going to be published this month.

The other thing that would be really good and help women, other Members of Parliament and others who are subject to internet abuse that stops them from taking public office is the creation of an internet ombudsman. When will the Minister create that? The Government have been talking about it for quite a while. Again, I am looking at the House of Commons Library paper and I cannot find any official announcements regarding the creation of such a position, but that would be extremely important in ensuring that we tackle some of the bullying that goes on, especially of female MPs and of those who, because of intersectionality, suffer horrendous additional abuse on top of that suffered by others because they are a woman, a black woman, disabled or gay.

As a woman of colour, a black woman, and as a working-class trade unionist, a career in politics was not an obvious choice for me. It was not something people encouraged by saying, “You must do that—you’ll

be a great politician.” In fact, they often thought that I was just too mouthy to do anything. It has been an extremely hard journey, and I want to ensure that, when I leave this place, the journey for other Members of Parliament coming through is smoother. The Government are in a position to do an awful lot to tackle the barriers for women entering Parliament and to ensure that we have a 50:50 Parliament. If I might be so bold, the Labour party still has a long way to go, but the all-women shortlist has done a lot in terms of ensuring that this House is more representative than it ever has been.

Victoria Atkins: Will the hon. Lady please ask her Whips Office to pair mums of newborn babies so that they can be slipped from this place? I understand that Labour Whips are refusing to pair mums who should be on maternity leave; they are being dragged back to the Chamber. Please can she encourage her Whips Office to do that?

Dawn Butler: That is an important point. We have already spoken about pairing and having people subbing for others, but it does not help when the Government act in such an irresponsible manner when conducting the business of the House—threatening to keep MPs here until three o’clock in the morning, with mothers and fathers having to bring their babies through the Lobby. When the Government do not say when we can have Opposition day debates or when they are going to have certain discussions, that does not help with the pairing of Members of Parliament. However, I will try to adopt a consensual tone by saying that anything that can be introduced to ensure that Parliament is fairer and more family-friendly should be supported by all parts of the House.

3.49 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Anne Milton): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger, and to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) on securing the debate. I was tempted to say “Stop squabbling,” and it is very likely that I will forget the speech I have in front of me: my one point is that if we want to change things, we have to take down the party political barriers. There is fault on every side, but all political parties have done what they can and what they feel is appropriate to make sure that some of the barriers come down.

I go to women’s forums where people stand up and say, particularly in business, “We have done so well.” I get a bit tired of hearing how well we have done; the truth is that we have not done well enough. I am absolutely clear about one thing: as women, we have to take down those barriers. Only then can we get change.

Mrs Miller: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that we need to do more. We need the data to understand exactly how much more we need to do. As she knows, the Government could enact section 106 of the Equality Act 2010, so that parties publish the data on candidates who are standing. The Government have rejected that proposal from my Committee.

Anne Milton: I thank my right hon. Friend and praise her for the work she has done. In life, it is the squeaky wheel that gets the oil.

Mrs Miller: I am a very squeaky wheel!

Anne Milton: That was a compliment, Sir Roger. It is the tenacity of people such as my right hon. Friend that will change things. It is almost 100 years since the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1918 was passed, which made it possible for women to stand as parliamentary candidates. Next year is the centenary, which is an opportunity for us, as women in Parliament, to do something to make sure that we remember the message. It is extraordinary to think that that Act received Royal Assent on 21 November 1918, just 10 days after the end of the first world war. Even while Europe was reeling from four years of devastating conflict, Parliament recognised the necessity for equality by introducing and passing a Bill.

The question we need to take away is whether we still recognise that necessity for equality today. Those of us in this chamber do, but we need to make sure that we never let that ball drop. The 1918 Act came after years of protest and debate for women’s suffrage. Brave women fought and died, and were imprisoned and demonised by Government and the police. Thousands petitioned and marched throughout Britain. The struggle was bruising. Nancy Astor has been mentioned already. In her maiden speech, she said:

“it was very difficult for some hon. Members to receive the first lady M.P. into the House. It was almost as difficult for some of them as it was for the lady M.P. herself to come in.”—[*Official Report*, 24 February 1920; Vol. 125, c. 1623.]

This is the most diverse Parliament in British history, with 208 female MPs: 32% of the House. Some 45 MPs identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual, and 52 MPs are from a black, Asian or minority ethnic background—interestingly, they are 26 women and 26 men. However, that progress has been painfully slow, and 100 years on the House does not reflect the public it serves. One hon. Member referred to there having been only 489 women MPs, with 33 of those first elected in 2017. In 2015, we finally exceeded the existing number of sitting male MPs. Women make up 51% of the population and, as the shadow spokesperson rightly pointed out, the men would not be here if it was not for us.

It would be ridiculous to believe that, in a population of 66 million, there are not 124 women who are capable and absolutely willing to take on the job of MP. Women made up a record 29% of candidates in 2017, but it is a stark fact that in 104 constituencies there were no women candidates at all. That equates to about 7.5 million people who had no option to vote for a woman.

The problem is twofold. My hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh talked about barriers and the problems of women who have children, and we looked at a number of those, but there are also the social and structural limits that we systematically place on women and girls. Women are less likely to consider themselves knowledgeable about subjects than men, despite growing evidence that proves there is no difference. Many women feel excluded or uninformed, because time and again they are shown that the opinions and authority of men are valued over theirs. The overwhelming majority of expert opinion and commentary in all public spheres is given by men.

Much work has been done in recent years to improve the diversity of experts called on by the news media. The 30% Club, which was launched by women, created a database of women experts for the media to contact on a range of topics. However, we need to see sustained efforts. I was recently told a story by a member of the

[Anne Milton]

Government who was phoned up by a mainstream radio news outlet in the past couple of years but who was stood down at the last minute and told, “It’s alright; we’ve already got a woman.” It is shocking that, in this day and age, mainstream media still feel it acceptable to say something like that.

Chris Bryant: We are not very good on that in Parliament either, are we? Often, every single witness—brought in at MPs’ request—in a Select Committee evidence session will be a man. Surely that should be a thing of the past.

Anne Milton: It absolutely must, and I take the opportunity to praise Mr Speaker for his chairing of the diversity and inclusion group. We have looked at exactly that—opportunities for crèche facilities for expert witnesses and so on.

There is no doubt that parenthood remains a structural and practical barrier for many women. Of those not in work due to caring responsibilities, 89% are women; I am not denying that men perform some of those roles, but 89% are women. Mothers have been underrepresented in Parliament. Interestingly, a 2013 survey of MPs found that 55% of the women had children, which is low, compared with 72% of the men. Women juggle their dual lives as parent and a parliamentarian, working against long and unpredictable working weeks—an issue that the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) rightly raised.

I will pick up on a couple of points. My hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) mentioned gender stereotyping. It is a critical issue and I am pleased that the Advertising Standards Authority

has recently taken action on it. All-women shortlists also came up. I also struggle with them; they ensure compliance but not a change in culture, and as women in this place we need to aim for a change in culture. I went into politics with absolutely no political background at all. Somebody once described me as an “accidental Member of Parliament”, which I feel I was. I did not feel as though people like me were well represented—a woman with a background in the public sector—and that was one of the driving forces behind why I came here.

I would like to feel as though I will leave something behind me. The shadow Front-Bench spokesperson talked about things the Government can do, and that plays its part, but we have to change the culture. We have to leave women feeling that they have an equal chance of getting here. It is critical that they come, so that we have the benefit of their skills, life experience and the unique contribution that they make, and to make sure that the voice of 50% of the population is equally represented in this place.

3.59 pm

Mims Davies: I thank all Members from across the House for the spirit and tone of the debate. It would be remiss of me not to mention the candidates department, which I hope is being swamped with applications from females as we speak. I will use and adapt two Madeleine Albright quotes to end the debate: there is a special place in hell for women and men who do not support other women; and we should use the debate to form our opinions, and use those opinions to create discussions, so that we can all work to break and end barriers.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Corby Urgent Care Centre

[MR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Corby urgent care centre.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. I have to say that in the two and a half years I have been a Member of this place, this is the first Westminster Hall debate that I have ever applied for. The reason is that I think we should use these sorts of opportunity sparingly, for issues that are very pertinent and significant for our constituents. This issue matters very much to people in Corby and the surrounding area, so I felt that it warranted a debate. I am delighted that this opportunity has been granted.

I want to emphasise at the outset that the facility we have in Corby at the moment—the Corby urgent care centre—is class-leading, hugely popular, well used and a beacon of best practice. I know that representatives of Lakeside Plus, which is the current provider, are watching this debate closely. At this point, I want to say a huge thank you to Lakeside Plus for the quality of service it has provided since 2012, when the Corby urgent care centre opened under the coalition Government. I am proud that it was Conservatives in government who delivered this class-leading facility for my constituents. The dedicated staff who work there day in, day out do a remarkable job, and that is something I hear all the time. When I knock on doors in the constituency and am out in the town centre, that is the message I hear loud and clear.

