

Thursday
26 October 2017

Volume 630
No. 41



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 26 October 2017

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Fly-tipping

1. **David T. C. Davies** (Monmouth) (Con): What steps the Environment Agency is taking to prevent illegal fly-tipping on farms. [901399]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Fly-tipping on farmland is a serious antisocial crime that damages the environment, human health and farm businesses, so tackling it is a priority for this Government. So far, we have strengthened the ability of the Environment Agency and local authorities to seize the vehicles of suspected fly-tippers. We have also given local authorities the power to issue fixed penalty notices. We are working with the National Farmers Union to increase reporting and to better target enforcement. I also recognise that this is a devolved issue, so my hon. Friend will be working with Natural Resources Wales.

David T. C. Davies: Is my hon. Friend aware of the excellent campaign by *Farmers Weekly* to bring in much tougher penalties across the UK for the criminal gangs responsible for fly-tipping on farms in Britain?

Dr Coffey: Minister Coffey is a bit coughy this morning, Mr Speaker.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right to stress the importance of tackling such criminality, so we are working closely with the Environment Agency to investigate further ways of doing that. We will continue not only to work with the police, but to create new powers so that we can get rid of criminals from the waste industry entirely.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Fly-tipping is a curse not only on farmland in Huddersfield, but up and down this country. It is usually associated with people who operate just above the law. They hire out skips, and then take the money, evade landfill duty, and tip the waste everywhere. We must have an Environment Agency with the powers and resources to do something about that.

Dr Coffey: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We do work closely with the police in making fly-tipping a focus for the Environment Agency. I also draw to the attention of the House the fact that we are continuing to do more to help councils to tackle litter more widely. As we announced yesterday, we have plans not only to double fines, but to make it easier to tackle motorists who throw litter out of cars. The Government are very focused on this, and we are working with councils to make progress.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I support the views of my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies). The trouble is that the fines are not heavy enough, which makes it easier to tip on farmland than to go to a waste disposal site. Unless we get some teeth and impose really heavy fines, we will not stop these people, who leave farmers with the huge problem of getting rid of the waste.

Dr Coffey: I recognise what my hon. Friend says. It is key that we continue to do more to work with farmers at a local level to ensure that their farms have better barriers against such access. Nevertheless, this is about targeting, getting intelligence, ensuring that we follow up people who are dumping, and using the full force of the law to deter such behaviour.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister has outlined the importance of the issue and the role of the local councils. Will she indicate what incentives local councils can make available to homeowners to encourage them to use waste recycling centres, rather than harming agricultural land and farmers?

Dr Coffey: This matter is devolved in Northern Ireland. We are issuing new guidance with the Department for Communities and Local Government to try to clarify what councils should and should not be charging when people want to use the recycling centre. I know that councils want to do the right thing. Some £800 million is spent every year on tackling litter and fly-tipping, which is why we want to work with councils and the Environment Agency to make improvements.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): The Warwickshire NFU convened a roundtable on this matter last month after a terrible spate of fly-tipping. It has two asks of the Minister: can we provide more briefing for magistrates so that fines are proportionate to the crime; and can we extend fixed penalty notices to the statutory duty of care for the disposal of waste on households?

Dr Coffey: We are looking carefully at the issues that my right hon. Friend raises, particularly the second one. I will take them away and speak to one of the Justice Ministers about potential sentencing guidance.

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): Zero Waste Scotland estimates that Scotland's deposit return scheme will save Scottish councils around £13 million a year in fly-tipping, litter-picking and kerbside recycling costs. Has there been any attempt to conduct a similar analysis in England?

Dr Coffey: We have issued a call for evidence on reward and return schemes for things such as plastic bottles. An independent committee will be looking at that. I know that the Scottish Government have asked our Department to work with them on their proposals. We are looking carefully at the report that came out a couple of weeks ago, but trying to extrapolate economic benefits on the basis of a handful of councils is not necessarily a straightforward exercise.

Ivory Trade

2. **Luke Hall** (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What steps he is taking to end the ivory trade; and if he will make a statement. [901401]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): We are consulting on proposals to introduce a total ban on UK ivory sales, which we hope will contribute to eliminating elephant poaching. We will, however, consult on certain narrowly defined and carefully targeted exemptions.

Luke Hall: The decline in the elephant population, fuelled by poaching for ivory, shames this generation, so I welcome the Secretary of State's swift and robust action to address the issue. How quickly will the recommendations be implemented so that we can ensure we are doing everything possible to protect this magnificent species?

Michael Gove: The consultation closes on 29 December. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for highlighting how vital it is to ensure that as many people as possible contribute to the consultation so that we can move towards legislation as quickly as possible thereafter.

16. [901415] **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his answer; I think that he is doing the right thing. Will he give us an undertaking that he will come to the House as soon as possible after the consultation and lay out a timetable for the proper implementation of a full ban?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair request. Of course I will do that.

12. [901411] **Ms Nusrat Ghani** (Wealden) (Con): I, along with students and residents across my constituency, welcome the Government's commitment to a near total ban on ivory sales in the UK. How will the Government work with our friends abroad, especially in south-east Asia, to ensure that together we bring an end to poaching by illegal armed gangs?

Michael Gove: I thank my hon. Friend, as I know that she has been campaigning with young people across Wealden to ensure that there is heightened awareness of the direct link between the ivory trade and illegal poaching. We are hosting the illegal wildlife trade conference next year, and we will ensure that we work with countries, particularly in east and south-east Asia, to close down this evil trade.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I met some Angolan MPs last week who were unaware of a recent report stating that Angola's elephant population has

fallen from 200,000 to 3,400. Is not it the case that the world simply is not doing enough to protect the African elephant, as well as other animals and environmental species? We have to do more to save the planet, and the African elephant is a start.

Michael Gove: I completely agree. We lose 20,000 of these magnificent creatures every year. It is simply not good enough for the world to wash its hands and say that this is a responsibility of only developing nations. We have to act together globally to ensure that the threat to this magnificent animal is properly met.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): As my right hon. Friend examines the answers to the welcome consultation, will he disregard the scare stories being put about by certain parts of the antiques industry that say that old and much-valued artefacts will be destroyed under his proposals? That is not the intention. The intention is much more important—it is to help an iconic species that is on the verge of the risk of extinction.

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. His campaigning has been inspirational, and he is right to call out the one or two isolated voices who have attempted to generate scare stories about our consultation. Significant organisations across the cultural, antiques and art market sector have welcomed the nature of the consultation, and I am grateful for their constructive approach.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State take it as a representation from me that the 1947 cut-off date is too late, and that he should also look carefully at banning the sale of antique ivory? Such a cut-off date could lead to the import of ivory that is purported to be antique, but is actually new.

Michael Gove: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. There is no reference to a 1947 date in the consultation, as had been mooted at one stage. Our view—I think it is also his—is that it is much easier to have a total ban for enforcement purposes, because there are unscrupulous individuals who will attempt to claim that artefacts are antiques when, in fact, they are nothing of the kind.

Beer Exports

3. **Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on reforming the excise duty regime to promote British beer exports. [901402]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): Beer is the UK's third largest food and drink export with a value of nearly £600 million last year. Last week, I visited the Griffin Brewery in Chiswick, run by Fuller Smith & Turner, to launch a new British beer export strategy with the British Beer and Pub Association. Fuller's now exports to more than 80 countries and is one example of our successes with exports. We have regular discussions with the Treasury on the beer industry's contribution to our local economies and communities.

Daniel Kawczynski: The Minister will be pleased to know that we have had some initial success in promoting and exporting Shropshire beer to Poland, but more needs to be done over the small breweries relief scheme to help breweries such as Battlefield Brewery in my constituency to unlock the potential for additional exports. Will he continue to press the Chancellor on this important project?

George Eustice: There are some great success stories in my hon. Friend's constituency and in Shropshire. I did in fact discuss the small breweries relief scheme with the British Beer and Pub Association last week. I am aware that many microbreweries feel constrained by the current regime and have argued for changes to it. While this is obviously a matter on which the Treasury is the policy lead, I can say that we have ensured that those representations have been highlighted with the Chancellor.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) for raising this issue. St Peter's Brewery in my constituency has built up a very good export business over many years. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is vital post Brexit, if we are to open up new markets and create new jobs, that such obstacles are removed?

George Eustice: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. Indeed, I attended an event that we hosted in our embassy in Japan just last year to promote a range of British drinks, including British beers. They are one of our great success stories. The industry aims to increase its exports by around £100 million a year over the next few years, and there are some great success stories that we should champion.

Mr Speaker: We very much hope that the Minister partook himself.

Animal Cruelty: Sentencing

4. **Robert Courts (Witney) (Con):** What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Justice on the potential merits of raising the maximum sentence for animal cruelty to five years' imprisonment. [901403]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): I had positive discussions with the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice prior to my announcement on 30 September that the Government plan to increase the maximum penalty for animal cruelty from the current six months to five years' imprisonment.

Robert Courts: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that answer. Recent research from Battersea has shown that two thirds of the British public would indeed like sentencing to be increased, as the average sentence was only 3.3 months in 2015 once credit for a guilty plea was taken into account. However, will the Secretary of State reassure my constituents that the courts have indicated a desire for those increased sentencing powers such that they will actually get used once they are in place?

Michael Gove: Absolutely. I thank my hon. Friend for raising this. He has a distinguished legal career of bringing prosecutions against individuals who have been responsible for acts of animal cruelty, and we are all grateful to him for his work. It is the case that the courts have indicated that there are specific, exceptional cases of genuine sadism for which a penalty greater than that of the maximum six months is required.

10. [901409] **Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con):** Many of my constituents have written to me urging the Government to increase the sentence for animal cruelty, so I thank the Minister for what he has said. Will the Government be looking to give more powers to organisations such as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals to investigate more matters of animal cruelty?

Michael Gove: We are all grateful for the RSPCA's excellent work on highlighting animal cruelty, but we have no plans to extend such powers at the moment.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I welcome this proposal, having secured a debate on this issue in Westminster Hall in the last Parliament. This issue is extremely important, particularly in relation to dog fighting, which is an appalling act of animal cruelty. During last year's debate, it was said that the policing of such crimes and the funding for that need to be increased. What is the Minister planning to do in that regard?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady makes a very good point. Of course, sentencing decisions and, indeed, policing matters are devolved, but one thing we do at DEFRA is to work closely with the Home Office to ensure that examples of animal cruelty that need to focus the minds of police forces on more effective investigation are at the heart of our shared conversations.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): My constituents would welcome increased sentences for animal cruelty. Is the Secretary of State able to draw on any international experience regarding how best we might prosecute such cases?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic have similar sentences, and it is also the case that similar sentences apply in other Commonwealth jurisdictions, including Australia, Canada and New Zealand. It is a sign of our capacity to learn from other nations, both within and outside the European Union, about what a genuinely progressive approach to animal welfare might be.

Badger Culling

5. **Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab):** How many culled badgers have been found to be infected with tuberculosis since new cull licences were issued in September 2017. [901404]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): We do not carry out post-mortem examinations on every badger removed in cull operations. However, we know from previous research that the prevalence

rate of the disease in badgers in the high-risk area is typically around 30%. However, we do want to monitor trends as the cull is implemented, so a small sample of badgers is being collected and tested this year to explore different testing protocols that could be deployed to track the prevalence of TB in badgers culled in future years.

Paula Sherriff: I thank the Minister for his response, but will he tell us what has provided the scientific basis for the wider roll-out of the cull?

George Eustice: The basis for the roll-out of the cull was the randomised badger culling trials carried out under the previous Labour Government. Those trials showed that there would be a reduction in the disease through a badger cull. Indeed, research carried out earlier this summer by Christl Donnelly has confirmed that there is a 58% reduction in the disease in cattle in Gloucester and a 21% reduction in Somerset. That is within the range we would expect, based on the RBCTs.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

Mr Speaker: In calling the shadow Minister, I hope the House will want to join me in congratulating the hon. Gentleman, who in the few years when he was out of the House acquired a doctorate in rural economy.

Dr Drew: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I think I can dine out on that for a few more days.

I hear what the Minister says, but now that the culls are coming to an end, it is estimated that between 20,000 and 33,000 badgers were caught and dispatched in the roll-out. Is he seriously telling me that we will not test a significant proportion of those badgers so that we can at least have some scientific efficacy and know that there is some sense in what the Government are trying to do, even though Labour Members totally oppose it?

George Eustice: If the hon. Gentleman had listened to my earlier answer, he would know that I said precisely that we want to monitor trends in this disease, which is why we are starting to collect and test a sample of badgers to develop these protocols. A lot of post-mortem analysis was done during the RBCTs, and we know from that—it was not conclusive—that the typical prevalence rate of the disease in the badger population in the high-risk area is 30%.

Leaving the EU: Labour Supply

6. **Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab):** What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on the supply of labour to the farming and agricultural sectors. [901405]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): We are working with the farming and agriculture sector to assess the impact on this industry of leaving the EU. Following the decision to close the seasonal agricultural workers scheme in 2013, DEFRA set up the SAWS transition working group, which brings industry and the Government together to monitor seasonal labour. I met this group on 7 September. DEFRA is working with the Home Office to ensure that workforce requirements are considered in any future immigration system.

Nic Dakin: In order to give farmers and the industry confidence in the system, when will the promised review that the Minister alludes to report?

George Eustice: We regularly meet the SAWS transition group, as I said, and we work closely with Home Office officials on this. The Home Office has established a review by the Migration Advisory Committee. Indeed, its call for evidence closes this week—on 27 October. Over the past month, we have been encouraging all interested parties to contribute to that review.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): There is a lot of discussion about the farming and agricultural sector but, as the Minister will know, the Department is also responsible for food and drink manufacturing, which is the largest manufacturing sector and also a very large employer. Will he assure me that that sector will not be overlooked?

George Eustice: I assure my hon. Friend that I regularly meet food processing companies and food manufacturers. He is right that some sectors, notably fish processing and meat processing, have become very reliant on east European labour, particularly over the past 10 years. We are ensuring that all the information provided by those sectors is fed back into the review that is being undertaken by the Home Office.

14. [901413] **Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab):** The Minister will no doubt be aware that farming contributes £1.5 billion a year to the Welsh economy. If the Government decided on a no-deal Brexit, it would have a significant impact on Welsh farming, including in relation to workforce shortages. Will he make a statement on what he plans to do in a no-deal scenario to support the Welsh agricultural economy?

George Eustice: I assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government are planning for all scenarios. We have been very clear that we want a comprehensive free trade agreement with our European partners, and we want a close partnership to be put in place. However, if we want to be serious around a negotiating table, we obviously have to prepare for everything, and that is why we are also preparing for a no-deal scenario.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): New Zealand has had an effective seasonal migrant workers scheme for farms for many years. Will the Government, at the very least, look at that? Will they also note that New Zealand has expanded its scheme to include the tourism sector, and especially the fishing sector? Such a scheme would prevent boats on the west coast of Scotland from being tied up due to lack of crews, especially at a time when we often see fine crews prevented from coming from the Philippines or Ghana. Due to barmy Home Office rules, the boats are tied up, at a cost to the economy.

George Eustice: We are indeed looking at the system in New Zealand, which is similar in many ways to the seasonal agricultural workers scheme that operated from 1945 to 2013 in this country. The Home Office had some other sector-based schemes, but the MAC concluded in 2013 that they were not being utilised and were therefore unnecessary, but as I said, there is a review led by the Home Office with the MAC looking at this question now. That is the right place to put that information.

Leaving the EU: Policy Framework

7. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Whether he has met representatives of the National Farmers Union to discuss a policy framework for agriculture after the UK leaves the EU. [901406]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): Since taking up my role, I have met representatives from the NFU, NFU Scotland, NFU Cymru, the Farmers' Union of Wales and the Ulster Farmers Union, all of whom help me to shape my work.

Mr Carmichael: In that case, the Secretary of State should be aware that the UK does not have a single agricultural industry; we have several. The needs of farmers and crofters in my constituency will be very different from those of dairy farmers in the south-west of England, but all will have to be accommodated in the framework. Will the right hon. Gentleman therefore continue to engage with both NFU Scotland and the Scottish Crofting Federation, because in this they are the experts?

Michael Gove: I quite agree. I had the opportunity to hear from representatives of the crofting sector when I visited Scotland. I make a commitment to visit every part of the United Kingdom and to work constructively with the devolved Administrations to create a UK-wide framework that ensures that we can preserve the internal market within the UK and get the best trade deals with other countries, but at the same time be sensitive to the specific needs of, for example, Orkney's very fine beef farmers.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Many farms and rural communities in my constituency straddle the border with England. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that the voices of those communities are not ignored in the discussions about Brexit and devolution?

Michael Gove: Their voices are certainly not ignored, not least because they have such an excellent and articulate representative in my hon. Friend, whose dramatically increased majority at the last general election is testament to his hard work on behalf of all his constituents.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Can I press the Secretary of State to confirm whether the Government have undertaken an assessment of the impact of Brexit on the food and drink manufacturing sector, and to explain how they have consulted with businesses as part of that process?

Michael Gove: Not only have I spoken to the farming union representatives I mentioned earlier, but I have had regular conversations with the Food and Drink Federation and others across the food and drink sector. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that food and drink is the UK's biggest manufacturing sector. We see huge opportunities outside the European Union to export more and make the most of British produce, because we are so lucky that British food and drink is the best in the world.

13. [901412] **Zac Goldsmith** (Richmond Park) (Con): The most recent scientific evidence again shows the link between a decline in our pollinators and the use of neonicotinoids. My right hon. Friend has secured so many successes in the last few months, including on ivory, plastics, CCTV in slaughterhouses and mandatory sentencing for cruelty. Will he now ensure that the science that we know is correct is implemented and we introduce a permanent ban on the main three neonicotinoids on the market today?

Michael Gove: I thank my hon. Friend for his campaigning on this issue. It is vital that we do all we can to ensure that our insect population, and in particular our pollinator population, is protected. They are vital to the health of our environment. We are looking closely at the science in this matter.

Leaving the EU: Scotland

8. **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on his departmental priorities for Scotland after the UK leaves the EU. [901407]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): I made it a priority to engage with the Scottish Government as early as possible and I spoke to the Scottish Government Cabinet Secretary, Fergus Ewing, during my first week in office. We met for follow-up talks at the Royal Highland Show on 22 June. I also met Mr Ewing and representatives of the other devolved Administrations on 25 September, and we are due to meet again in early November.

Stuart C. McDonald: Since 2013, this Government have short-changed farmers in Scotland of £160 million of CAP convergence money. Will the Secretary of State commit to urgently change how those funds are distributed, not after 2020, but imminently?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that subject. I received a letter from my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack) on behalf of Scottish Conservative MPs setting out a very constructive suggestion on how to take matters forward. That is proof that having 14 Scottish Conservative Members here is a way of ensuring that the interests of Scotland's farming and fisheries sectors are better represented than ever before in this House.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): While my right hon. Friend is considering Scotland, may I remind him that many Scottish farmers are concerned about the reintroduction of lynx in the Kielder forest? Can he reassure me that my constituents and the Scottish Borders Council will be consulted before this moves forward?

Michael Gove: May I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue? I visited his constituency in a private capacity in August to fish on the Tweed. I had the opportunity while there to hear from his constituents not only about what a fantastic job he is doing, but about their concerns about the reintroduction of lynx.

I will of course ensure that we take full account of their views before any progress towards such a reintroduction takes place.

Mr Speaker: We trust that the Secretary of State caught something. Perhaps further and better particulars should be deposited in the Library before long.

Leaving the EU: Finance

9. **Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What plans he has to reform financial support for farming after the UK leaves the EU. [901408]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): Leaving the EU is a great opportunity to design a new agriculture policy that is fit for purpose in the 21st century. As we develop plans for a new agriculture Bill, we are considering how best to deploy the financial support committed to agriculture and the farmed environment. At the heart of that policy will be a focus on delivering environmental outcomes and improving soil health. Other measures under consideration will address issues such as productivity, animal welfare and risk management.

Nigel Huddleston: I thank the Minister for that response, in particular on the need to increase productivity in the farming sector. What consideration has he given to potential changes in taxes, to encourage more investment in machinery and technology post-Brexit?

George Eustice: As part of our work on innovation, we are considering grants to support investment in farms. Tax policy is obviously a matter for Treasury Ministers, but there are already annual investment allowances to support investment in farm machinery, and many farmers make use of them.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The uplands have some of the most important environmental benefits in the country, but the farmers have extremely marginal incomes. Will the Minister therefore commit to making no cuts to the support for hill farmers in the uplands?

George Eustice: We are doing quite a lot of analysis of sectors of the industry that could be affected by any future reform in agriculture policy. The hon. Lady is right to say that some farmers in the uplands are more financially vulnerable, and we are taking that into account. We have also been very clear that any change we implement would have a transition period to ensure that people can adjust.

Leaving the EU: Common Fisheries Policy

11. **Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): Whether the rules of the common fisheries policy will apply to the UK during any transition period in the event that the UK leaves the EU. [901410]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): As the Prime Minister made clear to the House on 11 October, when we leave the European Union we will leave the common fisheries policy, and we leave the EU in March 2019. However, the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill will bring across current

EU legislation to provide continuity on the day we leave. In the context of fisheries, that will include the body of technical conservation regulations currently set by the EU.

Mr Bradshaw: That is very interesting: we will not have a voice at the table but we will have to abide by all the CFP rules. Can the Minister give an assurance to our industry, which exports more than 80% of what it catches straight to the rest of Europe, that it will not face any tariffs or other barriers during or after that transition period?

George Eustice: We are seeking a comprehensive free trade agreement and trade would continue as usual during the transition period. The right hon. Gentleman is wrong to say that we would not have a seat at the table. He is familiar with fisheries negotiations and knows that they are annual events, whether we are negotiating with EU member states at December Council, with EU-Norway or at coastal states meetings. We will become an independent coastal state on the day we leave the European Union in March 2019.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): I welcome the Government's commitment to listen to the views of the food sector and to ensure that it has a strong voice in the EU exit negotiations. Does the Minister share my view that the interests both of Scottish fishermen and of those in the other devolved nations must not be sacrificed during the negotiations?

George Eustice: I very much agree with my hon. Friend and I know that many Scottish Conservative MPs have worked closely with Scottish industry on the issue. The fishing industry is very important in Scotland. Roughly half of the industry is located there, and sectors such as the pelagic sector, which targets mackerel, the largest fish species that we target in this country, are of incredible economic importance. I reassure my hon. Friend that I regularly meet fishing industry leaders in Scotland to discuss their concerns.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): May I take this opportunity to send our sincere condolences to the family of the crew member of the fishing vessel Solstice who sadly died at sea since the last DEFRA questions?

While the Brexit negotiations on the common fisheries policy continue, the fishing Minister will appreciate that the safety of our fishermen and women must be paramount. The Solstice is the third fishing vessel to sink involving the loss of life in the last two years where there has been a delay in launching lifeboats. With that in mind, will the Minister reassure the fishing industry that he is working with his colleagues in the Department for Transport to secure a full investigation into the Solstice, in order to rebuild confidence in the fishing community that the coastguard is able to respond quickly and effectively to incidents at sea?

George Eustice: I join the hon. Lady in offering sincere condolences to the family of the crew member who sadly lost his life with the loss of the Solstice in the west country. She will be aware that this issue is covered by the Department for Transport and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, but I have had the opportunity to discuss the matter with my colleague the shipping Minister,

and I know that the marine accident investigation unit will carry out an investigation in the normal way. In addition, and to respond to the points the hon. Lady has raised, he has asked the marine accident investigation unit to consider whether we have adequately learned the lessons from previous accidents—which, as she said, have some similarities—and whether there are wider trends on which we ought to reflect and change policy.

Topical Questions

T1. [901417] **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): Authoritative scientific analysis is hugely important for my Department, which is why I was so pleased earlier this month when our chief scientific adviser, Professor Ian Boyd, agreed to stay on for at least an additional year. I am hugely grateful, as I know my predecessors are, for his distinguished work. We are grateful to have him.

Kerry McCarthy: Is it appropriate for the 2 Sisters group to be allowed to undertake any mergers and acquisitions while the Food Standards Agency is conducting its investigations and until it has reported in full, not least in case any issues of corporate governance are uncovered during the investigation?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady raises a very important issue. She will be aware, of course, that the Food Standards Agency is answerable to the Department of Health and questions of mergers and acquisitions are matters for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. However, these were deeply concerning allegations and the whole House will want to ensure that they are properly investigated, to ensure that the highest standards of food safety are observed in all our processing plants.

T2. [901418] **Matt Warman** (Boston and Skegness) (Con): The £100 million Boston flood barrier is probably the biggest public investment in the town's entire history—promised and delivered under a Conservative Government. I know that the Minister has had the public inquiry's report; can she update the House on when we are likely to start actually building the thing?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): As my hon. Friend points out, this significant barrier will substantially reduce the risk of flooding for almost 15,000 homes and nearly 1,000 businesses. He is right that I have received the report; the findings are now being considered by lawyers. This legal due diligence must be completed before I can make any final decision on granting the order. In the meantime, I can assure him that the Environment Agency is making all necessary preparations to start construction as soon as possible, subject to securing funding from the Treasury, which I am confident of.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): In the referendum last year, people did not vote for dangerous levels of pollution and the weakening of environmental protections. It is all very well for the Secretary of State to make worthy speeches about a green Brexit, but as it stands, the Government's repeal Bill makes this an impossibility.

Will he now admit that the omission of the “polluter pays” principle and other environmental protections are a fundamental flaw, and will he work with me and other colleagues to guarantee the strongest possible protections for our environment as we leave the EU?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady raises a very important issue. It is absolutely right to draw attention to the fact that while there have undoubtedly been aspects of our EU membership, such as the common agricultural policy and common fisheries policy, that have been harmful to the environment, there have been welcome environmental protections, which we have helped to develop while we have been in the EU. I want to work with her, as I am working with others, to ensure that people can guarantee that the protections that they value stay in place.

Sue Hayman: I thank the Secretary of State for his comments. Clearly, many of our environmental protections come from Europe. Another victim of the repeal Bill that I would like to draw his attention to is the precautionary principle, which sets a benchmark to protect the environment from policy and developmental proposals that would do irreparable harm. Is his commitment to me now therefore a commitment to working cross-party to ensure that these vital environmental protections are transferred into EU law as promised, or is he happy for the EU to reclaim its reputation as the dirty man of Europe?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady perhaps made a slip of the tongue there, because I think she is probably worried about the UK being the dirty man—or indeed the dirty creature—of Europe. In short, the principles to which she alludes are valuable interpretive principles. We need to make sure they are consistent with the application of UK common law, but yes I would like to work with her and others.

T4. [901420] **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The Government are committed to planting 11 million trees. May I encourage the Secretary of State to ensure that many of them are planted in Chipping Barnet? He would be very welcome to visit to see those trees planted in our wonderful green spaces.

Dr Coffey: We do want to plant more trees. We are trying different ways to accelerate the planting of trees. My right hon. Friend will also be aware of our manifesto commitment to plant 1 million urban trees. I am very hopeful that many of them will be in her delightful constituency. I am sure either I or the Secretary of State will visit in due course.

T3. [901419] **Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Like many other MPs across the House, the Secretary of State and I supported CAMRA's general election pledges for beer and pubs, because we recognise the role of pubs in our communities. Is he putting pressure on the Chancellor to freeze beer duty in the Budget?

Michael Gove: Conversations between the Chancellor and myself are fruitful. They are fruitful because they are intimate and therefore I cannot say any more.

T7. [901423] **Mrs Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Is the Minister planning to set a date for when all food packaging will be recyclable?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend raises an important point. The Government's recently published clean growth strategy outlined our ambition for zero affordable waste by 2050. Policies and regulations, such as the packaging and waste regulations, are designed to increase recycling and reduce the amount of packaging that ends up in the natural environment. Almost all packaging is technically recyclable, although some local authorities and waste management companies choose not to collect it for various reasons. Next year, we will be publishing a new resources and waste strategy, in which I hope to set out more.

T5. [901421] **Jo Stevens** (Cardiff Central) (Lab): How much of the waste produced by the Secretary of State's Department is recycled?

Dr Coffey: I may need to refer the hon. Lady to *Hansard* and I will write to her. I am aware that we generate food waste, but that all of it goes to anaerobic digestion.

T8. [901424] **Luke Graham** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that as powers are repatriated from the EU, everywhere in the UK should feel the benefit? Would he be willing to visit my constituency to meet colleagues and representatives of Scottish agriculture to understand local concerns, and to discuss the potential placement of further UK Government Departments in Scotland?

Michael Gove: I would be delighted to visit my hon. Friend's incredibly attractive constituency which is well represented in this House. I will seek to do so very early in the new year.

T6. [901422] **John Mann** (Bassetlaw) (Lab): Do we expect progress in sorting out abandoned waste sites owned by the Crown Estate, such as the one at Sandy Lane in my constituency?

Dr Coffey: I met the hon. Gentleman to discuss this matter. We have been engaging with the Treasury about the site, because I know there is a particular issue he wishes to be progressed. The Treasury has oversight of the Crown Estate and the tax system and will consider the business case in due course, but I can assure him that the Environment Agency will continue to work closely with the local councils. They have removed the dangerous waste that was there.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): How many slaughterhouses do not currently have CCTV installed?

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): From memory, about 90% or 95% of all animals slaughtered are slaughtered in the larger slaughterhouses which have CCTV. However, about half of all slaughterhouses do not, particularly some of the smaller ones. That is why we are bringing forward legislation to make CCTV compulsory in all slaughterhouses.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Eighty per cent. of Welsh farm income is rooted in the common agricultural policy. The Welsh Government are currently responsible for the distribution of that funding. Will the Minister

confirm whether they will retain that responsibility post-Brexit, and whether funding received will be based on the needs of Welsh farms, not a simple headcount?

George Eustice: What I can tell the hon. Gentleman is that we are working with all the devolved Administrations and territorial offices to design a future policy. We want to ensure that all the devolved Administrations retain the ability to put in place the types of policies that are right for them.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): What is the future for glyphosate use, given the decision from Europe yesterday?

George Eustice: We support the research work by the European Food Safety Authority. Its conclusion is very much that glyphosate is safe and that is why we have supported its re-authorisation. On pesticides, we will always take an evidence-based approach.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Last Friday I visited Askham Bryan agricultural college in York. It says that the new exam framework does not work because assessment of, for instance, the felling of trees cannot be done in the tight window of the spring, and the harvest cannot be brought in during the spring either. Will the Secretary of State make representations to the Education Secretary about broadening the scope within which assessments can take place?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that important point, which I will indeed put to the Education Secretary.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The fishing communities in my constituency and in neighbouring Grimsby are looking forward to Brexit in March 2019. What support will the Department give the industry to enable it to expand its trade with other countries, and to take up the opportunities that Brexit will offer?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend is right: as we leave the European Union we shall have a great opportunity to look afresh at access arrangements and shares of the total allowable catch, and we are working with the fishing industry to develop that opportunity. I met some of the leading fish processors this week—obviously, they are strongly represented in my hon. Friend's constituency—to talk about issues that are concerning them at present.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Electronic Voting

1. **Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): What estimate the Commission has made of the cost of introducing electronic voting in the Chamber. [901425]

3. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What estimate the Commission has made of the cost of introducing electronic voting in the Chamber. [901427]

10. **Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): What estimate the Commission has made of the cost of introducing electronic voting in the Chamber. [901434]

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Commission has given no formal consideration to the cost of introducing electronic voting. Its responsibility is limited to any financial or staffing implications of any change in the present system, were a change to be agreed by the House. Such a change would normally follow a report by the Procedure Committee, which would, I am sure, welcome representations from the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) and his hon. Friends.

Peter Grant: While I accept that this is not primarily a matter for the Commission to decide, does the right hon. Gentleman not agree that before we spend astronomical sums on refurbishing this place, the Commission should at the very least build in the capacity for electronic voting in the future, should the House at some point decide to move itself into the 20th century before the rest of the world enters the 22nd?

Tom Brake: I have set out for the hon. Gentleman perhaps the most effective way in which he could voice his concerns, but an opportunity may well be provided shortly by a contingency Chamber, in which case it would of course be open to the House to decide to implement an electronic voting system if it considered that to be appropriate.

Patrick Grady: We do read reports about a contingency Chamber. Have any assessments been made of the differing costs of installing voting Lobbies—which I assume would have to include little toilets at the end, in which Members could hide if they accidentally made their way into the wrong Lobby—and simply installing an electronic voting system? Would the latter not be a more sensible use of public funds?

Tom Brake: I suspect that we have not yet reached the stage of deciding whether the provision of toilets will be needed for a contingency Chamber, or, indeed, establishing whether any financial assessment has been made of the installation of electronic voting. According to figures produced in past debates, however, it appears that the cost might be up to £500,000.

Hannah Bardell: In the Scottish Parliament, where there is a seat for every Member and voting takes two seconds rather than 20 minutes, electronic voting is very effective. Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that in this Chamber there were more than 500 votes between 2012 and 2014, which took up more than seven days? Given what is coming down the line with Brexit, does he not think that this is a perfect time to install electronic voting in the House of Commons?

Tom Brake: I am aware that electronic voting takes place in the Scottish Parliament, and my personal view is that it is a more effective way of dealing with votes. Members who have not been here as long as I have may

not remember that back in 1997 there was an attempt to reform a number of ways in which the House operated. I supported it, but it was blocked by the House.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): But is it not the case that there are advantages in going into the Lobby—one can meet colleagues and do things? If we listen to the Scottish National party all together, why do we not go the whole hog? Why do we not just sit at home, watch proceedings on the Parliament channel, and vote on our iPhones?

Tom Brake: I did not hear in any of the earlier contributions any suggestion that we should stay at home to do our voting, and I am sure that the SNP representatives here today would not favour that approach either.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): As a Minister in the previous coalition Government and now as a Back Bencher, the right hon. Gentleman will appreciate that one of the advantages for Back Benchers of voting in person is that Ministers have no escape from Back Benchers who want to collar them to raise local and national issues.

Mr Speaker: I am sure Ministers love meeting the hon. Gentleman in the Division Lobby, and that they have good conversations—although they are probably usually one-way.

Tom Brake: I have nothing to add to what Mr Speaker has said.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners was asked—

Income Inequality

2. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What recent discussions the Church of England has had with the Government on income inequality. [901426]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): The Church has committed to being a living wage employer and for many decades has paid the same level of minimum stipend regardless of gender or geography. I can only answer for Church policy, but bishops in particular speak to relevant Ministers in the Treasury and other Departments about the impact of their policies.

Kerry McCarthy: Earlier this month the Archbishop of Canterbury wrote a powerful article for the *Financial Times* on how our economic model is broken and no longer working for everyone. Does the right hon. Lady agree with him—I appreciate she has just said she cannot answer for everyone—and particularly on the need for a fairer tax system, does she believe the Government are listening?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Archbishop of Canterbury has recently been involved in the Institute for Public Policy Research commission on economic justice, and

the article the hon. Lady mentions was written off the back of that commission's erudite report, which I commend to the House. It focuses on things that need to be fixed and improved, but the Church itself is trying to do its bit. It recognises that we need to start right at the beginning of life by teaching financial literacy to our children so they are able to avoid the perils of debt, which is a scourge on this nation.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Church Commissioner will agree that the Church has a strong role to play in the guidance of others. Does she also agree that the glass ceiling, which she has referred to, is still in place? How can we encourage small and medium-sized businesses to play their part in bringing it down?

Dame Caroline Spelman: As a female, I am sympathetic to the point about the inequality caused by glass ceilings, which are still very much in place. This goes beyond the policy of just the Church, however, although it is trying to do its bit to ensure that its male and female employees are treated equally.

Heritage Lottery Fund

4. **Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): What representations she has received on the closure of the Heritage Lottery Fund strand for listed places of worship. [901428]

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church continues to regret the decision by the Heritage Lottery Fund to close the grants for places of worship scheme. The Church Buildings Council is in close discussion with the HLF as to how we can try to find a way forward. The Church has received assurances from the chairman of the HLF that the amount of its funding for places of worship will, as a proportion, continue at comparable levels to the distribution in 2016.

Helen Goodman: Parishioners at St Mary the Virgin in Middleton-in-Teesdale and at St Mary's in Barnard Castle were disappointed. Given that we are talking here about half the listed buildings in the country and that three quarters of Church of England buildings are listed, will the Church make further representations to the HLF on this important matter?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I am aware of the decision by the HLF north-east committee to reject the two applications to which the hon. Lady refers. There was a great deal of competition for those funds, but I understand that both the unsuccessful projects are being invited to a heritage grants workshop on 1 December at HLF offices to look at other ways of applying through its open programme for funds.

Clergy Vocation

5. **Chris Davies** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What progress the Church of England has made on reaching its target of increasing clergy vocations to the priesthood by 50% by 2020. [901429]

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church of England is well on its way to reaching its 2020 target, when we hope to see 50% of the priesthood being women, and,

indeed, we have the highest level of ordinands for 10 years, an increase of 14% since last year. There has been a particularly strong increase, of 19%, in the number of women entering training compared with 2016.

Chris Davies: I thank my right hon. Friend for her answer and for the welcome news that it contained. What steps is the Church taking to ensure that the diversity of those being considered for ordination better reflects the country as a whole? While answering, will she join me in congratulating the Most Rev. John Davies, the Bishop of Swansea and Brecon, on becoming the 13th Archbishop of Wales—the first from that diocese?

Mr Speaker: Perhaps he is a relative of yours.

Dame Caroline Spelman: I certainly welcome the new Archbishop of Wales, John Davies, to his post. I also welcome the new Bishop of Llandaff, the Right Rev. June Osborne. I would certainly say that the Church in Wales is doing its very best to progress diversity. Also, we should not overlook the need to draw more people from different ethnic backgrounds, and the Church has strategies to increase the numbers of black and ethnic minority ordinands, who currently make up only 3.5% of clergy.

Mr Speaker: I am glad to hear that there are such plans. They ought to get on with it.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am sure that my right hon. Friend will agree that a vocation for the priesthood is fundamentally based on a call from God, and that that call never went only to white men of a certain age. Does she therefore agree that this work is about making people feel able to take up that call and not about setting a target to increase the number of calls that God makes?

Dame Caroline Spelman: Very much so; a vocation is gender blind. The 19% increase in the number of women coming forward for ordination is evidence that it is an attractive vocation to enter, and the Church strives to make training programmes more accessible to women and to people from diverse backgrounds.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Restoration and Renewal

6. **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What recent progress has been made on the Palace of Westminster restoration and renewal programme. [901430]

12. **Jo Swinson** (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): What recent progress has been made on plans for the restoration and renewal programme for the Palace of Westminster. [901436]

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Substantial progress has until now been hampered by the lack of a decision in principle by the two Houses on the preferred way forward. The report of the Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster was published in September last year, and I am pleased that the Leaders of both Houses have indicated that they will make time for a debate before the end of this year.

Gavin Newlands: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that answer, but the replacement of major systems in the Palace has been due for more than a decade. The Leader of the House is now appointing yet another Committee, delaying the repairs yet again, despite warnings that delays increase the risk of serious events such as fires. Has the Commission made any estimate of how much longer the deployment of a new body to consider costings will delay the timeline of the work?

Tom Brake: The expectation is that once the shadow sponsor board and the delivery authority have been established, it might take them something of the order of 12 to 18 months to consider the options for decanting. That would therefore add to the timescales. I welcome the fact that we are going to have the debate by the end of this year. We really need that, because meanwhile the fabric of the building continues to deteriorate and the very high maintenance costs that we incur as a result also continue apace.

Jo Swinson: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the public might be somewhat puzzled at the thought of a further 12 to 18 months' delay while options that have already been assessed are discussed yet again? When works are considered urgent for structural and safety reasons, surely we should choose the option that maximises the ability to carry out those works efficiently while minimising the cost to the public purse without any further delay.

Tom Brake: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. Since the original Joint Committee report, the idea of creating a contingency Chamber and perhaps doing more works around the northern estate have changed the picture slightly. The sponsor board and the delivery authority will be established according to the timescale set out, and I hope that she and others will take advantage of the engagement programme that the Government have launched, with three separate dates on 14, 21 and 28 November, and that Members will avail themselves of the opportunity to go on the tour of the basements to see why these works are needed.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I might be wrong, but I get the impression that the Treasury would much rather spend money over a long period than over a shorter period. Does the right hon. Gentleman know whether the Treasury would prefer to spend £5 billion or £6 billion over five or six years or much more over 20 to 30 years?

Tom Brake: As the spokesman of the House of Commons Commission, I am somewhat loth to express a Treasury view—the Treasury is better equipped to do that than I am. However, as for the risk profile associated with doing these works over, say, a 30-year period as opposed to a much shorter period of time, the risk of some catastrophic failure is clearly much higher if the

works take place over 30 years while we are in situ debating in either Chamber and, indeed, our staff are here working.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman says that we are hampered in making a decision because the two Houses have not come to a view, but that is because the Government refuse to table the motion that was agreed last year by the then Leader of the House, which says that there is

“an impending crisis which we cannot responsibly ignore.”

It is downright irresponsible of the Government consistently to delay. The next edition of the “Oxford English Dictionary” will say for the word “procrastination”: “See the inaction of the Tory Government on the misunderstanding of the phrase ‘impending crisis.’” Get on with it, man!

Tom Brake: For the reasons I set out about the risk profile associated with the services in the building, I certainly support what the hon. Gentleman says about the need for urgent action to be taken, although I may not echo the tone that he uses.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for his attempted imitation. I usually have the copyright on the phrase “Get on with it, man,” but they say that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, so I am deeply obliged to the hon. Gentleman.

Chris Bryant: Parliament has no copyright, as you well know.

Mr Speaker: Indeed, admittedly so. Nevertheless, I am going to bank the compliment from the hon. Gentleman. It might be the only one that I ever get.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Given the attitude to change in this place, including the resistance to electronic voting, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that consideration should be given to turning this place into a museum?

Tom Brake: When that matter was looked at by the Commission and the Lords equivalent, there was no desire to turn this place into a museum. Indeed, there was a desire to ensure that this building is able to continue to operate for staff, for Members and for visitors and to remain a significant world heritage building. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Just in case those attending to our proceedings did not hear, the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) says that he wants to be an exhibit. He should be careful of what he wishes for.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners was asked—

Overseas Oppression and Discrimination

7. **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to support Christians facing oppression and discrimination abroad. [901431]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): This is an excellent and timely question, because tomorrow marks International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day, and the Church of England has been supporting a number of events, not least the one held in your house yesterday, Mr Speaker. There will also be a debate on this subject later today. The Church remains concerned about the increasing attacks on Christian communities around the world and continues to assist the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Theresa Villiers: Will my right hon. Friend tell us what the Church is doing to help internally displaced Christian communities return to their homes in northern Iraq?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I have raised with the Department for International Development on number of occasions the need to help Christians return to their ancient homeland. I can tell my right hon. Friend that the Nineveh Reconstruction Committee, which is a collaboration between the Chaldean Church, the Syrian Catholic Church and the Syrian Orthodox Church, has so far restored 1,700 properties, enabling just over 4,700 Christian families to return home.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Next week marks the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. What is the Church doing to promote and celebrate an event that led to major religious and social freedom in this nation?

Dame Caroline Spelman: There are already a number of events to mark the Reformation. Indeed, you can hardly fail to turn on the radio without hearing about the commemoration of this great occasion. However, in the spirit of the question, I want to share with the House something that a Minister of State said yesterday at the reception in the Speaker's house: "It is incumbent on us all—all of us of faith and those of no faith—to speak up for the tolerance to hear each other."

Same-sex Marriage

8. **Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab):** What recent discussions Church of England bishops have had on allowing parishes to hold ceremonies to celebrate same-sex marriages. [901432]

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church's doctrine, as set out in canon law and as explicitly recognised by the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013, is that marriage is a union of one man and one woman. As hon. Members will be aware, a resolution was passed over the weekend by the synod in Hereford. That motion will go to the General Synod and will be considered by its business committee for debate.

Mr Bradshaw: Given that many Anglican churches, including my wonderful cathedral in Exeter, already perform ceremonies to celebrate same-sex marriages, would it not be better for the Church just to get on with it and for bishops to make an announcement, rather than carrying on with what is in effect an institutionalised hypocrisy?

Dame Caroline Spelman: Obviously it is open to the right hon. Gentleman's diocese to follow the same process that the Hereford diocese has just undertaken, but the Church is active in this area with two initiatives. A pastoral advisory group has been set up—led by the Bishop of Newcastle, Christine Hardman—to work on the development of pastoral practice within the Church's existing teaching, and a major teaching document is being produced on marriage and sexuality.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): When so many gay people are being persecuted throughout the world, particularly in Commonwealth countries, does my right hon. Friend not believe that allowing gay people to marry in churches in this country would send the right signal?

Dame Caroline Spelman: An important step forward was made by the worldwide Anglican Church in accepting a new doctrine against homophobia, which is part of trying to stamp out such persecution across the wider Anglican communion.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Electoral Returning Officers

9. **Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op):** What assessment has been made of the availability of electoral returning officers. [901433]

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South): The Electoral Commission provides guidance for returning officers, and it monitors and reports on their performance. The commission targets monitoring and support on areas where it is needed, including where there is a change of returning officer or a change in the electoral services team. The commission will publish its report on the administration of the 2017 general election and the performance of returning officers in November.

Luke Pollard: A shortage of trained returning officers was identified as one of the contributing factors to 6,500 votes being missed out on the declaration for my seat and to 1,926 postal votes not being sent out. What further action can be taken to train more returning officers?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend will be aware that the returning officer for Plymouth commissioned an independent review, led by Dr Dave Smith. The investigation reported in September. The Electoral Commission fully supported the investigation and continues to support the city council in delivering the improvements required.

The Electoral Commission is working with the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and the Association of Electoral Administrators on the issue of the decreasing number of election and registration specialists.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Does the hon. Lady know whether returning officers have commented on the fact that people voted in more than one parliamentary constituency at the last general election?

Do they have a view on supporting my private Member's Bill, which would allow electors to be registered in only one parliamentary seat?

Bridget Phillipson: The hon. Gentleman will know that in certain circumstances it is possible for someone, including a Member of Parliament, to be lawfully registered to vote in more than one place. The Electoral Commission takes very seriously any claim that individuals voted twice. The Minister with responsibility for the constitution, the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore), has informed the House that police forces are investigating several allegations. The commission urges anyone who has evidence of such individuals to take those allegations to the relevant police force.

Mr Speaker: We are out of time, but we should hear the question of Mr Christian Matheson.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Maintenance Contracts

11. **Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): What criteria the Commission applies when awarding contracts for maintenance work. [R] [901435]

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): The House awards contracts to the most economically advantageous tender, in accordance with the statutory regime set out in the Public Contracts Regulations 2015. That involves the evaluation of bids using weighted objective criteria, such as whole-life costs, service levels, equality and other environmental or social aspects to ensure compliance with the principles of transparency, non-discrimination and equal treatment, meaning that tenders are assessed in conditions of effective competition.

Christian Matheson: The Big Ben refurbishment contract has been awarded to McAlpine, which is up to its neck in blacklisting. Is it not now time that we gave McAlpine a taste of its own medicine? Is it not possible for us to strip that blacklist of the contract? If not, can the House of Commons Commission take industrial relations and social responsibility into account in the awarding of future contracts?

Tom Brake: I understand the hon. Gentleman's question. He may be aware that pre-qualification criteria contain grounds for mandatory exclusion where a potential supplier has been convicted for breaching any relevant legislation, including the Employment Relations Act 1999 (Blacklists) Regulations 2010. However, I think the critical issue is there having been a conviction for breaching that legislation. The other difficulty is that, unfortunately, a large number of major contractors in the UK were involved in blacklisting, and an approach that involved offering no work to any of those, including those who perhaps settled out of court, would make it very difficult for any work to be undertaken.

Leaving the EU: Parliamentary Vote

10.40 am

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union if he will make a statement on the Government's policy of a meaningful vote in Parliament to agree the final withdrawal agreement with the European Union.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): I thank the shadow Secretary of State for his question. We have been very clear right from the start of the process that there will be a vote in both Houses of Parliament on the final deal that we agree with the European Union. I reiterate the commitment my Minister gave at the Dispatch Box during the article 50 Bill, when he said:

"I can confirm that the Government will bring forward a motion on the final agreement, to be approved by both Houses of Parliament before it is concluded. We expect and intend that this will happen before the European Parliament debates and votes on the final agreement."

Furthermore, he said:

"we intend that the vote will cover not only the withdrawal arrangements but also the future relationship with the European Union."—[*Official Report*, 7 February 2017; Vol. 621, c. 264.]

These remain our commitments.

The terms of this vote were also clear. Again, as my Minister said at the time:

"The choice will be meaningful: whether to accept that deal or to move ahead without a deal."—[*Official Report*, 7 February 2017; Vol. 621, c. 275.]

Of course this vote cannot happen until there is a deal to vote upon, but we are working to reach an agreement on the final deal in good time before we leave the European Union in March 2019. Clearly, we cannot say for certain at this stage when this will be agreed, but Michel Barnier has said he hopes to get a draft deal agreed by October 2018, and that is our aim as well. So we fully expect there will be a vote in the UK Parliament on this before the vote in the European Parliament and before we leave the EU. As we have said before, this vote will be over and above the requirements of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010.

We have also said many times that we want to move to talking about our future relationship as soon as possible. The EU has been clear that any future relationship and partnership cannot legally conclude until the UK becomes a third country, as the Prime Minister said in her Florence speech. As I set out in the Select Committee yesterday, our aim is to have the terms of our future relationship agreed by the time we leave in March 2019. However, we recognise that the ratification of that agreement will take time and could run into the implementation period that we are seeking. There can be no doubt: Parliament will be involved throughout this process.

Keir Starmer: What a mess! We get one thing one day and another thing the next. Yesterday, the Secretary of State was asked in the Brexit Committee, "Could the vote in our Parliament be after March 2019?" The answer he gave was, "Yes, it could be." Later in the day the Prime Minister had a go at correcting him, and then

his own spokesperson had to clarify his remarks. Today, he says that the vote will be before the deal is concluded. That is not good enough. May I remind him that the commitment he has just referred to, made at the Dispatch Box, that we would have a meaningful vote was made when the Government were on the verge of losing a vote on a Labour amendment to the article 50 Bill to give Parliament that vote? That commitment cannot now casually be dispensed with.

The text of article 50 is clear: there can be no deal until the European Parliament has approved it and voted on it. The nonsense we heard yesterday about "nanoseconds" has to be put in that proper context. It would be wholly unacceptable if time was found for the European Parliament to vote on the deal before it is concluded but time was not found in this House. Does the Secretary of State expect us to sit here watching on our screens the European Parliament proceedings while we are told that we do not have time? I do not think so. We need a cast-iron guarantee that that will not happen.

The Secretary of State has repeatedly asked us to accept his word at the Dispatch Box. Given the events of the past 24 hours, will he now accept the amendments tabled to the withdrawal Bill that would put into law a meaningful article 50 vote, so that we all know where we stand and do not have to repeat this exercise?

Mr Davis: I am afraid the right hon. and learned Gentleman altered the quotation from yesterday slightly. What the Chairman said, and I refer to exactly what he put to me, was that "it is possible"—possible—"that Parliament might not vote on the deal until after the end of March 2019. Am I summarising correctly what you said?" I said, "in the event we don't do the deal until then." That is the point I was making.

I will take up the right hon. and learned Gentleman's point about the European Parliament, because I have said at the Dispatch Box and we have said that it is our intent and our expectation—those were the words used; I crafted them—that we will vote on this in this House before the European Parliament does. That stands. If it goes to the timetable that Mr Barnier expects, or wants to go to, which is October 2018, it is likely that the European Parliament will vote in December or January, under the normal processes that apply to that Parliament; it has a committee stage to go through first. We will vote on that and we will have it put before the House before then. There is no doubt about that. That undertaking is absolutely cast iron.

The issue that I raised yesterday, because I take it as a responsibility always to be as forthright and open as I can with the Select Committee, was to go through what has happened in the past in European Union treaty negotiations. This time, there is an expectation by the Commission; there is an incentive on the part of the various countries to get it done as quickly as possible; and there is our expectation and intention. None of the undertakings given at the Dispatch Box have in any sense been undermined. The issue here is one of practicality and what we control. What we control, we will run to give Parliament a proper and meaningful vote at the right time.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I understand my right hon. Friend's concern about hypothetical situations that might arise at the end of the negotiation, but is not

the reality that if the negotiation leads to an agreement, it will be necessary for not only the European Parliament but ourselves to act in accordance with our constitutional principles in deciding to approve it? The only way we can do that properly is by statute in this House. In those circumstances, is not it rather fanciful to imagine that, having reached a deal with the European Union, it would hold us in some strange way to ransom because we pointed out that we needed the time to enact the necessary statute? That flies in the face of reality. It would just tone down the debate a little and introduce a bit of rationality if we understood that our European Union partners would expect us to reach our own conclusion in accordance with our own constitutional requirements.

Mr Davis: My right hon. and learned Friend has a point. As I understand it, the reason why Mr Barnier wants to conclude the negotiations, including that element of article 50 that refers to the future arrangements, by October is to enable that ratification process to take place. In that respect, I agree with my right hon. and learned Friend.

Mr Speaker: May I just ask the Secretary of State to face the House, because some colleagues could not quite hear?

Mr Davis: I was facing you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I am always delighted to be faced by the right hon. Gentleman, but I think that privilege should be enjoyed by the House as a whole.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): We have a withdrawal Bill that has not only been delayed, but just has not come to the House in any of the three or four weeks in which we expected it to, and we do not know when it will. We have the former UK ambassador to the European Union telling us that the Prime Minister's approach to the negotiations is in danger of leaving the UK "screwed". The negotiations are being led by somebody who thinks that Czechoslovakia is one of the countries with which we are negotiating, although unlike the Cabinet, Czechoslovakia is split into only two parts and they are still on amicable speaking terms. The Government refuse to publish the truth about the impact of Brexit, saying it is confidential, despite the fact that between 2013 and 2014 they published 16 different analyses of the potential impact of a yes vote in the Scottish independence referendum. The Prime Minister is having to make emergency trips to Europe to try to bail out her failing Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union.

Will the Secretary of State confirm that, for any vote to be meaningful, we must be in possession of the full facts? Will he therefore agree that Parliament will have sight of the Government's recently produced analysis before a vote takes place, and will he confirm that the Administrations of the three devolved nations will be treated as equals, as the Government have promised, and that they will also have a timeous and meaningful vote before we leave the EU?

Mr Davis: Before I answer the hon. Gentleman's substantive question, may I just correct him? He talked about Czechoslovakia. The Minister involved was correcting

somebody else; he was not asserting a belief that that was who we were negotiating with. I would prefer that to be on the record.

Yes, with the full facts, absolutely; that is why the vote has to take place once the draft deal is concluded. At that point, we will know precisely what the withdrawal deal amounts to and what the framework for the future arrangement is.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Given the way the EU has delayed and delayed, it is not entirely unreasonable for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to think it will carry on delaying. Will he impress on Monsieur Barnier, however, that it would be much more preferable to conclude a deal as early as possible, because any implementation period will be of far less value if business cannot be certain it will be available to it sooner rather than later?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is exactly right. Indeed, that is one of the things I said to the Select Committee yesterday—that we intend or will try to get the Commission to agree the implementation period as soon as possible.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State told the Committee yesterday that the Government's aim was to conclude one agreement covering the divorce, the transitional arrangements and the new deep and special partnership with the EU, but he has also accepted that the last of these has to be agreed by a different process because that deal could not be finally concluded until we had left the EU. Given that it is likely to be a mixed agreement, only one Parliament objecting would mean it could not be concluded. In those circumstances, would that bring down the whole deal, and if so, is it not sensible to separate out the divorce and the transition, which would not require the consent of every Parliament of the 27, and the new deep and special partnership, which ought to be negotiated during the transition period?

Mr Davis: As I think I said to the right hon. Gentleman's Committee yesterday, negotiating that during the transition would put us at a negotiating disadvantage. The House was promised, in respect of the approval of the negotiations, that all three elements—the divorce, as he terms it, the transition and the long-term arrangement—would be put to the House together. That is the best way to assess this whole thing. The hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) said that the decision should be made on the whole facts—all the decisions, all the facts.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): There is a way for the Government to put this matter completely beyond doubt and that is to accept amendment 7 to the withdrawal Bill tabled by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve). Reports have reached Government Back Benchers that the Secretary of State does not think that those Conservative Members who have signed the amendment are serious about supporting it if we need to. May I tell him that we are deadly serious? It would be better for all concerned if the Government were to adopt a concession strategy and have the withdrawal agreement secured by statute sooner rather than later.

Mr Davis: I will not pre-empt the discussions on the Bill, but those reports are not true.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): With the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), saying one thing from the Dispatch Box on 7 February and the Secretary of State saying not one but two things in the space of 24 hours yesterday, it is clear that ministerial assurances on this matter are not enough. Does the Secretary of State not agree that after the shambles of the last 24 hours, when he had to be rebutted by his own departmental spokesman, the only way to guarantee Parliament a meaningful say on and input into these most vital negotiations is to amend the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill accordingly?

Mr Davis: No, I do not agree with the right hon. Gentleman on that. His description of events is also wrong. It is one thing to give an undertaking, which is binding, and another to say that these are the probabilities and the difficulties that we face together, which is what I said yesterday. I treated the Exiting the EU Committee chaired by the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) with absolute respect in outlining what had happened previously—not what we expect, not what we intend, not what the Union intends, but what had happened previously and the risks that we have to take on board. We intend to meet all our undertakings, and I do not take it very well that the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) suggests that we will not.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): How can we approve an agreement before we have an agreement?

Mr Davis: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point; we cannot. That is why the House will be given the agreement to approve as soon as possible at the draft stage, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) has previously made clear at this Dispatch Box.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Hardly a day goes by without another example of the Government's muddle about Brexit. Yesterday, the Secretary of State confirmed to me three times during the Select Committee proceedings that the vote could come after March 2019. This is not about leave or remain, but about the nation coming together for the big change ahead. Will he confirm what he understands by the term "meaningful"? Does it still mean a choice between leaving the European Union with a negotiated deal or not? If Parliament votes against a deal, what happens next? In the case of no deal, would the Government expect to leave the European Union without a vote of the UK Parliament, or would the Prime Minister seek further negotiating time? Is the vote meaningful if there is nothing that it can change? Has he taken into account the fact that, next year, the European Parliament will dissolve for elections? If we are delayed beyond October, will our deal not be left in limbo?

Mr Davis: I am afraid that I have lost count of the questions. As the hon. Lady is challenging the status of statements from this Dispatch Box, I will repeat this to

her. The choice will be meaningful: whether to accept that deal or to move ahead without a deal. Full stop. That was the promise that was made.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I listened to the Chair of the Select Committee, and I want the House to know that he was expressing his view, and not the view of everyone on the Committee.

Hilary Benn: Of course it was my view.

Mr Bone: Well, in the past, Sir, Select Committee Chairmen have come to this House to represent the Committee, not their own personal views. *[Interruption.]* I am diverging and wasting the House's time. *[Interruption.]* Sorry, let me get to the point. I would like the Secretary of State to agree with Labour Members that, if we do not have agreement by October 2018, it will be impossible to do a deal. Will he go back to Brussels and say, "If we do not have a deal by 26 October 2018, there will not be a deal and we will be coming out without one"?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is trying to tempt me. No, it is my job to get the best deal possible, and if that means keeping going until November, then so be it; that is what we will do.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. There was a little hubbub a moment ago following the observations of the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone). Just to put the matter to rest, let me say this: conventionally, if the Chair of a Select Committee comes to the House under our procedures to make a statement—a relatively recent innovation in our procedures—they are doing so on behalf of the Committee. However, it is perfectly commonplace for Select Committee Chairs to come to the Chamber to ask questions, and it is understood that they are doing so on their own account and taking responsibility for their own words, a proposition to which—to name but two at random—the hon. Members for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) and for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) can readily and with enthusiasm sign up.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary went around this country in a big red bus, saying that £350 million extra per week would go to the NHS if we voted to leave. That will not happen. The Environment Secretary said that the 3 million EU citizens in this country would be automatically granted the right to remain. That has not happened. This Secretary of State said that this House would get a vote on our withdrawal arrangements before we leave, and that does not look like it is guaranteed to happen either. Why should we believe anything that is said at this Dispatch Box? Clearly, we have to take what they say with a lorry load of salt.

Mr Davis: As I understand it, the hon. Gentleman's first two comments referred to the leave campaign. Those remarks were not made at this Dispatch Box or by Government Ministers in this context, so I am afraid that he is not correct. The undertaking that I gave will stand and does stand.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): No deal would be a very bad deal indeed for this country. What if the House votes on the final deal and rejects it? Is the Secretary of State implying that those who voted against it would be saying that they would like to leave with no deal at all?

Mr Davis: All I was doing was repeating exactly the statement that was made at this Dispatch Box by the Minister during the debate on the relevant Bill.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Sorry, but the answer is not good enough. This is a critical question. The Secretary of State says that if the House votes against the deal, which could be a bad one, the Government will move ahead without a deal. Does that mean that the only choice is to crash out on to World Trade Organisation terms, which would be an absolute disaster for our country, or does it leave open the option of the Government continuing to negotiate, seeking more time or even staying in on current terms?

Mr Davis: What I was saying was exactly in answer to the question; it was what was given as an undertaking by the Minister in the article 50 debate.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that it remains his intention and that of the Prime Minister to make regular reports to this House on the progress of the negotiations with the European Union? Does he agree that it is always open to this House to subject those negotiations to the minutest possible scrutiny, as this urgent question amply demonstrates?

Mr Davis: My right hon. Friend is, of course, right. He knows this subject rather better than most, given that I have been quoting him throughout my contributions today. During the course of the article 50 Bill, I made the point a number of times to the House that there will be many votes on many aspects of the deal—on the Bills before the House now such as the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill and the Nuclear Safeguards Bill, and on a number of other pieces of primary legislation. In addition, the undertakings to this Chamber were given over and above the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010. I remind the House that that means that any treaty—there may well be a number, as the Chair of the Select Committee said—is subject to being denied ratification by a vote of this House. That point should not be forgotten.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the Secretary of State accept that a meaningful vote will be a vote that allows Parliament to send the Government back to the negotiating table, rather than the false choice between a deal and no deal? If Parliament is offered a meaningful vote, the public should also be offered one—a vote on the facts.

Mr Davis: The right hon. Gentleman's party's policy is for a second referendum, and I do not think that any other party in the House believes in that.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): There was a meaningful vote. It was in June 2016. On a 78% turnout, 61% of voters in Kettering voted to leave. People in

Kettering are honest, straightforward and plain-speaking. Will the Secretary of State reassure them that we are leaving the European Union in March 2019?

Mr Davis: Yes. My task is to respect that vote because, as my hon. Friend said, it is the biggest mandate given to a modern Government. It is also my task to deliver the best deal possible—which means a deal, not no deal—respecting that vote.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The wording of amendment 7 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill is clear. It would require

“the prior enactment of a statute by Parliament approving the final terms of withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union.”

Surely that should be of concern to us all across the House, whatever form of Brexit we want and whatever size of divorce bill we think is acceptable. It is a simple matter about Parliament having the right to have its say, and guaranteeing that on the face of the Bill. Will the Secretary of State agree to accept amendment 7 or table a very similar Government amendment—yes or no?

Mr Davis: I am not here to preview the Committee stage of the Bill, but let me say this to the hon. Gentleman. I take very seriously the views of the House in this matter, and I expect that there will be any number of votes—I have just referred to the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act as one element of that, but it will not be the only one—which will give the House very strong influence on the outcome of this negotiation.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): In his answer to the shadow Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend said that there would be a vote at the right time. Will he confirm that the right time is prior to a deal being signed and before we leave the European Union in March 2019?

Mr Davis: The right time has to be, first, when we have a draft treaty in front of us—not an actual treaty, because it will be prior to ratification by the European ratification process, starting with the European Parliament, and we have made that undertaking. It has to be after that is done, in order for the House to be informed. Otherwise, it will be as soon as possible, and as I have said, our intent and our expectation is that it will be before the European Parliament has its opportunity and, therefore, before the process goes ahead.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Surely the point is that a *fait accompli* is not a British concept in law. What the Government are trying to do, effectively, is present this House, Parliament and the country with a *fait accompli*—take it or leave it. If the Secretary of State were not a Government Minister now, I am sure he would be signing the amendment of the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve). Just in case the Secretary of State loses his job between now and Committee stage, would it not be a good idea for him to declare now that he is going to sign up to that amendment?

Mr Davis: Will I be signing somebody else's amendment? I am not sure—I think not. The processes we are going through are designed to give the House a great deal of

[Mr David Davis]

input into this process. That includes, as was said earlier, the sequences of statements, appearances before Select Committees, urgent questions and the like. In addition to that, as I said—it was ignored, of course—the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 gives the House the outright ability to reject out of hand, if it chooses.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The truth is that we run a £70 billion trade deficit with the European Union. Does my right hon. Friend believe that that will help to focus minds and keep these discussions and deliberations on timetable?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is right, in that it drives the views of the member states in terms of what they want out of this negotiation. One of the things that is happening between now and December is that the Council will lay down its guidelines for this process, and particularly about future trade arrangement. In those guidelines, it may well be that the Council actually says something about the timetable, which will relate to the issues in front of the House.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Yesterday, the Secretary of State told the Exiting the EU Committee that he is seeking meetings with the leaders of various European Union regional Parliaments. Of course, he knows that they will have a vote on the final deal if, as he envisages, it is a mixed agreement. He said he particularly wanted to discuss trade issues with them. Will he confirm that he will involve the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the Northern Irish Assembly in relation to trade matters? Will he confirm that the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the Northern Irish Assembly will get a vote on the final deal, just as other regional and national EU Parliaments will?

Mr Davis: What I think I told the hon. and learned Lady yesterday was that, at the last Joint Ministerial Committee on European Negotiations—JMCEN—I talked about the economic impacts within each of the devolved Administrations, and I talked about information exchanges to influence the process.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the 18 Labour MEPs who recently voted to hold up these key EU negotiations, showing, frankly, a distinct lack of ambition about moving forward on the key issue—our trading agreements. We should be pulling together in the national interest to secure the best possible deal and outcome. That is what all our constituents want.

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is right: this House should be pulling together in the national interest, but let me say this. I have never, ever accused my opposite number of being anything other than interested in the national interest—of course, he has a political interest. While I am at it, by the way, I should also say to the Chairman of the Exiting the European Union Committee that I took his views as his views, not those of the Select Committee as well. It is very important in this exercise that we keep things on a proper, stable, rational and patriotic level, and I think everybody does.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State ignore the voices of manic optimism that seem to be compulsory among Conservative Members and agree that the choice that will be made on the final deal will be very, very different from the choice made on 23 June 2016? Does he not believe that well-informed second thoughts are always superior to ill-informed first thoughts?

Mr Davis: Unlike the hon. Gentleman, I respect the views of 17.5 million people, and I intend to uphold them.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that since the Florence speech there has been a change of tone in EU capitals, and that Mr Barnier is far from alone in wanting to see progress towards a good deal as soon as possible?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is exactly right. The Florence speech had a massive impact, frankly, on the attitudes in the capitals of the European Union and, indeed, within the Commission. Certainly, Mr Barnier, Mr Juncker and Mr Tusk have all said as much.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The Secretary of State can hardly be surprised that many people in this House think that the promises—the undertakings—he is giving on a meaningful vote are merely empty words, given the debacle of yesterday. May I therefore encourage him to put his money where his mouth is and put this into the Bill, so that we can move on to other issues? Can he give the House and the country one good reason why he would not put it into the Bill?

Mr Davis: They are not empty words; they are the exact words that were said to the House when the undertaking was given. That is what is important in this. The undertaking was given in those terms.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for the tremendous amount of work that he and his team are doing to achieve the best possible outcome for the United Kingdom. I know that he, as a true parliamentarian, would expect us to vote on this matter before we leave the EU and not after. As the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) said, there are three issues: withdrawal; the transition, or implementation; and the final agreement. It should be quite possible to achieve the first two by sometime in the middle of next year, or hopefully earlier. On the third, a heads of agreement could perhaps be agreed on the European system of qualified majority voting so that it can come to this House and we know exactly what we are talking about even if all the details are not sorted out.