Back on 20 July, I spoke in the final debate before the summer recess, which was an important opportunity, given the press release issued by Corby clinical commissioning group on 13 July that led to concern locally about the potential loss of this service at the end of September. Fortunately, we are in a better position now than we were when I spoke in that debate on 20 July. That is because on 29 August, the governing body of the CCG met, and the CCG subsequently communicated with me to advise that at that meeting a number of things had been agreed to, including a rolling four-month extension to Lakeside Plus's contract, subject to legal agreement, and a "robust timeline" for patient, public and stakeholder engagement and consultation. That is obviously a very important step forward and, in some respects, provides reassurance to my constituents in the short term.

I understand that the contract extension has not yet been agreed, and the clock is ticking. Once we get to the end of September, that is the cliff edge. I want to see urgent action taken by the CCG, getting around the table with Lakeside Plus to get the contract signed, to take the cliff edge out of the equation, because that is what my constituents are most worried about at this point—and with good reason, because we can conclude that, were the facility to close on 30 September, it would be very difficult for it to be reopened. We must avoid that cliff edge, and I urge everybody concerned to get around the table and ensure that we get the agreement signed as quickly as possible.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and on his tireless efforts, not only in this House but locally in Corby, to fight this cause. It is a hugely popular facility. My constituents in Kettering know that without the Corby urgent care centre, the pressure on Kettering General Hospital would be even greater. The Minister knows how busy Kettering General Hospital is because he had the good heart to visit it recently. I am 100% behind my hon. Friend in his campaign.

Tom Pursglove: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend, who has been unstinting in his support for the Corby urgent care centre and the local campaign. He recognises, quite rightly, the pressures that the facility relieves Kettering General Hospital of. Kettering General Hospital is obviously a very important facility in our community. I will touch on those pressures a little bit later, but I very much appreciate his support for what we are doing.

I have talked about the short-term situation. In the longer term, the CCG appears to be committed to much more thorough consultation, first with a pre-consultation, and followed by a thorough consultation on options, which I understand would run between November and January. I welcome that, but I am clear that corners must not be cut in that process. The whole community must be engaged. It is not enough to engage with a group of 700 people in a patient participation group; that is just not good enough.

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. His reference to Kettering General Hospital and this fairly narrow consultation leads me to ask whether he agrees that not only Kettering General Hospital but Northampton General Hospital would be impacted by this. Have those he has been working with made references to that in the course of their discussions?

Tom Pursglove: I am grateful to my county colleague for his intervention. He is absolutely right. As this campaign has progressed since July, I have been receiving communication from people across the county and from outside the county who say they make use of the Corby urgent care centre rather than going to the acute hospitals in our area. I have no doubt that not only Kettering General Hospital but Northampton General Hospital would be affected. This is not just a Corby issue by any means, although it is obviously very important to Corby residents. It is also fundamental to the wider health infrastructure of north Northamptonshire.

I want Corby CCG to be very aware of and alive to the fact that I will be watching the consultation process ahead of us like a hawk, because the consultation that has gone on previously has not been good enough. I think the CCG would recognise, if it were honest, that that has not been good enough, and we need to see improvement. I will not hesitate to ask difficult questions, should they need to be asked. I will also be clear with the CCG that it ought to make no mistake that in the long term we need urgent care facilities in our town. There are a number of key reasons for that.

The first is the growth agenda. There can be no doubt that in north Northamptonshire, there will be increasing pressures on our health infrastructure more generally in the years ahead. We are taking thousands and thousands of new homes, not just in Corby but in east Northamptonshire, Kettering and Wellingborough. That inevitably brings pressures for existing health services.

[Tom Pursglove]

I have already referred to the KGH pressures, which are very pertinent. I am pleased, as I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) will be, that the recent Care Quality Commission inspection saw quite considerable improvement compared with the last inspection. We welcome that, but I do not want to see all that good work undone by additional people who would previously have gone to the Corby urgent care centre turning up at A&E.

One flaw in the CCG's argument to date has been that it has never been able to account for the number of people who currently go to the urgent care centre and who, if that were not available, would go on to Kettering General Hospital. I am very concerned about that. We must not forget that last year, 70,000 people made use of the Corby urgent care centre, and only 6% of those went on to Kettering General Hospital for further treatment. That gives us an idea of the impact here. I think we would also all recognise that Corby has significant and acute health needs, particularly on the back of the fact that we are an industrial town. Our town has been built on our industries, which inevitably leads to acute health needs among the local population.

I know that local people share my strength of feeling on this. The "Save Corby Urgent Care Centre" group has done a fantastic job, particularly online, harnessing local opinion and local support for the campaign. In fact, tomorrow night at the end of business, I shall present a petition signed by more than 2,500 local people in support of the urgent care centre. I pay tribute to Lyn Buckingham, Maria Bryan and others for the work that they have been doing on the issue.

As the local Member of Parliament, I am proud to say that the fact that we have a Labour council in Corby does not mean that we do not work together for what is best for the people of our area. Tom Beattie, the Labour leader of the council, and I have worked very closely on this issue, as we do on others, such as the steel issue, because party politics does not matter when it comes to these issues. People do not want to see politicians squabbling and arguing about petty points; they want solutions to the problems, so I am pleased that that cross-party work continues in our community. I want to say again a big thank you to my Northamptonshire colleagues for their support on this issue, because, as I said, it affects not just my constituents, but people in their areas.

The final thing giving me heart in terms of the strength of local feeling is that I launched a parliamentary postcode campaign on this issue, and although not that many have yet been delivered—that process is going on at the moment—we are seeing hundreds and hundreds returned. I look forward to the opportunity to present sacks of those cards to the commissioners in the months ahead, as part of the consultation process, to hammer home how strongly we as a community feel about the issue. They are also coming in thick and fast on email, and not just from people in Northamptonshire.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Minister for his interest. Obviously, we have just had a recess, which is not necessarily a particularly good time for challenges to occur in constituencies, but I have really appreciated the fact that he has always been willing and available to talk about this issue when concerns have been brought to my attention. That availability is appreciated.

Often, politicians are accused of talking about problems, raising issues, but having no solutions. When I look at this issue, there are some things that really stand out for me that I think are just common sense. What concerns me is that when we look at the figures for same-day access in Corby, for example, we are not doing well enough. There are clearly key challenges ahead, and the CCG's performance on that particular matter has to improve.

However, that should not be at the expense of urgent care facilities in the town, and local people should not be penalised in relation to the urgent care centre as a result of the current contract not having been handled as it should have been by the commissioners. Obviously, the expert determination speaks to that point. I do not need to say any more on that, but local people should not be penalised, in terms of the health services available to them going forward, as a result of the contract not having been handled as it should have been.

It is clear to me that if we improved GP access, the cost of the urgent care centre service would reduce, because if more of my constituents, or more of those people from the surrounding areas, could see their GP on the day that they needed an appointment, they would not have cause to go to the urgent care centre, where they have perhaps been going because the access has not been good enough to date. It should be about doing both: improving GP access at the same time as providing urgent care facilities. I argue very strongly that the cost of the urgent care facilities would be less were the GP access better.

I will continue to advance these arguments in the months ahead. I am conscious that county colleagues who are present may want to say a few words, so I shall wrap up, but I want to be very clear about the fact that losing this facility would be a betrayal of local people. The proof is in the pudding: it is making an impact. The idea of losing it is obscene when we consider that other areas look at Corby urgent care centre with envy. For example, people in Wellingborough want to see, at the Isebrook site, a very similar service replicated. Were we to lose Corby urgent care centre, that would also undermine the whole model that we have been working on, cross-party, for some years. I am talking about a hub-and-spoke model—ensuring that we have the urgent care hub on the Kettering General Hospital site, with a spoke in Wellingborough and a spoke in Corby. That makes absolute sense, and I do not want the good work that has been done on it undone, because this facility is class-leading and can demonstrate that it has made quite an impact. I say again that I am in no doubt that losing the facility would be a disaster for Kettering General Hospital. I also recognise that Corby CCG has responsibility for Kettering General Hospital as its pinned CCG.

As I said in the debate before the summer recess, my message to the CCG remains very clear: please don't let us down.

4.14 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove) and my hon. Friend the Minister for allowing me briefly to speak in the debate. We have an excellent Minister who has shown a great deal of interest in the concerns of north Northamptonshire NHS.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Corby both on initiating the debate and on his campaigning across his constituency on many issues, but particularly on Corby urgent care centre. His listening campaign has galvanised support from all over the town and the surrounding areas, and it is the surroundings areas that I want to mention, because people from Wellingborough go to Corby urgent care centre. Wellingborough is one of those towns that does not have an urgent care centre or a hospital, so if someone unfortunately has an emergency, they have to travel to Kettering and, on occasion, to Northampton, which is not a good situation. The urgent care centre allows people to be seen more quickly, and the system really works. I saw one of my constituents who had fallen ill, could not see the doctor that day in Wellingborough, went to Corby urgent care centre and was then referred on to Kettering, so the system works. I am grateful to my hon. Friends the Members for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) and for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) for being here, because they represent the two constituencies with the two major hospitals. The problem is that if we get rid of Corby urgent care centre, we will finish up with more and more people going to Kettering A&E and to Northampton General Hospital.

For a long time now—since before my hon. Friend the Member for Corby was even elected—there has been a campaign for a hub at Kettering. That would be a national leader and is something that the Department has supported. We would have the urgent care centre in Corby, which we already have; we could have an urgent care centre at Kettering General; and we would have an urgent care centre at the Isebrook Hospital in Wellingborough. That is my plea to the commissioning groups, because I have been round the site where they are going to put the urgent care centre in Wellingborough, but I am afraid the commissioning groups have let us down. I have introduced in this Parliament a Bill, which you may be aware of, Mr Chope, to merge the two commissioning groups, the Northamptonshire Clinical Commissioning Groups (Merger) Bill, because having a Corby commissioning group—the smallest in the country—is hopeless. I am not much more impressed by the Nene group, so let us put them together and see whether we can get something better. I have also introduced a Bill that would bring the hub system to Northamptonshire—the North Northamptonshire (Urgent Care Facilities) Bill.

I am really grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Corby for letting me speak in the debate. He is doing an absolutely terrific job in Corby. He said right at the beginning of his speech that these debates should be used only for really important occasions. The first time I was in Westminster Hall, the aim was to keep open Rushden fire station, using a listening campaign, and we achieved that, so I hope that as a result of this debate we will ensure that Corby urgent care centre stays open.

4.18 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): Thank you, Mr Chope, for chairing the debate in your inimitable style. I was intrigued to learn that my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove) had not used the precincts of Westminster Hall to raise an issue before; I was somewhat surprised, because he is such an assiduous campaigner for his constituency and such a frequent contributor in the main Chamber.

The reason may simply be that he does not manage to find time to get into Westminster Hall, so often does he raise his constituents' interests on the Floor of the House. It is good to see him so well supported again today by his constituency neighbours from Wellingborough and Kettering.

We have discussed this matter privately and, to a limited degree, on the Floor of the House. My hon. Friend the Member for Corby referred to the Adjournment debate to which he contributed before Parliament rose for the summer recess. We have also discussed during the summer, as events unfolded in a more unpredictable way, what could be done to secure the future of the facility for which he has advocated so well today.

I feel reasonably up to speed with events in Corby; for the benefit of other Members present, I will rehearse a small number of them. I will not go into too much detail, not least because at the heart of the issue has been a contractual dispute, which has limited the ability of participants to describe the nature of it. That has, in itself, given rise to some problems in communicating to the local population what the problem has been. We remain bound by the confidentiality arrangements around the legal procedure, but suffice it to say that, as my hon. Friend correctly observes, we are close to a point where action has to be taken to maintain the facility from the end of this month.

From my conversations with the CCG leadership in preparation for this debate, I can assure my hon. Friend that on that side of the negotiating table they are determined to ensure that continuity of service is provided through the rolling four-month contract. They alerted him to that contract at the end of last month and are engaging with the provider, Lakeside Plus, to try to reach agreement. There is no doubt that without an agreement, some of the services would have to be provided in an alternative and less satisfactory way for the local population. That is inevitable, if it is put together in a short timeframe.

It is in everybody's interest to make this work, but it will be a precursor to a longer-term solution, which is clearly required for the local population. I am pleased that my hon. Friend recognises that such a solution needs to be widely consulted on. Indeed, he is pressing for a more fulsome consultation than is perhaps typical. Given the circumstances surrounding this case, I will be urging the CCG regarding that full consultation. I have been alerted that it is due to start in November, and think that he has been given the same information.

I was not aware of a pre-consultation, and am not quite sure what it means. Hopefully, it means providing an opportunity to ensure that the full consultation is as detailed as necessary. I am quite sure that my hon. Friend will encourage all those who have been in touch with him to participate in that consultation when it gets under way. I was pleased to learn from him about the cross-party nature of the support and full engagement that he has been working, alongside the action group, to generate. I am sure that all those taking an interest will participate in the consultation.

To touch on the substance of the issue, I should say that the GP practice co-located with the urgent care centre has the largest patient list of any GP practice in the midlands, certainly, and possibly across NHS England's footprint, so it has some unusual characteristics. One of the pressures on that practice, which my hon. Friend

[Mr Philip Dunne]

alluded to, is access to that GP surgery. Pressure is put on the urgent care centre by the difficulty in securing access to that part of the GP provision in the area. My understanding is that there is a federation of GPs, beyond the immediate catchment of the UCC but within the CCG area, that has much better access. Work should be done as part of the consultation to see how the performance across the entire CCG area can be improved to relieve some of the pressure on the urgent care centre.

A consequence of that pressure is that the original contract, designed to undertake 120 patient episodes a day, has been dealing with more like 170 patients a day attending the urgent care centre. Of those patients, the vast majority—88%—could be dealt with either in that facility or in the GP practice itself. As I understand it, 12% definitely require treatment at the urgent care centre, and some of those are then referred to either Kettering General Hospital or, in a small number of cases, to Northampton's A&E facility.

There is a need for an urgent care setting, but there is as much of a need to ensure that those who could be treated in the primary care environment can be. Part of the consultation will look at the appropriateness of a primary care home arrangement. That is an establishment that brings together primary care providers, social care providers and other providers, such as pharmacies, within an area, to provide a more integrated primary care service. That in itself might have benefits for improving access to treatment for the population served by the UCC at present.

My hon. Friend will be well aware of the history of the contracting challenge between the CCG and Lakeside Plus. I will not exhaust his patience by going into that in any detail, but will simply say that it is the intent of the CCG to re-establish a contractual relationship. The CCG wishes to have this moving forward on a four-month rolling basis while the consultation takes place, and then any subsequent arrangements will need to go out to tender. The intent is that this contract will

continue until the successor arrangements are in place, so that there is continuity of care for his constituents—something that the Department absolutely supports.

I conclude by saying that it is really important that we use this public consultation to get the model of care right for the people in the area served by the UCC. That needs to take into account the evidence base for the clinical model, the right to patient choice for the people who will be using it, to meet the local need—my hon. Friend spoke eloquently about the particular local needs in the Corby area, and those are recognised—and also value for money. The approach has to be coherent and comprehensive, to come up with the right solution for the future.

I heard what my hon. Friend's neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), said about looking for a similar hub in Wellingborough. I will look with interest to see how his private Member's Bill progresses, to endeavour to bring that about. I also note his comments regarding the structure of the CCGs in the area. That is really a matter for the STP—the sustainability and transformation partnership—to make progress on and decide the structure of both commissioning and provision of service in the area. It is not really for me to comment on that off the cuff here today, but I note what he says and am aware that this is one of the smallest CCGs in the country. I am also aware that there is a very substantial programme of collaboration already underway with the neighbouring CCG at Nene, so I think that the CCGs themselves see the benefits of closer integration of their working.

On that basis, I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Corby that I will endeavour to keep him informed as matters come to my attention, and I am quite sure he will continue to keep me and the Department informed as well.

Question put and agreed to.

Mr Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. As we have got a minute and a half spare, we can go straight on to the next debate because the Minister is here. I now call the next speaker, Mr Linden.

Scotland-Malawi Relationship

4.28 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I beg to move,
That this House has considered the Scotland-Malawi relationship.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope, having spent the afternoon with you in the Procedure Committee.

I am pleased to have secured today's debate, and am very grateful to be able to give the House a chance to discuss and celebrate our very important and successful bilateral relationship. Before I speak about some of the more pressing matters, I would like to talk about the connection, the significance of which is seen through the numerous links to Malawi in every single one of the 59 constituencies in Scotland. I do not doubt that some of the other hon. Members present will be keen to use this debate to highlight some of those cultural links and will try to keep my comments brief to allow other Members to speak. I am happy to take appropriate interventions as well.

I pay tribute to the Scotland Malawi Partnership for all its work to promote the relationship between our nations. It has been invaluable in helping me to prepare for this debate. In particular, I thank and pay tribute to David Hope-Jones, its chief executive, who is tireless in his resolve to celebrate the scale, energy and impact of Scotland's bilateral relationship with Malawi.