Mr Davis: As the Chairman of the Select Committee said, there are three components to this, but they are not unrelated, with article 50 itself taking into account the framework of the future relationship. We intend that they are broadly agreed at the same time and that they are conditional upon one another. That is because it would have a material impact on the negotiation to separate them completely. That is why we will bring the whole thing to the House. That was the undertaking given. Indeed, that was what was asked for during the

passage of the article 50 Bill. With regard to the future relationship, of course, as the Prime Minister said in Florence, article 218 says that that agreement cannot be signed until we are a third country, in effect. It is also the case that there could well be more than one treaty, for reasons of interest and benefit to ourselves. The House will therefore have multiple occasions to look at that separately from the overall decision. That, I think, is in the interests of democracy.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The issue that we are debating today goes to the heart of the trust and confidence that the British people should have in our parliamentary democracy. The sad reality is that ministerial assurances are no longer good enough. The Secretary of State has said that he will not sign somebody else's amendment, so why does he not table his own amendment to the withdrawal Bill to give this House and the British people the clarity and coherence that is so desperately needed?

Mr Davis: I say two things to the hon. Gentleman. He was in the Committee yesterday and he saw that I was answering questions as straightforwardly and factually as is possible. What I was describing were items of fact, not promises. His own Front-Bench colleague, my opposite number, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), said yesterday: "I don't doubt assurances which are given at the Dispatch Box." I think that is the proper approach to this.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): I wish the Secretary of State well in his negotiations with Mr Barnier, and I pledge that I will do nothing that could ever be interpreted as trying to undermine those negotiations. We have had 11 referendums in this country since 1975. Can my right hon. Friend think of one in which we have gone against the wishes of the British people? Will he accept that, as a democrat, I am deadly serious that, at the end of this process, we will be leaving the European Union?

Mr Davis: There have been a few references by Opposition Members to my commitment to Parliament, but my commitment to Parliament is an indirect commitment to the democracy of the British people, and that is what matters here. Seventeen and a half million of them voted for this—a majority of more than 1 million. We have to take it seriously; we have to deliver the best outcome on that decision.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. May I gently say to the House that we must not, either calculatedly or inadvertently, allow this exchange to elide into a general discussion of the merits of EU membership or withdrawal? That is not the subject matter. The subject matter, as I have just been helpfully reminded by our procedural king, is the question whether there is a meaningful vote on a deal. That is the narrow question, and questions should focus on that matter.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): In the Bill, the Secretary of State is taking the power to set the exit date. Will he now acknowledge that he can allow Parliament as much time as it needs to take the primary legislation to approve the new arrangements?

Mr Davis: What we are doing is taking that power, but the power does not give us the right to overrule article 50, which takes us out of the European Union in March 2019.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Under the terms of withdrawal from the European Union, the Government have announced a series of measures—a series of eight Bills that will be brought before Parliament and go through the parliamentary procedures. One of those Bills, dealing with an important aspect, is the immigration Bill. Do the Government intend to take that Bill through its parliamentary stages before we vote on the final deal, or will that Bill be brought before Parliament after we have agreed a deal? That could affect our negotiation strategy.

Mr Davis: It will be before the deal—that is what I would expect anyway, unless it goes much faster than I expect. That is true not just of that Bill but of most of the other Bills my hon. Friend refers to.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I think the general public will be bemused at the contrived controversy that has developed here today, because even the most uninformed observer will know we cannot have a vote on an agreement until an agreement has been reached. Does the Secretary of State share my concern that a stand-alone unspecified transitional arrangement, plus the mixed message coming from this House on its willingness to respect the wishes of the people of the United Kingdom, are likely to encourage EU negotiators to delay any agreement, with the consequence that we continue paying money into the EU when we do not need to?

Mr Davis: I agree that there is a degree of contrivance in the fuss and noise coming from the Opposition—there is no doubt about that, but that is not new, I guess. As for the ongoing transition or implementation period, the hon. Gentleman is right. That is why I said that if we let the negotiation go into that period, we will be at a disadvantage, because the EU will presumably be receiving money, if that is the arrangement, and will want to spin out the time it does so as much as possible. We have to be practical and sensible if we intend to respect the will of the British people and deliver the best outcome for them.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): The Secretary of State will know that proportionately more people in my constituency than in any other in the country voted to get us out of the European Union. Does he agree that far more damaging than not having a meaningful vote in this House is the idea that we should have a second referendum, or indeed that we should talking about not leaving at all?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is right. I think he has taken a moral and outstanding stance, given his views and those of his constituents. He is exactly right: we have to respect that vote and not undermine it by other contrivances.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is not just Members of this House who want to be absolutely assured that parliamentarians will have a meaningful

[Kate Green]

vote. My constituents have understood all along that I would come here to vote to represent their best interests, and that that would make a difference. Although I am sure that the Secretary of State means what he is saying to this House today, any assurance for the future is meaningful only if it is on the face of the Bill, so I ask him either to accept amendment 7 or to table his own amendment to achieve the same outcome.

Mr Davis: I hear what the hon. Lady says and take it as it is meant. The Government's intention is to create circumstances whereby this House has appropriate influence without undermining the negotiation. That is what we will try to do.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am sure that the Secretary of State will have reflected on the fact that, unlike in many other trade negotiations, our starting point is that our regulatory position and much of our law are the same as those of the EU. Does he therefore agree that there is plenty of time not only for a full and frank negotiation resulting in a good and deep deal, but for a vote on it in this Parliament?

Mr Davis: Yes, my hon. Friend is exactly right: this is a unique trade negotiation, about which I will say two things. First, we already have open trade and, secondly, a vast amount of trade is already going on—it is worth something like €600 billion—so there is a strong vested interest in protecting that.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I say to the Secretary of State, in the friendliest of terms, that he should stop fudging? This vote is a complex matter and our constituents and the people of this country deserve clarity. We understand and sympathise with why he fudged yesterday, and that is why he is here today—because the nest of vipers behind him and in the Cabinet make him a fudger. Stop fudging and be honest with the British people! [Interruption.]

Mr Davis: I have known the hon. Gentleman a very long time and I always get nervous when he starts a question with, “May I say in the friendliest of terms?” We are having this discussion today precisely because I did not fudge yesterday. I told the Committee what I saw that the facts were, and that in no way changed our intent or, indeed, our commitment to the House.

Mr Speaker: There was a certain amount of harrumphing from a sedentary position from the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), in response to which I simply observe, without fear of contradiction, that none of my parliamentary colleagues is a viper. However, I think it would be fair to say that that is a matter of taste rather than of order.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that if we are to have a meaningful vote on the final deal, it will be better if all Members engage constructively with the proceedings rather than seek to frustrate the will of the British people?

Mr Davis: I could not have put it better myself.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Given the confusion yesterday, will the Secretary of State publish a written timetable of what he expects the sequence of decision making will be, both here in the UK and in the European Parliament? And just in case he is inclined to say no, why not?

Mr Davis: If I controlled the timetable, I would happily do so; but it is a negotiation, so I do not.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): There is a dangerous and sinister anti-intellectualism running through the Brexit ranks—we have seen more evidence of that this week. There is no substitute for facts, so if we are to have a meaningful vote, will the Secretary of State undertake to publish, before that vote takes place, his own Government's impact assessments on the effect of Brexit?

Mr Davis: I do not think it is anti-intellectual at all. I will abide by the instruction of this House, which it passed by a very large majority in December last year, to provide as much information as possible without undermining the interests of the country.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The UK Government have got themselves into an unnecessary muddle. As has been said, if there is a final deal, it will have to be ratified by the EU27, including national and regional Parliaments within EU states, and six months has been allocated to that process. In order to ensure that the future relationship works for every part of the British state, does the Secretary of State agree that the formal endorsement of the National Assembly for Wales, the Scottish Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly should be sought before any final deal is reached—or is it going to be a case of “Westminster knows best”?

Mr Davis: To answer the first half of the hon. Gentleman's question, one of the reasons we said that we would put a draft deal to the House is that we wanted to give the House the first say, before the European Parliament and other European institutions came to it. This is a treaty for the United Kingdom.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): In the Secretary of State's discussions with Michel Barnier, what is the last date that this Parliament can have a meaningful vote before the European Parliament has its ratification vote?

Mr Davis: As I said earlier, what Mr Barnier is aiming for is October next year as the outcome for the draft agreement. If we hit that, the likely timetable, as I think I said to the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), would be for the European Parliament to address that in December, January or even later, and the undertaking I gave was that we will come to this House before then.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Secretary of State's pledge is that a meaningful vote will be taken and that we will have full knowledge of all the facts. When will he issue the UK Government's impact analysis showing the possible detriment to Scotland, so that I can explain to my constituents the reasons for casting the vote that I am going to cast?

Mr Davis: As I said in the Committee yesterday, at the last Joint Ministerial Committee we did actually discuss some of these matters with the devolved Administrations—at an official level—before we go into the negotiation, so that they can influence the negotiation, taking into account the impact by sector, by country.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I think we have learned that the Government will not accept amendment 7, in the name of the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), and that they will not table their own amendment, but can the Secretary of State at least guarantee that we will have a vote on a no deal strategy?

Mr Davis: The hon. Lady starts by attributing to me a lot of things I have not said. I have quite deliberately not got into the questions of what will be before the House in Committee; it will be appropriate at that point for the Minister dealing with it to respond at that stage. The meaningful vote will be as laid out in the undertaking to this House by my right hon. Friend the Minister of State at the time.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): The Secretary of State can keep parroting the words “the undertaking given to this House”, but that is meaningless unless we know what happens after a supposedly meaningful vote. When will he explain to us what he means by, “We move ahead without a deal”?

Mr Davis: I would have thought that would have been self-evident. What we intend, however, is that the House will have put to it by the Government the deal that we negotiate, which will be the best deal we can obtain for this country, respecting the decision of 17.5 million people. In other words, it will bring back control to this House; it will bring back control to this country; it will deal with the borders issue; it will deal with money; it will deal with the future relationship. All that will be put to the House and the House will decide whether it approves of that or not.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): On a very germane point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Ah! A new criterion in the mind of the right hon. Gentleman: that a point of order should be selected earlier than it otherwise would be, on account of the self-description “germane”. Because I am in an indulgent mood, I will give him the benefit of the doubt. Let us hear the point of order. I am in a state of eager anticipation, with bated breath and beads of sweat on my brow, to hear what the right hon. Gentleman has got to say.

Sir Desmond Swayne: How can I get it on to the record that I am in fact the parliamentary species champion for the smooth snake and not the viper?

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman has achieved the early gratification that he sought, and I am sure that his observations will be of consuming interest, not least to scribblers.

Business of the House

11.28 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for the week commencing 30 October will be as follows:

MONDAY 30 OCTOBER—Second Reading of the Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Bill [*Lords*].

TUESDAY 31 OCTOBER—Remaining stages of the Finance Bill.

WEDNESDAY 1 NOVEMBER—Opposition day (4th allotted day). There will be a debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 2 NOVEMBER—Debate on a motion on Calais and unaccompanied child refugees in Europe, followed by debate on a motion on sexual harassment and violence in schools. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 3 NOVEMBER—Private Members’ Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 6 November will include:

MONDAY 6 NOVEMBER—Business to be nominated by the Backbench Business Committee.

TUESDAY 7 NOVEMBER—Business to be nominated by the Backbench Business Committee.

The provisional business for the week commencing 13 November will include:

MONDAY 13 NOVEMBER—Second Reading of a Bill.

TUESDAY 14 NOVEMBER—Committee of the whole House on the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill (day 1).

WEDNESDAY 15 NOVEMBER—Committee of the whole House on the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill (day 2).

THURSDAY 16 NOVEMBER—Business to be nominated by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 17 NOVEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for 2 and 6 November will be:

THURSDAY 2 NOVEMBER—General debate on HMRC closures.

MONDAY 6 NOVEMBER—Debate on an e-petition relating to mental health education in schools.

I am pleased to inform the House that there are motions on the Order Paper to establish, either today or on Monday, a further eight Committees, including the Committees on Standards and on Privileges, and the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments. All remaining Committees will be set up as soon as possible.

I would also like to direct the attention of Members to the written ministerial statement that I have laid this morning on Opposition day debates. Following the suggestions of many Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), when an Opposition day motion is passed by this House, the relevant Minister will respond to the vote by making a statement to the House. This will be within a maximum time period of 12 weeks.

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

Finally, this week I have updated Members of both Houses on the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster. This is an urgent matter for Parliament, so the Government are facilitating a debate in both Houses to ensure that swift progress can be made. It is key that the work to repair the Palace offers the best value for taxpayers' money, as well as ensuring the safety of the many visitors and staff who work in and visit the Palace every year.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the business. I am delighted that she has given us the business up until 17 November—even though one week is comprised of two days of Back-Bench business, with the other days in recess—and that we have two days of debate on the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill on 14 and 15 November. Will she confirm that we will have all eight days of the Committee of the whole House before the Christmas recess?

I am pleased that the Leader of the House raised Opposition day debates, but sadly I received her note only this morning. I think it was embargoed until 10.30 am. I checked with the Library just before coming into the Chamber. It does not appear to have a copy, so I am not sure that the statement has actually been published, and I am not even sure that you have seen a copy, Mr Speaker. I have concerns about this. As the Leader of the House said, Ministers will make a statement no more than 12 weeks after the passing of an Opposition day resolution. Will she please say whether Ministers will actually be attending in the Chamber? I had understood that that was the purpose of wind-ups.

The Leader of the House seems to have two tiers of resolutions of the House. There is one tier for resolutions of the House on Opposition days and another for all the other resolutions of the House. Will she say what discussions she has had with the Clerks and even Mr Speaker about these two tiers of resolutions, and do the Standing Orders need to be amended?

The last paragraph of the Leader of the House's statement says:

"This is in line with suggestions made by Members across the House".

There has been absolutely no discussion with business managers on our side and I do not think that that is acceptable. This is no way to treat the House. This is rapidly becoming like "House of Games"—a combination of "House of Cards" and "Game of Thrones". The Government should get their house in order and deal with the democracy of why we are here. We are elected as representatives to speak on behalf of our constituents.

The Leader of the House might want to correct what she said to the House last week. She said that discussions about the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill were starting in the other place, but discussions there were none. My friends in the other place have said that they were simply told that the Bill would start in that House. There was a First Reading and then the Bill was published. That cannot possibly be right. It must be profoundly against the democracy of our country for a First Reading to take place and for no one to have sight of the Bill until the next day. Will the Leader of the House confirm that that process will not be used again?

All Members have received a letter about R and R. It is welcome that there will be a debate in December, but this means a delay of 18 months—the report was published in 2016—just to get to a position of a final option. This approach actually takes options away from Members, because it says that when the delivery authority comes back to the House, Members will just be able to vote yes or no. That cannot be acceptable. I see no reason why the three options cannot be placed before the House alongside setting up the delivery authority.

Will the Leader of the House write to me to let me know how many consultants there have been? What are the costs of the people who have been employed while the Government have delayed making a decision? If we follow one of the options set out in her letter with regard to State Opening, will she really be asking our Gracious Sovereign to attend a building site? Will hard hats be available for all of us?

In a week when a Government Whip has raised the spectre of Lenin and McCarthy stalking our fiercely independent world-class universities, we have now been told that his real inspiration was Lennon and McCartney, because he wants to be a "Paperback Writer"—he is writing a book. If he is writing a book, should he be writing on Whips' headed paper? He should have been clear about the information that he wanted, and he could have found all of it out for himself if he had just looked on the universities' websites.

Four years ago, students—the sort of students who are apparently being brainwashed by their universities—who were economics undergraduates at the University of Manchester and others around the world formed the Post-Crash Economics Society. They criticised university courses for doing little to explain why economists had failed to warn people about the global financial crisis, for focusing too heavily on training students for City jobs, and for not teaching alternative economic theories such as those of Keynes and, yes, even Marx. I am afraid that the Leader of the House is on her own. This was not a nice letter, because all those who received it found it menacing and threatening—[*Interruption.*] That is including the Prime Minister, as she too has distanced herself. We seem to be seeing a return of the nasty party.

Continuing that theme, let me add that nearly three months after the employment tribunal fees policy was struck down by the Supreme Court, the Government have only now revealed plans for refunds, the first phase of which will take place when officials start to write to 1,000 people. That was also hidden in a written statement. Will the Leader of the House tell us when the former Justice Secretary will apologise for acting unlawfully, and when all claimants will receive their refunds, including interest? Will she also explain why the Government are to press ahead with the reform of legal aid fees that are paid in criminal cases, despite the fact that 97% of the submissions to a consultation opposed the plan? People have said that the decision is reckless and could place justice in jeopardy. It might well be open to challenge if it is made against the evidence and no valid reasons are given.

And so to Brexit. The National Farmers Union says that no deal would have severe effects for UK farmers and growers, 71.4% of whose exports go to the EU. This week, UK business leaders wrote to the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union asking him to establish, quickly, a Brexit transition deal that—in their

words—mirrors existing arrangements, because otherwise we are at risk of losing jobs and investment. In her Florence speech, the Prime Minister referred to an implementation period, but if in March 2019 there is no deal, what will the Government be implementing? Yesterday, before 12 pm, the Secretary of State told a Select Committee that there would be a vote on a deal after March 2019. After 12 pm, he said that he expected and intended that there would be a vote before March 2019. If that is the way in which the Government are negotiating, no wonder we are stuck. They must remember that they are negotiating with friends, not enemies. We worked with these people on the common causes of growth strategies, climate change, tax avoidance, and the health and wellbeing and peace and security of our nations.

Finally, we say goodbye to Fats Domino and thank him, wherever he is, for all those wonderful songs. We send congratulations to the new Labour Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern. The Leader of the Opposition said at the time of the election, “Do it for us,” and she did.

Andrea Leadsom: First, I join the hon. Lady in wishing New Zealand well with a new female leader. In this Chamber, of course, we have had two now—aren’t we doing well—but I am not sure that the Opposition have ever welcomed the achievements of women on my side of the House. Nevertheless, I am very happy to welcome the achievement of the people of New Zealand.

Turning to the hon. Lady’s specific questions, she will be aware, I hope, that my office rang hers earlier this morning to give her advance notice of the laying of the WMS, which was in fact published at 10.30, as is appropriate. It has, indeed, been published; that is confirmed—it is online. I am sure that she is simply incorrect to suggest that it was not published.

The hon. Lady asks whether a Minister will attend the House. It is intended that Ministers will attend in person wherever possible, but it is possible that a written ministerial statement will be provided from time to time. It is also intended that 12 weeks is the maximum time before a ministerial response is provided.

The hon. Lady asks if Standing Orders need to be amended—they do not. She says there was no discussion of this with business managers. As the Government’s representative in Parliament and Parliament’s representative in government, it is for the Leader of the House to listen to all Members. It is Members across the House who have been urging a response from the Government, and that is what are responding to in my statement today.

The hon. Lady talks about the R and R options that have been put before the House. It is absolutely right that we do the work to ensure the best value for taxpayers’ money. It has been clear for a long time that the Labour party does not care about taxpayers’ money. Opposition Members constantly talk about just going with three options in front of this House, but the reality is that the full costs of each option have not yet been bottomed out. That is why it is important that we set up an independent delivery authority that can assess the costs in a short space of time—

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Eighteen months.

Andrea Leadsom: No, 12 to 18 months. The authority can assess the costs in a short space of time to properly bottom out the costs.

This is not a blank cheque. We must get the best possible value for taxpayers’ money in restoring this Parliament for future generations, and Members right across this House should support that. It is right that both Houses take a decision on whether to establish this independent authority that will look at the full costs and then make a recommendation for a further vote by both Houses. It is also right that the sponsor board that oversees the work of that delivery authority has strong parliamentary representation.

The hon. Lady asked what the universities’ response should be to a question about their courses. Right across this House we support free speech. Our universities are total bastions of free speech, too, and they should welcome exploration of all sides of an argument. I will leave that point there.

The hon. Lady asks about refunds to claimants following the judicial review. I understand that that was fully discussed at the Justice Committee earlier this week, so I urge her to look at the record. I can write to her separately with information about that discussion.

The hon. Lady then asked about Brexit. I say again that the Prime Minister set out in her Florence speech a very generous and collegiate offer to the European Union. I am delighted that, following the European Council, there has been a warm and improving tone from European leaders about the prospects of moving on to discuss trade and co-operation across all areas. The Government remain committed to getting an excellent deal for the United Kingdom and for our EU friends and neighbours, and we believe that that will perfectly possible to achieve before March 2019.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): May we have a debate on making better use of natural resources? Is the Leader of the House aware that in a few days’ time we are going to go through the ridiculous ritual of putting our clocks back an hour, thereby plunging the nation into darkness and misery by mid-afternoon? Can we look again at the possibility of moving our clocks forward an hour? That would boost tourism and could reduce the number of road accidents.

Andrea Leadsom: I am aware that this is a long-standing issue and that there are strong views on both sides of the argument. At this time of year, perhaps my right hon. Friend might want to raise the matter in an Adjournment debate. There are views on traffic accidents versus views on agriculture, and it is important that all those views are taken into account when making a balanced decision on this issue.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. So, another week, another no play in Opposition day debates. This Government could not even organise a vote in a Parliament! And now we have this woeful ministerial statement on Opposition days which says that a Minister will urgently respond within 12 weeks when the House has approved a motion. Instead of issuing a statement months later, why cannot the Government just agree to what the House has democratically agreed in these votes?

Scotland is to be the hardest impacted part of the UK with this Tory hard Brexit. We did not vote for it, we wanted nothing to do with it and we are being taken

[Pete Wishart]

out against our collective national will. Now the Government say that they will not even let the Scottish people see the cost of this disaster. Surely the Scottish people have every right and entitlement to see what the cost of this disastrous Brexit will be, and surely they should then have the opportunity to assess all the options that will be available to them.

Finally, I wonder whether the Leader of the House and I could get together with your office, Mr Speaker, to assist our new Conservative colleagues from Scotland. They seem to have great difficulty in distinguishing between reserved responsibilities and devolved responsibilities, and I think the occupants of your Chair are getting a bit tired of constantly having to correct them on that. Perhaps we could give them the kind of lesson that Father Ted gave to Father Dougal: “These are the powers for this Parliament. Those are the powers for a Parliament far away.” However, it might not be such good news for them if we did that, because they would then have absolutely nothing else to talk about in this House.

Andrea Leadsom: I am concerned that the hon. Gentleman is showing an inability to understand how Parliament works. As you have said, Mr Speaker, it is not for Parliament to tell individual Members that they have to vote, or indeed how they should vote. That is a matter for the parties and for Members of Parliament. I am sure the hon. Gentleman can recall days when his Scottish nationalists have abstained on votes, and it is a matter for them to decide whether to do that. Likewise, it is a matter for Members on both sides to decide whether or not they wish to vote. Mr Speaker, you have also made it clear that when the House does express an opinion and a motion is passed, it is a motion of this House. I have set out today how the Government intend to respond to an Opposition day motion that is passed by this House. This is genuinely an effort on the part of the Government to listen to Members across the House, to respond to the concerns that they have raised and to come back to this Chamber to ensure that the Government’s response is seen and understood by all Members. I think that the hon. Gentleman should welcome that, rather than displaying his distinct lack of understanding of parliamentary process. He also insists on having plans for the costs of Brexit. Again, he does not really understand how this works. A negotiation is going on at present, and once that has happened, we will be able to assess precisely what the implementation arrangements will be and therefore what the costs will be. That is the way round in which it works. The negotiation happens first.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman seemed to suggest that the excellent Scottish Conservative MPs are somehow representing their constituents in a way that he does not like. I absolutely encourage my hon. Friends to carry on with their excellent work to hold the Scottish Government to account and to make clear the areas in England where people are being better looked after than people in Scotland. It is absolutely right that they should be doing that, and I encourage them to continue.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the provision of support in our schools for children who suffer from

diabetes? Diabetes UK fully understands the challenges that our schools face, but it thinks that further training should be given to the staff who are charged with giving that support.

Andrea Leadsom: I am sympathetic towards my hon. Friend’s point. In fact, I have a brother-in-law who was a child diabetic some years ago, so I am aware that things have improved dramatically in schools. In 2014, the Government introduced a new duty on school governing bodies to arrange support for pupils with medical conditions such as diabetes. As a constituency MP, I am also aware of challenges when parents have found that schools have struggled to provide that support, so I encourage my hon. Friend to continue to take up this issue, perhaps through an Adjournment debate, because it is important that we solve it.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement and for advance notice of the allocations of time on 6 November, 7 November and, provisionally, 16 November. That is very useful indeed. We have received 21 applications over the past three weeks, and a number of debates have not yet been allocated time. Would what she said about Opposition days and the 12-week response time also apply to Backbench Business debates if the House divided on a Backbench motion, and would the response come within 12 sitting weeks or 12 calendar weeks?

Additionally, the House may remember that I ventured a crackpot theory last week that the House was suffering from a Faraday cage effect due to the scaffolding. I had a telephone call from technical services yesterday to confirm that my crackpot theory was in fact correct and that telephone signal is suffering because of that Faraday cage effect.

Mr Speaker: Well, not only is the hon. Gentleman an illustrious Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, but he has other qualities to boot, including a degree of technological or scientific or even physicist-orientated knowledge.

Ian Mearns: O-level: failed.

Mr Speaker: Ah, but the hon. Gentleman has recovered since then, and the House rejoices in his distinction.

Andrea Leadsom: I continue to look into the issue, and I am glad that the hon. Gentleman is ahead of me on that one. He will be aware that there are significant differences between Opposition and Backbench Business days. Backbench Business debate motions are selected by a cross-party Committee with cross-party support and, the vast majority of the time, they are non-partisan and designed to facilitate cross-party debate, which they do extremely effectively. My proposal for statements relates specifically to Opposition day motions, but I will take his point on board. Wherever possible, Ministers do come back to respond during debates on matters that they can take forward following those cross-party discussions.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): We in this Chamber—especially you, Mr Speaker—know the power of language, and we also have a duty to respect that power outside of the Chamber. Can we have a debate on the use of misogynistic, anti-Semitic and homophobic language and its negative impact on political discourse?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that point. We have all been disgusted by some of the recent reports of the use of some appalling language, and it is right that we should have a debate on that subject. We have already had a debate in Government time on abuse and intimidation during the general election, but it is right that all Members, as the Prime Minister said, are careful and considered in how they refer to other people. Things go much broader than that, however, and we have seen an enormous amount of abuse against people in public life. We want to encourage people to feel that they can come into public life and not receive that torrent of abuse, so I would be happy to provide any support that my hon. Friend needs to bring forward such a debate.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Can we have an urgent debate, in Government time, on whether Ministers understand the concept of urgency? The Leader of the House said earlier that the state of the Palace of Westminster is an urgent problem, and the Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster, which was chaired by her predecessor but two, the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling)—we are getting through Leaders of the House at quite a pace—agreed that there is an impending crisis in this building.

The Joint Committee's report was published on 8 September 2016, with the guarantee of a vote by Christmas last year. Now the Leader of the House is saying that we will have a debate by the end of this year, but we will not make a decision then—we are going to delay it for another 18 months. Honestly, this is downright irresponsible. Just let the House make a decision, if you understand the concept.

Andrea Leadsom: Mr Speaker, do you understand the concept? Perhaps the hon. Gentleman misspoke.

This is an urgent matter for Parliament to resolve. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that, since I became Leader of the House, the House of Commons Commission, chaired by Mr Speaker, has let some contracts to ensure that urgent repairs to the House are carried out and to ensure that we have a safe space in which to work while the decision is taken. As I have already made clear, we have to ensure value for taxpayers' money. The Joint Committee made a recommendation without being in a position to pin down the entire costs of its proposed option. It is essential that that work is done, and it will be done as quickly as possible.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Can we have a debate on the Puma HC2 helicopter? The aircraft can be deployed on contingency operations quickly and versatilely, and it often provides assistance and badly needed capabilities to those in desperate need.

Andrea Leadsom: RAF Benson, in my hon. Friend's constituency, does a huge amount of work to promote Government priorities, including providing support to those suffering from the hurricanes in recent months. I encourage him to seek a way to have a debate on this important subject.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House draw the Chancellor's attention to Tuesday's Westminster Hall debate, led by my hon. Friend the

Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), on local authority funeral fees? The Leader of the House will be aware of my campaign to establish a children's funeral fund, and she may wish to draw the Chancellor's attention to the growing consensus on both sides of the House. If he were to make provision for such a fund in the upcoming Budget, it would be welcomed not only by colleagues but by the general public.

Andrea Leadsom: I commend the hon. Lady for her long-standing commitment to this issue. I urge her to seek a way to raise it directly with the Chancellor. I am very sympathetic to her concerns.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on health outcomes across the regions and nations of the United Kingdom? The highly critical Audit Scotland report on the state of the NHS in Scotland exposes how badly the Scottish National party has mismanaged the NHS since it came to power more than 10 years ago.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important point on the inequalities across the nations of the United Kingdom in certain areas. *[Interruption.]* SNP Members are shouting and yelling because they do not want a spotlight on their activities in government in Scotland, but Conservative Members will continue to raise those inadequacies and will continue to support their constituents in Scotland.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I wonder whether the Leader of the House can answer a question the Prime Minister failed to answer when I asked her on Monday, or ensure that I get a written answer: have the Government or their agencies received any requests from Robert Mueller, the special counsel, or the congressional investigators in the United States for help or information in connection with their inquiry into Russian subversion of the American presidential election?

Andrea Leadsom: If the right hon. Gentleman wants to write to me on this, I will see whether I can get him an answer.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): My thoughts and prayers are very much with the people of Kenya today as they go to the polls. We wish for a peaceful outcome and dialogue between the Government and the Opposition for the future.

May I ask my right hon. Friend whether we can have a statement on the current situation in the overseas territories in the Caribbean after the terrible effects of Hurricane Irma? It is vital that all possible support is given to these overseas territories, for which we are in some respects responsible. Various definitions of official development assistance from the OECD should not stand in the way of making that assistance available.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important point. He will be aware that every assistance possible has been given to those suffering as a result of those awful hurricanes and continues to be provided. A number of statements have been made in this House, and I

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

suggest that he raise this matter during either Department for International Development or Foreign Office questions at the next opportunity.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): My right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) has again raised a crucial issue. We now have, almost every week, new proof that Russia and foreign billionaires are interfering with elections and referendums in other countries. May we have an urgent debate on the fact that we have no mechanisms to protect the integrity of our electoral system, given the possibility of sudden general elections or a second Brexit vote?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is as concerned as Members from right across the House are about potential interventions in democratic systems. He will be aware that a lot of investigatory work is going on, and he will know very well of appropriate ways to raise this matter through a debate in this House.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): The Government have helpfully published a number of sectoral post-Brexit plans. May I ask the Leader of the House to ask the Department for Exiting the European Union to publish a plan on financial services—our largest export sector and a big tax earner that employs many people in my constituency?

Andrea Leadsom: I share my hon. Friend's enthusiasm for this vital industry for the UK. I am sure he is as delighted as I am to hear that the UK's financial services sector has extended its lead over all other financial services centres around the world; that announcement has been made only in recent months. I will be sure to pass on his request.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I wonder whether the Leader of the House might clarify the position from yesterday's statement on supported housing. Would it be beneficial to have a general debate in Government time on fair rents in the social housing sector? I have been making representations on behalf of constituents who are tenants of the Bernicia Group, where new tenants are being charged lower rents than existing tenants. I have taken this up with Bernicia, but it is refusing to lower the rents for existing tenants, which is taking money away from vulnerable constituents—single parents, families and those struggling to make ends meet. If we could have a debate, it would highlight the need for genuine, accountable social housing, with fair rents, managed by the local authority.

Andrea Leadsom: As ever, I encourage the hon. Gentleman to take up specific cases directly with the Department for Communities and Local Government. It is vital that, as constituency MPs, we all represent people on the individual problems that crop up. He will be aware that we committed £400 million in the last spending review to deliver a further 8,000 supported housing units, and we have made an exemption from the local housing allowance cap. We are working towards a model that is responsive to the needs of this diverse sector and delivers long-term sustainability. We are absolutely on the same side in solving this argument, and he should take up his individual issues.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Last week, the Scottish Government gave themselves a bit pat on the back for being on track with their commitments on access to superfast broadband. However, the reality is that, as of 2016, 17% of premises in Scotland were still without superfast broadband, which compares with a figure of just 11% for the UK as a whole. The UK Government have given the job of delivering broadband in Scotland to the Scottish Government, but they are clearly failing rural areas such as those in my constituency in the Scottish borders. Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on this important issue of improving broadband connections across Scotland and the rest of the UK?

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op) *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Leader of the House.

Andrea Leadsom: Mr Deputy Speaker, it is important not only that we hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) but that I reply to him. He is absolutely right that SNP Members like to take credit for things going well and to blame this Westminster Parliament when things do not go so well. The UK Government have provided £100 million for the phase 1 broadband roll-out in Scotland, and we have committed nearly £21 million for the phase 2 roll-out. Superfast broadband now reaches 91.8% of homes in Scotland, but coverage is at only 78% in the Scottish borders. The Scottish Government plan to deliver full superfast broadband access by 2021, whereas the UK Government plan to achieve 95% coverage in England by 2017.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The UK Government's own deadline for the ratification of the Istanbul convention is 1 November. Will the Leader of the House confirm that the Government will make an oral statement next week on the progress of ratification? Does she agree that sticking to that deadline is an important step to ensure that we end violence against women and girls?

Andrea Leadsom: It is a very important convention and the hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Government are committed to it. I cannot answer his question because he did not give me notice, but if he would like to write to me, I can look into it for him.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Prior to your taking the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker, the Leader of the House announced a new convention for the House, whereby a Minister will respond to Opposition day motions that are passed by the House by making an oral statement within 12 weeks. That "Leadsom convention" is a slight movement back to the House and away from the Executive. May we have a statement next week, perhaps from the Deputy Leader of the House, on that very issue so that we can press the case and have that convention extended to any motion passed by the House, perhaps backed up by a written statement? Perhaps we could also have a progress debate in each Session on how the Government are dealing with the convention.