I cannot speak on this subject without honouring another David—now would probably be a good time for someone to intervene with those immortal words, “Dr Livingstone, I presume?” The doctor is a famed figure across the globe, but nowhere more so than in his home nation of Scotland and in Malawi, where he travelled extensively on missionary work. David Livingstone's influence on Malawi is evident right across the country. Its commercial centre and oldest city, Blantyre, was named after his birthplace in Lanarkshire. The history of the great Scotsman's travels and crusades against slavery is taught to every schoolchild in Malawi even today, which ensures that he remains a much revered figure.

It should therefore come as no surprise that almost 200,000 Malawians are now involved in the Scotland Malawi Partnership, along with 100,000 Scots. The organisation's impact should not be underestimated: some 2 million Malawians benefit directly from the partnership and 4 million benefit indirectly. In Scotland, almost half the population know someone with a connection to Malawi—an absolutely remarkable statistic.

There are 1,131 Scottish organisations and community champions with active links to Malawi, such as the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund, Classrooms for Malawi, Mary's Meals, Oxfam Scotland and 500 Miles. Glasgow City Council also has strong links. Successive Lords Provost have made the link a real priority since 2005, with each visiting Malawi and outdoing the last in raising funds, engaging and inspiring more people in Scotland and Malawi to connect for their mutual benefit. I recently met our newly appointed Lord Provost, Councillor Eva Bolander. I take great pleasure in informing the House that she will continue the tradition and is ready for the challenge.

A number of Glasgow City Council's schools already have thriving relationships and partnerships with Malawi. These are active, dignified, two-way, school-to-school links that inform and inspire generations of young Scots to be good global citizens and that are transforming lives in Malawi and in Scotland.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Will he join me in recognising and commending the excellent work of a disproportionately large number of people in my constituency to support the people of Malawi? He has already mentioned the excellent work of Mary's Meals, but we also have the Mid Argyll Malawi Twinning Group, the Imani Development Foundation in Oban, the Netherlorn Churches' project “Seed for life. Feed for life”, many secondary schools such as the Rothesay Academy, Dunoon Grammar School, and the primary schools of Strone, Dalmally and Iona.

David Linden: I wholeheartedly join my hon. Friend in commending those wonderful local organisations. We have seen the generous, welcoming spirit of Argyll and Bute in its international work in recent years. I am more than happy to put that on the record.

In my constituency, Carmyle Primary School, St Joachim's Catholic Primary School, Croftcroighn School, Swinton Primary School, Eastbank Academy and my own former high school, Bannerman High School, all participate in programmes to connect our distinct but intertwined communities over thousands of miles. On a recent visit back to Bannerman, I was delighted to learn that the school is preparing for a trip to Malawi next year, which I hope to be able to join.

Bannerman High School's preparations are likely to be a lot easier than those of Malawians who wish to travel to Scotland, however. That brings me to my first substantive issue: the extremely serious shortcomings in the UK Government's handling of visa applications. The Scotland Malawi Partnership has reported that over the past decade, its members have experienced an increasing number of issues with visa applications. Worryingly, many of them feel that the situation is worse now than it has ever been. Some argue that Malawians who apply for visas to visit the United Kingdom are treated with contempt from the outset, with ever increasing charges and an ever decreasing quality of service.

The partnership reports that what it sees as the dysfunctional processing of UK visas not only affects its work and the work of its members across Scottish civil society, but has a serious negative impact on the Government's own development and diplomatic efforts, causing reputational damage. It is quite clear that this is not an isolated issue. The partnership's experience is that Scottish churches, schools, non-governmental organisations, businesses, NHS boards, hospitals, universities and community groups have had to cancel visits, often at a considerable cost, because UK visas have not been processed correctly or in time.

When concerns have been raised in this place, the Government have been quick to point out that about 82% of UK visa applications from Malawi are successful—perhaps the Minister might ask the relevant Minister to break down for me how that percentage was arrived at. I understand that a significant proportion of Scotland

[David Linden]

Malawi Partnership members who start the process of applying for a UK visitor visa are not able to complete it because of systemic failures, so I would be keen to find out whether those incomplete applications are included within that percentage. I would also like to know if the figure includes visas that are awarded on the day of travel or even after the scheduled travel date.

The second substantive issue is the 1955 Malawi-UK double taxation treaty. I appreciate that Ministers may have been somewhat distracted by Brexit and disrupted by the snap general election, but the Government have not yet honoured their promise—and it was a promise—to update that treaty. The final deadline of July 2017 has now passed. My hon. Friend the Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) recently asked a written question about the matter, but I am afraid the Treasury's answer was disappointingly non-committal about the timeframe for completion. Its reason for delay—that the Government of Malawi had raised further points for consideration in August 2016—was somewhat at odds with the promise made by the then Financial Secretary to the Treasury last December that

“we hope to conclude soon”.—[*Official Report*, 16 December 2016; Vol. 618, c. 1142.]

Nine months on, we seem to be no further forward. I do not think that I am overstepping the mark when I say that the UK Government appear to be dragging their heels. They ought to get on with their day job and bring this matter to resolution. I do not consider it unreasonable to ask them to let us know exactly when they aim to have the treaty signed off. Any update would be most welcome.

The Minister for Africa (Rory Stewart): Would the hon. Gentleman like to reflect on whether this is an entirely one-sided problem, or whether there are any issues on the Malawian side of the double taxation treaty that may also be holding things up?

David Linden: The point is that we need to get on with getting this sorted. The Government have been quite clear about setting a timeframe, but I can see from my constituency caseload that they are perhaps too focused on other matters at the moment. I would like Ministers in the Treasury to honour their promise to get this sorted. As I said, I do not think it is unreasonable for the Government to let us know exactly when they aim to have the treaty signed off. Perhaps the Treasury can follow that up, although I appreciate that it is not the Minister's Department.

My third concern is investment in Malawi. It is only fair to point out that the Scotland Malawi Partnership applauds the CDC-DFID impact accelerator programme, which enables smaller investments that are better suited to a country such as Malawi. I echo the partnership's calls for the Government to build on that and urge the CDC to increase the investment going to Malawi.

I am conscious of time, as I know other hon. Members wish to speak. The final issue I will raise is DFID's engagement with civic links between Scotland and Malawi. The Department's small charities challenge fund aims to better engage smaller NGOs, but there are concerns about the design of the programme, such as the fear that payment in lieu will render the fund inaccessible for smaller organisations in Scotland. Will the Minister

undertake to discuss that with his colleagues, so that this well-intentioned fund can be tweaked to be of greater benefit to organisations that have the potential to do great work with its support?

Let me finish by looking positively towards the future of the bilateral relationship between our nations. The phenomenal work being done in Scotland and Malawi, which I hope other hon. Members will highlight, is certainly something to be celebrated. Our ties continue to be strengthened and further developed. Our 150-year relationship bridges the gap. Let each of us continue to build upon that. In the words of Dr Livingstone,

“I will go anywhere, provided it is forward.”

4.39 pm

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) on securing this debate.

Malawi obviously has a great effect over all of Scotland, and I will mention one or two of my colleagues who cannot be here today. Scottish organisations such as Scotland's Rural College, part of which is in my constituency of Gordon, and the Co-operative College have developed innovative solutions for agriculture and trade—which, being a farmer myself, is something that is close to my heart—helping to increase sustainable daily production and helping farmers to get the best return from their crop. That has transformed Malawi into a regional hub for the development of cattle vaccines, which protects livelihoods and food security for hundreds of thousands of people.

The hon. Member for Glasgow East has mentioned a number of schools already; I will not go over them all again. However, Williamwood school in East Renfrewshire, which is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton), has sent more than a hundred pupils on visits to towns in Malawi and raised more than £25,000 for Classrooms for Malawi, leading to the construction of a local nursery and the completion of 14 classrooms at Ekwendeni Primary School.

In my own constituency of Gordon, Famine Relief for Orphans in Malawi has worked with communities in Malawi for more than a decade. Originally set up to provide food for feeding stations, it worked in response to the floods in Malawi in 2015 and 2017, and over time it has provided funds to build two health clinics, a health worker's house and two school classrooms with composting toilets.

My hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) has also supported development opportunities in Malawi for some time now. She told me that she visited an excellent event in her constituency last Saturday, which highlighted the brilliant work of the Dalitso Project, an organisation based in Arbroath, since 2007. It runs two day care centres and orphan residences. It now cares for 310 children and provides jobs for 30 staff.

I want to add my voice to that of the hon. Member for Glasgow East. I am aware of the difficulties for Malawian citizens of obtaining a visa for the UK. There have been many reports of the system being dysfunctional. Furthermore, the 1955 UK-Malawi double taxation treaty dearly needs updating. Now is the time to use the strength of our relationship to overcome these hurdles.

4.41 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate and I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) on securing it.

The links between Scotland and Malawi were well documented by the hon. Gentleman. They have their roots in history, but they are still flourishing now. I suppose that traditionally they existed through the links between the Church of Scotland and the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian, which remain strong to this day. Indeed, my own presbytery in Orkney is linked with the Thyolo Highlands Presbytery in Malawi. These are the sort of direct and meaningful links that exist.

Like other hon. Members, there are schools in my constituency that have direct links and partnerships with schools in Malawi. Westray Junior High School and Sanday Junior High School in particular have done a lot in recent years to offer their pupils an opportunity to see the life of their contemporaries in Malawi and to offer people in Malawi a chance to come in the other direction.

Those are very commendable links—the sort of links that should give us confidence that the civic links between Scotland and Malawi will continue to grow and endure, built as they are on links between communities and individuals within those communities. Indeed, at this point I should also pay tribute to the Scotland Malawi Partnership, which provided me with a briefing for this debate. I suspect that it has done for other hon. Members what it has done for me—namely, listing the links that exist within our communities.

In fact, there is another link that the Scotland Malawi Partnership was obviously not aware of, because it did not appear on its list. Nevertheless, it is an absolute exemplar of the sort of project that we should see and indeed do see across Scotland. It is the Malawi Music Fund, which is based in Orkney. It was set up by a constituent of mine, Glenys Hughes, who taught music in secondary schools in Malawi in 2006; she took a year out to go there. She came back and with her knowledge and experience she then built up links. The traffic between the two countries has continued to this day. Malawi Music Fund runs residential workshops and also raises funds for bursaries for secondary education, which, as hon. Members will know, is not free in Malawi.

Just this weekend, I met a dance teacher in Orkney, Joanna Davies, who had just been in Malawi with Orkney's Malawi Music Fund. She told me, with some excitement, of her plans to bring a dance teacher and dancer from Malawi to Orkney—a link that she had built during the visit. I listened with a curious mix of inspiration and despondency. I could not help being inspired by the enthusiasm of somebody who had gone out and made a connection with somebody she had identified, from her own professional experience, as very talented. I was despondent, however, that by encouraging her to go forward with a visit or programme for this young man, I was almost certainly creating my own casework, because from the profile she described, I just know that getting him a visa will be an absolute nightmare.

It need not be like that. As a constituency MP, I have seen a number of projects over the years in which visitors come from Malawi to the United Kingdom.

I have lost count of the number of times I have sat at my desk, bashing the phones and trying to get some common sense out of UK Visas and Immigration, the UK Border Agency, Border Force or whatever it was called at the time. It is the same old story every time: “We don't believe that these people are going to go back, notwithstanding the basis on which they have been brought here.”

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I apologise for coming late to the debate; *pepani chomene*, as we say in Chitumbuka. Is it not one of the greatest ironies of visas that the visitors who apply have so often been funded by Government institutions? These are UK Government and Scottish Government programmes that are vouched for by highly reliable organisations, but that does not seem to make a blind bit of difference to the Home Office.

Mr Carmichael: In calling it ironic, the hon. Gentleman is being kind to those responsible. Whether or not it is ironic, it sure as hell is frustrating and totally unnecessary. I have found myself speaking to Heathrow Border Force staff on a Saturday, with every document that could possibly be required, but it is always the same old story: any ambiguity in any of the information provided is always interpreted to the detriment, not the advantage, of the person seeking entry.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman makes some very good points; I share his frustration in my own constituency cases. Does he agree that it fundamentally undermines the reciprocal nature of the relationship that we can go to Malawi relatively easily, but people from Malawi cannot come here? It is difficult to have a friendship of equals when we do not treat people from Malawi as equals in the immigration system.

Mr Carmichael: Indeed. It strikes at the very heart of the nature of the relationship, which ought to be a partnership. I was struck by the last thing Joanna Davies said on Saturday, after I outlined a fraction of what she would have to deal with before her friend's visit: “When we go there, we have absolutely none of these difficulties.” That is the experience that many of us have had, and I hope the Minister will take on board the hon. Lady's good point. It is difficult and occasionally impossible to build the sorts of links that I believe the Minister wants, if another part of the Government is operating in a way that undermines the efforts of such groups.

The hon. Member for Glasgow East mentioned the 1955 UK-Malawi double taxation treaty. It is to be regretted, to say the least, that we are still speaking about this; I rather thought that we had got beyond that and that we had sufficient undertakings. If there are difficulties at the Malawi end, we need to hear more about them, but surely in a modern agreement the partners should be equal. The characterisation of the 1955 treaty is one of a colonial power to its colony. I hope that when the Minister talks about difficulties coming in each way, that is not an indication of the UK Government's attitude in the present day.

Rory Stewart: It is a little uncomfortable, but the question of the trade relationships is about technical legal definitions and trade. The problem is not an ideological

[*Rory Stewart*]

problem; it is not a problem of colonial history or timetables. It is a problem of such things as very specific legal definitions of geography. These things cannot be resolved by simply standing up, trying to shame the British Government and telling us to get on with it. The Malawian Government have to make some moves in the negotiation. The negotiation cannot be resolved in the way the right hon. Gentleman suggests.

Mr Carmichael: I was a legal practitioner before I came to this House, so I am well acquainted with the issues around interpretation and negotiation. All I would say is that if the Government are experiencing difficulties in revising a 62-year-old treaty with a former colony—now a partner in the Commonwealth—they may have a taste of what is ahead of them in other upcoming negotiations. The Minister may wish to educate some of his ministerial colleagues in that regard.

In conclusion, we often hold up Malawi as an example of some of the negatives: poverty, the debt burden and some of the social issues, such as the oppression of LGBT+ people within the country. That is an inevitable fact in how the issues are seen. I suggest that today's debate offers us an opportunity to hold up Malawi and our relationship with it in a rather more positive light. How Malawi has built its links with Scotland—the civic links, church links, school links and business links—could in many ways inform the opportunities open to other African countries. I spent two weeks with Voluntary Services Overseas in Cameroon a couple of years ago. The problems facing people in Cameroon are not dissimilar to those affecting people in Malawi, but there is not the same plethora of local groups and civic engagement across Cameroon. Malawi could bring some of its experience to bear, perhaps through an organisation such as the Commonwealth, to show the opportunities for civic engagement and the results that could be produced when that is made to work properly.

4.53 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Chope, for the opportunity to speak in this important debate marking the relationship between Malawi and Scotland. I start by paying tribute to Dr Jack Thompson, one of the Scotland Malawi Partnership board members. He passed away last month. He played a huge role in bringing our two countries together, and he will be missed.

It is a real pleasure to be able to say a few words about the warm historical ties between our two countries and what we can do in the future. Scotland has long had a close relationship with southern Africa, with many Scots making that part of the world their home in days gone by. In recent times, many Africans have chosen to make Scotland their home. I welcome that diversity and I want to see more of it. I am hugely proud to be a Lanarkshire man and to represent my area in Parliament, but Lanarkshire men have been making their mark for generations. None other than David Livingstone left Scotland generations ago and formed a lasting bond between Malawi and Scotland.

Health and wellbeing matter to us all, particularly those of us on the Labour Benches. Today's debate on public sector pay showed that; the motion has just been

accepted, which I welcome. Health and wellbeing are at the heart of our partnership and friendship. In Edinburgh just last month, Sarah Brown, the education campaigner and wife of the former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, rightly paid tribute to the role Scotland has played in reducing the numbers of women dying during childbirth and during pregnancy. There has also been good work on HIV and support for older people. In education, the links between our young people grow and grow—year after year, some 94,000 people throughout Scotland have active links with Malawi.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point about health and wellbeing, and I know of his constituency association with Dr David Livingstone. Will he acknowledge, with me, that the association continues to this day—not least through the University of St Andrews and its connection with the College of Medicine in Malawi? The university is doing some fantastic work and is continuing the good work of David Livingstone.

Hugh Gaffney: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that. I certainly recommend such work, as I recommend anyone on a visit to Blantyre to see the tribute we pay to David Livingstone.

Forty-six per cent. of Scots know someone who has been to Malawi, supported someone living and learning in Malawi, or donated to charities supporting good work in Malawi. I pay tribute to all those Scots who have played a part and I ask more to do so.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman mentioned education. Rosshall Academy and St Marnock's Primary School in my constituency are partnered with schools in Malawi. Does he agree that two-way communication ensures that generations of young Scots become good global citizens?

Hugh Gaffney: I certainly pay that tribute to education, and I will come on to it, as many schools in my area are involved.

I will say a word about the Scotland Malawi Partnership, which exists to co-ordinate, support and represent the huge number of civic links that Scotland has with Malawi. It is a small charity working independently, but it is changing lives. Organisations from across Scotland include half of Scotland's local authorities, every Scottish university and most of the colleges, as well as more than 100 primary and secondary schools, hundreds of faith groups, hospitals, businesses, charities, NGOs and, more widely, several grassroots community-based organisations.