Andrea Leadsom: I think that I have already given an awful lot, considering that my hon. Friend did not buy me the glass of wine mentioned when he raised this

matter a couple of weeks ago. I am always keen to hear further thoughts and I am open to suggestions from Members from all parties.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It had better be a bottle from now on.

Mr Sheerman: I am sure the Leader of the House knows that I was not trying to jump the queue earlier, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was eager to ask her whether she has read Sir David Attenborough's comments this week about marine pollution and the growing evidence that we are poisoning the world's oceans. May we have an early debate on the issue, followed by a series of debates and statements, because it is too important to leave it to Sir David Attenborough to lead on?

Andrea Leadsom: There is absolutely cross-party consensus that, first, Sir David Attenborough is a national treasure and, secondly, it is vital that we do everything we can to stop and reverse marine pollution. The Government have done an enormous amount to create a blue belt around our overseas territories to ensure the protection of those areas. We are looking into what further action we can take to reduce litter on land, because it often ends up in the seas, and of course we have the ban on micro-plastics, which I was keen to put forward when I was the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. My right hon. Friend the current Secretary of State is fully committed, and I am sure that many more Government initiatives will come forward to try to address this issue.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs this week rightly highlighted the dangerous effects of intensive farming on soil nutrient levels, and the Woodland Trust has highlighted the grave danger to the soil and the special environment in our ancient woodland and pastures. Will the Leader of the House consider scheduling a debate on the important issues affecting ancient and precious sites?

Andrea Leadsom: I think that we all value our ancient woodlands enormously, and if Members have not been to one, I would encourage them to do so. These woodlands, the oldest in the UK, are really quite astonishing and absolutely irreplaceable. My hon. Friend is right to raise the importance of protecting our soils. As Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, I had the great pleasure of attending a conference sponsored by His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales to discuss just this issue and the importance of reducing the intensity of agricultural activity to reduce the damage being done to our soils. This is something that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is determined to promote.

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): May we have a debate and/or a statement on the application of the Prosecution of Offences Act 1985? A prominent animal rights campaigner, John Bryant, has sought to bring a private prosecution under section 9 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 against a racehorse owner who has seen nine of his horses killed over the past 10 years at Cheltenham races. Section 9 obliges owners to protect their animals from injury, but Gloucester magistrates court has repeatedly refused to issue a summons.

Andrea Leadsom rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We cannot interfere with the law. A general answer might be all right, but we cannot go into an individual case. [*Interruption.*] If not, let us move on.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The weekend before last, I attended a brilliantly organised World Squash Day event, organised by my constituent James Roberts, but frustratingly we do not have any squash courts in Corby. May we have a debate to discuss the benefits of squash and the pressing need for squash courts in Corby?

Andrea Leadsom: I invite my hon. Friend's constituents to come and play squash in Brackley, just down the road in my constituency, where we are doing rather well in the leagues. His constituents might like to come and get some training there. But he is exactly right. We want more sport in this country—he is a keen sportsman—and as Members we should promote more of it in our constituencies. I would encourage him to apply for an Adjournment debate to see what more can be done.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): In the light of this week's ruling by the Information Commissioner's Office on unlawful calls made by Blue Telecoms on behalf of the Conservative party during the 2017 general election, will the Leader of the House make time available for a debate about the importance of all political parties fully complying with electoral law?

Andrea Leadsom: All Members agree that all political parties should abide by electoral law. If there are any accusations the hon. Lady wants to make, she can rest assured they will be taken up by the Electoral Commission.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): May we have a debate about the recruitment of doctors to emergency medicine? Cheltenham A&E is hugely valued by me, my family, my constituents and the population of Gloucestershire, but in 2013, before I was elected, it was downgraded. NHS managers at the time used recruitment issues as a pretext. May we have a debate to establish whether this explanation still holds water?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a vital constituency matter and is absolutely right to do so. Decisions by NHS professionals must always be taken in consultation with local people—I have a similar issue of great concern to my constituents right now. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate to hear from a Minister what more he can do to protect his own medical facilities.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I am sure the Leader of the House agrees that our armed services veterans deserve the very best treatment when they are suffering from mental health problems, including post-traumatic stress disorder. My constituent, Colin, has benefited from treatment at Audley Court in Shropshire; but unfortunately, this is now under threat of closure. Given that the Government claim to care so much about parity of esteem for mental health, may we have a wider debate in Government time about facilities for our brave veterans?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise first the importance of looking after our veterans and secondly the clear issue of mental health problems arising from the trauma they often suffer in action. She will be aware that the Ministry of Defence and the Royal Foundation have publicly announced a new partnership to deal with the issues of stigma and the treatment of mental health problems across the defence community, and the Government are determined to do all they can to promote strong mental health. I am sure she can raise her specific point about the prospective closure in her constituency at Defence questions.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Before the election, the Government released an excellent White Paper on the future of housing policy, at the weekend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government suggested that the Government should borrow £50 billion to kick-start the housing policy, and we are told that the Chancellor will make housing a keynote element in his Budget statement. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate in Government time on housing policy so that Members can contribute ideas before my right hon. Friend the Chancellor makes his Budget statement?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is right that sorting out our housing market is not just a priority for the Chancellor but a personal priority for the Prime Minister, who is determined to tackle the ever-increasing challenge facing young people trying to get on to the housing ladder, either by buying or renting. I am sure that my hon. Friend, as always, will find a way to raise this with the Chancellor before the Budget.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Yesterday, I wrote to the CEO of RBS, Ross McEwan, about my call for a judge-led inquiry into the bank's treatment of smaller businesses. His reply was:

"I have no interest in supporting another investigation after four years of review."

Many small business owners will regard Mr McEwan's comment that he has no interest in their plight as dismissive and disrespectful, given the way so many have had their lives torn apart as a result of what the Financial Conduct Authority described as the inappropriate treatment of small and medium-sized enterprises. Will the Leader of the House ask a Minister to respond to my request for a judge-led inquiry and to comment on what Mr McEwan has said?

Andrea Leadsom: I would say that as City Minister I always found Ross McEwan to be incredibly sympathetic to the issues facing small businesses. [*Interruption.*] I just want to give an alternative view on that. The hon. Gentleman is right, however, that there have been some appalling cases of banks failing to support small businesses. The FCA has looked at many specific cases and carried out quite an in-depth review, but if he has further specific cases, he should raise them with either the FCA or the City Minister.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): A constituent attended my surgery last week to inform me that she was repeatedly raped and beaten by her ex-partner and currently has an injunction against his contacting her. Much to her horror, however, her bank has told her that she cannot

remove herself from their joint account without attending with her ex-partner and without his agreement to the change. May we have a debate or statement on how banks treat people who have been abused domestically and amend the necessary regulations to ensure their safety?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an appalling-sounding situation with which I absolutely sympathise. I am sure there must be a way through this. I urge her to raise the matter with Ministers to try to find a way forward for her constituent.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I was delighted to attend the launch of the Scottish poppy appeal yesterday, when it became apparent to me that 2017 and 2018 would see many centenaries, particularly over the role of women in the great war. Will the Government allocate time to ensure we properly commemorate the centenary of these wonderful occasions and give proper notice to the country that we remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice and helped out in the great war?

Andrea Leadsom: I think there is cross-party support on this issue, and I am absolutely certain that the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee would be interested in promoting such a debate in the Chamber. I join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to all those who made the ultimate sacrifice and remind hon. Members that next year we also celebrate the centenary of women's suffrage. The contribution of women over the last 100 years or so is something we can all celebrate.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Government reforms in 2015 led to the unlocking of pension pots for more than 200,000 people, but today's *Financial Times* reports high-pressure sales tactics, scaremongering and mis-selling, so may we have a statement? It looks as if another pensions scandal is brewing.

Andrea Leadsom: I, too, saw today's report and share the hon. Gentleman's concern. It does look alarming, and I am sure that he will find a way to raise it with Ministers.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I am currently pursuing a meeting with a Minister on the case of my constituent, an Iraqi-born Kurd, who was granted British citizenship in 2009. He is currently trying to get his one-year-old daughter out of a war zone around Erbil where she was born during a visit home by my constituent and his wife. The issues he is facing—the problems with paperwork and the impossibility, it seems at times, of moving the case forwards—prompts me to ask whether we can have a debate in this Chamber about how we are helping families who are torn apart by war and who come here for sanctuary but have to leave family members at home. What are we doing and how are we working to reunite them?

Andrea Leadsom: I am incredibly sympathetic to the hon. Lady's point. She is absolutely right to stand up for her constituent. We all, as constituency MPs, have cases where procedures seem to get in the way. I encourage

her to write to me, so that I can take it up with the Home Office, or she can take it up directly with Ministers herself.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Last Sunday, I attended a charity fundraising event in my constituency to help raise money to buy women and girls sanitary products, because they simply cannot afford them. That is a growing issue in schools up and down the UK regardless of which Administration are in control. Can the Leader of the House find Government time for a debate on the impact of Government cuts, particularly those that impact on women and girls?

Andrea Leadsom: This Government have done more for women in the workplace, for women's incomes, for reducing inequality, and for ensuring that more families have the security of a pay packet and a wage to protect themselves and their families than was achieved in 13 years of a Labour Government. The hon. Gentleman makes a very specific point that he may wish to raise in an Adjournment debate, or indeed through oral questions.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): A plumbing firm in my constituency is going to close before Christmas rather than being sold as a going concern because of false debt accrued under the multi-employer pension provisions of the Pensions Act 1995. When will the Leader of the House and this Government make changes to those regulations to stop more firms going to the wall?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point about a business in his constituency. He may well want to look into that further through an Adjournment debate. I urge him to raise the general point about regulations at Treasury questions to see what more can be done.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Given the Government's recent and welcome conversion on the road to Manchester regarding council, social and affordable housing, may I ask for an urgent debate, ahead of the Budget, on what support the Government are providing to ensure that all local authority-owned land, such as that in the ownership of my local Warwick District Council, is used exclusively in its provision as that would be the simplest, cheapest and most significant action in its delivery?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise the importance of ensuring that local authorities do all they can to facilitate new house building. He will be aware that the Government are looking into how we can facilitate exactly that. I encourage him to raise it with Ministers at every opportunity.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I was bitterly disappointed that the Leader of the House did not announce a debate around the NHS. We have heard cries from across the House about the state of the NHS. In York, our health service will run out of money within the month. Can we have an urgent debate, ahead of the Budget, on NHS funding, so that we can ensure that the money goes to the right place? We are having real-term cuts in York.

Andrea Leadsom: As I have said to a number of hon. Members, it is absolutely right that we all focus on the specific health issues in our own constituencies and that, where necessary, we defend them. The hon. Lady will be aware that NHS funding will be more than half a trillion pounds from 2015 to 2020, that the overwhelming majority of patients continue to be seen within four hours, and that the Government are investing more money in doctors, GP surgeries, nursing training and so on. On the specific issues for York, she should certainly seek to raise them in an Adjournment debate.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): The citizens advice bureau in Wrexham is doing an excellent job at the moment, providing advice on universal credit and debt pressures, but, unfortunately, the local authority is proposing to withdraw funding for the CAB in Wrexham at the end of this financial year. Can we have an urgent debate on advice and the importance of funding advice for people who are under financial pressure?

Andrea Leadsom: I take this opportunity to thank citizens advice bureaux for all the excellent work they do in all of our constituencies. The hon. Gentleman raises the important point that they are very often largely volunteer funded—although they do a lot of their own fundraising—and we should all defend the budgets for those citizens advice bureaux as well as the budgets for other advisers who provide a lot of volunteer work to help people to stay out of debt.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It would be reasonable to expect that when right hon. and hon. Members email the Department for Work and Pensions hotline they receive an acknowledgement or a correspondence, details of who is dealing with the case and a rough timescale. Sadly, that is not the case, as it simply acts as a hub for passing on inquiries, and then we are left in the dark having to find out those things. Can we have a statement from Ministers as to how that can be reformed and made fit for purpose?

Andrea Leadsom: There is a very good service on universal credit from the DWP. As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, Ministers are committed to incremental improvements. Every time they hear of some problem, they are determined to resolve it. We have seen in recent weeks that Ministers are responding. The roll-out of universal credit is slow and assured; 8% of benefit recipients are now on universal credit. That is expected to be up to 10% by January when the next pause is due to look at what more needs to be done. The hon. Gentleman has put his concerns on the record, and Ministers will be listening to them.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): Ministers have said recently that the pay cap on public sector workers has now been scrapped, but the reality on the ground is that there will be no more money for the public services that have to find extra pay. Can we have a debate on the flaws at the heart of the Government's pay policy to make sure that we do not see the erosion of our police and our other important public services?

Andrea Leadsom: Our public servants do a fantastic job for which we are all incredibly grateful. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that our economy is still

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struggling to recover from the state in which it was left in 2010. We are still spending far more money than we take in tax revenues every year. We have a choice: we can either tackle it ourselves in this generation or we can leave our children and grandchildren to deal with the problems of this generation, which were left to us by a Labour Government. What is absolutely vital is that we listen carefully and take the advice of the independent pay review bodies, which is what we are doing.

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): Can the Leader of the House find time next week to debate the decision, taken yesterday behind closed doors, of Airedale NHS Foundation Trust, which, as part of a VAT scam, agreed to set up a separate company registered at Companies House to run a large part of its activities, with the power to reduce the terms and conditions of new staff?

Andrea Leadsom: That sounds like a concerning issue. I urge the hon. Gentleman to take it up directly with Ministers in the Department of Health.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Can we have an urgent debate about the very worrying 13% increase in crime and the concerns raised by chief constables and the Office for National Statistics that that represents a genuine increase in crime, not just changes in reporting? The rises in knife crime, violent crime and homicides are putting pressure on police resources. I am seeing the impact in my constituency of activities relating to spice, drug use and dealing. The police need extra resources to cope with this rising crime.

Andrea Leadsom: We are absolutely committed to doing more. The Home Secretary has announced her intention to bring forward draft legislation to look at what we can do to stamp out knife crime. The Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 was passed last year to deal with the increasing use of psychoactive substances such as the ones mentioned by the hon. Gentleman. The crime statistics this year cannot be compared with the previous year, because the previous estimate did not include fraud and computer misuse offences. In fact, crimes that are traditionally measured by the independent crime survey for England and Wales have fallen by 9% over the past year, which is a continuation of the overall downward trend.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): May we have a debate in Government time about routine delays in the Home Office? The Immigration Minister promised a 90-minute Q&A session yesterday, but left after 12 minutes—an absolute insult to the staff and MPs who turned up. My constituent entered further submissions for his asylum claim in 2014, but they have still not been considered by the Home Office's complex casework team. Does the Leader of the House think that a three-year delay is acceptable for someone who has fled persecution in Georgia?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is right to raise that constituency case. I encourage her to speak to Home Office Ministers, who I am sure will take it up. The situation sounds very concerning, and I am extremely sympathetic to her.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I welcome the comments of the Leader of the House on the difference between this Government's and the last Labour Government's commitment to women. Would she like a comparative debate? If not, could we have a debate on the rape clause? Could we have a debate on the rise in maternity discrimination due to court charges for women? Could we have a debate on the one in four women who cannot get refuge any more? Could we have a debate on the number of split payments in universal credit? Could we have a debate on the gender pay gap, which is not closing? Could we have a debate on the women under 25 who are not entitled to the minimum wage? I could go on and on. I would like some debates.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a smörgåsbord of issues. As a strong supporter of women, I heartily agree that we need to raise issues that affect women. We also need to raise issues that affect the entire population. The Government are determined to improve the lives of all people in this country. We have done a huge amount specifically focused on women, including having had two female Prime Ministers. We have improved the number of women on boards and in public life. We also have improved the employment rate for women, women's wages and childcare support for families where both parents work. It is vital that we continue to do so; on that we can heartily agree.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): If we are going to have some debates, could I add something? I have read the written ministerial statement by the Leader of the House, the cause of which is the Government not turning up for Divisions on Opposition day motions, so could we issue to the Government Whips Office white flags to wave every time we have an Opposition day debate? That would provide a visual representation of the reality of the Government's craven attitude towards them.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is plain wrong. The Government have turned up to all Opposition day debates. Senior Ministers have spoken from the Dispatch Box, introduced the debates, and answered and responded to all Members' points. There have been an equal number of Government versus Opposition speakers. We have fully participated in all those debates. As Mr Speaker reminded the House, it is up to individual Members and parties as to whether and how they vote. The hon. Gentleman's party frequently abstains from votes, and he would not appreciate the Government insisting that he turns up and votes against every single policy.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On 16 October, the Nepalese President signed into law a Bill that includes clauses that criminalise religious conversion and the hurting of religious sentiment. Such clauses have been widely misused in neighbouring countries to persecute religious minorities, and there are signs that this has already begun to happen in Nepal. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement or a debate on this important issue?

Andrea Leadsom: As ever, the hon. Gentleman raises an important point about religious persecution. It is the Government's view that all religions should be protected. People have the right to express their views, free from fear and threats. The hon. Gentleman always finds a way to raise these matters, and it is right that he does.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Dr Maria Sapouna from University of the West of Scotland has been awarded £250,000 from the Erasmus+ programme. Universities across Europe will be collaborating to support learning around prejudiced-based bullying by using gaming technology. As we approach Anti-Bullying Week on 13 November, may we have a debate for Members to discuss how innovative approaches such as this one can stop bullying behaviour?

Andrea Leadsom: Bullying affects children and young people in particular right across our society. We are fully committed to stamping it out in every way that we can. I commend the hon. Gentleman for looking at innovative ways to achieve that, and urge him to suggest that all Members do so in their constituencies.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Last, but certainly not least, I call Nic Dakin.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I recently launched my Small Business Saturday awards to celebrate the richness and diversity of small businesses in Bottesford, Kirton in Lindsey, Scunthorpe and the surrounding areas. Small Business Saturday is coming up on 2 December, so may we have a debate before that date on the contribution that small businesses make to our economy and communities?

Andrea Leadsom: I commend the hon. Gentleman for raising this matter. Of course, small businesses are the lifeblood of our communities. We all share a concern that, too often, the town centre dies when small businesses leave and close down, so we should do everything that we can to support them. The Government welcome and fully take part in Small Business Saturday. I think that we will all be visiting our local small businesses on that Saturday.

Points of Order

12.36 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Leader of the House may have inadvertently misled the House by saying that her written ministerial statement was available at 10.30 am. In fact, we have heard numerous times at which it became available. Some say they only received the alert at 11.42 am and others say 11.30 am. When a written statement is produced, could she ensure that we all receive it at the same time—when she presses that button?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Would the Leader of the House like to respond?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): I can only say again that I have absolute assurance that the statement was published at 10.30 am.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am not alleging anything about the Leader of the House, but the truth of the matter is that the statement was not available on the parliamentary website, nor in the Vote Office, until 11.30 am. The only reason why this matters is that none of us would want the Leader of the House to be ill-advised by others and to be living in a state of ignorance about what is actually going on. Of course, the written ministerial statement was about the timeliness of responses, so it would seem appropriate to get it right.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I might be able to help. I am sure that the Leader of the House will take the point, that the timings will be put right and that nobody wants to mislead the House in any way, shape or form.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Leader of the House seemed to suggest that part of the responsibilities of a Member of this House is to hold the Scottish Government to account. Short of getting Nicola Sturgeon at the Dispatch Box to answer questions from hon. Members, can you advise how we discharge these responsibilities?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I do not think I need to; that is the good news.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have informed the hon. Member concerned—the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman)—that I intended to raise this matter.

According to many of today's news outlets, the hon. Gentleman hosted anti-Muslim extremist Tapan Ghosh in Committee Room 12 last Wednesday. Mr Ghosh holds abhorrent views, is on record calling on the United Nations to control the birth rate of Muslims and praising the genocide of Rohingya Muslims in Burma, and also said that Muslims should be forced to leave their religion if they come to a western country. Only this Monday, Mr Ghosh was pictured with UK far-right extremist leader Tommy Robinson. It is incredible to me that any Member would think it acceptable to host a meeting

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with this individual, let alone invite him to the House of Commons. Mr Deputy Speaker, would you please advise us all on our responsibilities to protect everything that this House stands for, and not to allow it to be used as a platform to propagate and legitimise hate and extremist views?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bob Blackman, do you want to come in?

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I do, Mr Speaker. I thank the hon. Lady for notifying me that she was going to raise this point of order. She has inadvertently misled the House. Let me be clear: I did not invite Tapan Ghosh to the House of Commons. I hosted, in my capacity as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for British Hindus, two functions last Wednesday, which Tapan Ghosh attended. One was the annual Diwali celebration on the House of Commons Terrace, which a number of hon. and right hon. Members attended. Subsequently, in the evening, we had the launch by the National Council of Hindu Temples of a report into Hindu minority rights in Bangladesh and Pakistan. Tapan Ghosh was invited by the National Council of Hindu Temples to attend that meeting and present evidence of physical attacks, rapes, forced marriages and forced conversions that have taken place in West Bengal and other places. I have made clear, and the National Council of Hindu Temples has made clear, that it was only in that capacity—as presenting that evidence—that that individual was invited to this House. He made no abhorrent remarks at the meeting, and I am quite clear that I and the National Council of Hindu Temples do not agree with the views he previously stated. We do not accept them, and we do not endorse them in any shape or form, but it is right that this House has the opportunity, and that Members have the opportunity, to hear evidence from people of what is happening in other countries.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It might help if I give you some of the facts about where the House stands. Obviously, I thank the hon. Lady for notice of the point of order, and I also thank the hon. Gentleman for clarifying his position.

The Speaker's principal responsibility for access to this estate by members of the public relates to security, in which I have a particular role. Subject to that, it is

open to an hon. Member to see who they wish, and we all value the exercise of the right of free speech here on the estate and elsewhere. We do not control the views of those who visit here. All hon. Members will inevitably hold meetings with individuals whose views they do not share.

That said, I want to place firmly on the record the abhorrence that I know is shared by all colleagues of all racism and bigotry. Such views have no place here. On the eve of International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day, I know that all colleagues want to do everything possible to foster tolerance and respect.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In the social care debate yesterday, the Minister claimed that the number of people working in social care has increased, yet the Office for National Statistics workforce data say that the number of people working in

“other health and social care”

has decreased every quarter consistently for the last five years. Is it in order to ask the Minister to confirm in writing the evidence base that informed that comment?

Mr Deputy Speaker: You have put it on the record. You have certainly put that request forward. I am sure that you will find another avenue. You may wish to put a written named-day question down to help solve that problem.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff, West) (Lab): Further to the earlier point of order about the written statement, Mr Deputy Speaker. This does tend to be a perennial issue. Would it be possible for the Leader of the House, when she investigates what happened this morning around her written statement, to place a letter in the Library of the House of Commons to be clear about exactly what the sequence of events was? There is clearly a dispute about the facts in terms of when the written statement was actually released. She is convinced it was released at 10.30 am, and I am sure she was given that information, but other hon. Members have had other experiences.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It is not for me to put right, but I am sure that the Leader of the House will take on board the views of the House and will wish to check what information was given. Obviously, the House matters not only to the Leader of the House but to all Members. Therefore, I would like to think that things will be put in place to make sure things like this do not happen again.

Backbench Business

Modern Slavery Act 2015

12.44 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the implementation of the Modern Slavery Act 2015.

First, may I refer to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests? I thank the hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) and all the other colleagues who have helped to bring about this Backbench Business debate. I also thank the Minister for her attendance. As Members, we are all united by our desire to do as much as we can to tackle the scourge of modern slavery.

Over 200 years ago, politicians described slavery as an activity

“so enormous and horrible, that there was no parallel to it in the annals of the world.”—[*Official Report*, 16 March 1807; Vol. 9, c. 133.]

Wilberforce said it was

“our duty to put a stop as speedily as possible to the traffic and sale of our fellow men”.—[*Official Report*, 17 March 1807; Vol. 9, c. 139.]

Yet, here we are in 2017, and slavery still exists in our country. That horrible reality demands more than our emotional outrage; it demands even more action on our part.

Just 15 years ago, many MPs would have suggested that slavery perhaps did not exist, but thanks to the campaigning of many people in this House, including our former colleagues Anthony Steen and Fiona Mactaggart, much has changed in our approach to the issue. Referrals to the Government's mechanism for identifying victims—the national referral mechanism—rise year on year, with a 17% increase in 2016. The number of prosecutions also rises annually. We have a Parliament and, to be fair, a Prime Minister with a genuine desire to tackle this issue. We have what was regarded as—and what is, to be fair—a trail-blazing Act, which offers life sentences for traffickers and provides a statutory defence against criminality for victims. We have additional funding going to the police, as well as international aid and safe houses.

The commitment of all of us who work in the House, and indeed of those who work in the Home Office on this issue, cannot be doubted. However—I hope the Minister will accept this in the spirit in which I mean it—it is important that we challenge where we are and look at the things that still need to be done if we are to take this issue forward. Too often, what we say does not happen in practice.

Many traffickers are not getting caught, and, in many circumstances, those who are caught receive minimal sentences. Many slaves are not being freed, and when they are, many are lost, and that includes children, as the Minister knows. So the challenge, first, is for us to try to find the victims, and more potential victims are being identified. Some 3,805 were identified in 2016, and I should point out that 1,227 of them were children—in our country, in 2017.

However, that is still a long way, as the Minister will know from her office's estimates, from the 10,000 to 13,000 slaves in this country. We have to ask why that is

and why victims are not coming forward. First, some of the people who should identify them, such as the first responders, often do not recognise them. Local authorities have a duty to identify, but many do not, and there has been little funding to train their staff. As the 2016 National Crime Agency data show, many local authorities find no one at all.

The second reason is that we often have little to offer victims when they are found. We ask them to stop living under a trafficker's roof—risking repercussions, threats or violence—and then to enter the system. If adults do consent to enter the system, they face time-limited support, fears as to their immigration status, and long-term uncertainty, even if they are found to be victims at the end of the process. Should we be surprised, therefore, at the small numbers? And if we are not surprised, what are we going to do to increase the numbers?

At its heart, the national referral mechanism relies on traumatised people, who have often known only betrayal, immediately agreeing to go into a Government system. If they do not, they have to fend for themselves. A small minority may be supported by non-governmental organisations, but the rest receive no support. One NGO outside the national referral system found that three fifths of survivors will go into the national referral mechanism if they are given a preliminary period of support of, say, six weeks. Will the Minister therefore recognise that we need to do more to ensure that victims feel safe and secure entering the national referral mechanism, and what does she propose to do?

However, there are other problems. The statutory national referral mechanism recovery and reflection period of support is 45 days, but that is not adequate. Frequent delays mean that, on average, the process is actually 95 days. It can take longer than that just to access legal or health support. Safe, suitable accommodation is not a given. There is no minimum standard. Section 50 of the Modern Slavery Act provides powers to introduce regulations and support, but those powers have not yet been implemented. Entire families could be housed in one room, sometimes hours away from any of the services they need. There is not enough specialist accommodation, and not just for those with children. Traffickers often target those with learning difficulties or addiction issues, and yet our services for survivors oddly do not. Will the Minister give us her thoughts about extending the amount of safe house provision for those with specialist needs? Would she consider introducing care standards along the lines of recommendations published by the Human Trafficking Foundation and supported by the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner to guarantee that survivors receive high-quality support? The lack of support is a real challenge for the system.

The Minister will know that the UK has no data on what happens to victims beyond the 45-day period, and no system to ensure that survivors do not fall back into exploitation. We spend £10 million each year on providing short-term support, only to end the support once the decision is made on whether the person was actually trafficked. The Modern Slavery Act, unlike other Acts, does not explicitly place a duty on the state to provide support or state the victim's entitlements. Rather, section 49 says that these will be set out in guidance. Can the Minister say when that guidance is set to be published?

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend may know that this is a very important issue for the Co-operative party. Is it not the case that people who have been entrapped into slavery do not stop being victims at the point when that has been identified but find that it can take many years to recover and rebuild their lives?

Vernon Coaker: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that absolutely crucial issue. Often at the end of the statutory 45-day period of reflection, there is a period of further support that people may be given, but the evidence shows that the vast majority of people who enter into that fall back into exploitation or are re-trafficked. Something needs to be done to deal with this.

The police say that they have often referred the same individual into the national referral mechanism multiple times.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): With regard to tracing perpetrators, and indeed achieving all our anti-slavery aims, throughout the UK, including in Scotland, how will these processes continue to function effectively—or will they function effectively at all—once we have left the EU, given that that is likely to mean that we will also have left intelligence-sharing agencies such as Europol and Eurojust?

Vernon Coaker: I very much agree that there will be real challenges for the system in leaving Europol, Eurojust, and the other systems involved. As the debate progresses, we will have to ensure that if we do leave the European Union, as the hon. Lady says, we look to see how we replicate those systems within whatever deal is done. That is crucial for these victims. I totally agree with her point.

We have heard that each time survivors have left safe houses, they were made destitute again and targeted by traffickers. How destructive and destroying that is for the police, but also life-destroying for those survivors. We have to accept that the short-term system of support fails us all and we all need to look—the police, Government, all of us—at what more we do for victims. A refugee granted asylum receives five years of leave to remain in the United Kingdom. Surely if a person has been recognised as being enslaved, that should entitle them to some sort of similar provision, if not for five years.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing such an important issue to the House. He is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that our domestic justice system—particularly the UK justice system—is not set up to deal with these matters, and that the burden of proof is so high for a conviction that very often the person goes free? Leave to remain is dependent on a conviction when the two things should be absolutely separate.

Vernon Coaker: That is absolutely crucial. Often the victim is placed in an immigration situation where they are regarded as a victim of trafficking and yet have no certainty about their status in the UK. I know that the Minister is looking at that, but it is a real problem in the way that the system operates at the moment, as the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) points out.

The Work and Pensions Committee has made recommendations along these lines. Lord McColl's private Member's Bill, currently in the Lords, does the same.

We cannot continue to lose so many survivors, many of them going back to the same traffickers. As Wilberforce himself said:

“You may choose to look the other way but you can never again say that you did not know.”

It is for us, as legislators, to say, “What are we actually going to do about this?” Survivors need time and assistance.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): One of the critical issues is inspection and enforcement within the labour market. Does my hon. Friend agree that resourcing that is crucial? A recent report by Focus on Labour Exploitation, a charity of which I am a trustee, detailed how far we are lagging behind other European countries in International Labour Organisation-recommended levels of resourcing. Is he concerned that we have only 0.4 inspectors per 10,000 workers while Poland has twice as many and Norway over three times as many, and that we allocate just £7.69 per worker for enforcement while, closer to home, Ireland spends twice as much? Does he think that the Minister needs to address this issue in her response?

Vernon Coaker: My hon. Friend puts the point very well. There is a need to look at the whole area of labour force enforcement. The co-operation between the Gangmasters Licensing Authority, the Home Office and so on in sharing data and information is important.

The Minister may want to consider an additional point about awareness. Only last week there was a case in the area of my local authority, Gedling Borough Council. The case is in the public domain. Just outside my constituency, people found a victim of labour exploitation working on their farm, Hammond farm. They were found by a person being made aware by a chance remark that caused them to question what was happening. Part of this is about enforcement but it is also about trying to raise awareness so that people may question what is happening and try to report it to the appropriate authorities. We might want to consider how we do that.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con) *rose*—

Vernon Coaker: I will give way, but before I do, let me say that I have been in this House a long time, and we give way a lot and that is fine—I do not mind doing it—but Members cannot have it both ways if I then speak for a long time.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I might be able to help everybody. I am sure that you want to finish within 15 minutes—

Vernon Coaker: From when?

Mr Deputy Speaker: From when you started. The benefit of that is that I will be putting on a time limit of seven minutes and I will not have to reduce it to six—I do not want to do that. Are you sure you want to intervene, Mr Chalk?

Alex Chalk: If I may. As somebody who has prosecuted offences of servitude in the past, I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the passion that he is showing regarding this horrible offence which robs people of

their dignity. Raising awareness is vital. Will he join me in paying tribute to the Salvation Army in Cheltenham, who last week held an event on this? We need to get the message out to people that everyone needs to be on their guard.

Vernon Coaker: If you will nod at me, Mr Deputy Speaker, when I need to start thinking about finishing, that would be good.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Okay.

Vernon Coaker: Thank you.

On the serious point that the hon. Gentleman has raised, of course I pay tribute to people like that in Cheltenham. I also pay tribute to all hon. Members of this House, who would, I know, wish to draw this heinous crime to the attention of the authorities in their areas to try to combat it.

Survivors need time and assistance to access justice but they also need access to compensation—something enshrined and recognised as critical by the Modern Slavery Act—because surely we do not want to make crime pay. Between 2004 and 2014, 211 persons were convicted of human trafficking and slavery, but according to the figures I have, only eight compensation orders were made for those crimes, amounting in total to £70,000. The Minister may correct me if, as I hope, I am wrong, but we do need to look at the whole question of compensation for victims. Where the courts order traffickers to pay, most do not pay up, having moved their assets abroad. That is something else we need to look at, and I would be grateful if the Minister could deal with it in her response.

Jean Simester, a tireless campaigner whom I met in Speaker's House—as did the Minister—when she won an award from the Human Trafficking Foundation, provides a powerful example of how hard it is for survivors to access justice and support. Her son, Darrell, was enslaved by a Traveller family and worked day and night over 13 years with no pay. The police refused to recognise that her son might be at risk, so in the end he was found and rescued by his own family. Yet four years after being rescued, Darrell has still not had a penny of compensation, nor has he received the sort of support that we might expect.

I suggest to the Minister that while the Act focuses on criminal justice without prioritising support, we will not get the level of prosecutions, let alone convictions, that we would want. Broadly, prosecution and conviction rates are rising, but they remain far too low. According to the Crown Prosecution Service, 295 human trafficking prosecutions were completed in 2016-17, but the number of convictions actually fell, from 192 in 2015-16 to 181 in 2016-17. The police say that often the reason why cases fail in the courts is that many of the victims they uncover are unable to find accommodation or get access to benefits, so many go missing before they go into the national referral mechanism.