Mr Paul J. Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend makes great mention of the level and depth of support in Scotland for Malawi, in particular for its development. Will he take particular note of the Mary's Meals charity, which supports 320,000 children by ensuring that they have at least one nutritious meal a day as part of their education? That is a vital component of ensuring a resilient education system in Malawi.

Hugh Gaffney: I certainly welcome Mary's Meals. My hon. Friend is right in what he was saying. It is a charity from Scotland, and the work we do in Scotland through

such groups is absolutely fantastic for our nation. I urge as many people as possible to join the Scotland Malawi Partnership and attend the 2017 annual general meeting on Saturday 30 September.

I pay tribute to my Labour colleague, the noble Lord Jack McConnell, who inspired the signing of the Scotland Malawi Partnership, and to the Scottish Government for their work in this area. Labour has a proud record of international work, support and investment. We did so much to help the poorest in our world, to support small businesses, to encourage and defend the rights of women and girls and, importantly, to deliver on the values of never walking by on the other side.

The days of Lady Penelope and Parker are over; this is about equality, solidarity and decency. My constituency has a proud and active number of residents building strong links with Malawi. We talked earlier about education, and in my constituency we have schools such as Coatbridge High School, St Mary's Primary School and St Michael's Primary School twinning with schools in Malawi, allowing our young people to share ideas, experiences and ambitions. That is at the foundation of building a better world for us all, no matter where we stay.

It is worth noting that Scotland and Malawi have been drawn in the same group for my favourite sport, netball, at the Commonwealth games next April. I am hopeful that our long-standing friendship will withstand the result of the game, which I am quite sure will be a Scottish victory.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) on securing it.

4.59 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I am grateful to you for calling me, Mr Chope, because I appreciate that I came late to the Chamber. I was detained in a Select Committee, so my apologies—pepani chomene. I am grateful for the opportunity to offer a few brief reflections on Scotland's relationship with Malawi, and congratulate—yewo chomene; zikomo kwambiri—my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) on securing this debate.

I was fortunate enough to secure an Adjournment debate on St Andrew's Day 2015 to mark the 10th anniversary of the Scotland-Malawi relationship. In the nearly two years since, the relationship has continued to get stronger. The Scotland Malawi Partnership continues to publish evidence of its impact and outreach in both Scotland and Malawi.

One of the most formative experiences of my life was spending a year working in the north of the country, teaching in St Peter's secondary school in the wonderful city of Mzuzu. I made many tremendous friends, who have stayed with me for life, and had a huge number of valuable experiences interacting with the young people and seeing how daily life pans out for people in some of the most difficult circumstances in the world.

I echo the points made about the value of the relationship in both directions. We in Scotland and the United Kingdom have just as much opportunity to learn from our friends, colleagues and communities in Malawi as they have to learn from our different experiences here in the UK.

There has been a lot of mention of constituency links. In my own constituency, a number of different projects and schools have connections and partnerships. I would particularly highlight the University of Glasgow's Wellcome Centre for Molecular Parasitology, which is running the Blantyre-Blantyre project. It is funded by the Scottish Government and a number of other funders to study life expectancy and different health interventions in Blantyre, Malawi and Blantyre, Scotland, and to share the learning experiences and the lessons from both those communities.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman highlights some of the projects in his constituency, including education projects. South Morningside, Bruntsfield and Gilmerton primaries in my constituency have direct links with primary schools in Malawi. Will he reflect on the fact that that might be why this partnership has grown, flourished and endured for so long—that younger people are involved and they take that through the rest of their lives?

Patrick Grady: That is absolutely correct. It is more than 10 years ago now that I spent time living there, although I do not know that I would have counted as a young person even when I was there. In my 2015 debate, I said that it would be a fascinating job of work to fund research that tracks the experiences. I say that to the Minister again today. Many of the partnerships and school visits took place when the children were quite young, in secondary school. They will now be well into their careers. We should track the impact that that has had, as well as the impact on their counterparts in Malawi, so that we can start to quantify and see how we can continue to build on it.

Mr Sweeney: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Patrick Grady: I am conscious of the time.

We need to make sure that there is support for the institutions of Government. I would reiterate the points made about visas, so that we can show that we are genuinely welcoming. People who are sponsored and supported by organisations in Scotland, very often with Government money, are able to come here, take part in those visits and feel the benefits, and the communities they visit are able to feel the benefits.

Likewise, there is a need to get the tax treaty correct. The way that we will ultimately help Malawi and countries across sub-Saharan Africa and the developing world is when they are able to mobilise their own resources and invest in their own infrastructure. That means they have to have tax treaties and financial institutions and structures fit for the 21st century.

I am grateful for your indulgence, Mr Chope. I congratulate all the speakers and look forward to the Minister's reply. Zikomo kwambiri.

Mr Christopher Chope (in the Chair): I am going to call the Minister no later than 20 past five. I hope the two Opposition spokespeople will be able to share the time between now and then, should they so wish.

5.4 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): It is good to see you in your position, Mr Chope, and it is a pleasure to be back in Westminster Hall. I congratulate my

[Chris Law]

hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) on securing this important debate.

We have heard today that the links between Scotland and Malawi go back more than 150 years. They are built on a sense of dignified partnership and civil engagement. It is a relationship of mutual understanding and respect. The friendship between Scots and Malawians began, as we have heard, in the late 1850s, with a warm welcome extended to abolitionist and missionary David Livingstone and his companions when they entered what is now Malawi for the first time. The Scotland-Malawi relationship is arguably one of the world's strongest north-south people-to-people links. It is defined by respect for a two-way partnership, rather than simply a one-way charity. As we have heard, almost 100,000 Scots are actively involved in links with Malawi, and almost double that number of Malawians are actively involved in links with Scotland. In fact, almost half of all Scots personally now know someone involved in a link with Malawi. That is an incredible achievement, is it not?

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East said, the partnership succeeds in mobilising energy from across all sections of Scottish civil society, with hundreds of Scottish schools, churches, community groups, universities, businesses and hospitals actively involved.

Alison Thewliss: My hon. Friend mentioned the links that schools have made. Is he aware of the Glasgow-Malawi Leaders of Learning programme that Maureen McKenna, the director of education in Glasgow, has piloted? It has taken 35 staff from Glasgow since 2012 over to Malawi and fostered really great links between Malawi and Glasgow.

Chris Law: I am aware of it. It is just one of many examples of the partnership between Scotland and Malawi and how it continues to grow. I certainly will touch on a couple more examples.

To give one example in my constituency, Dundee University medical school is partnered with the University of Malawi's College of Medicine and Kamuzu Central Hospital in Lilongwe, providing outstanding opportunities for final-year Dundee medical students through placements at partner institutions in Malawi. Those placements are used to help to develop medical and educational infrastructure in Malawi by supporting staffing and staff development.

A further example is the twinning project between Westgate health centre in Dundee and Matawale clinic in Zomba. They maintain two-way communication between Dundee and Malawi via internet access at the clinic. They also provide locally sourced equipment for the clinic, and local Dundee artists display their paintings for sale in the waiting room, with 25% of the purchase price then donated to the project.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): We have heard a lot in this debate about the constituency and school links. In my constituency, St Margaret's High School has set up an orphanage. It has improved attendance and attainment at its partner school, Chisitu. New Monkland Primary School, Clarkston Primary School and St Dominic's nursery are also all doing great work.

Does my hon. Friend agree that the work done on fostering those links from an early age is so important for both countries and needs to continue?

Chris Law: I absolutely agree. It is also about understanding people from different parts of the world, and the exchange, the cultural relationship and the building of bonds.

I would like to turn my attention to the 1955 UK-Malawi double taxation treaty. I echo the comments and concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East and other colleagues who urged the Government to update that treaty. It is without doubt a completely unfair and outdated treaty. It is so outdated, in fact, that it cannot cover not only digital and IT services but televisions, which go back to before my date of birth. We know that both Governments have committed to updating the treaty. However, in the last Parliament UK Ministers repeatedly stated that it would be imminently finalised, and a final deadline of July 2017 was stated and once again missed. I do not know about your thoughts on this, Mr Chope, but to me, "imminently" means immediately. Here we are, with something so simple still to resolve. I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments shortly.

I would also like to draw the Minister's attention to the issue of UK visas, which we have heard about today. Malawians regularly report that getting a visa for the UK is almost impossible because they are faced with endless bureaucracy, failing systems and non-existent customer service, and they can only ever speak with private businesses contracted to work for the UK Government. The failures of that system, week in, week out, have the potential to undermine not only the 150-year-old Scotland-Malawi friendship but the UK Government's own development, diplomatic and trade interests in Africa. I therefore urge the Minister today to support a full public review of the UK Government's visa-issuing processes for those invited to the UK as part of our credible, long-standing civic links.

On a lighter note—I will finish on this—I believe that this debate has captured and celebrated the scale, energy and impact of the bilateral relationship between Scotland and Malawi. The relationship is stronger and more engaging today than ever before and represents the best of Scottish internationalism. For the reasons I have stated, Scotland can rightly be proud of the distinctive and effective approach it has taken over the last 150 years to international development, and I am sure that all in the Chamber would agree that they wish this partnership to not only endure but strengthen for many years to come.

5.9 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), who has summed up the issues succinctly. It is my pleasure also to speak for the Opposition in this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) for securing this important debate.

The relationship between Scotland and Malawi, as most contributors have said, is rooted deep in history, going back more than 150 years to the work of Dr David Livingstone. In addition to the historical nature of the relationship, the Scottish Government justified their

decision to focus effort on Malawi on the basis of developmental need. Malawi is one of the world's poorest countries and ranked 170th out of 176 countries in the human development index, which includes such factors as income, education and health achievements.

Today it was my pleasure to speak to Lord Jack McConnell of Glenscorrodale, who, as the then First Minister of Scotland, signed off the Scottish international development programme. He emphasised to me the cross-party nature of the agreement. That has been reflected in today's debate and in the excellent contributions made by all the speakers. I particularly note the comments of the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark), who talked about the various exchange projects in his community, including help with schools in Malawi and also giving aid to famine victims.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) talked about the opportunities for Scottish schoolchildren to see the lives of children in Malawi, which we would all agree is an education in itself and an opportunity that not all schoolchildren get. He also talked about the Malawi Music Fund. Many speakers touched on the issues of obtaining visas for Malawian visitors who wish to participate in exchange visits to this country. I am interested to hear what the Minister says about visas.

Mr Sweeney: My hon. Friend makes the point about how the relationship is not simply to do with development, but about how the value added by Malawian citizens making their home in Scotland is a great thing too. I particularly think of the African Challenge Scotland partnership in my constituency, which promotes citizenship and activity with the African community in Glasgow. Is that not a demonstration of the opportunities that better visa relationships with Malawi would offer and a greater cross-pollination of activity and cultural sharing between our two countries?

Liz McInnes: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I agree that it is difficult to think of anything negative that comes out of such relationships. They educate our children and make them more aware of their role as international citizens. Today I was at a meeting about the Send My Friend to School project, which serves a similar purpose. It teaches schoolchildren about the world outside the UK and makes them think about the plight of young children growing up in developing countries. Children getting such an education gives us all hope for the future.

The double taxation treaty of 1955 was also mentioned and remains an issue. Despite the Minister's interventions, I think we would like a response to the concerns raised. My hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) talked about health and wellbeing and about improvements in HIV treatment and in maternal mortality. He also talked about the Commonwealth games. Perhaps netball is one area where Scotland will not offer assistance to Malawi, but we look forward to the game with interest.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) brought his own valuable personal experience of working in Malawi to the debate. There is no substitute for visiting a country and finding out exactly what makes it tick. Spending time there and working there is an education in itself.

On the issue of aid, it is important that the impact of aid spending is correctly and appropriately assessed. I want to ask the Minister about the 2016 Springfield Centre report, which highlights issues with Scottish Government aid to Malawi. It questions the sustainability of some of the actions taken and how their impact is measured, with actions taken not necessarily being reflected in their impact. I would be interested to hear the Minister's comments on that.

I also emphasise the role played by the British Council in Malawi, which works closely with the Scotland Malawi Partnership, particularly in schools. The head of youth and schools at the Scotland Malawi Partnership will be visiting Malawi later this month, where she will discuss how the Scotland Malawi Partnership and the British Council can support each other and work together over the coming year.

The British Council has a strong programme, "Connecting Classrooms", which focuses on skills development and capacity building of teachers across the country. The British Council has for many years been sharing information on those Malawi schools participating in "Connecting Classrooms" to facilitate links. Of the 180 school links over the last six years, 70% are between Malawi and Scotland. The British Council is working with the Scotland Malawi Partnership and Education Scotland to increase that further, using the professional partnership's visit in February next year as a platform to do that.

Ian Murray: My hon. Friend, as always, is making a wonderful speech from the Front Bench. I think it would be appropriate to pay tribute to David Hope-Jones, the chief executive of the Scotland Malawi Partnership. He has not yet been mentioned in this debate, but he does so much, not only to enhance the partnership but to provide us all with the information we require in this kind of debate.

Liz McInnes: I thank my hon. Friend for putting the name of David Hope-Jones on the record, and I apologise for my omission.

The British Council Scotland has worked closely with colleagues in Malawi on the Future News Worldwide programme—a journalism and media-training project, conceived in 2014. Recently, two young Malawian journalists were selected out of almost 2,000 applicants to attend the annual Future News Worldwide conference, held in the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh in July of this year. There, they received exclusive training from some of the world's leading media organisations, including Reuters, CNN, Facebook, the BBC and Google News Lab, and connected with 100 young journalists from across the globe.

The Scottish Government launched a new international development strategy last autumn, focusing on a small number of key countries: Malawi, Rwanda, Zambia and Pakistan. The Scotland Malawi Partnership helps to ensure that Malawi has a continued high profile in Scotland, particularly in schools and among youth organisations. According to the University of Edinburgh, more than 94,000 Scots are actively involved in links with Malawi each year. Separate research suggests that an estimated 46% of Scots now personally know someone

[Liz McInnes]

with a connection to Malawi—whether a parent with a church link, a child involved in a school partnership, or a friend active in linked communities.

It could be argued that this relationship is mutually beneficial. More than 300,000 Scots benefit from it, not least through the 160 school-to-school links, which are now an integral part of the educational experience for young Scots. I would be interested to hear the Minister's views on that issue, which has been a running theme throughout the speeches and interventions in this debate.

5.18 pm

The Minister for Africa (Rory Stewart): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) for introducing this debate, but above all I pay tribute to the Scotland Malawi Partnership—genuinely one of the most unique, remarkable, interesting and human interweavings of two nations anywhere in the world.

Right hon. and hon. Members have spoken powerfully about those links. The hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) spoke about the links between the University of St Andrews, the University of Edinburgh and the University of Aberdeen in maternal healthcare, obstetrics and specialist tropical diseases. The hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) spoke about responses in childbirth.

That is all part of a pattern of a dense interweaving of different types of interaction. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) spoke about interactions in music. My hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) spoke about the relationships that exist in exchanges. The hon. Members for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) and Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) spoke about school partnerships and connections. Everything that has been said, including by the hon. Member for Glasgow East about Mary's Meals and by the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) about the personal experience of his extraordinary year spent teaching in Malawi, shows the genius of the Scotland Malawi Partnership. Those are just a dozen out of 1,300 different examples of Scottish individuals, small Scottish charities and Scottish institutions linking to Malawi.

There are three things from which we can learn. The first is, to use a horrible jargon phrase, the civic multiplier—the way in which the Scotland Malawi Partnership, with a relatively modest amount of money, can draw on all the institutions to create a much richer partnership and be more than the sum of its parts. The second element, which has come through time and again in today's speeches, is mutual respect. Everyone who spoke talked a great deal about equality and about how we can learn as much from Malawi as it can learn from us. Finally, there is the genius of co-ordination and connections. Since 2005 the work of the Scotland Malawi Partnership has been not to create the connections, but to find them and mine them—to draw them out of the soil and reveal to us that thick web of connections between two nations, essentially putting Malawians on the board. That is a very important part of the work of the Scotland Malawi Partnership.

Along with the Scotland Malawi Partnership and, indeed, the good work done by the Scottish Government in Malawi, the Department for International Development is also a major player there. In financial terms it is a considerably larger player, as we spend probably 12 times more a year. We are doing something slightly different. We pay a huge tribute to the Scotland Malawi Partnership, but we recognise that there is space for other things.

We work on a systems level. We have been working since the 1960s, and during that time we have spent well over £1 billion on trying to transform the country's fundamental governmental systems. That means addressing health systems, not merely through the ways that we have been discussing, such as university exchanges, but by getting into the details of how drugs are bought, procured and moved into clinics, and of how to deal with HR mechanisms of health clinics. It means thinking about enrolments in education. Almost every boy and girl in Malawi now goes to primary school, but the question is how we move on and think about quality. As for agriculture, Malawi is heavily dependent on maize, which is a challenge. There are not always markets for maize and the Malawian Government are currently reluctant to allow people to export it. There is a question not only about transforming the markets for it, but about how to diversify into other crops.