The police face many challenges, but this week's report from Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary says that many victims of modern slavery receive a wholly inadequate service from police, and describes a host of concerns. I know that the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton), and the Home Secretary have commented on the report, but it was an

HMIC report: an independent inspector seriously criticised the way the police dealt with modern slavery. The criticisms included a lack of focus on victims and a tendency to refer those without legal status to immigration services—the point made by the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell)—and concern was expressed about the quality of investigation, with investigations being closed prematurely. The result, according to HMIC, was that we are

“leaving victims unprotected while offenders are not brought to justice”.

I will make a couple of further remarks before concluding, as I think you are encouraging me to do, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have not talked about children, yet we are seeing large numbers of children brought into the care of the state as a result of trafficking or suspicions of trafficking. As a recent report showed, many of those children abscond, leave or are taken away. It cannot be acceptable that in our country in 2017, we cannot protect children who are brought into the care of the state. It cannot be right. We need to understand and consider what more can be done.

It is important that we review the Act and consider both the sections that are yet to be implemented and what more needs to be done. In 2006, I was a Home Office Minister responsible for this area of work, and I had much of the responsibility for dealing with modern slavery for four years between 2006 and 2017. When I challenge the Government, it is a challenge to all of us. It is a challenge to what I did. It is a challenge to every one of us, to every local authority and to every police force. We have to challenge ourselves to do better. It is not acceptable that modern slavery still exists. It is a blight on the conscience of this nation. Although we have done a lot, there is so much more to do. Those who are enslaved deserve our support and our help.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Before I call the next speaker, let me say what a pleasure it is to see Anthony Steen in the Lower Gallery for this important debate.

There is a seven-minute limit on speeches from now on. I call Helen Grant.

1.3 pm

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): I declare an interest as a trustee of the Human Trafficking Foundation.

First, I pay tribute to a group of mainly former parliamentarians and a former judge who remains a Member of the other place: Anthony Steen MBE, Baroness Butler-Sloss, the right hon. Clare Short, the right hon. Sir John Randall and the right hon. Fiona Mactaggart—not forgetting, of course, the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), who chairs the all-party group on human trafficking and modern slavery. Without their passion, foresight and commitment, we would not be in the position we are today in the cause of defeating human trafficking. I thank the Salvation Army and its partners for the incredible work they do at the coal face, looking after and supporting victims of this terrible crime.

For me, human trafficking is a scourge. It does not discriminate; it permeates across age, race, class and gender. It crushes self-confidence and self-esteem—

[Mrs Helen Grant]

prerequisites for aspiration, motivation and success. No civilised society should tolerate the exploitation of vulnerable men, women and children by predatory criminal groups. It creates victims who are often some of the most vulnerable members of society, separated from their families and friends, with no access to financial help or support.

As I speak today, I am reminded of a young man I met about three years ago, when I was the victims Minister. He dispelled many of the myths surrounding human trafficking: he was a man; he was British; and he was trafficked for forced labour. He bravely shared with me his story of absolute misery and how he was dehumanised and degraded. The meeting drove home to me just how important it is for the Government, local authorities and all our partners to work more effectively together.

Thanks to the efforts of many people, including our Prime Minister, some good progress has been made in combating trafficking. Indeed, the Modern Slavery Act 2015 is a landmark of success. We now have a wide range of laws to protect victims and a wide range of organisations to support them, but much more needs to be done. There must be far more focus on prevention by tackling the problem at source and working smarter at our borders. We must improve prosecution and conviction rates, improve data collection and deal with ongoing scepticism and the poor response still greeting victims when they try to report abuse. Sadly, that can come from people and organisations that ought to know better, such as the police.

The Government's ambition is to eradicate all forms of human trafficking, and many millions of pounds have been spent on supporting victims. Our Home Secretary summed up the position well and candidly when she wrote in April:

"We must be better at getting immediate support to victims when they are at their most vulnerable. Otherwise they just slip through the net, to be abused all over again, and we lose any opportunity to gain information on the criminals who exploited them in the first place...We also want to make sure that victims are able to rebuild their lives. Our aspiration to help these people is in the right place—but at present, the provision of support may yet not be."

Clearly, the Home Secretary recognises that more needs to be done. I will therefore focus my suggestions today on what can be done for a group of people the authorities accept are victims of human trafficking: those who receive a positive conclusive grounds decision.

First, the conclusive grounds decision must carry with it more status, weight and meaning. In my view, victims of trafficking fit into the same vulnerable group as refugees and victims of torture. It therefore seems right that conclusive grounds should carry with them the same 12 months' residency permit. Not only would that provide the stability and assurance that victims need to begin to recover, but it would create a better environment for victims to assist law enforcement agencies in finding and prosecuting perpetrators.

Secondly, the paperwork received by victims with positive conclusive grounds must be recognisable and transferable. Frankly, the current form is flimsy, short and unhelpful. Instead, it should be recognised by other Departments and agencies and should allow access to appropriate services.

Thirdly, victims need advice from those who understand the system relating to accommodation, immigration and employment support—the system that, as a lawyer for some 23 years and now an MP, I often struggle to deal with. Victims with conclusive grounds should have access to caseworkers to help them to comply with the procedures and to access services.

Fourthly, victims need a roof over their head. I ask the Minister to consider introducing greater flexibility in the moving on of a victim from a safe house. The safe house, of course, should not be permanent, long-term accommodation, but the current cliff-edge approach of losing safe-house accommodation just two weeks after a conclusive grounds decision is failing and not satisfactory.

Human trafficking is a scourge. It is abhorrent and inexcusable, and every time I hear about an incident or meet a victim, I think, "What kind of world are we living in, and what can we do to make things better?" Every victim and witness of a crime needs to know that they will be offered all the help and support they need and deserve to move on in their lives and to bring perpetrators to justice. We can do better; we must do better.

1.10 pm

Ann Coffey (Stockport) (Lab): Kevin Hyland, the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, stressed this week that using children to transport and sell class A drugs in county lines operations is a form of modern-day slavery. He said that the police and other agencies were not seeing it for what it is: the use of children and young people as commodities by criminal gangs. He said that more and more county lines were being discovered each day but there was often a lack of sympathy for the victims. He was responding to the HMIC report, "Stolen freedom: the policing response to modern slavery and human trafficking".

The criminal exploitation of children to sell drugs in county lines operations is the next big grooming scandal. It has many similarities to grooming in the early child sexual exploitation cases in places such as Rotherham and Rochdale. The National Crime Agency says that 83% of police forces have reported activity in their areas, and I have been told by a well-informed police source that there could be up to 1,000 county lines operating from major cities throughout the country that have well-established criminal gangs, including London, Liverpool and Manchester.

Although the exploitation of children by organised crime to carry and sell drugs is not new, there is a huge and growing problem of children being groomed to supply class A drugs—crack cocaine and heroin—around the country. That usually involves a gang from an urban area expanding their operations by crossing one police force boundary, or more, over to more rural areas, setting up a secure base and using runners to conduct day-to-day dealing.

A county lines enterprise almost always involves the exploitation of vulnerable children and adults. As more and more county lines are set up, more and more children are being targeted and groomed to carry and supply drugs. For the criminal gangs, it is a very successful business: new markets bring more income, and using children and young people reduces the gang's risk of detection. For the children and young people, it often

ends in drug and alcohol addiction, violence and sexual and other exploitation. The children become criminals and the groomers and exploiters of other children. The extent of county lines is very difficult to map, as data are collected by various agencies and there is very little sharing of those data.

This week, I was invited by Greater Manchester police to help launch an excellent new campaign called Trapped, to raise awareness of how children and young people can get drawn into county lines. Children as young as 11 have been ferried from inner-city parts of Manchester to Blackpool and Barrow to sell drugs. Only this week, the police found a young boy in Blackpool who they said was relieved to be locked up and whose face was green, as he had been so badly beaten.

The Trapped campaign aims to raise awareness of all forms of criminal exploitation by gangs of young people and vulnerable adults. Key to its approach is working with schools, youth centres and housing and drugs services to prevent young people from getting embedded, or further embedded, in criminal gangs and to provide them with safe people to talk to.

Some children are vulnerable to being targeted because of chaotic family relationships; others because they are looked-after children. Some may be younger children whose older siblings have got caught up in drugs, while others may have parents who have become complicit in the use of their children by gangs, to help feed their own drug habit. Methods of recruiting children include offers of cash and goods, coercion with threats of kidnap and young people having to work to pay back a drug debt owed to a gang member.

I chair the all-party parliamentary group on runaway and missing children and adults, which is supported by the Children's Society and Missing People. In March, we held a roundtable on county lines, taking evidence from victim's parents, experts and agencies. May I thank the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) for attending that roundtable? The report we produced made clear that children from all backgrounds are at risk of being drawn into county lines. Indeed, the parents who gave evidence did not meet the profile of a chaotic family. Their sons had become involved through friendships with other young people who had associations with gangs.

Pressure on young people is huge, and at the time of transition from childhood to adolescence, they are particularly vulnerable to pressure from peers. Young people can get drawn into what initially looks like a good offer, in terms of cash and lifestyle, but end up being trapped and coerced by some terrifying people.

Looked-after children in particular are targets for grooming by criminal gangs. Those placed miles away from their home areas can be especially vulnerable. There are additional difficulties involved in keeping children safe when they are placed far away. It is hard for social workers to give support from hundreds of miles away. It is concerning that since March 2012 there has been a 78% increase nationally in the number of children being placed in children's homes outside their borough.

Parents whose children have been exploited expressed to our roundtable their despair at the response the system often gave to their pleas for help. I am concerned

that the response of the safeguarding system is increasing the vulnerability of young people. The parent who is not supported will leave the child more vulnerable. Placing a child or young person in a children's home that is being targeted by criminal gangs increases their vulnerability. Failing to assess risk in missing episodes appropriately will increase vulnerability.

There needs to be a more joined-up response from the National Crime Agency and at a regional and local police level. Criminal gangs are making millions from the exploitation and degradation of children, and they are responsible for countless beatings, stabbings and murder. We need to disrupt the grooming of vulnerable children at a very early stage, while prosecuting senior gang members. Preventing children from getting into gangs in turn prevents many more victims. We need to consider the better use of child abduction warning notices, and the national referring mechanism needs to be better understood, as it can be used to identify children as victims of exploitation, which in turn makes it easier to prosecute exploiters—who are hiding behind the children—under trafficking laws. That will also prevent prosecution of the child.

The exploitation of children by criminal gangs is increasing, and it is shocking that the message that organised crime is getting is that, provided that they use children and young people, we are powerless to do anything about it. We need to find better ways to work together and use available resources, and a better safeguarding response for children. Children should be our priority—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order.

1.17 pm

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Last week the Church of England launched the Clewer Initiative, which is aimed at tackling modern-day slavery and draws on excellent work pioneered by the Bishop of Derby. This three-year project has been designed to help dioceses detect instances of modern-day slavery in their midst and provide appropriate support for victims. There are many tools available in the local community to help end slavery, and the Church, which is present in all communities, has an inherent responsibility to help lead those efforts. As the Archbishop of Canterbury has said:

“William Wilberforce convinced his generation that slavery was a sin. That belief has not changed. The sin lies in our ignorance to its existence around us.”

The Clewer Initiative takes its name from a group of sisters that was founded in 1852 to help marginalised women, but its legacy today will be to help address modern-day slavery. The campaign slogan is, “We See You”, and the aim at the heart of the initiative is to empower people like us to spot the signs of modern forms of slavery, which is happening all around us in our towns, cities and villages. Slaves can be right in the middle of the communities in which we live. We do not always know the signs and we are not sure about the right questions to ask. Modern slavery is a hidden crime, and for that reason we have to take seriously the injunction to know who our neighbour really is. Our neighbour could be a homeless man forced into work, or a girl kept in domestic servitude. Victims may be

[*Dame Caroline Spelman*]

nearly invisible to us, so we have to develop sharper eyes in order to detect their needs, hence the campaign slogan, “We See You”.

The Clewer Initiative is designed to help dioceses develop strategies to detect slavery in their communities, by offering training and monitoring. Crucially, it gives people the correct contacts to reach out to if they spot signs of slavery and are worried that someone might be trapped in it. Nationally, the initiative involves developing a network of practitioners committed to sharing models of best practice and providing evidence-based data to resource the Church’s national engagement with statutory and non-statutory bodies. The project has taken best practice from Derby, and there are now 10 other participating dioceses: Bath and Wells, Chester, Durham, Guildford, Lichfield, Liverpool, Rochester, Portsmouth, Southwark, and Southwell and Nottingham. A further 14 dioceses are due to sign up later this year, and it is hoped that the Church of England’s 42 dioceses, or 12,000 parishes, will all become mobilised in the battle to eradicate modern slavery. Of course, as the landscape in each is so different, the approach and training will need to be contextualised, but there is no doubt that this approach can make a difference.

If we take the vanguard of this approach, the Bishop of Derby and his diocese—Bishop Alastair was on the Draft Modern Day Slavery Bill Committee, along with me and many other Members present—we see that the key is developing a strong working relationship with the key agencies: the police, the city council and others that can reach out and provide assistance to the victims. Within the Church, the Mothers Union has taken on the need to ensure supplies for victims by fundraising and producing emergency packs for them. There are many examples from the Clewer Initiative of each diocese taking the opportunity to help. I encourage every Member present and those who will read this debate to prompt their own diocese to find out what is happening in their locality.

Of course, none of this is to diminish the good work carried out across the country by secular non-governmental organisations in our community. I highlight the work of Soroptimist International of Great Britain and Ireland, of which the Solihull club in my constituency is a member. It has undertaken online and face-to-face surveys to understand how much the public know about slavery and human trafficking and what their perceptions are. The survey seeks to help the UK modern slavery training delivery group to assess the level of public knowledge in order to help to combat it. As of last week, 3,700 online surveys had been completed and more than 4,400 paper surveys returned.

When we made our bid to the Backbench Business Committee last week, one of the issues I wanted to raise was child trafficking. I was shocked to read the report in *The Times*, which Baroness Butler-Sloss described as “very disturbing”, about the scores of vulnerable minors who fall back into the hands of traffickers. More than 150 Vietnamese minors have disappeared from care and foster homes since 2015, with 90 others going missing temporarily. It would seem that many go missing within two days of entering care. How can we use the word “care” if children go missing that rapidly? In that report

in *The Times*, Kevin Hyland, the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, expressed concern at the “frequency and speed” with which Vietnamese minors go missing and said that the case of a teenager taken from care not once but twice showed

“a lack of professionalism in the response to the plight of trafficking victims”.

I join the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) and others who have spoken in impressing on the Government the need to go out of their way to tackle this terrible abuse of the most vulnerable of the vulnerable in our society.

1.23 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I welcome the Modern Slavery Act 2015, in particular section 54, on supply chains, which we had to fight quite hard for. Despite the legislation, as the National Crime Agency said earlier this year, modern slavery is steadily increasing. There are many industries in which modern slavery goes undetected, in everyday situations right under our noses. Twenty cases of modern slavery have been investigated in Bristol over the last year, including one involving eastern European workers who were exploited by a Bristol car wash and forced to work long hours for low pay. One had worked for 18 months without any pay at all, and it is believed that five others are in the same situation.

In July, police arrested four people on suspicion of human trafficking and slavery offences following a raid on a nail bar in Southmead in Bristol, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones). Unseen, a Bristol-based charity that works to eradicate modern slavery and runs the UK-wide modern slavery helpline, is running the “Let’s Nail It” campaign, which aims to raise awareness and help to stop slavery in nail bars. I am happy to support the campaign—hence my bright pink nails today—as is Avon and Somerset police, which ended up being denounced by the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) on the front page of *The Sun* for its efforts. However, it was right to do so: we need to bring people’s attention to what is happening right under their noses. Over the past 12 months, police in the wider Avon and Somerset area have dealt with 60 investigations and seen a significant increase in modern slavery-related intelligence. Calls to the helpline also went up following the awareness campaign.

However, the police need to be properly resourced. As my local police and crime commissioner and chief constable have said in their recent report, “The Tipping Point”, the police are being stretched to the point where they lack the resources to carry out basic policing functions, let alone mount investigations. Both the Gangmasters Licensing Authority and Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs have faced cuts to their capacity to deal with slavery offences. In 2014, the Migration Advisory Committee said that on average a firm could expect a visit from HMRC inspectors only once every 250 years.

Many of the calls about nail bars cite the physical or psychological state of workers, inappropriate sleeping accommodation on business premises, poor working conditions, lack of spoken English, cheap prices, cash-only transactions and concerns of abuse and violence—the

workers seem intimidated by their bosses. Consumers need to be aware of these signs so that they are never unintentional supporters of organised crime. The Southmead nail bar raid was prompted by a tip-off from a member of the public who raised concerns about a woman's welfare. Without that intervention, it could have taken a lot longer for the victim to be identified and taken to a place of safety.

People need to know how to spot the signs that modern slavery is happening in their community. Victims may show signs of physical or psychological abuse or appear withdrawn. They may have few possessions. They may always wear the same clothes and have no identification documents. They may all live and work at the same address. They may regularly be dropped off or collected for work either very early or very late at night. People need to be vigilant.

Finally, I want to say a bit about slavery in the food processing, fishing and agriculture sectors, which remains a huge issue. Unite the Union's excellent "From Plough to Plate" report found that employers in those sectors are some of the worst exploiters of workers, with countless instances of abuse meeting the legal definitions of slavery and forced labour. Only last year, a group of 16 Lithuanian chicken farm workers won their case against two Kent-based gangmasters who had forced them to work under threat of violence and kept them in squalid living conditions. This was the first settlement of a claim against a British company in relation to modern slavery. In another 2016 case, two Lithuanian men had been trafficked to work in a meat processing plant. They had their pay withheld and were subjected to violence, but the traffickers were sentenced to only three and a half years in jail.

The Environmental Justice Foundation has done admirable work over the past five years in exposing modern slavery in Thailand's seafood sector, uncovering widespread human trafficking and human rights abuses both in the pre-processing facilities and at sea. There have been examples of people being kept at sea for several years, being moved from ship to ship, and never reaching shore and being able to seek sanctuary. In April, the Environmental Justice Foundation reported that, despite reforms, forced labour continues to be widespread, citing the shocking statistic that 59% of Thai fishing workers had witnessed the murder of a fellow worker. Many more had been tortured and abused, and had wages, food and sleep withheld from them. This is directly linked to the supply chains of many major seafood companies around the world, including in the UK; millions of pounds of seafood products are imported from Thailand every year.

Moving on from seafood, another example, from just this week, is that two of Italy's biggest tomato suppliers for UK supermarkets have been implicated in a range of labour abuses, in what have been described as "conditions of absolute exploitation", with workers required to work 12 hours a day, seven days a week, with minimal pay and no access to medical care. These are just a few examples of something that is incredibly widespread.

In 2015, *The Economist* described the supply chain transparency requirements in the Modern Slavery Act as "light touch", with only 12,000 commercial companies affected. The Government need to go further. Submission of a full and comprehensive statement should be legally binding on all companies, with penalties for non-compliance

that go beyond naming and shaming, and greater criminal liability for cases when practices of slavery or forced labour are found in a company's supply chain or products.

Specifically in relation to the seafood sector and the fishing industry, the Environmental Justice Foundation is calling for: transnational approaches for all countries—port, flag and coastal states—to ratify and implement fully the International Labour Organisation's convention 188 on work in fishing; all countries to implement legislation to prosecute national citizens engaged in human trafficking on vessels registered to another country; and retailers and the industry to establish effective transparency and traceability across their whole supply chain, including committing to independent, third-party and unannounced auditing of their supply chains.

Cheap products and services often come at an unseen cost. We need to ask ourselves: just how come prices in the shops are so low? If it seems too good to be true, it probably is. Such products have no place on British shelves. Such services should never be used. We all need to play a role in suffocating slavery at source by exercising vigilance.

1.30 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), who made some excellent points. I also want to pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister for her dedication when Home Secretary in starting to rid our nation of the evil practice of modern slavery and leading the way globally through the legislation she introduced.

The UK Modern Slavery Act 2015 is world-leading legislation. It is of paramount importance that other countries follow our lead if it is to be truly effective. My right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) highlighted the important role that the Bishop of Derby, Alastair Redfern, has played in driving the legislation to where we are today. My constituency is on the doorstep of Derby, and it was listening to the Bishop speak on the subject that inspired me to take more than just a passing interest in this issue. It is because of Bishop Alastair that I am here today speaking in this debate.

Bishop Alastair has been at the forefront of the fight against modern slavery, with the establishment of the Derby and Derbyshire Modern Slavery Partnership, before it developed into the Clewer Initiative. This collaboration of organisations across different sectors is drawn from both the city and the county. It aims to raise awareness and an understanding of what trafficking is, how traffickers operate and the experiences of victims. It is now seen as a model of best practice across the country. Nowhere is immune from the threat of modern slavery: it does not just happen in big cities. It is as likely to be happening in our local car washes and nail bars in our towns as it is in our major cities.

To give this important issue some context, research carried out by the Home Office in 2014 estimated that in 2013 the number of potential victims of modern slavery in the UK was between 10,000 and 13,000. Personally, I believe that this is an underestimate of the problem, as more and more people are becoming aware of this horrendous practice. More needs to be done to educate employers and their staff—I know work is

[*Maggie Throup*]

being done on this—on how to identify people who may be modern slaves. A recent case in Derbyshire highlighted that issue. The figures represent not only victims trafficked into the UK, but British adults and children too. The National Crime Agency estimates that in 2013 the UK was the third-most common country of origin of identified victims. Modern slavery is happening on our doorsteps.

In today's debate, I want to focus on the supply chain aspect of the legislation: the Transparency in Supply Chains—or TISC—part of the Bill. This aspect of the legislation applies to commercial organisations that operate in the UK and have an annual turnover over £36 million. Such businesses have to produce a slavery and human trafficking statement each year. The statement, which is placed on the company's website, should set out the steps it is taking to address and prevent the risk of modern slavery in its operations and supply chains. As my interest in the subject has developed, I have read numerous slavery and human trafficking statements from some of our largest retailers and other businesses. I am saddened when I read some of the statements and realise that a proportion of businesses are still only paying lip service to the legislation and do not appear to really appreciate the importance of making their supply chain slavery-free.

In the previous Parliament, I tried to introduce a private Member's Bill that would have strengthened the current legislation. The Bill, which was first introduced in the House of Lords in May 2016 by Baroness Lola Young, a Cross-Bench peer, aimed to amend the Modern Slavery Act 2015 to require commercial organisations and public bodies to include a statement on slavery and human trafficking in their annual report and accounts, not just on their website. We came across one problem. As the annual report and accounts are legal entities, the inclusion of the slavery statement would have caused a legal headache. That needs to be looked at again.

At the time of the introduction of the private Member's Bill, the Government recognised that the 2015 legislation was only the first step towards a solution to the problem. The legislation currently applies only to the private sector, not the public sector. To include the public sector is of paramount importance. The other part of the private Member's Bill was to extend the requirements the private sector are under to the public sector. I find it quite disturbing that the public sector, which procures vast amounts of goods and services, is not included in the legislation. I feel this is a major flaw, which needs to be corrected. I was pleased that, at the time, the Home Office—I had meetings with the Minister who is in her place today; we have continuity, which is fantastic—agreed with the sentiment and aspirations of the Bill, and were developing policies in line with it. I look forward to hearing an update from the Minister on the progress we talked about when she responds to the debate. I am very proud that we lead the fight against modern slavery in this country and that this battle continues to be a priority for our Government.

1.36 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I thank hon. Members who brought this issue to the Backbench Business Committee—actually, I was on both sides; I just realised as I was saying it that I was thanking myself twice—as it is really important that we debate it.

Prior to coming to this House, I ran one of the services that operates safe houses and community-based support for victims of modern slavery. We largely focused our safe houses on women and children. I want to tell a few of the stories of the people I met while I was working there.

The vast majority of women now living in the safe accommodation provided through the national referral mechanism are there because they have been trafficked into this country for sexual slavery. It is not sex work; these people were slaves. I worked with women who forced to have sex with over 50 men in a day and were fed scraps from the table of their “honest Johns”. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) talked about our need for vigilance. The idea, in a modern system of sex work, that we have an “honest John” who is saying, “Do you mind if I ask you where you come from? Are you here out of choice?” is a total fallacy and something successive Governments have failed to tackle. We really, really need to be tackling it now, because the number of women from different countries and originally from the UK who are prostituted, exploited and trafficked around the country is absolutely phenomenal. Hundreds and hundreds and hundreds have gone through the service I used to work for. If we do not tackle this head on we are letting down the victims of slavery, because some people maybe want to call it something more civilised, like “sex work”.

I also want to talk about some of the problems I found while working in that service. I worked very closely with the Home Office and, before that, the Ministry of Justice, which was originally responsible for this area. Everybody wanted success. There are still some major, glaring holes in how we treat the victim and how the victim goes on the journey. I wonder whether the Minister could feed back on the difference between those who are housed in safe houses and those who are housed in generic accommodation through the asylum system. Those who live in safe houses receive amazing service. Of course I would say that, because I ran up the curtains and made everything lovely: it was brilliant. However, there is a two-tier system for slaves in this country.

I remember visiting one woman who did not qualify for entry to a safe house because of her immigration status, and who was therefore in asylum accommodation. She was nearly nine months pregnant, but she looked considerably thinner than I was at that time. She was sleeping on a floor, and was being given one meal a day. I was there to offer her community support and give her some money. She wanted to move, and she was due to be moved to Nottingham that day, through the national referral mechanism. I said to her, “Normally I would kick off about this, because you are in the final stages of your pregnancy, you have had care, and you need to maintain the continuity of your care.” She cried, and begged me not to prevent her from being moved. As a practitioner who had a duty of care to a pregnant woman—a duty not to move her away from the continuity of care that she had been receiving from Birmingham Women's Hospital—I found myself in a terrible dilemma. Instances such as that will have to be tackled.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on human trafficking and modern slavery, raised the question of what happens after the end of the 45-day

reflection and recovery period. I cannot say that I remember anyone needing only 45 days. The system allows people to apply for more days, and they always get those extra days, because the system is not mean in that sense. For those who are deeply traumatised because people have tried to take their organs, have enslaved them or have had sex with them 50 times a day, 45 days will never be enough. What happens to them afterwards, however, is of massive concern. They are lost from the services provided by organisations like mine, which was Black Country Women's Aid. We tried to do all that we could to keep in touch with those outside on an informal basis, but such organisations do not have the necessary resources.

Those organisations are doing amazing and innovative things. I saw some of them at Speaker's House last week, talking about the links between substance misuse and human trafficking. But, as part of the voluntary sector and with 178 people in service on a single day, they simply do not have the resources to be the system that follows those people afterwards. They deal with 8,000 people a year, across different services.

The Government must introduce a system to ensure that that drop-off does not happen. Sometimes it is due to repatriation. I think many people, especially those of us who deal with immigration cases, would be surprised at the number of people receiving human trafficking services who want to be repatriated, and that may be one reason for not being able to find people, and hoping that they are all right. However, it is necessary to tackle the trafficking of those who are still in the UK, and to aid their long-term recovery. The issue of criminal compensation must also be dealt with. A man who lived in slavery for 13 years, and whose aggressors were sent to prison for only two and a half years, is currently unable to gain access to compensation, which is a disgrace. He has also made no national insurance contributions.

We must look after people after the 45-day period, and create a system that works for all of them.

1.43 pm

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), who is a member of the Women and Equalities Committee, and who made a passionate contribution to this passionate debate. Some of the very difficult personal experiences such as those that she described really do hit home. I also thank the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) for securing the debate. He, too, made a passionate speech. Tackling modern slavery is extremely important, and I thank him for his work on the issue. I also thank Members on both sides of the House, and other individuals and organisations, who do so much in this regard.

I know that the Minister shares our strong concerns about exploitation and the safety of women and girls, and about the need to ensure that victims are identified and looked after, working with partners such as the NHS. As we have heard, the Prime Minister, in both her previous and her current roles, has been a leading example of those who speak of the need for us to step up our efforts to stamp out slavery internationally, in all its forms. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for women in Parliament, I know how important it is

that there are more women in all parts of the House than ever before, and that they are able to stand up and make themselves heard, as they have today.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): A few months ago there were some police raids in north Wales. People were being kept effectively as slaves. A common response was, "We never realised that this sort of thing went on here." There is an idea that it only happens in London or other big cities, but it is happening throughout the country.

Mims Davies: I absolutely agree. Indeed, I have found the same in my constituency. I did not think that it affected Hampshire, but it does. We need to be vigilant. We need to focus on drug trafficking and criminal exploitation, which, as we have heard, happens in the agricultural sector. We must also tackle the sexual exploitation of vulnerable people, including, in my area, people with learning difficulties.

The Modern Slavery Act 2015 has been very welcome, but my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) made some excellent points about the need to make progress on the basis of that groundbreaking Act, and it would be very hard to disagree with what she said. The Act sent a strong signal to criminals about the vile trade that is going on, but, as with any Act, we have an opportunity to move forward. Nevertheless, the Act is already making a difference not just locally, but domestically and abroad.

Let me say more about what we are doing abroad, including the work done by the Department for International Development to ensure that we spend a minimum of 0.7% of our GDP on aid. It is important that that work is being seen throughout the world. We are putting in a great deal of work, around the world and indeed locally, but, as has been said at a roundtable on the issue, we need to focus on outcomes. It is crucially important for us to help those affected by modern slavery. We are spending about £150 million on tackling it, including a £20 million investment in the global fund, but it is also crucial to focus on outcomes, rather than just talking about change.

The Prime Minister has worked with the United Nations on this issue, and as we know there has been an event at Speaker's House, so we all know what needs to be done. Church representatives have raised their concerns with me locally, in Eastleigh, and both they and representatives of Churches internationally seem to be very clued up.

Let me say more about my local experience. I particularly remember a constituency surgery at which I met the mother of a girl in her mid-teens, who was struggling to explain to her daughter that what she thought was a positive relationship was actually based on exploitation, and on doing things in exchange for sex or presents. We tend to think about large exploitative gangs, but sometimes this can be down to one or two people with a handful of young girls who interpret such relationships as positive.

Another issue of concern in my constituency is the exploitation by grown-up children of their parents or grandparents for drug money. In effect, they are making those parents and grandparents continue to go to work in order to fund their choices—to support people who may be addicted to drugs, and who are bludging off their families. They are forcing members of their own

[Mims Davies]

families to go on working when they do not need to, in order to fund a lifestyle choice. In that context too, we need to look more broadly at the 2015 Act.

Like other Members on both sides of the House, I think that more can be done. The Government have made some giant leaps forward, particularly in respect of the human aspects—the pain and suffering that we see—but business and communities also have a role to play. They need to seek this out, and not allow people to hide. There must be transparency in businesses and supply chains, especially the fashion industry. How do we know the circumstances in which the garments that we are wearing were made, and are we confident about what we think we know?

My constituency is on the Hamble river, and I recently went out on an operation with the Hampshire Constabulary marine unit on to Southampton water and across to the Solent. I thank all the police involved in such operations out on those waters, making sure they are doing the right thing to deal with slavery, because victims are being trafficked across, and without those members of the marine unit, we would not find out what is going on. They shared with me some grave concerns that they have, and said what needs to be done to enable them to help people who are sent in boats across the water.

I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments, and welcome the opportunity that this House has to take the Modern Slavery Act 2015 forward and change the lives of so many people, just by opening our eyes.

1.51 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) on her speech. It is good to see passion on both sides of the House in this debate. Indeed, for probably the first and only time, I want to place on record my recognition of the value of the Prime Minister's role when she was Home Secretary in bringing forward this legislation, not only for itself but also because it showed leadership on an issue where leadership is fundamental. Whether at national or local level, it really does make a difference.

I will begin on the same track as my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips). When I was Greater Manchester's police and crime commissioner, a brothel was raided and one of the women there was asked whether she had been trafficked. She denied that vehemently until taken into a room on her own when she said, "Look, I have been trafficked. I need you to drag me out of here in handcuffs, with me fighting and kicking and screaming, because I need to demonstrate to my traffickers that I am not a willing accomplice with the police." This woman was no sex worker; she was a sex slave. In that case, the police were able to work with her so she could pursue a different ambition.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) said that he perhaps did not do enough when he was police Minister, but I do not think any of us were talking enough about slavery at that time. Even when I first began to have conversations with the then chief constable of GMP and the current chief constable, I do not think we in Greater Manchester had a proper understanding of what slavery was all about. However, although Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary's report was critical of policing, it did say that there were

some bright spots, and that Greater Manchester was one of them. I say that with some pride, not in myself, but in the people who have made that work, because there has been leadership from the very top, by the current chief constable, Ian Hopkins, and the previous chief constable, and by Ross Jackson, the chief superintendent who has direct line responsibility. I also want to mention Detective Sergeant Deborah Hurst and her team; it is a dedicated and small—there are only four or five of them—team of officers committed to this role. They have taken the time and care to understand the subject, and therefore have been able to infect—so to speak—the whole of Greater Manchester Police and beyond with an ambition to make a real difference.

GMP has trained 120 victim liaison officers. They make a considerable difference, because it is important to work with people who have been through the trauma of enslavement. The enslaved who are in Manchester speak many different languages, and the police often face cultural differences. There are other, sometimes very simple, issues facing women in prostitution, such as the basic needs for toiletries and clean underwear, so it is essential that there are now trained liaison officers who recognise the need to go through the journey with those who have been enslaved.

Members on both sides of the House have talked about the need for a wider partnership, and that has a number of impacts. Different agencies such as probation, immigration, the police, the Border Force and the local authorities are fundamental partners in making a protective system and a protective service that work. Partnership makes a real difference in that regard. Building partnerships also opens up the conversation about the different forms of enslavement that there are in our society, because it is everywhere. It is obvious in some aspects of prostitution and sometimes, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Ann Coffey) mentioned, with children being entrapped and taken across county lines, but enslaved people can be found in almost any occupation and area of activity. We need to recognise that, and raise public and corporate awareness of the fact.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) mentioned the criticism of the Avon and Somerset police force. If a few police officers put on nail varnish to bring home to the public that there might be people who are enslaved in our nail bars, that is not such a terrible thing. In fact it is sensible, because it is saying to the public, "Please be aware; please think about situations when people around you might be enslaved." At the moment there is a duty to notify, but it is still circumscribed, and I ask the Minister to consider extending that concept.

Members have talked about facilities for people after their enslavement. First night accommodation is often an issue: where do people go on the day when they are sprung from their captivity? I paid, not from taxpayers' funds as such, but as the PCC for the safe place of such emergency accommodation, but we need to look at the issue of ongoing accommodation and work with the voluntary sector to make sure that provision is in place. Both empathy and the provision of institutional support are of great importance.

I shall finish on a positive note, however. My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling talked about the need for compensation. Alexandra is a Hungarian woman

who was tricked into coming to Greater Manchester by the offer of legitimate work. In fact she was forced to work as a street sex worker—I use that term, if my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley will forgive me, as I cannot think of a better one—on the streets of Manchester. There was nothing voluntary about that, but fortunately the police were able to work with her to such good effect that she came back from Hungary to take part in the subsequent prosecution. The Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority awarded her compensation, and she is now living with her son in Hungary, happy and free.

1.57 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) on securing this important debate, and also congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), who has a huge amount of experience and passion; we are lucky to have someone with her background in this place.

Just this week, a highly critical report found that police forces are failing to tackle modern slavery and human trafficking because the cases are often too difficult and senior officers believe the public lack sympathy for the victims. This report should concern us all as we consider our international obligations and how we support those who have endured trafficking and modern slavery.

Sadly, I have my own constituency experience. As the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) said, when we come to this role we have an idea of what we might and might not deal with. I have to say that I did not expect to deal with the issue of modern slavery in my constituency of Livingston, and the case we have dealt with has been deeply distressing, both for my constituent and my constituency staff.

My constituent was trafficked from Nigeria to London at the age of 14 and subjected to horrific abuse, including rape, before she escaped to my constituency. The Metropolitan police worked incredibly hard to bring charges against her kidnapper, but told us that the burden of proof in these cases is often so high that they are not able to charge anyone. Unfortunately, the Home Office was predicating her leave to remain on the conviction of her abuser, which in itself highlights the flaws in the Home Office's internal processes. I recognise the work that has been done by the Government on bringing in the Modern Slavery Act 2015 and the work that they have been doing subsequently, but my constituency case highlights some of the challenges and flaws. One of the officers in the Met who was dealing with my constituent's case identified some of the issues, saying:

“I would advise that the burden of proof in a criminal case is far higher (beyond all reasonable doubt) than in a civil case (balance of probability). In light of this, I would suggest that any outcome of the criminal case should not adversely impact on any immigration appeal.”

I know that the Prime Minister, when she was Home Secretary, commissioned a report which found that

“slavery remained under-reported, but the operational response was improving.”

However, the review said that there were

“problems, including a lack of consistency between law enforcement and criminal justice agencies and poor quality intelligence at all levels.”

As things stand, due to the interventions from my office, my constituent now has a year's temporary leave to remain and the right to work, but the clock is ticking. We need the Home Office to review its own processes and this case. Yes, the case might have been difficult, but those officers who worked on it fought tooth and nail for my constituent, and I want to pay tribute to the Met police today and put on record how grateful I am for the work that they and local police officers in West Lothian did to protect her when she was very scared. She was scared to send her children to school, for example, because she was worried that her attacker might come to Scotland and seek her out.

It beggars belief that anyone could lack sympathy for the victims, but that is what the report states. Anyone at home listening to the details of my constituent's case and those of others would surely find it difficult not to have sympathy for them. At the age of 14, Temitope George was given some clothes, taken to an airport in Nigeria and told that she was going to leave the country. The woman who took her told her not to talk to anyone, and to do as she was told. She was brought to London and taken to a woman's house, where she was told she would be staying and looking after the woman's children. She asked the woman when she would be going back to school. That was the first time the woman slapped her. She also asked about her mother, but she was told to speak only when she was spoken to and that she was not allowed to make any friends.

Temitope George's daily routine involved getting up at 5 am, getting the children ready for school, taking them to school and collecting them, and doing the shopping, cleaning and cooking. If she went out on an errand, the woman who was holding her would spit on the floor and tell her that she had to be back before the spit had dried or she would be beaten. She ran everywhere as she was frightened of being late. She was beaten on a daily basis, she had her head flushed down the toilet, and she was often privy to what we believe were drug deals in the house. She also had a kettle of boiling water poured over her chest. The details are very distressing, but my constituent gave me permission before I came to the House today to share them. I have not shared them publicly before, although I have raised her case, and I am grateful for the work that has been done by the Home Office today.

Temitope George was terrified that she would be killed and that no one would know she was there. She was told that if she ran away, nobody would believe her and that there was nowhere for her to hide and she would not be found. She said that there were often men hanging around, and when she eventually escaped at the age of 17, she was homeless and spent some time on the streets. She was held at knifepoint and raped in north London. She eventually managed to escape to Livingston with her now husband. They started a new life there. They got jobs and had three beautiful children, but when she applied for indefinite leave to remain, she was told that she could not work and had to leave her job. Since the Home Office's intervention and the granting of temporary leave to remain, she and her husband have returned to work. Her husband recently won an award for social entrepreneurship. As I have said, it seems incredible in this day and age that anyone could face such persecution and terrible treatment. However, that has been the reality for my constituent and I ask the Minister to work with me and look again at my

[*Hannah Bardell*]

constituent's case because it is so distressing. She has spent a significant number of years in Livingston bringing up her children and contributing to society there.

The Scottish Government have done a huge amount of work on these issues and recently published their trafficking and exploitation strategy, which identifies how to support victims, find perpetrators and disrupt activity. I know that the Scottish Government are hugely committed to that work, and I would encourage the UK Government to look at the good examples that are being worked on there. It is the duty of all Members in this House, and indeed of all Governments, to do everything we possibly can. The flaws that exist within the legal system and in the Home Office are real, and these are real constituency cases. I hope that the Minister is listening to us and that she will do all that she can to ensure that the flaws in the system are sorted out.

2.5 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) on bringing this important debate to the House. It goes without saying that human trafficking, sexual exploitation, forced labour, organ harvesting and servitude—to name but a few forms of modern slavery—are criminally deplorable, and for many people they go unseen. It is for this House and for others to make it clear that slavery continues to exist at every level of our society, including in my constituency. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) said, in July this year the Avon and Somerset constabulary raided a nail bar in my constituency, arresting four people on suspicion of human trafficking and slavery offences. In greater Bristol, further such raids have taken place in recent months.

A constituent came to see me at one of my first constituency surgeries as a new MP. She was tearful, she had little English, and she was unable to communicate the sheer disempowerment and lack of dignity that she had suffered through sexual exploitation in another part of the country. However, thanks to the Modern Slavery Act 2015, the modern slavery helpline and other organisations, she was being supported, even though the visa process at the Home Office was going very slowly. I know that the Minister is aware of that case.

Car washes and nail bars are a common location for these activities, and vigilance and local knowledge are required. I share other Members' concern that the papers have reported a so-called backlash against the Avon and Somerset constabulary for raising this issue on social media in a way that communicates to people in their daily lives and asks them to keep an eye out for these activities. Along with my hon. Friends the Members for Bristol East and for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), I too have proudly painted my nails today in support of the Avon and Somerset police's "Let's Nail It" campaign. Perhaps I am the first male MP to have painted nails in the Chamber. I should add the cautionary note that this is not an endorsement for Eddie Izzard's candidacy for Labour's national executive committee.

We know that much more needs to be done, but in the face of continued severe cuts to our policing, the job is becoming more difficult. I often stand here and say that

Bristol is leading the way, and I am proud to say that that is also the case on this issue. In 2007-08, Andrew Wallis and friends in Bristol started conversations that led to the establishment of safe houses in 2011, a resettlement service in 2013, the Anti-Slavery Partnership in Bristol, and the headquarters of the national charity, Unseen, which now provides the national modern slavery hotline.

In true Bristol fashion, we are also innovating in the way we do things. As the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) has mentioned, the "Transparency in Supply Chains" report—the TISC report—is the world's largest open data register, helping to track and monitor compliance with the Modern Slavery Act 2015. It was built by Jaya Chakrabarti and friends in Bristol, and it provides a compliance solution that can prevent modern slavery. There is little point in legislating without enforcing. We have already heard about the difficulties for the police in enforcing the legislation in local communities due to funding cuts, and the TISC report has a growing list of more than 2,264 companies that continue not to comply with their reporting obligations under the Act. I do not know whether the Minister has seen the TISC Report, but if not, I would be happy to arrange for a copy to be sent to her. I hope that, in her summing up, she will set out what she will do to ensure that companies get in line, comply with the legislation and take this matter seriously.

Finally, I want to draw the Minister's attention to the issue of construction projects. Where projects are entirely privately funded, the checks and balances built into public procurement process are often bypassed, and with the use of sub-contractors who sub-contract to sub-contractors, or the use of umbrella companies who sign the deal but do not directly employ workers themselves, the situation becomes much more complex. It is often at the depths of the sub-contractor chain that exploitation can take place. I raise this matter because I have significant construction projects in or near my constituency, including energy plants, Hinckley Point C and its supply chain, tens of thousands of new homes, expanding retail projects and major infrastructure upgrades in Bristol. I understand from trade union officials, who play a vital role in checking whether exploitation is happening on the shop floor and on the ground, that there are concerns about unethical working practices in my constituency that, in their view, approach modern slavery. I am working with them on that.

Learning lessons from the Welsh Government, who have addressed unethical working practices and modern slavery together to create ethical workplaces for constituents, I will begin work on a new project next year that will seek to eradicate unethical working practices and modern slavery from my constituency. To the individuals and companies who exploit or enslave my constituents and to those that exploit and enslave others within my constituency, let me be clear: you are on notice; you are not welcome; and we and our partners will ensure that you are prosecuted. But in order to do that work properly, I must work with businesses, trade unions and community groups and with important innovations such as the TISC report. We need proper Government enforcement, proper funding for policing and proper support from the Home Office for those who have been enslaved. I make a final plea to the Minister to set out how the Government, in the face of all the challenges,

will ensure that the Modern Slavery Act—a good piece of legislation—is enforced properly and how we can work with partners to ensure that that is the case.

2.10 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): I appreciate the opportunity to speak in this debate on a subject that I feel strongly about. It gets to the very root of who and where we are as society. It tells us an awful lot about whether we truly are the peaceful, free and modern 21st-century democracy that we strive to be and support others to become and, as we have heard, there is much to be proud of. I am new to this place, but I am well aware of the 2015 Act that is under consideration today. It was described earlier as trail-blazing, and we should celebrate the fact that its protections for individuals are in law. We should celebrate the obligation for businesses to be transparent about modern slavery and the possible risk, and we should celebrate the greater legal powers for authorities to bring to justice those who do the awful things that we have heard about. However, as we celebrated Anti-Slavery Day last week, it is right to consider how the law is doing and how we can ensure that it delivers what we want it to. I therefore congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) on securing this debate, which I am proud to support, and on his work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on human trafficking and modern slavery, in which Members across the House and in the other place are active.

I want to focus on two things: awareness, and what we might do to the current legislation. I will start with awareness, because I have already learned something during the course of this discussion—as one would hope. The right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) highlighted a scheme that is apparently operating in my local diocese, so I will be seeking it out following this debate to see how I might be able to help. Having laid my ignorance on the table, I must say that I was shocked to read the results of the poll conducted by the Co-op group that show that one in five people in Britain have never heard of modern slavery and that two-thirds—this is critical—do not know how to spot the crime. Furthermore, the poll showed that a 10th of Britons think they may have come across a victim, yet half say they would not know how to react or who to talk to. That was a poll of 2,000 people, so something clearly must be done. There is a role for us, both here and as leaders in our community, but there is also an important role for businesses and local authorities to play in heightening awareness and using whatever power or influence they have to ensure that people know what is going on, how to spot it and what they might be able to do about it.

Local authorities seem a good place to start. Before I came to this place, I was a member of Nottingham City Council, and one of my special responsibilities was procurement. A monthly procurement committee sees an awful lot of important things commissioned from public, private and community and voluntary sector sources, and it is difficult to follow the pound through the process. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) said, it is difficult to know where things go next after the first commissioning process. Perhaps we could learn from the Welsh Assembly Government about their code of practice to ensure that

local authority leads are able to follow the money properly and ensure that things are not happening that they would not countenance.

Similarly, outside of statutory services, there are innovative employment programmes, such as the “Bright Future” programme of the Co-op and City Hearts, an anti-trafficking group, which aims to offer proper work to victims of modern slavery to enable them to get their lives back to normal and be treated properly. Those are the sorts of things that we can do around awareness, and I want to associate myself with the comments from across the House about the Prime Minister’s lead on the Modern Slavery Act. She hoped that we would reimagine the British dream and told us that it was

“time to forge a bold, new, confident role for ourselves on the world stage... Taking the lead on cracking down on modern slavery wherever it is found.”

Moving on to the Act, the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) said that she did not feel that the estimated 10,000 to 13,000 exploited people was accurate, and I share that view. The police think that it is the tip of the iceberg, and Britain’s anti-slavery tsar Kevin Hylands has described the estimate as far too low, so we know that we need to do more to find and help victims. A good place to start is to see whether the transparency obligation on any business operating in the UK with a global turnover of more than £36 million is working. I have been tabling written questions to Minister, not because I am seeking to show anyone up, but because I am trying to build up a picture of what has happened.

I know that the picture can vary in terms of how firms have treated that obligation and of what we as a Parliament understand as the aggregate impact. We need to look at the obligation and consider what we can do with the public sector. Is £36 million an effective threshold, for example? I am particularly concerned about the 2022 World cup in Qatar. At the moment, a loophole in the legislation means that there is no obligation to report on wholly owned subsidiaries operating overseas. People could be working on a construction project in Qatar, but there is no obligation to report on activities there, so firms may unwittingly be involved in things elsewhere that they would not countenance in Britain.

There are other things that we can do. Others have discussed the 45 days of support, but Scotland is moving to 90 days, so we should look to do the same or perhaps go further. We also need to put in statute what that offer of assistance and support ought to be so that there is no variation. As I said, we could also revisit the £36 million turnover threshold. Eventually—this touches on what my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West was saying—the other shoe has to drop for non-compliant companies. I might not say this myself, but I could understand it if people said that there should be some patience while firms get things right under this new, trail-blazing legislation. However, we are reaching the point by which accurate reports have to be completed, and the penalties for not doing so should be considerable. There is lots to do, and all those things would improve the legislation and our society’s approach to modern slavery.

The House may not know that I am one of the 38 Labour and Co-operative Members, and this topic is one of our key issues for this year and beyond. I will certainly be using my place in the Chamber, and all the other great opportunities that MPs have to raise matters

[Alex Norris]

both inside and outside the House, to ensure that we make the legislation as good as possible and that we shine light into the dark corners.

2.17 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) and his colleagues on securing this timely and important debate. I thank all the right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part today for their thoughtful and powerful speeches.

I recently had the pleasure of visiting the impressive International Slavery Museum in Liverpool, which powerfully, shockingly and bravely sets out the close links between that fantastic city and the abhorrent historical slave trade, with Liverpool ships transporting half the 3 million Africans carried across the Atlantic by British slavers. As we have heard, many would think that a museum is the only place that someone could still find slavery in the UK today, and if this debate has drawn attention to the ongoing existence of slavery, that is a good thing. I am sure that the painted nails of the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) will certainly help in that regard. It is genuinely beyond despairing that, 210 years after this Parliament voted to abolish the slave trade, we must face down a new and modern forms of slavery and trafficking.

We have heard already that the estimate of 10,000 to 13,000 victims in the UK is likely to be a grave underestimation. As others have eloquently outlined, the effect on each of those victims is immeasurable. We all hope that 2015 will be looked back upon as a turning point and as the year in which three different Parliaments with competency in this area took up that battle by passing legislation: here, then Holyrood, and then Stormont. That legislation has been widely praised and includes clear new offences, stronger powers, including over sentencing, prevention orders, risk orders, independent child advocates—the Minister may want to address when they are to be rolled out across England and Wales—and the duty to notify. All that makes a solid legislative platform on which to build.

Yet again, however, we have a salutary lesson that legislation in itself is not enough—just as the Slave Trade Abolition Act 1807 was only one step on the long route to ending the slave trade and slavery. In her one-year review, Caroline Haughey described the 2015 Act as

“inevitably a work in progress”,
but she noted that the Act

“has already had a positive impact on the response to slavery, and that it could have a far greater impact if used to its full potential.”

That is undoubtedly true.

I commend those who secured the debate for focusing on implementation. They could not have timed it any better, with Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary publishing its report earlier this week. One frustration with that report is that it almost feels as though the Haughey review has sat on a shelf and been allowed to gather dust. Haughey suggested that there is a need for specialism in police forces and that, for example, they should have single points of contact. She also pointed to the importance of intelligence capacity at regional,

national and international levels and the need for tailored training and, especially, for more frontline police and criminal justice staff. The HMIC report makes it clear that that is just not happening in far too many places.

Like Ms Haughey, the HMIC report found pockets of good practice—the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) referred to the Greater Manchester police force, which was strongly praised—but, overall, its conclusions cannot be described as anything other than incredibly disappointing. Victims are being let down at every stage, and police services need to do much more before they can be satisfied that they are responding coherently and successfully to modern slavery and human trafficking.

The four chief constables who appeared before the Home Affairs Committee this week acknowledged that the HMIC report has to be seen as a wake-up call, and I detect a willingness to address modern slavery. Two reviews have now set out what exactly has to be done, and we also need the Government to provide the resources and strategy to make it happen.

A huge range of issues have been raised today and, in my remaining time, I will briefly focus on two. First, what happens with the immigration rules if victims are discovered? The Select Committee on Work and Pensions published a report earlier this year that made powerful points about the complexity and dubiety of victims’ immigration status and its effect on their access to support after going through the referral process. Some people are recognised as refugees; a smaller number are non-EEA nationals who have obtained discretionary leave to remain without having to apply; and a similarly small number are EEA nationals who have been granted discretionary leave to remain, but only after applying. For many, there is no stability and lots of dubiety, particularly for EEA nationals, who will almost certainly find it impossible to show that they are exercising treaty rights here, which has a knock-on implication for their attempts to access benefits and support.

As Baroness Butler-Sloss told the Work and Pensions Committee, the lack of any form of automatic entitlement for victims of trafficking while they take even basic steps to rebuild their lives is a “ludicrous situation”. The anti-slavery commissioner pointed out to the Committee that there is precedent in the two years’ leave given to victims of modern slavery who are here under the immigration rules as domestic servants. Against that background, the Committee recommended that all confirmed victims of modern slavery be given at least one year’s leave to remain with recourse to benefits and services. I fully endorse that approach.

Apart from anything else, if imminent removal is a remotely realistic result of coming forward as a victim of trafficking, we will struggle to find any victims to support or any traffickers to prosecute. More generally, a stronger firewall needs to be established between bodies that are enforcing labour market standards and those that are enforcing immigration checks. The two often require vastly different approaches, leading to inconsistency. That will be an important issue for the new director of labour market enforcement.

Secondly, the hon. Members for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and for Erewash (Maggie Throup) mentioned supply chains and the statements required from companies with a turnover of more than £36 million—that is one of the few provisions in the 2015 Act that applies across the UK. It is clear that those statements need to be

significantly strengthened. Even by Home Office estimates, less than a third of companies that should be publishing statements are doing so. There must be a requirement to file the statements with a public authority and much greater clarity on what is required. Nil returns cannot be acceptable; otherwise these provisions will prove to be barely worth the paper on which they are written.

The 2015 Act is a welcome start, but it is only a start. If it is to become the turning point that we all hope it can be, efforts, strategies and resources need to be stepped up.

2.24 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I am delighted to take part in today's debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee and particularly the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), who led us off so powerfully, for providing us with the opportunity to debate the implementation of the Modern Slavery Act 2015. There have been many fantastic contributions from both sides of the House, including by my hon. Friends the Members for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) and for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald). I also thank the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) for sharing her extraordinarily powerful experiences of working in this sector. The debate is better for her participation.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East said, we sometimes allow ourselves to believe that human trafficking and exploitation takes place in some other country, in some other culture and in some other time and place. However, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston, it is happening throughout our communities, and we all have a role in ending this exploitation.

The perfectly laudable Modern Slavery Act aims to rid the world of modern slavery, including commercial sexual abuse, forced unpaid labour, domestic servitude and organ removal. We are shocked when we hear about those crimes on the news, but we are deeply wrong and misguided if we allow ourselves to believe that human trafficking and exploitation do not take place here at home.

Two thirds of trafficking victims are women. However, human trafficking is committed against men, women, boys and girls, and it does not take account of a person's nationality or citizenship. Indeed, travelling from one place to another is not a required action for there to be an offence of human trafficking in Scotland, and it does not matter whether the victim has consented.

Statistics from the National Crime Agency report that 3,805 potential victims were submitted to the national referral mechanism—the framework for identifying victims of trafficking or modern slavery—in 2016. As the hon. Member for Gedling said, that was a 17% increase on the previous year. Of those 3,805 victims in 2016, 150 were from Scotland, 123 from Wales and 33 from Northern Ireland. Behind those damning statistics are horrifying stories of lives being destroyed, of women being abused, of children being sexually exploited and of workers being forced to work without pay through fear of the consequences if they refuse.

Unfortunately, despite the implementation of the 2015 Act, the National Crime Agency warns about the scale of modern slavery and has stated that it is “far

more prevalent” than previously estimated, with alleged victims as young as 12 being sold and exploited. However, the police seem to be failing or are unable to tackle the issue. I can accept the police in England and Wales are under Government funding pressures, but I am concerned that police forces are failing to recognise the crimes that make up modern slavery. That is leaving victims unprotected from the actions of those who would take advantage of them.

As has been mentioned, a recent report by Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary states rather bluntly that victims of modern slavery are being let down at every stage. The police are not investigating cases quickly enough, allowing the prolongation of abuse, with some referred victims also being dismissed at the start due to assumptions about their citizenship. I cannot believe that when a case of slavery is suspected, the authorities' first response is to check the victim's passport and immigration status, rather than providing a helping hand to stop the abhorrent abuse.

Cases of slavery or suspected slavery are also being closed without inquiries being made, and in some cases detectives have not even spoken to victims. Wendy Williams, the inspector of constabulary, spoke on this issue:

“We found inconsistent, even ineffective, identification of victims and investigations closed prematurely. As a result, victims were being left unprotected, leaving perpetrators free to continue to exploit people as commodities.”

That is simply not good enough. We are failing those who need our help the most.

The Prime Minister previously vowed that Britain would lead the world in ridding the problem of modern slavery. How close are we to achieving that admirable aim when, first, the problem is increasing and, secondly, we fail to take action when modern slavery is reported to the appropriate authorities? Although the Government's intention to rid the world of modern slavery is laudable, we should be concerned that the implementation of that vision is failing.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the white ribbon campaign, I take pride in being part of an international movement that stresses the important role that men can play in ending the abuse that too many women and girls face on a daily basis. Gender-based violence, including the abhorrent acts of trafficking and exploitation, affects every society, and we all have a moral responsibility to create a society where it is consigned to the history books.

Unfortunately, a rapid Brexit, particularly a no-deal Brexit, may have consequences for the Government's ability to protect people from being the victim of modern slavery practices. A report by *The Independent* suggested that Brexit could dramatically curtail efforts by the police service to tackle slavery and human trafficking. Tamara Barnett, from the Human Trafficking Foundation, says that many lawyers working in this field make use of the EU to defend victims of trafficking because of the lack of safeguards provided in the Modern Slavery Act. Brexit will also make it harder for the UK to work with other EU partners to resolve the crimes that take place across national boundaries.

The 2005 convention on action against trafficking in human beings was a great example of European countries working together to protect people from being caught

[Gavin Newlands]

up in trafficking. Ryan Mahan, of the campaign group Every Child Protected Against Trafficking, has spoken about the importance of this law:

“Almost every significant trafficking victim-protection provision we have in law and policy in the UK has been implemented as a direct result of the Convention.”

Brexit will undoubtedly make it harder for us to tackle this issue, so, as other Members have mentioned, the Prime Minister has to guarantee that that security co-operation will continue following our exit from the EU. This must be a crucial part of the negotiations.

In Scotland, we are also taking seriously our responsibility to seeing a world free from modern slavery. The Scottish Parliament unanimously passed the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015, whose overarching objective is to consolidate and strengthen the existing criminal law against human trafficking and exploitation and to enhance the status of and support for its victims. The Act also strengthened the penalties that can be passed down, adopting a maximum penalty of life in prison.

Earlier this year, the Scottish Government published their “Trafficking and Exploitation Strategy”, which sets out how our country intends to eliminate this abhorrent crime from our society. It was developed in partnership with support groups and those who have survived human trafficking offences and aims to identify and support victims; detect perpetrators and disrupt activity; and address the conditions that foster trafficking. By listening and learning from victims themselves, the Scottish Government have been able to capture the physical and psychological damage caused by trafficking. This new strategy has been welcomed by important stakeholders, including Lord Advocate James Wolffe, who said:

“We welcome the publication of the Trafficking and Exploitation Strategy. Human trafficking is a serious and complex crime that presents unique challenges to investigators and prosecutors. This strategy will work hand in hand with the tools we have at our disposal to tackle this abhorrent trade”.

As the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) said, the Scottish Government have also recently announced that the period of support for victims of trafficking in Scotland will be doubled to 90 days, demonstrating that Scotland is again leading the way in protecting the most vulnerable members of our society. The victims of human trafficking have been calling for that, and I encourage the UK Government to follow Scotland’s lead.

In conclusion, this has been a consensual yet challenging debate. One of the scandals of the modern age is that we have to debate this at all. Everyone—children, women and men, UK national or not—can be affected by these sick and abhorrent crimes. We should all be deeply concerned that this is still happening and furthermore that the problem is actually growing. Our response to helping those who are being abused is coming up short. Today’s debate should serve as a wake-up call for us to do more to rid our society and, indeed, the world of modern slavery.

2.33 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): I wish to start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) on not only securing today’s

debate, but the excellent way he takes a lead on this important issue. I also congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) and for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) on their excellent contributions today. I pay special tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) and the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) for bringing the real-life consequences of the evil practice of slavery into the Chamber today.

When this House passed the Modern Slavery Act 2015 it was a landmark piece of legislation that provided leadership on a global scale. However, the lack of subsequent legislation has meant that it now risks becoming less effective on key issues of the fight against modern slavery. I will start by setting the scene: 45.8 million people are enslaved worldwide—this can mean anything from forced labour to forced marriage and forced sexual exploitation. In the UK, one of the most well developed countries in the world, an estimated 13,000 people are in modern-day slavery—that is far too many.

As was mentioned by the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup), companies that have made statements under section 54 of the Act are in the minority; the majority have not done so. Where they have made a statement, the quality ranges from the very good—I would specifically name Marks & Spencer and the Co-operative here—to the almost worthless. Yet, Ministers have done nothing to address this, leaving businesses free to carry on and take no action, despite what this House legislated for. We must put into place a regime where this House can be confident that its wishes, as expressed, and the commitments in the Modern Slavery Act, will be fulfilled. So I ask the Minister: when will the Government publish a list of all companies that should be producing statements on their modern slavery policies?

We all acknowledge that the police do a fantastic job when they protect and rescue individuals from slavery, but the HMIC report published earlier this week was a stark reality check for us all. The report tells us that all too often the trafficker’s threats to the victims—that they have no means of escape, as they will not be believed—have sadly become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The report’s biggest critique was that policing against modern slavery and human trafficking is reactive rather than proactive, so more must be done to support vulnerable people to ensure that they will not be placed in the hands of traffickers. It is vital that we learn how traffickers prey on their victims, so that we are able to be more effective with preventions and protections. Does the Minister agree that there is a real need to improve training for the police, to help them better understand how to identify victims and how best to respond to issues?

I want to move on to the problematic national referral mechanism. Adults are required to consent to their referral, but without appropriate funding, support and accommodation, and a suitable environment where they can get proper advice to allow them to make informed decisions, far too many turn to homelessness or, even worse, return to their traffickers. All too often, NRM forms are rushed, just to make sure that the person concerned has access to accommodation. That means that some forms are incomplete or contain inaccurate information, undermining the individual’s credibility. Legal advice and representation must be offered early

to all potential victims, to support them in understanding their rights, and in giving them access to justice and a real opportunity to move on with their lives. Government support is withdrawn quickly after a conclusive groundwork decision is made, and non-governmental organisations are all too often having to pick up the pieces because of a lack of resources and awareness among local authorities. Safe house accommodation should be more flexible, with support diminishing gradually according to an individual's needs; they should not just have the rug pulled from under them.

Not only is this lack of support detrimental to the individuals, but it makes it difficult for police and prosecutors to do their job. Police have spoken about losing survivors due to the lack of support, and NGOs have spoken about anxiety caused by an insecure immigration status and how that prevents survivors in dealing with their traumatic experiences. Victims are entitled to only 45 days of NRM support following rescue, and that is simply not enough. Regardless of how well organised that 45 days' support is, it is still not enough. Many of those rescued want to regain control of their lives through schemes such as the Co-op's "Bright Future" project, which gives them a pathway back to paid employment, but they cannot do so because either they have not had the support to get them ready for work or they do not have the legal right to work.

Victims continue to be denied access to the vital services that they need to recover and rebuild their lives. Authorities often prioritise immigration control over the safety of victims. That can leave adults and children vulnerable to going missing. Traffickers see these individuals as vulnerable, and they exploit the existing system using evil and despicable practices. I welcome the fact that the NRM is being reformed, but I hope that during the reform process organisations such as the Human Trafficking Foundation, ECPAT UK and UNICEF are listened to and their advice heeded.

Slavery touches our lives every day, whether we know it or not. No country is free from this horrific crime and no one is safe: women, men, youngsters and, worse still, children are vulnerable. Exploitation on any level is unjustifiable, but when it involves a child it is chillingly deplorable. I have a huge concern that no specialist support or accommodation for trafficked children is available under the NRM. I urge the Minister to address that as a matter of urgency.

We passed the legislation two years ago, but it has been left to go stale, through a lack of enforcement, additional legislation or desire. Victims of modern slavery and trafficking are still being criminalised for crimes they were forced to commit. There is no clear pathway or continuity of support for victims, and the inconsistent training and co-ordination of services that are in place to protect them can be a hindrance because of a lack of knowledge, appropriate training and funding.

We are dealing with the most vulnerable individuals. This is a modern scourge with historical roots. Too many people rely on us to protect them from danger and to offer them support, so we must make sure that the service we offer is robust, reliable and effective.

2.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald

(Mrs Grant) and the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) for securing this really important debate, and I am delighted that Anthony Steen is present.

As the Prime Minister has said, slavery is the gravest human rights abuse of our time, and we all share a moral duty to stamp it out. That duty really should transcend party politics. We have come a long way in the two years since the Prime Minister introduced the Modern Slavery Act, but the Government absolutely recognise that we are on a journey, and there is much more that we want to do.

I have very little time to respond to the debate, so I shall concentrate on reforms to the national referral mechanism, because I wish to make some important announcements. I will, though, get back to colleagues who have raised very important points, and I will continue to work with the all-party group. I look forward to further meetings to discuss further reforms in more detail.

Following the meeting of the modern slavery taskforce last week, several improvements to the NRM were announced. To improve the decision-making process, a new single, expert unit will be created in the Home Office to make decisions about whether someone is a victim of modern slavery. An independent panel of experts will be created to review all negative decisions, adding significantly to the scrutiny that such cases currently receive. A new digital system will be developed to support the NRM process, to make it easier for those on the front line to refer victims for support and to enable data to be captured and analysed to better aid prevention and law enforcement.

There are things we want to do to improve support for adults before, during and after the NRM process. It is paramount that victims' rights and entitlements are robustly protected, which is why the Government will invoke section 50 of the Modern Slavery Act and set out in regulations the support to which victims are entitled. We will also launch a consultation on the preparation of statutory guidance under section 48 of the Act on the identification of and support for victims of slavery. Such a regulatory framework will ensure that victims know what they are entitled to, and that those who work with victims are clear on their roles and responsibilities.

It is vital that victims have access to support immediately upon their rescue from situations of exploitation. The Government are introducing places of safety for adult victims for the first three days after they are identified by public authorities, before they make a decision about whether they want to enter the NRM. During that period, potential victims will receive advice and support to ensure that they understand their options and what entering the NRM will mean for them. If a potential victim opts to enter the NRM, we must ensure that the care they receive is consistent and meets minimum standards, regardless of where in the country they are being cared for. That is why the Government will adopt the Human Trafficking Foundation's trafficking survivor care standards as a minimum standard for victim support.

Moving on from the NRM can be a challenging and difficult time for some victims as they leave the security and sanctuary of a safe house and reintegrate into society in the UK or return home. In many cases, the existing 14-day move-on support period does not give enough time for support to be provided properly, so we

[Sarah Newton]

will extend the period to 45 days, thereby guaranteeing that confirmed victims will receive a minimum of 90 days of Government-funded support. Further, we will extend by a week the period of support for those who are not confirmed as victims, making it nine days. For all confirmed victims who have left the NRM, we will run weekly drop-in centres in partnership with the Salvation Army, so that victims can continue to receive ongoing support and advice.

As part of the refocus I have described, and to enrich the support we give to victims, we wish to make sure that we consider the victims who are in the asylum system. As Members will know, and as was said in the debate, a vast number of victims of slavery are identified by UK Visas and Immigration staff when they are looking through applications and spot people who might also be victims of slavery. It is important that we ensure consistency among people receiving comparable Government support, with respect to their day-to-day living expenses, while also ensuring that the victims of modern slavery receive specialist services, regardless of where they are accommodated, to enable them to begin to recover and rebuild their lives. For those victims of modern slavery who are in asylum accommodation, specialist services are provided through identified outreach support workers, who ensure that victims receive the same expert counselling, medical care, legal aid and other assistance as they would if they were in NRM safe houses.

As we move towards the implementation of the specific improvements to the specialist support arrangements available to all victims of modern slavery that I have announced today, we also plan to align the arrangements for covering basic living costs with those in place for asylum seekers, while continuing to ensure that the specific additional needs of certain people are catered for. We want to build on our work to identify victims of modern slavery properly, so we will also consult on strengthening the first responder role, by among other things looking at the criteria for becoming a responder and making sure they are properly trained.