There are therefore two different relationships: the very rich one between the constituencies of those right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken, the Scottish people and Malawi; and the bigger relationship with the British Government. What can we learn from each other? Perhaps I may modestly and bravely suggest things for the Scotland Malawi Partnership to consider. It has been an incredibly successful partnership, but two or three things occur to me. The first is whether the wonderful friendship, partnership and diplomatic relations that have been developed could occasionally be used to challenge the Malawian Government about uncomfortable issues, such as corruption. Can the relationships be used to talk about that—or about family planning? The Malawian Government have brought the fertility rate in Malawi down from 5.7, but the average family size is still 4.5 children. That is a major challenge for a country that is already densely populated. Is the Scotland Malawi Partnership prepared to speak about that?

The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) raised some recent surveys about the Scottish Government's work in Malawi. Indeed, we in DFID could reflect on some of those questions about innovation and sustainability, and how the human, personal connections, which are often really good, can be sustained into the future. How can we achieve structural transformation and get beyond supporting 300 people in a particular place today to changing the Malawian Government system, so that they could do that themselves?

Two areas of learning have emerged for the Department: the questions of the double taxation treaty and of visas. My interventions have probably revealed my views on the double taxation treaty, but I think we can do more on visas. Progress has been made. We have now identified a designated UK Border Force officer, who will focus on Malawi visas to try to facilitate the Scotland Malawi Partnership. That may save the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland from having to spend every Saturday talking to the UK Border Force. However, there is more that can be done.

More broadly, the big lesson from the Scotland Malawi Partnership may be for the Department for International Development itself. The Scotland Malawi Partnership shows us a great deal. It shows us the powerful example of a man such as David Hope-Jones and what leadership can mean. In a pretty remarkable achievement, this man has succeeded in ensuring that 15 Members of Parliament appear to have read in detail the 1955 double taxation treaty, the 1978 amendment to it and all 16 of its articles. I am delighted that they show such authority and detailed knowledge. That shows David Hope-Jones's extraordinary success in communicating with Parliament.

More seriously, at the centre of the Scotland Malawi Partnership is its use of the idea of history and identity—something that perhaps the United Kingdom could be more confident in doing. We have heard a great deal about David Livingstone, but this relationship is not one that could necessarily have been taken for granted. Like all relationships, it was nurtured and developed. There was no inevitability about the relationship being between Scotland and Malawi. The hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) could have made a powerful argument that the natural relationship might be between Dundee and Calcutta. There are many profound relationships between Scotland and many different parts of the world. Malawi was chosen for good reasons, and over time, through talking about it, that relationship has become more powerful, more interesting and more human. There is a great deal we can learn from that.

There is also a precedent point: as the world changes, as African economies grow and as China and India come in, the amount of British money going into Africa will form a smaller proportion of those economies. Learning that we cannot necessarily do everything, and that we may want to take a leaf out of the book of the Scotland Malawi Partnership and learn how to operate at a smaller, more human scale in certain designated countries, may be important for the British Government.

Mr Carmichael: I sense that the Minister has said as much as he is going to say about the double taxation treaty. Given that we have not met the deadline that his ministerial colleagues previously identified, what new deadline have the Government set for themselves? Does he not understand that this taxation treaty is more important to Malawi than it is to Britain?

Rory Stewart: I am afraid I do not have time to address that point, but as a lawyer the right hon. Gentleman should be aware that setting arbitrary deadlines is completely irrelevant in that type of negotiation, and

his intervention was extremely inappropriate given the time. We can talk about that in much more detail later, and we can discuss the 16 articles if we wish. Deadlines are not the key; the key is the Malawian political position on the treaty. Setting an arbitrary deadline is not likely to help us.

If we could move away from the right hon. Gentleman's confrontational tone and towards what I had hoped he would address, namely a more positive discussion on how we can learn from the Scotland Malawi Partnership, I would like in the remaining 45 seconds to touch on what those lessons could be. The first is about learning how to operate at a smaller scale. The second is about learning how to use history and identity. The third is about learning how to use civic connections, and the fourth and most important lesson is about learning how to place the human at the centre.

What is so striking about the Scotland Malawi Partnership is that it has found ways of engaging a whole human population. Britain could do that in Malawi or in Tanzania, Uganda or Nigeria. It is a very exciting way of thinking about how to do development in the 21st century. The fact that so many right hon. and hon. Members are here championing international development shows how these human connections give us the legitimacy and centre to make progress. I wish they would also champion international development in the main Chamber and champion the UK aid budget in the same way. I will end by saying zikomo kwambiri—thank you very much.

5.29 pm

David Linden: I thank the Minister for his remarks. We have discussed the double taxation treaty and the issue of the deadline—I should clarify that the deadline was set by the UK Government. I am grateful to hon. Members for turning out in such numbers for the debate. It has highlighted that there is a real appetite to foster and develop this relationship on a cross-party basis in Scotland. I hope that all hon. Members present will join me and come together to form an all-party parliamentary group over the coming weeks and months. I thank hon. Members for their indulgence.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Scotland-Malawi relationship.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 13 September 2017

CABINET OFFICE

Cabinet Office Consolidated Fund Standing Service

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): The UK general election took place on 8 June 2017, resulting in an increase in non-voted programme resource departmental expenditure limit of £140,850,000.

This forecast covers England, Scotland and Wales and comprises:

£98,310,000 to cover fees and expenses incurred by returning officers in running the poll.

£42,540,000 to cover primarily the delivery of elections addresses at public expense by the universal service provider (Royal Mail) in accordance with legislation.

The additional non-voted resources of £140,850,000 will be shown in Cabinet Office's supplementary estimate 2017-18.

	<i>DEL written statement £</i>			
	<i>Change</i>		<i>New Total</i>	
	<i>Voted</i>	<i>Non-Voted</i>	<i>Voted</i>	<i>Non-Voted</i>
Resource DEL	-	140,850,000	353,520,000	148,227,000
<i>Of which:</i>				
<i>Administration - budget</i>	-	-	160,939,000	-
<i>Depreciation</i>	-	-	35,000,000	-
Capital DEL	-	-	97,010,000	-

Having drawn down £140,850,000, the Cabinet Office will transfer £14,359,330 at supplementary estimate 2017-18 to the Scotland Office to cover forecast election expenses in Scotland.

[HCWS130]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Biometrics Commissioner: Annual Report

The Minister for Security (Mr Ben Wallace): My hon. Friend the Minister of State, Home Office (Baroness Williams of Trafford) has today made the following written statement:

I am pleased to announce that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is today publishing the third annual report of the Biometrics Commissioner, together with the Government's response.

The Biometrics Commissioner, Paul Wiles, is appointed under section 20 of the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012. His responsibilities are:

to decide applications by the police for extended retention of DNA profiles and fingerprints from persons arrested for serious offences but not charged or convicted;

to keep under review national security determinations made by chief officers under which DNA profiles and fingerprints may be retained for national security purposes;

to exercise general oversight of police use of DNA samples, DNA profiles and fingerprints. His report is a statutory requirement of section 21 of the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012.

I am grateful to Mr Wiles for this report. No redactions to it have been made on the grounds of national security. The Government have considered it and produced a response.

Copies of the report will be available from the Vote Office. The Government's response will be placed in the Library of the House.

[HCWS129]

ORAL ANSWERS

Wednesday 13 September 2017

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
NORTHERN IRELAND	821	NORTHERN IRELAND—continued	
Brexit Discussions.....	828	Security Situation.....	829
Common Travel Area.....	825		
Cross-border Security.....	824		
Executive Accountability.....	823	PRIME MINISTER	830
Governance and Political Stability.....	827	Engagements.....	830
Northern Ireland Powerhouse.....	826	Engagements.....	837
Political Situation.....	821	West Midlands Economy.....	837

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Wednesday 13 September 2017

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
CABINET OFFICE	23WS	HOME DEPARTMENT	24WS
Cabinet Office Consolidated Fund Standing Service.....	23WS	Biometrics Commissioner: Annual Report.....	24WS

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

**not later than
Wednesday 20 September 2017**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Wednesday 13 September 2017

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 821] [see index inside back page]

Secretary of State for Northern Ireland
Prime Minister

Carbon Monoxide (Detection and Safety) [Col. 846]

Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Eddie Hughes)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time

Opposition Day [1st allotted day]

NHS Pay [Col. 849]

Motion—(Jonathan Ashworth)—agreed to

Higher Education (England) Regulations [Col. 905]

Motion—(Angela Rayner)—agreed to

Petitions [Col. 946]

Employment Tribunals [Col. 949]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Autism Diagnosis [Col. 289WH]

Future of RAF Northolt [Col. 315WH]

Parliamentary Candidates: Barriers for Women [Col. 323WH]

Corby Urgent Care Centre [Col. 349WH]

Scotland-Malawi Relationship [Col. 357WH]

General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 23WS]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