Lastly, on our final objective, we want to improve the support for child victims. We will continue to roll out the independent child trafficking advocates nationally and to test new and innovative ways of supporting trafficked children, including specialist accommodation. The £2.2 million we granted as part of the child trafficking protection fund will test what specialist support for children works. We will also consider how to make the NRM decision-making process as child friendly as possible, including by looking at how we communicate NRM decisions to children.

We believe that this package of reform will significantly improve the current NRM and put victims' needs at the centre of the process. We are grateful for the work of the Work and Pensions Select Committee, the Independent Anti-slavery Commissioner, organisations across the third sector and indeed Members of this House. As we deliver the changes I have announced today, I will work with those organisations and Members to ensure that victims experience these improvements as soon as possible. I want no one in the House to be in any doubt that the Government are totally dedicated to preventing this appalling global trade in human misery and to ensuring that victims of modern slavery receive the support they need and that offenders are brought to justice.

We have today heard examples of the great work being done around the country to raise awareness of modern slavery and sent out powerful messages that, despite all our differences on many other issues, the House of Commons is united and committed to ending modern slavery. We in this House and those beyond the Chamber all have a role to play. It is clear to me that only by working together can we stamp out this most horrendous crime against our shared humanity.

2.51 pm

Vernon Coaker: I thank everyone who has taken the time to contribute to this massively important debate from across the country. I also welcome the Minister's comments and the reforms she has announced—I think I have had a greater impact as co-chair of the all-party group than I had as policing Minister. [Laughter.] The serious point is that the changes she announced to the NRM, particularly around the extension of the period for which support will be available, are very important. Other extremely important changes are those around aligning the living costs available to victims vis-à-vis people in the asylum system and around awareness raising, particularly with respect to first responders.

There are other things, of course, that arose in the debate that we will need to discuss, but for now I just want to thank the Minister for her response and to say to her that the all-party group will continue to challenge the Government, not because we wish to be underhand, but because it is only by challenge that we can address what we all agree is a heinous crime. As we speak, there are still unknown thousands of children, women and men in sexual or labour exploitation. It is 2017, not 200 years ago during the abolition debate. We need to do more. The Minister has made some welcome comments today, and the House is united in doing all it can to stamp out this modern scourge.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the implementation of the Modern Slavery Act 2015.

Global LGBT Rights

2.53 pm

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered global LGBT rights.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to this debate, which was proposed by members of the all-party parliamentary group on global lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights, which I have the honour to chair.

This is a tale of two worlds. In one, as we saw in this House, we have seen the near completion of rights for LGBT people, full recognition in law—with some exceptions, of course, throughout the UK—culminating, four years ago, in the passing of same-sex marriage legislation by overwhelming majorities in this House and the other place. In a 16-year period, 25 countries around the world have passed same-sex marriage legislation, while others have passed legislation recognising civil partnerships. Taiwan became the latest to do so this year. We hope that Australia will follow suit soon, if that is the will of the people. It is noticeable that only Japan among the G7 countries does not have recognition of same-sex marriage. All the other G7 countries now do. Italy has recognition of civil unions.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing this very important debate. He mentioned Australia—I add my support to those campaigning for same-sex marriage there—which is a key member of the Commonwealth. We will be holding the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting here in the UK. Indeed, this morning I received a card from the Commonwealth Parliamentarians' Forum, but I was a bit disappointed not to see the specific mention of LGBT+ rights on the agenda for discussion. Does he agree that the meeting of CHOGM and the Commonwealth Parliamentarians' Forum provides a great opportunity to raise these issues with our Commonwealth partners?

Nick Herbert: I strongly agree with the hon. Gentleman. It is important not least because of the health and equality issues that are raised, which he will know in his capacity as chair of the all-party group on HIV/AIDS. It will come on to CHOGM shortly.

There is another world, too. I am talking about a world in which 75 countries criminalise same-sex activity between consenting adults. That covers 2.9 billion people. Some 40% of the world's population live in these jurisdictions, which means that more than 400 million people live under laws that punish same-sex activity, and punish it with the death penalty. Our all-party group was keen to secure this debate now because of the events in a number of countries last month, during the conference recess. What happened was a matter of grave concern.

In Azerbaijan, during the last two weeks of September, organised police raids led to mass arrests of perceived gay and bi men as well as trans women in the capital, Baku. The authorities claim that the arrests were made as part of a crackdown on prostitution, but activists and the victims' lawyers claim that LGBT people were specifically targeted. While in detention, victims report being subjected to beatings, electric shock torture, forced medical examinations and other degrading treatment

and ill-treatment. The majority of the detainees were charged with disobeying police orders, which is an administrative offence, and sentenced to between five and 20 days in custody. The country's own Ministry of Internal Affairs stated that 83 people were detained in total.

The ambassador of the Republic of Azerbaijan noted that we were calling this debate and wrote to me this week. Let me quote what he says:

"I can reassure you that this was not a concerted effort to crack down on the LGBT community, but rather a police action to stop solicitation of sexual services in downtown Baku following complaints from local residents. It may be that some within the local police force acted over-zealously and exceeded their mandate. As soon as the appropriate authorities were made aware of this the police operation was stopped and all those detained were released.

I would like to reiterate that the Azerbaijani constitution guarantees all forms of freedom of expression. Same-sex sexual activity for both men and women has been decriminalised in Azerbaijan since September 1st 2000."

That does not deal properly with the situation. Local groups have reported that, since the initial raids, the authorities continue to intimidate and harass people whom they perceive to be LGBT. It is very important that this House, and I hope the Government, send a very clear message to the Azerbaijani Government that that kind of oppression is unacceptable in the eyes of the global community.

This House heard an urgent question earlier this year about the terrible situation in Chechnya, with arbitrary arrests and the illegal detention and torture of LGBT people. That continues to take place as part of a wider crackdown on human rights, despite the protests that have been made to the Russian authorities.

In Egypt, more than 50 people have been arrested in response to the flying of rainbow flags at a pop concert in Cairo on 22 September. That act alone resulted in arrests. The victims stand accused of debauchery, inciting debauchery, promoting sexual deviance and belonging to a banned group—charges that carry up to 15 years in prison. Many have already been sentenced. Victims report being subject to beatings, sexual harassment and forced anal examinations while in detention.

Although same-sex conduct is not explicitly prohibited in Egypt, the Egyptian Parliament is now debating criminalising homosexuality with a proposed punishment of up to 15 years in prison. What are Her Majesty's Government saying to the Egyptian authorities and Government about this terrible abuse of gay people for committing what we in this country would regard as no crime at all, but simply the freedom of expression of flying a flag? I was struck by a message sent to me by a young gay man living in Egypt who attended that concert. He said:

"I can hear those consistent steps. Coming closer. Fear. Is it happening? Fear. Are they coming for me?...This has been the most common stream of thoughts during the past weeks in Cairo. The thought of being arrested would not leave my mind ever since the recent escalation of the state in its crackdown on the LGBTQs in Egypt. Fear that has, more or less, accompanied me for a life time as a gay man in Egypt. It is heartbreaking to wake up everyday to a new chapter of fighting for your right to exist, just to be."

These are not isolated cases. Attacks on freedom of expression and association of LGBT people are widespread in other countries. State action, in turn, licenses discrimination at best, violence at worse and a climate of fear under which LGBT people have to live.

[Nick Herbert]

In June 2013, the Russia Duma unanimously adopted, and President Putin signed, a nationwide law banning the distribution of propaganda for non-traditional sexual relations—often the excuse for measures that discriminate against LGBT people. Since the introduction of that Russian law, 14 countries have considered similar legislation in eastern Europe, central Asia and Africa.

Nigeria's Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act 2013 criminalises the formation, operation and support of gay clubs, societies and organisations, with sentences of up to 10 years' imprisonment. Uganda's Parliament passed a similar act—the Anti-Homosexuality Act 2014—which would have prohibited the promotion of homosexuality by individuals and organisations, incurring penalties of up to seven years' imprisonment. That has now been revoked, but Uganda's Pride had to be cancelled this year as a consequence of the actions of the state and the police, who were absolutely determined that that expression should not take place.

It is sometimes suggested that the UK may be guilty of some kind of neo-colonialism by seeking to impose our views on countries in the same way as we did in the past. It is true that 40 of the 53 member states of the Commonwealth criminalised same-sex activity using legislation inherited from the British empire. I would argue that our history gives us a special responsibility to atone for the measures that we introduced, and to act. That view is shared by the Prime Minister, who—I am delighted to say—said last week at the *PinkNews* awards that, on the world stage, the Government are

“standing up for LGBT rights, and challenging at the highest level those governments which allow or inflict discrimination or abuse. The anti-LGBT laws which remain in some Commonwealth countries are a legacy of Britain's Colonial past, so the UK government has a special responsibility to help change hearts and minds. We will ensure these important issues are discussed at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, which we are hosting in London next April.”

That is immensely welcome.

Only this week, the Commonwealth Equality Network of activists and non-governmental organisations is meeting in Malta to discuss how to reverse the oppression of gay people in too many Commonwealth countries. The stand that the Prime Minister has taken and the Government will take at CHOGM next year is very important. After all, what many of these countries are doing is in breach of the Commonwealth charter itself. Indeed, outside the Commonwealth, every country has signed up to the United Nations declaration of human rights—rights that guarantee liberty, freedom of expression and freedom from torture and oppression. That is why it is so important that we continue to support campaigns run by United Nations institutions, such as the Free & Equal campaign, as well as other multinational initiatives, such as the Equal Rights Coalition, which was launched last year with UK Government support. It now incorporates 29 Governments, who co-operate and share information, but it needs the continuing and active support of the UK Government.

I would argue that the UK Government, who have done a great deal in this area, can do much more, and I welcome the Prime Minister's commitment to a high-level challenge. The all-party parliamentary group produced a report last year and made a number of specific

recommendations on what the Government could do. First, they could adopt a cross-departmental strategy to ensure that all parts of the Government are co-ordinated and take the necessary steps, so that they can take a stance and promote the values that we in this country think are important. There are multiple actors—the Department for International Development, the Foreign Office, the Department of Health and the Home Office—and it is important that they are co-ordinated. I welcome the presence here of the Minister for Equalities, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb); he is a Minister in a domestic UK Department, but I nevertheless recognise his cross-cutting responsibility for these issues, and that co-ordination is important.

Secondly—this is perhaps one of the most important things of all—there is the funding that can be provided for LGBT activist groups on the ground. These are vulnerable, fragile groups, which are run by very brave activists in countries across sub-Saharan Africa, in Russia and in other countries that we have discussed and will discuss. They need support, and the support they can be given—yes, by private individuals and foundations, but also by the British Government—is immensely important. It is important that those funding streams that can be directed through British high commissions and embassies are maintained.

Thirdly, we should ensure that safe routes are given to people who flee persecution—particularly when they are applying for asylum—in the way that was done in countries such as Canada and other European countries in relation to the LGBT people who were so egregiously persecuted in Chechnya.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for bringing this important debate to the House. On the point about funding, does he agree that it is great to see so many corporate organisations supporting the Big Pride celebrations across the UK and globally, but they, too, need to think about how they can direct some of that funding and support to local groups across the UK and the world?

Nick Herbert: I thank the hon. Lady. I was coming to that point, but she has made it very effectively for me.

I will draw my remarks to a conclusion because others wish to get in. My central point is that we see terrible abuses of LGBT people globally, but change can be effected, and we should not be despondent about that. In Uganda, partly because of the influence of the World Bank, which was considering granting an important loan to the country, the President was prevailed on not to implement the law the Parliament had passed, which would have oppressed gay people. In Belize, a legal challenge has resulted in protection for LGBT people. In Mozambique, legislation has effected the same thing. We can effect change.

The United Kingdom has a really important role. We are still the fifth largest economy in the world. We have a global reach. We have important historic ties across the world, not least through the Commonwealth. We have one of the largest aid budgets in the world and the massive opportunity to exercise soft power and influence. In Cairo, the crackdown on gay people began when they flew the rainbow flag, and the flying of the rainbow flag over our own Parliament and our own Government

buildings sends an important signal about an attachment to freedom and a belief in liberty and equality. We should not underestimate the fact that taking such a stance is not trite and not trivial. It matters. It matters in the eyes of the communities and activists who are looking for our support in other countries. People will be watching this debate, and they want to know that this House supports these communities on a cross-party basis and that the British Government supports them. We are talking about thousands of activists and millions of people. Let freedom ring for them!

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I call Kerry McCarthy with a seven-minute limit.

3.9 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I hope that I will not take as long as that.

I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) for his very powerful speech. He has been a tour de force in championing this issue. I really do hope that we have genuine cross-party co-operation on this—there is absolutely no reason why we should not.

I pay tribute to the countries that have made progress, and to the very brave activists in those countries who have, in some cases, even lost their lives because of standing up for LGBT rights. I think of David Kato, who set up Sexual Minorities Uganda and who was brutally murdered in 2011. We know the reaction of the Ugandan Government, with newspaper headlines more or less calling for people to hunt down and lynch homosexual men in the streets. There was very much a climate of fear, so it was incredibly brave of him and his successor, Dr Frank Mugisha, who now runs Sexual Minorities Uganda, to speak up. When I met Frank, he said that the handful of openly gay people in Uganda could almost be counted on the fingers of two hands because so few people were willing to come forward. We then had the proposals to introduce the death penalty for such people.

This debate is often couched in terms of saying, “We don’t mind what you do in the privacy of your own homes—the problem is when you promote it and start talking about these issues in front of children.” That is a very pernicious angle to take, because, in effect, it prevents people from leading their lives freely, openly, and without fear of persecution.

Another activist, Eric Lembembe in Cameroon, who was murdered in 2013, spoke of

“a climate of hatred and bigotry”

in his country

“which extends to high levels in government”

and

“reassures homophobes that they can get away with these crimes.”

Two weeks later, he was tortured and murdered. The right hon. Gentleman has spoken eloquently about some of the persecution that has been suffered by activists in countries such as Egypt and Uganda, and the suppression of Pride last year.

I want to talk briefly about what leverage we have. Certainly, our membership of the Commonwealth should give us enormous influence. I spoke at the Commonwealth

Parliamentary Association conference a few years ago when I was the shadow Foreign Office human rights Minister. I came across the tricky issue where it felt slightly like people from the white countries, to put it very crudely, were preaching to people from the African countries. Somebody said to me, “You came over to our country and told us that homosexuality was wrong. You sent the missionaries over. You preached the Bible to us. You showed us where it said that these customs and practices”—which had actually been tolerated then in Uganda and some other countries—“were wrong, and now you’re coming back and telling us, ‘Hang on, we got it wrong that time—you’ve now got to start accepting our norms.’” There is a real concern about being seen as a colonial force in doing that.

There is also the issue of how this fits into the debate about freedom of religion and belief. We have heard about that in this House before. Yes, people should be free to express their religious views and beliefs, but they should not be able, through expressing those views, to promote persecution of homosexuality or bigotry towards people from the LGBT community. Too often it is used as an excuse.

The leverage we have other than through the Commonwealth is through our trading relations with other countries. In autumn 2013, the coalition Government launched, with a great fanfare, their business and human rights action plan. The then Foreign Secretary, Lord Hague, spoke of how he wanted to mesh the two and said that business and human rights should not be separate but integral. He was almost talking about an ethical foreign policy. Since then, it has been really disappointing that that action plan appears to have been shelved and is not spoken about. Two years ago, the permanent secretary to the Foreign Office gave evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee, and he admitted that human rights were no longer a priority for his Department, saying that far more resources were going into pursuing trade deals. I think that the Foreign Office dropped the specific branches of its human rights activity in favour of some very vague priorities. At the time, human rights groups described his comments as being as

“astonishing as they were alarming”.

That was obviously before Brexit. Now that we are entering a world in which we will be pursuing ever more vigorously trade deals and new business relationships with overseas countries, human rights absolutely need to be back at the heart of our conversations. I have asked so many questions of Ministers about what they say about human rights when they go to countries like Saudi Arabia, and I get back very vague answers saying, “Nothing was off the table”, or, “A range of issues were discussed”. Clearly, if they were discussed at all, it was left to some minor official from the Foreign Office to mention them in passing at a meeting, just so that box could be ticked.

It is really disappointing that the business and human rights action plan seems to have been sidelined and is not on the International Trade Secretary’s radar at all. When we go to countries that have a dreadful record on human rights and on LGBT issues in particular, we need to be having that conversation. We have to put that on the table and say it is unacceptable. Even LGBT employees of British companies going to work in countries with such dreadful records are not safe. I hope that we will take up that agenda as a group.

3.15 pm

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): It is a great honour to follow the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy). I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) on moving the motion.

We have come a long way over the years—this country, this Parliament and even myself. Growing up in Swansea, I wondered whether it was braver of me to come out as a Conservative or gay. I have tried both and it does not seem to have done me any harm. Look at the journey we have made even in this Parliament: that we have more openly gay Members of Parliament than any other Parliament in the world is a fantastic thing of which we should be proud. I congratulate the Scottish National party, which has the highest percentage of openly gay MPs.

I remember David Cameron, when he was the Prime Minister, asking me, “When are you going to become Speaker of the House of Commons?” I said, “Well, Prime Minister...” and he said, “You’d be the first gay Speaker.” I replied, “I don’t think so, Prime Minister. I suspect there’s been a few others.” [*Laughter.*] We know at least one Deputy Speaker was gay. In 2010, when I was in the Speaker’s apartments for that fantastic reception when I came out as gay, I said to the Speaker, “The only thing more gay than me is the apartments.”

Each and every one of us who comes out as gay, and each and every one of us who is not gay but who speaks up for LGBT+ rights, is vitally important throughout the world. We all know that there are people living in fear of persecution for being gay. In some cases, it is not about having fulfilling lives, but about being fearful for their lives. That is appalling. We have already heard the number of countries where being gay is a capital offence, and on too many occasions we sadly read in our newspapers about people being pushed off the top of tall buildings, simply for the “crime” of being gay.

I remember in a Westminster Hall debate talking about the two young people in Iran I had read about in a Sunday magazine. They were teenagers—16 or 17—and they were strung up for being gay. At an Inter-Parliamentary Union meeting, I confronted the Iranian delegation, asking, “Why is it that young gay people are being executed in Iran?” They said, “Well, if it’s done in private, nobody knows, but if it’s public, they will be tortured.” They actually used the word “tortured”. I was so angry. I said, “Yes, you tortured them first, then you hanged them.” That is totally unforgivable.

My own party has not always been as liberal towards LGBT+ rights as it is now. At selection meetings, the question was always asked, “Is there anything in your cupboard?” When he was asked that question, Alan Clark replied, “I couldn’t get anything more in my cupboard,” which I thought was rather brave of him—he still got selected, of course. That question is not asked any more. In fact, it is not only the Conservative party that has come a long way on these issues; I think it is almost—not quite—compulsory to be gay to get selected.

My right hon. Friend mentioned Taiwan. I chair the all-party group on Taiwan and I was there just a couple of months ago as a guest—it is in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I am proud of what the Taiwanese have done. Australia is going through the same process now. I believe that the chief executive

officer of Qantas has been named as the most influential LGBT person in the world for speaking up rather bravely. Sadly, a lot of CEOs are afraid to come out as gay.

The situation is exactly the same in the world of sport, particularly football. I just wish that more sportsmen who are gay would be as brave as Tom Daley and come out, because that would send a massive signal. A lot of Commonwealth countries are obsessed with football, and if only more sportsmen were prepared to do that, it would send absolutely the right signals.

In the world of politics, I am proud that former Prime Ministers of Iceland and Belgium, and the current Prime Ministers of Luxembourg, Ireland and Serbia, are all gay. That also sends the right signals.

I have just returned from an Inter-Parliamentary Union conference in Russia, where the human rights sub-committee decided to raise at next year’s Geneva conference what Parliaments can do to stop LGBT+ discrimination. It was wonderful. The chairwoman was from Botswana and said how important it was to discuss the issue. We were not passing a resolution; we just wanted a debate. A number of countries spoke in favour, including MPs from Cuba and Malaysia, and said, “Yes, let’s talk about this. It’s an important issue.” The proposal was passed, but then right at the last moment it was defeated in the full plenary, when most people had started to go home. Politicians from countries such as Iran, Uganda and Morocco banged the table and said, “This can’t be discussed or debated.” It is appalling that politicians from those countries and others banged the table and said that they were not even prepared to discuss LGBT+ discrimination and what their Parliaments can do about it. That just shows how far we have to go.

And what about that incident in the United Arab Emirates the other day, when that chap ended up being prosecuted for bumping into somebody and touching them on the hip? I mean, come on—this is the 21st century! Fortunately, he is home now, but that incident did not do the UAE any good. I cannot imagine that many gay people will want to go there in the future.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): It is not just LGBT people who might not want to go there; others, like me, may think, “This is not acceptable.”

Mr Evans: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for saying that: it will send a strong signal to the UAE and perhaps a number of other similar countries.

I want to finish by addressing the appalling decision by the World Health Organisation the other day. What did it think it was doing trying to make Robert Mugabe a goodwill ambassador? This is not just about health issues. If we look at how he has treated LGBT+ issues in his own country, we will see that the stigma of being gay there means that many people are afraid to even get tested and are condemned to death because they do not get the treatment they need. I am delighted that the WHO changed its decision three days later—it clearly listened to the international community—but it did send the wrong signals and I hope it will reflect on that.

When I asked for the Pride flag to be flown from every high commission and embassy, I was told, “We can’t do that, because many of them have only one flagpole and there isn’t enough room for two.” Well, we

do it in Whitehall—we double-flag there—and I hope that in summing up, the Minister will tell us that during every future Gay Pride Week, the Gay Pride flag will fly from the flagpoles of all of our high commissions and embassies throughout the world.

3.23 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans), who is a fellow member of the Select Committee on International Development. I welcome today's debate, thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it and congratulate the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert). In particular, I thank the range of non-governmental organisations, based both in the UK and in other countries, and global ones such as Amnesty International, for their assistance.

Next year marks the 30th anniversary of section 28. Just three decades ago, this Parliament and this Chamber carried discriminatory legislation. We can learn something from the past 30 years, because after section 28 was passed there was a renewal of LGBT organisations in this country, including the formation of the Stonewall group, lesbian and gay organisations in our trade union movement, and lesbian and gay campaigns within political parties.

The Labour campaign for lesbian and gay rights, now known as LGBT Labour, played a critical role in what became Labour's 1997 manifesto. There are lessons from that experience in the UK for today's debate, because what happened was that this place listened to LGBT communities themselves. That needs to be our starting point when looking at global LGBT rights. In the briefing that the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs arranged earlier, somebody said, "Change has to come from below." In a world where there are still 13 countries where being gay is punishable by death and 75 where same-sex contact remains a criminal offence, the challenges are enormous.

I welcome the policy paper on LGBT rights that the Department for International Development published last year, particularly its focus on how the realisation of human rights underpins sustainable development and, importantly, the need to identify and engage with the southern voices that are beginning to emerge on LGBT issues. Two years ago, the world agreed the sustainable development goals, whose theme is, "Leave no one behind." Inclusion must mean non-discrimination, but if we are to achieve the SDGs on health, we need to be able to reach all communities, including LGBT communities.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Does he agree that when we look at DFID's work, it is crucial to look at the support given to deal with the HIV/AIDS epidemic, particularly as it applies to the LGBT+ community and the MSM—men who have sex with men—community in developing countries and, particularly where we are looking at pulling out bilateral or multilateral aid, at ensuring that adequate services for those communities remain?

Stephen Twigg: I thank my hon. Friend for that important point, which speaks to a broader issue about the availability of relatively small amounts of funding for local organisations working on HIV and AIDS or equality issues on the ground. The International

Development Committee raises this issue across the full breadth of DFID's work, but it has particular resonance and relevance for today's debate, so perhaps the Minister could refer to it in his response. I praise the DFID LGBT staff network for its work in this regard as well.

I want to address what is a tricky issue in this debate. Some people will say, although probably not in today's debate, "How come we're giving aid to these countries whose Governments are acting so appallingly to their LGBT communities? Should we not be cutting aid?" I urge caution against such an approach. Cutting support for malaria programmes or school programmes in some of the poorest countries of Africa does not help LGBT rights. We need to engage with civil society here in our own country and, most importantly, on the ground in the countries concerned. That sort of engagement would be very fruitful.

I welcome last year's appointment by the UN of Vitit Muntarbhorn as the independent expert on sexual orientation and gender identity. He has an important role to play. His position was challenged and there was a vote last year. Eighty-four countries voted to allow him to continue, but 77 did not want him to. I congratulate our Government on the leading role that the UK played in defending his appointment and the Governments of South Africa and several Caribbean countries, which stood out against the pressure to try to get rid of the position.

I pay tribute to the role that the trade unions have played here and internationally in the struggle for LGBT rights. LGBT rights are workers' rights, and next week Public Services International and Education International will host their fourth LGBT forum in Geneva. There are many crucial issues to do with rights in the workplace and violence against people at work, but also to do with trade unions' broader role in society in making the case for equality and against discrimination.

The right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs spoke about Chechnya. Many of us are deeply concerned about developments in Chechnya in recent months. Last week, Human Rights Watch highlighted the case of Maxim Lapunov, who had been confined for 12 days in a dark basement by the regime. The example of Uganda has already been described by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy). A recent front page of a daily newspaper in Uganda said, "Exposed! Uganda's Top Homos Named", and carried photographs of allegedly gay men. I pay tribute to the very brave community in Uganda. They have celebrated Pride there since 2012. Tragically, they were not allowed to this year. Let us think of those sisters and brothers in Uganda.

I want to say something today about Tanzania, because a catalogue of concerns have been raised by various organisations, including the International HIV/AIDS Alliance. The most recent incident was last week, when 13 activists and lawyers were arrested in Tanzania simply for trying to challenge the ban on drop-in centres that serve communities at risk of HIV. The 13 were accused of promoting homosexuality. They are still in detention. I urge the Minister to take to his colleagues in the Foreign Office the vital importance of the United Kingdom raising the case of those imprisoned people.

The hon. Member for Ribble Valley spoke about Iran. We know that Iran is a country that still executes people for the "crime" of being LGBT. I urge the

[Stephen Twigg]

Minister to set out what the Government are doing to press countries such as Iran that do just that to stop using the death penalty against LGBT people.

Most of the examples I have given are, understandably, from Russia, Africa and the middle east, but I want to say something about what is happening in the United States of America. President Trump's decision to ban transgender people from the US military is an enormous shame, one I hope we can condemn on a cross-party basis. I pay tribute to the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff in America for his positive and measured response to President Trump's actions. I urge our Government to do all they can to press President Trump to think again on his attempt to ban trans people from the US armed forces.

That, however, is not the only incident of greater homophobia and transphobia in American politics and policy. Recently, the United States voted against a UN Human Rights Council resolution that condemned the use of the death penalty against people because they are LGBT. President Obama left a very positive legacy on LGBT. Tragically, President Trump is undoing it. That leaves a vacuum in global LGBT rights. I hope that the United Kingdom, working with like-minded countries around the world, will play a leadership role to ensure we do not slip back, but instead move forward to global LGBT equality.

3.31 pm

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) for securing the debate and for the leadership he gives to the all-party group. He has taken the more voluntary route of taking himself off to the Back Benches to champion these causes and we all benefit from the quality of his leadership. I took a rather more compulsory route, but that does mean that I have the freedom to engage with these incredibly important issues. I want to reflect on why they are so important. What has brought us here today are the headline issues, raised by previous speakers, relating to what is happening in Azerbaijan, Egypt and Chechnya. We only have to go online to see horrific videos of mob justice in Nigeria, where gay men are being lynched, and the administration of ISIS justice, with gay people heaved off tall buildings.

I want to reflect briefly on some of the headline issues in Chechnya, because the cases there are truly appalling. My right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs talked about Maxim Lapunov. He was lucky enough to survive. There is, however, the story of popstar Zelimkhan Bakayev, who went back to Chechnya on 8 August for his sister's wedding. By all the accounts I was able to get hold of, he was arrested within three hours and was dead within 10. This was a man whose picture taken with Ramzan Kadyrov, when the Chechen leader wanted to ride on the back of this popstar's popularity. If that can happen to him in Chechnya, we can draw our own conclusions about how appalling the situation is and our expectations of the Russian authorities to do anything about it.

Headline atrocities have brought us here today: the dreadful scale of arrests in Azerbaijan and Egypt, and direct state repression. The number of people affected

by direct oppression runs into many hundreds of thousands. There are people who are in relationships that they do not want to be in, people who have experienced "corrective rape", and people who are in forced marriages. There are millions of people—probably between 50 million and 100 million in India—who, because of the laws of their countries, are simply not able to be themselves.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that although in various countries there is a wide range of laws to protect victims of abuse and discrimination, many are deterred from using the law to protect themselves because of, for instance, high legal costs, a heavy burden of proof or worry about the implications for their job prospects?

Crispin Blunt: My hon. Friend has drawn attention to all the difficulties of living a life if the society in which people live and the laws that surround them do not allow them to be themselves. The reason so many of us who are speaking in the debate are LGBT ourselves is that we know just how important this freedom is to us. I know, because I did not come out until I was 50. When I was growing up, having been born in 1960 into the United Kingdom that existed in the 1960s and 1970s, what I understood about myself was that there was something wrong with me. I wanted to be a soldier, and I wanted to be a politician, and that was wholly inconsistent with ever beginning to come to terms with myself.

An awful lot of men my age are coming out now, because they have the societal and professional freedom to do so. The British experience can provide a lesson, and the British story is one that we should be able to tell others. We should be able to tell the rest of the world how we have moved from active implementation of the criminal law in the 1950s, when more than 1,000 men were imprisoned for consensual same-sex acts, to where we are today.

When I say "we", I am thinking of the role that we can play as parliamentarians. We should not underestimate the huge challenge that faces our parliamentary colleagues in other countries that, because of religious beliefs and the influence of religion in those societies, are in the same state as the United Kingdom in the 1950s when it comes to attitudes to LGBT people. Nor should we underestimate the effect of our own personal stories, and our own personal testimony. We should look our fellow parliamentarians in the eye when we have the opportunity to do so and get them to first base. People's sexuality is not something that they choose.

I used those terms during a debate in the House in 1999, before I truly understood myself, and I was, quite rightly, heckled by colleagues on the other Benches. It should not be assumed that people understand. Once our fellow parliamentarians have got to first base and have accepted that sexuality is very largely innate—if not completely innate, but let us not go into that now—and not something that people choose, the public policy that ought to flow from that will flow from it.

We should say to our parliamentary colleagues in other countries, "You are representing gay people whether you like it or not. You are representing just as many gay people as I am." There is no evidence of any difference in the proportion of sexualities between different races or parts of the world. Our parliamentary colleagues in other countries have a responsibility, and they have a

lead opinion. Our responsibility is to help them to change their societies by means of the evidence that we can give them from our own experience.

3.39 pm

Gerard Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): When I received an email asking whether there were any countries about which I would like more information before the debate, I thought to myself, “Where do I begin?” I do not wish to talk down the progress that has been made, because we have made great progress, but the world is still a much smaller and more dangerous place for LGBTI people, whether we like it or not. In more than 30% of the 225 countries and territories listed on the Foreign Office travel advice website, homosexuality or homosexual acts are illegal. For nearly a quarter of them, there is a warning of some kind for LGBTI people. While we have the luxury of heeding that advice, as the hon. Member for Ribbles Valley (Mr Evans) said in the case of the UAE, people living there have no such luxury. The advice that frequently appears for countries where being LGBTI is legal but “frowned upon” or not “universally accepted” is, “You should be discreet.” Let us imagine living our lives that way; it is as absurd as asking someone to be discreet about their height.

The advice for countries such as Armenia, where homosexuality is legal, says about the culture there:

“same sex couples are often seen holding hands and kissing in public, this is common...and is not necessarily an indicator of sexual orientation.”

So it is not the act of the same-sex couple holding hands or kissing that is the problem; it is their sexuality. That is heterosexual privilege in action.

Often it is that intolerance bubbling under the surface of society that leads to the shocking attacks against LGBTI people that we have seen around the world. It is not enough to decriminalise homosexuality; there must be laws protecting the rights and safety of LGBTI people and an effort to make sure that society catches up with those laws by supporting LGBTI groups working in communities. Unfortunately, that is not the case for many LGBTI people around the world.

It is up to progressive countries like ours to lead the way in global LGBT rights, particularly in Commonwealth countries, but to do so we must make sure our own house is in order. It is shameful that comprehensive research by the Time for Inclusive Education—TIE—campaign in Scotland found that 90% of LGBTI young people experience homophobia, biphobia and transphobia at school, with 27% having attempted suicide as a result of that bullying. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) about section 28, but in some ways we have not moved on in that regard; there is still a hangover from that legislation.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Many contributors to the debate have spoken about the example we have set to the rest of the world, but he is right to say that we have to make sure that our own house is in order, and despite the huge progress in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland is still significantly lagging behind.

My hon. Friend also mentioned transphobia. I will be meeting a trans activist support group in Cardiff this evening. We need to do much more across the whole of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland on trans issues.

Gerard Killen: I agree completely with my hon. Friend’s points, and I will come on to talk about LGBT rights elsewhere in the UK.

The TIE campaign found that teachers often do not know what they are allowed to talk about in schools and do not feel adequately trained to tackle LGBTI issues. The TIE campaign seeks to change that, and I welcome the excellent work it has done and continues to do. Just today, it has secured the support of the first Catholic priest to back the campaign. Father Morton is from Cambuslang in my constituency and he joins other faith leaders in the Scottish Episcopal Church and the Church of Scotland, as well as teachers, trade unions, charities and politicians from all political parties, in recognising that we need action for LGBTI young people at school. It is very important that such examples are set by leading figures in society.

Legislation and Government also have a leading part to play in changing societal attitudes. I therefore wonder what example the Prime Minister set when she welcomed into the heart of Government a party hardly famed for its support of LGBT rights.

When I get on a plane in Glasgow and land in Belfast, not far from where my husband was born, despite not having left the UK our marriage is no longer recognised, because the Democratic Unionist party, ignoring public opinion and blocking the will of the Northern Ireland Assembly, refuses to extend to the people of Northern Ireland the same basic rights that are enjoyed by citizens in the rest of Ireland and the UK.

Members of this House who now find themselves propping up this Government are on record making comments such as:

“I am pretty repulsed by gay and lesbianism. I think it is wrong. I think that those people harm themselves and—without caring about it—harm society. That doesn’t mean to say that I hate them. I mean, I hate what they do.”

Such comments about LGBT people harming society are shocking. The Prime Minister talks about how far we still have to go, yet this is the company she is keeping in Government.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech. Does he agree that the DUP would do well to look south to the Republic of Ireland, which despite coming from the Catholic tradition—as I do myself; I was delighted to hear about the Roman Catholic priest supporting Time for Inclusive Education—has now recognised gay marriage and has a gay Taoiseach? Does he agree that the DUP would do well to follow in the footsteps of its fellow countrymen?

Gerard Killen: I absolutely agree with the hon. and learned Lady. The DUP would also do well to look east towards Scotland and to the example that we are setting there. It is a short journey from Glasgow to Belfast, but what a change in rights we see when we make that journey. The cost of the agreement that held this Government together was £1 billion. Why were LGBTI

[Gerard Killen]

rights and equality for all UK citizens not part of that deal? What kind of example can we hope to set for the rest of the world when we reward homophobia with a place in the Government? Silence and inaction are not an option. It is time for the Government to put their mouth where their money is.

3.45 pm

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): It is a particular pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Gerard Killen), not least because his constituency is the part of Scotland that my family hail from. Indeed, I cut my campaigning teeth in the Rutherglen constituency but, despite its having a ward called Toryglen, I came fourth. I also commend my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) for securing this debate and for his incredibly powerful speech. He was absolutely right to say that we have a two-world situation.

We should celebrate the fact that many countries in the world are making commendable progress on LGBT+ issues. On the first day of this month, same-sex marriage became legal in Germany following a vote in its Parliament earlier this year. We have also heard about the referendum in Australia, which I hope will go the right way. I have relatives over there, and I will be doing a spot of telephone canvassing to make sure that they vote the right way. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ribbles Valley (Mr Evans) mentioned, Taiwan has become the first country in Asia in which the highest court recognises same-sex marriage. I hope that, despite all the other tensions in that part of the world, that country's example will encourage others to go down the same route.

As Members on both sides of the House have detailed, however, there are also many shocking examples of countries in which incredibly regressive and retrograde developments are taking place. We have to be honest with ourselves and admit that there is not one simple, quick solution to getting those countries to move to a more enlightened place. We cannot simply legislate for change. We have to encourage and allow cultures to adapt, and prejudices to be challenged and diminished.

As other Members have said, we have to remember that this country has been on a journey as well. Yes, we probably have the most advanced equalities legislation in the world; yes, this Parliament is one of the most LGBT+-friendly Parliaments in the world; and yes, we have seen an enormous shift in British public opinion in a relatively short period of time, but it is only a couple of decades since the majority of people in this country believed that homosexual acts were sinful or wrong. That has been reversed, and rightly so, but prejudice remains.

I want to make brief reference to two events that happened to me in recent months and that confirmed to me that prejudice still exists. Back in the summer, I recorded a video for the Diana award "Back2School" anti-bullying project. As the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West said, the very fact that we have to take part in these campaigns because young people are being bullied at school shows us that prejudice remains. Secondly, in recent weeks my new partner and I were walking through the shopping centre in the middle of my constituency. We were just holding hands, as we

should have the right to do, when someone who clearly knew me shouted out a comment that was both racist and homophobic. The fact that that can happen in Milton Keynes, one of the more enlightened and modern parts of our country, shows that there is still prejudice in the United Kingdom.

Crispin Blunt: I want to reinforce that point. While there is simple prejudice and bullying in schools, there are aspects of public policy that are still in the wrong place. I am talking about the prescription of pre-exposure prophylaxis. It has been established that the net present value advantage would be about £1 billion if gay men could be prescribed PrEP. However, we cannot have an open public policy; we have to have a large trial to get this thing delivered, all because of the attitude that would surround the challenge facing the Secretary of State for Health to do the right thing for public health.

Iain Stewart: My hon. Friend makes an important point. To back up what I just said, we are still on a journey in this country even though we have legislated in many areas, and we have to understand that other countries will also take a long time to get to where we want them to get—they cannot just legislate. We have to use all the tools that are at our disposal, and colleagues on both sides of the House have mentioned some of them. We have soft power that we can exert due to our historical relationships with many countries, and I hope that we put such issues on the agenda for the upcoming Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. For example, the charges have now been dropped in that horrible case in the UAE where a Scottish gentleman was put on trial and, although I do not know, I hope that the exertion of diplomacy from this country helped in that situation.

We should absolutely ensure that the soft power that we can exert through our overseas aid budget is used in the right way; the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) was absolutely right about that. We need to ensure that the money is there to help groups on the ground, and I agree with him that we should not take money away from health projects just because of a country's horrible LGBT+ policies; it should be the other way around. We should be using that soft power to encourage countries down the road.

There is also a lot that individual parliamentarians can do. My constituency has a large Nigerian population, and I do not make any secret of my homosexuality when I go to meet them. By that simple act of being open with them—they can judge me however they like—they will hopefully see that I can act as a politician who is out, and that will filter through their community. I hope that that is something that each and every one of us can do. We also need to make more use of our soft power through sporting and cultural events, such as the upcoming Olympic games in Japan in 2020. I hope that individual sportsmen and sportswomen can be out and proud. I am sure that their sexuality makes no difference to their sporting ability.

As the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) said, trade will also be an enormously important lever. I do not want to get into a Brexit discussion—that is for other debates and there will be many of them—but one consequence of our leaving the EU is that we will be able to develop new trade policies with many African

countries, and I hope that that better interlinking of economies will mean that foreign companies realise that there is a huge pink pound market in the UK in which to sell their products. Countries may also realise that tourism might be inhibited by LGBT+ policies. Bit by bit and example by example, I hope that closer economic ties will help to break down some of the prejudices. We should not pretend that things will be easy or quick, but that should not dissuade us from the task of achieving a world in which people, whatever their nationality, religion or background, can love whomever they want.

3.53 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), but I start by paying tribute to the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) for securing this debate and to the all-party parliamentary group on global lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights for its hard work in keeping this important human rights issue high on the agenda.

As we have heard, over the past year—even just in recent months—we have continued to see persistent and appalling reports of persecution of the LGBT community around the globe, including in Chechnya, Azerbaijan, Egypt, Tajikistan and so many other places in between. We have heard about kidnapping, mistreatment in custody, beatings, harassment and even torture—all on a significant scale—with the leaders of those countries so often appearing to face nothing more than a stern talking to. I was going to speak about the case of Zelimkhan Bakayev, the gay Chechen popstar who was murdered while attending his sister's wedding in Chechnya, but the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) has already rightly highlighted that particularly tragic case.

Homophobia in all shapes and forms is absolutely abhorrent, but the state-sponsored persecution we still see too often is disgusting and despicable. Far from being the strong men they think they are, its perpetrators are among the most cowardly, pathetic and vile individuals alive.

The process of turning this around will not be easy, and clearly it will take co-ordinated international action, rather than the actions of one or two isolated Governments. The UK Government should be commended for the times they have shown leadership on LGBT rights across the world, but there is so much work ahead. It is imperative that they persist in calling for the immediate release of people who are detained because of their sexual orientation. Not only should they press for the repeal of legislation that allows such detention to happen, as the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Gerard Killen) said, they also have to argue positively for legislation that protects against discrimination and protects human rights.

Laws and political leaders are just one side of the coin. It is not just about changing the minds of Presidents and Prime Ministers. For example, according to a 2013 survey by the Pew Research Centre, 95% of Egyptians believe that homosexuality should not be accepted by society. There is an even bigger battle to change hearts and minds more generally, and hon. Members have already rightly said how both the Government and business can and must support non-governmental organisations in protecting LGBT rights.

We must take every opportunity to be ambassadors both in our actions abroad and when we are hosts. That brings to mind Pride House in Glasgow during the 2014 Commonwealth games, which is an excellent example of how Governments can positively promote LGBT rights across the world when acting as hosts. That project celebrated the participation of LGBTI people in sport and hosted a total of 90 events during the Commonwealth games. More than 6,000 people from at least 39 different countries and territories passed through its doors, and they all now know that Glasgow, Scotland and the United Kingdom want to support LGBT rights, even as we accept that we still have a journey to go.

Before I conclude, I will raise the issue of how we treat those who have fled the repressive regimes that we have all condemned this afternoon and who seek refugee status here. Several years ago I represented a young gay man in his appeal against the refusal of his claim for asylum. Back then, the legal challenge to the then Home Office practice of refusing refugee protection on the basis that a person could “be discreet” had barely started. Eventually, the Supreme Court made it absolutely clear that what is protected under the refugee convention is not some measly right to live a shadowy, furtive existence but the right to live freely and openly as a gay man or woman. Lord Rodger put it rather more colourfully in his speech:

“To illustrate the point with trivial stereotypical examples from British society: just as male heterosexuals are free to enjoy themselves playing rugby, drinking beer and talking about girls with their mates, so male homosexuals are to be free to enjoy themselves going to Kylie concerts, drinking exotically coloured cocktails and talking about boys with their straight female mates... In other words, gay men are to be as free as their straight equivalents in the society concerned to live their lives in the way that is natural to them as gay men, without the fear of persecution.”

Awful, awful stereotypes aside, it was a ground-breaking decision. Almost seven years on, there are real concerns that the Home Office, once again, is not taking the decision seriously at different stages of the asylum process—from detention to interview; and from the guidance it issues to the decisions and removals that are being implemented.

Although I welcome and encourage the Government to continue and redouble their efforts to tackle persecution abroad, I also ask them to consider how, here at home, they treat those who have fled that same persecution.

3.58 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Thank you for calling me to speak, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) for securing this important debate.

I am proud to sit with Members who have championed LGBT rights. The 2017 manifesto on which I was elected clearly stated that we were

“to combat...the perpetration of violence against people because of their faith, gender or sexuality.”

In action, the Conservatives pushed the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013, and we are now considering a gender recognition Bill. We are committed to the principle of equality in law.

The UK has a proud record of LGBT rights and, as we have heard, it has been a journey, but today we can stand tall on the international stage to champion how

[Luke Graham]

all parts of the UK put people's rights and their ability to live their life first. Elsewhere, as we have heard, a number of issues have arisen in Chechnya and Azerbaijan.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): I am the vice-chairman of the all-party group on Azerbaijan, and I am also a gay man. This afternoon, I had a meeting with Stonewall and I have given it my assurance that I will raise this issue formally with Azerbaijan's ambassador to London to get assurances that the sort of behaviour towards LGBT people that we saw in September will not be repeated.

Luke Graham: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and I wish him luck in his efforts.

Ideologies that suppress, torture and kill simply because of one human's feelings towards another are unacceptable. We in the UK must show international leadership, as it is very important in this issue. The United States was once a beacon for all kinds of individual rights and I would like to share with Members my disappointment, which I am sure they share, at the decisions of the latest American President to ban further recruitment of trans soldiers and to deny the funding of certain medical treatments for those soldiers. If someone is brave enough to fight for their country, their country should be brave enough to fight for them.

In this country, we have a number of measures that are helping internationally. I welcome the Magna Carta fund of £1.5 million, which is being pushed by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. I also welcome the Government's recent provision of £3 million to help tackle homophobic bullying in schools in England and Wales. The Scottish Government's "respect me" campaign has been very successful and the anti-bullying service it promotes is also welcomed, but I seek more joined-up campaigns across the UK to promote LGBT rights.

This country is a leader, but we have to maintain that position of leadership. In my constituency, we are able to collect statistics on sexual orientation-aggravated crime in two centres, Alloa and Perth, and in 2015-16 there were 21 cases of such crimes—that is 21 too many. A couple of weeks ago, I had the privilege, along with other Scottish Members, to hear from a representative from the Time for Inclusive Education campaign, who talked about a number of individuals' journeys and their challenges in dealing with their sexuality. One story that has stuck with me ever since was that of a young man who was so tortured by his sexuality and how he could fit in with his local community that he had gone as far as to pick a tree outside his house from which to hang himself, so that he could be easily collected by his family. I am sure other Members will join me in acknowledging the many tales of people tearing themselves apart because of the way they feel. They ask themselves one question: can I love who I do and still be good, still be a success, still be able to contribute to my community? In this House, the answer we must give is an unequivocal yes. I support the TIE campaign, which has been mentioned by Opposition Members and which promotes inclusive education to make sure LGBT issues are included in the curriculum. That is not to promote one path or another; it seeks just to give young people the confidence to walk the path that is their own.

We must uphold LGBT rights with the same ferocity as we uphold the rights of any other of our citizens. We must tackle discrimination, at home and abroad, and give everyone the confidence to live their life and contribute to our society. Unlike so many issues debated in this House, equality in law is something we can all agree with, and I hope that every Member in this House can commit to it.

4.3 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham); we always welcome allies in these debates, and we have heard a number of powerful speeches. The right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) has done an excellent job, as does the all-party group, in bringing forward and raising the voices of those around the world who cannot speak for themselves.

Let us consider the following:

"gay people are born into and belong to every society in the world. They are all ages, all races, all faiths; they are doctors and teachers, farmers and bankers, soldiers and athletes; and whether we know it, or whether we acknowledge it, they are our family, our friends and our neighbours.

Being gay is not a Western invention; it is a human reality."

Those are the excellent words of Hillary Rodham Clinton—words to which I have returned on many occasions in recent years.

As someone who took until I was 32 to come to terms with my own sexuality, I spent a lot of my early life hiding from myself, my feelings and my emotions, and from the truth of who I am and who I love. But I never, ever had to hide from the state or the police, or out of fear of being persecuted or killed. Sadly, as we have heard, that is the experience of many LGBT people around the globe in places such as Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Afghanistan. In those countries, in 2017, being LGBT is punishable by death. It is therefore vital that we shine a light, as we have with many powerful speeches today, on those people who are being persecuted and who cannot speak for themselves.

As we know, the gay men in Chechnya who were unable to hide have been beaten, tortured or killed, and the stories that have emerged have sickened us all. There has been cross-party condemnation of those acts. It is good that international pressure has led to investigations, but questions remain about President Putin's commitment to stopping these heinous crimes, and as *The Guardian* reported in May:

"Rights activists worry that Chechen authorities will do everything to obstruct the federal investigation into the allegations."

The UK Government must continue to put pressure on Russia, and any future trade deals during or after Brexit must not be traded against human rights.

I am very proud that the UK and Scotland have come so far. Scotland is now recognised as one of the most progressive countries in the world on LGBT rights. As the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) pointed out, the SNP is now the gayest party in this Parliament. I was proud to bring those numbers up and to be the most recent Member to come out. I am also proud that our leader in Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, was one of the first leaders to take part in a Pride event and to speak at Glasgow Pride earlier this year. It is not a competition,

though, although it was interesting to hear that a person now has to be gay to become a Conservative candidate—that is most definitely progress!

Like other Members, I pay tribute to Jordan Daly and Liam Stevenson from the Time for Inclusive Education campaign. They came to Parliament recently, and I was glad to co-host an event with the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Gerard Killen) that they attended. They told us Jordan's story, which is so powerful, and they have done so much to put pressure on the Scottish Government and on other Governments around the world. TIE has been recognised by the UN as a leading light—another example of how we are leading the world.

There are so many charities and organisations that we could recognise, but I want to draw particular attention to Stonewall and the Kaleidoscope Trust, which do important work not only here in the UK but around the world. A friend of mine who was openly gay at secondary school—something I was frankly too terrified to be—told me recently that had it not been for the support she had from Stonewall, she may not have survived. Stonewall was quite simply a lifeline that saved her life.

Joanna Cherry: Does my hon. Friend agree that part of the reason why we have such a difficulty with bullying over LGBTI issues in schools throughout the United Kingdom is the legacy of the section 28 legislation, which made it very difficult for teachers to deal with these issues? Will she add to the list of those to whom she pays tribute the Labour Government in Scotland who, with SNP support, repealed that legislation in 2000, and the politicians and activists who fought for so many years against that pernicious legislation? I remember going on a march against it in Manchester in 1987. Will my hon. Friend pay tribute not to me, but to the people who fought that legislation?

Hannah Bardell: Yes. I absolutely agree with my hon. and learned Friend. There is a great sense of consensus in the Chamber today. It is important that we pay tribute to those who came before us, including those in that Labour Government in Scotland, as well as to what the Conservative UK Government are doing now. The Minister for Women and Equalities is doing a lot of work on education and LGBT matters. It is so important that we all speak up and that we work together. We may disagree on many, many issues, but there will be areas of agreement.

There are some chinks of light internationally in the battle for LGBT rights. Countries such as Australia are finally catching up and having a public survey or plebiscite on equal marriage. I should declare an interest as the partner of an Australian citizen. It saddens me that she does not have the same rights at home in Australia as she has here in Scotland and the UK.

I also pay tribute to the Minister for Europe and the Americas, the right hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan), who is not in his place now but was earlier, and who took part, along with other Members, in a programme I made with the BBC's "Victoria Derbyshire" programme about politicians and their experiences of coming out. I might not always agree with him, but I respect the position he took recently on LGBT rights when he addressed the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. He said that,

"the UK is committed to promoting and protecting the rights of women and girls and of LGBT people everywhere, and to building a wider international consensus around efforts to advance equality and justice. That includes here in the US, because this is another area on which the UK government and the US Administration do not see entirely eye to eye. We have made clear that we oppose all discrimination, including within the Armed Forces."

The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire referred to President Trump's abhorrent stance on transgender people in the army. The restoration of the military ban on transgender people is just another regressive and divisive step that he has made, and it is good to see the UK Government standing up to it. Perhaps President Trump could take inspiration from former President Jimmy Carter, who famously said:

"America did not invent human rights. In a very real sense human rights invented America".

The hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) asked an important question about PrEP. I am sure he will join me in congratulating the SNP Government in Scotland on having made PrEP free on the NHS in Scotland. We would be happy to share our experience and hope that his Government will come forward with similar plans as soon as possible. He previously asked a question about which British embassies flew the rainbow flag on Pride day and International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia, and got the following response:

"The promotion and protection of LGBT rights is a UK foreign policy priority"

but

"no...records are kept".

I am sure he will agree that if we are to promote LGBT rights, we should be tracking the progress of our embassies and missions around the world. I am sure it is a policy priority for them all.

Progress has been made, however, and there are other chinks of light, including in Taiwan and Malta. The latter has become the first European country to ban conversion therapy—something we will all find utterly abhorrent.

In conclusion, someone at Pride in London spoke powerfully before the march about how across the UK we must continue to have lists and celebrate our LGBT leaders and to march for those who cannot march. Most importantly, we must set the best possible example to the rest of the world and make sure that no one is persecuted just for loving the person they love.

4.12 pm

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell).

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) for securing this important debate and the Backbench Business Committee, which keeps keeping me in the Chamber on a Thursday afternoon for really important cross-party debates. I know that my right hon. Friend is working hard on LGBTI rights here at home and abroad. Parliamentarians from across the House, by coming out and, most importantly, speaking out, are leading the way. It takes courage. As a fellow human, I see and support that courage.

We in the UK, which is leading the world on LGBT rights, have been on a positive journey. We will all have friends, family members, neighbours or colleagues openly

[Mims Davies]

identifying themselves as belonging to the LGBT community. And this has been reflected in Government policy. We have made huge strides since 2010, particularly under David Cameron, with the introduction of marriage equality, Turing's law and the abolition of offences that have affected so many people, and this summer when the Prime Minister announced the consultation on the Gender Recognition Act 2004. I am fortunate to be working alongside a constituent, Tara, and the transgender community, which is working so hard on these issues. I welcome all the Government's plans, and look forward to them moving forward.

As a former member of the Women and Equalities Committee, I am absolutely delighted that it is this Parliament that has carried out the first investigation into transgender rights. We were absolutely right to do that—some 650,000 people have been identified as transgender. We must tackle the issue as it affects families, mental health, our NHS and our communities. Our work in this area is world leading.

May I thank Julie and the lesbian and gay liaison team at Hampshire police for all the work that they do across our communities? We all want equality for all. It makes us safer, happier, and healthier. I also wish to thank those who work openly on this matter in the NHS, the fire service and all our communities, because by working together we become stronger, and by working with trans people in particular our communities become stronger.

It is hate crime awareness week, and we all have a huge responsibility to be temperate in our language and in our actions. Tolerance matters. Hate crime can leave an individual, a family or a community isolated from society. It highlights a broken society, and the UK is no place for hate. Tolerance and understanding make this a safer place in which to live.

I congratulate the Hampshire police and crime commissioner on his focus on joint working with the Hampshire Citizens Advice service on safe reporting spaces. I also congratulate the Isle of Wight on securing the right to host a UK Pride event in 2018, so next year will be a great occasion. I have been contacted by constituents in Eastleigh who also want to hold a Pride event. They want to see their town flying the flag. I was delighted to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) also say the same thing.

We are here today listening to stories about those living in fear across the world. We must remember that being who you are is not a crime, but targeting, bullying or threatening a person—wherever they live and whoever they are—is a crime. People do not have to put up with that behaviour. They should report it and ask for help. I congratulate Hampshire and Isle of Wight Youth Commission, which has carried out a project on tackling such behaviour. The behaviour is learned—perhaps from school or college—and it is unacceptable. If we can achieve all this here, we need to focus our attention abroad. We have heard about the perils of being born in Chechnya, Azerbaijan or Egypt. One's heart sinks when one hears that, in Chechnya, an LGBTI person does not even exist.

We have also been talking about Australia, where voting is compulsory. We can see the simple question that should be posed: should the law be changed to

allow same-sex couples to marry? A strong yes vote would be a huge victory for LGBTI Australians, and such a move would help their Government to send out a clear global message.

I welcome what we are doing in the UK to make the lives of people around the world better through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and through our aid budget. We must ensure that we continue to work with the UN Free and Equal campaign, which has reached an estimated 2 billion people through the use of social media, which gives us a huge ability to change attitudes.

We have made some huge strides in LGBTI rights here in the UK. We as parliamentarians do set an example in our local communities, in this Chamber and across the globe.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. I will not seek her support immediately for the amendments to which I am about to refer, because they relate to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, and she may want to look at them more carefully, but may I encourage her to look at amendments 287 to 290, which are supported by the Equality and Human Rights Commission and Amnesty International? They are relevant to ensuring that, as part of that process of conversion from EU law to UK law, we do preserve human rights aspects of that EU law, which often has been used in support of LGBT rights. I hope that she will at least look at them.

Mims Davies: To me, Brexit means Brexit. It is not about going back on equality. I feel extremely strongly about that.

I mentioned the WHO, which made such a regrettable decision, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley mentioned, but I am sure that UK pressure really made a difference in reversing that decision. So, yes, the world does watch us. The Prime Minister's speech at the *PinkNews* awards this month recognised that. I support the fact that she, Ministers and colleagues from across the House have the chance to support the LGBTI community. I look forward to my children—not just my children's children—growing up in a world where sexuality and gender are no measure at all by which to judge a person.

4.20 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) for securing this debate, which is important, particularly in light of some of the recent reports from Azerbaijan, Egypt and Crimea.

I visited Azerbaijan many times, in particular Baku and Ganja, when I was a member of the Council of Europe's advisory council on youth. I found the young people there to be tolerant, progressive and open-looking. It is often young people who help to create change in our societies. The reports of a Government crackdown are worrying. I remember raising the reports of a Government crackdown in Azerbaijan in 2006, after one of my first visits there. The ambassador's comments are reassuring, but we need more than just warm words. We need some concrete action from the Azeri Government. I am sure that the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies), who is the vice-chair of the APPG on Azerbaijan, will follow that up.

The youth are often the predominant group that the authorities crack down upon. The case in Egypt, where the crackdown was at a pop concert, is an example of where young people, as well as LGBT people, are disproportionately targeted. They were targeted for flying a flag—I mean, really! It beggars belief.

We cannot just be bystanders. We must be clear that we have a moral duty to speak out for human rights and against human rights abuses. Why are there laws against LGBT people in so many countries? Why is there section 377 of India's penal code? Why are there sections 76 and 77 of Jamaica's Offences Against the Person Act 1861? The date might give us a clue. Why is there section 377A of Singapore's penal code—the exact same number as the similar section of India's penal code? Why? Because, of course, those laws were imposed by British colonial rule and imperialism.

It was the imperial law—combined with our imposition of the imperial Christian religion at the time and expressed by an imperial English language—that enforced the homophobia that still exists in so many of our Commonwealth countries. It was often enforced against the practices and will of the local historical narrative in those countries. Study after study shows that former British colonies are more likely to criminalise homosexual acts than any other former colonial state or state that was always independent. Some 57% of states criminalising homosexuality have a British colonial background.

Luke Graham: The hon. Gentleman is raising a lot of historical points, which is fine, but does he agree that now is the opportunity to use some of our long-standing relationships with these countries to improve those LGBT rights and follow our good example?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: That is exactly what I am coming to. I am trying to say that it is our duty to speak up because we were the ones that historically imposed some of these laws. We cannot just wash our hands and say, "Well, we're anti-colonialists now, so we'll just let you get on with it." We have a duty to be proactive in our response. That is exactly the issue I am coming to, and I think we will agree on it.

Some 70% of Commonwealth countries have some sort of criminalisation of homosexual acts. Of course, we have CHOGM in this country next year, and we need to make sure that we are leading the way. I was at the CHOGM event in Sri Lanka—I was also at the event in Malta—as an observer for the Commonwealth Youth Forum, and it was very interesting in a number of respects. The young people had an interesting and detailed discussion around anti-LGBT discrimination. When the discussion was in the open plenary, it was touch and go whether we would pass some of the anti-LGBT discrimination clauses we were trying to get into the declaration. When we asked for them to go to a secret ballot, they passed overwhelmingly. When I asked the young people from Commonwealth countries, "Why the change later on?" they said, "Because we are afraid of our elders. We are afraid of often more established forces in our countries. But we and our friends, our colleagues and other young people in our countries do not see LGBT+ people as a problem. We actually see them as equal, and they should have their human rights respected." That is very positive, and it is why it is so important that DFID and the Foreign Office continue

to support young people in our Commonwealth countries and in other countries around the world in putting that argument.

Our role is not just to go into these countries again and to say, "Oh well, our old penal code was wrong. Reverse it." Our role is to stand shoulder to shoulder with other LGBT activists—brothers and sisters—around the world and to support them. That is why it is so important, as my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) mentioned earlier, that embassies and DFID have small pots of cash to support groups on the ground. That is why it is so important that ambassadors know that they will get the backing of the FCO if they put their neck on the line to support local LGBT groups on the ground.

I was in Uganda earlier in the year speaking to some of the LGBT groups there, and they are very thankful for the ongoing support our high commission offers them, but one thing they do say is that when the high commissioner changes, there is sometimes a slight change of direction, and that needs to be something we are concerned about. The FCO needs to give clear guidelines to all ambassadors and high commissioners to make sure they know we have their backs.

I will wrap up by saying that we have an opportunity at CHOGM and the UN to push for support for people on the ground, and we must not let that opportunity go, while also speaking up against countries that breach human rights.

4.28 pm

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): When we talk about these abuses around the world, it is best to speak with a sense of humility about the challenges we still face with homophobia in our own country. In the Brighton and Hove area—which I am proud to represent as one of its three MPs—we saw a savage homophobic attack in May last year against two young people, Dain Finney and his partner James. They were visitors to Brighton, but they were savagely attacked that night.

Just this week, we have also seen how somebody who ended up as a Member of Parliament, having been elected this year, used a type of homophobic language before first coming to this place that was really quite extreme and quite offensive.

There are three things about the response to both those cases that set us as a country apart from those countries that we are talking about and that we aim to tackle in this debate. First, in the case of Dain and James—the two men assaulted in Brighton—the men who assaulted them were arrested and convicted, and they are currently serving a five-year custodial sentence. The state was on the victims' side, but in some other countries—from Russia to Uganda—the police and the judiciary are often the ones carrying out the homophobia in the first place, whether through violence or the use of laws that are homophobic. They are not protecting the citizens they should be protecting.

After the assaults in Brighton that left Dain Finney with both eye sockets broken, both cheekbones broken and his nose broken, he said:

"I hope that what happened to us reminds people that discrimination of any kind isn't acceptable and we need to be challenging it when it does happen or when we see it. No one should live their lives in fear and I would just urge people to be themselves and walk out the door each day with their heads held high."

[Peter Kyle]

I know that those words, coming from a 22-year-old victim of hate crime, will be inspiring to Members across the House. However, this debate concerns people who live in countries where victims cannot hold their heads high because they suffer the fear of arrest, torture and even execution. Their own states will not protect them, so we as a country have to deliver some of the change that their own states are incapable of delivering themselves.

In the recent instance of the appalling words used by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Jared O'Mara) to describe gay people, it is noticeable that both Parliament and the media were convulsed with revulsion by his words and the sentiment that lay behind them, even though they were in his distant past. It is right that he has been suspended from the Labour party, while these words and actions are being investigated, but in Parliaments in Tanzania, Chechnya, Russia and too many countries of Africa, offensive homophobic rhetoric is not challenged—it has become the norm.

The excellent report from the APPG on global LGBT rights makes sobering reading. The work put into by parliamentarians and campaigning organisations was intense and immense, but really worth it. I was particularly struck by the legislative assault on same-sex relationships by the state in Uganda and in Nigeria. Legislation was introduced in both countries that strengthened the penalties for same-sex activity and drastically limited the ability of LGBT people to organise in defence of their rights. Nigeria's Same Sex Marriage (Prohibitions) Act contains provisions that criminalise the formation, operation and support of gay clubs, societies and organisations, with sentences of up to 10 years' imprisonment. The curtailment of the ability of LGBT communities to organise themselves, to receive funds and to provide services to and advocate on behalf of LGBT people goes beyond mere homophobia—it is a direct assault on civil society itself. In terms of finding ways to deliver change in these countries, the erosion of civil society worries me the most.

In Britain, the transformation from a country with section 28 in statute to one of equal rights and gay marriage was not conceived, led and delivered solely within the four walls of this Parliament. Most of the leadership came from outside—from within our communities and our remarkable voluntary and campaigning sectors. It was one of the best examples of civil society and legislators working together, almost in partnership, to deliver positive social change. It is notable that many of the countries we have talked about today have suffered an erosion or curtailment of wider civil rights first as part of a programme of eroding the rights of gay people. This makes people more vulnerable to abuse, both state-sponsored and from within the institutions of family and community that surround them.

I urge Ministers to act unrelentingly in this area to support lawyers trying to challenge abuse in-country by using the expertise and resources not just of DFID but of the Ministry of Justice, to train our ambassadors appropriately in the issue, to ensure that this is a priority of our whole Government and to use our position in every multinational and multilateral body—from the UN to the Commonwealth, to the monetary and banking organisations—to make sure that in the case of any

country that chooses to repress rather than support people who want the basic human right to be gay and to be happy, Britain is always on the side of those people.

4.34 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): We have had an excellent debate this afternoon. I pay particular tribute to the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) and his all-party parliamentary group on global LGBT rights for being instrumental in securing the debate.

I suggest that the litmus test of how much we in the United Kingdom really care about global LGBT rights is how we treat LGBT+ people who come to the United Kingdom, seeking sanctuary, from countries where they have been persecuted. Sadly, our record on that is not all it might be.

Yesterday, at Prime Minister's questions, I raised with the Prime Minister new guidance put out by the Home Office recently—earlier this year—on Afghanistan, suggesting that gay asylum seekers can return to Afghanistan if they pretend to be straight. That guidance flies in the face of the Supreme Court decision referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald). I was disappointed yesterday when I sought an undertaking from the Prime Minister that the Home Office would stop the practice of deporting LGBT+ people to Afghanistan with the instruction that they pretend to be straight, and she was not able to give me that undertaking on the spot. If she wants to go to the *PinkNews* awards and be lauded as an advocate of LGBT rights, she should know what is going on in her own Government, but she did not seem to know about that. I am glad to say, however, that the Home Secretary has approached me and said that she will look into the issue carefully.

This country is one of the few in Europe that detain people who have come here as LGBT asylum seekers. On this very date a year ago, Stonewall and the UK Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group—I pay tribute to UK LGIG for helping me to prepare my short speech today—produced a report, "No Safe Refuge", which detailed the experiences of asylum seekers in detention in this country. People who have come to the countries of the United Kingdom seeking sanctuary have been held in UK detention centres, where they have been asked about their past and had bad experiences with homophobic staff and other asylum seekers. Their physical and emotional wellbeing has been affected in detention and their access to health and legal services has been restricted. The report exposed many lapses in standards, with staff often ill-equipped to deal with LGBT people. Many of the people interviewed recounted shocking instances of homophobia at every level of our system, from guards to other detainees, interpreters and even legal representatives.

We must look at how we treat people fleeing persecution in other countries because they are LGBT+ who come to the United Kingdom looking for sanctuary. This morning, my office spoke to Paul Dillane, the executive director at UK LGIG. He told us that, a year since the report on the treatment of LGBT asylum seekers in detention was published, there has still been no formal response from the Government. If we in the United Kingdom want to promote ourselves as supportive of

LGBT+ rights and if we want to stand here and criticise other countries that are not, we must, across the parties, tackle the disgraceful treatment that some LGBTI+ asylum seekers and refugees receive in the United Kingdom. I hope that the Minister responding to the debate will note what I have said and pass it on to the relevant Department. It simply will not do to pose as great defenders of LGBTI+ rights when we treat people who come to this country seeking sanctuary so badly.

4.38 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) for securing this important debate. We have had a very good discussion, with important and moving contributions from Members in all parts of the House. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) paid tribute to activists around the world who have been murdered and talked about the leverage our country has in trade talks post Brexit. The hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) talked about gay football players, although I think the Football Association will have to change considerably before what he wants to happen does so. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) talked about sustainable development goals and paid tribute to DFID and trade unions for the role they play in securing LGBT rights. The hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) gave a moving account of his lived experience of coming out.

Tragically, of those LGBT people killed in the Americas in 2013-14, 46% were trans women, and more than 2,000 trans gender and gender-diverse people were murdered in 65 countries between 2008 and 2015, according to the trans murder monitoring project. Although Labour has often led the way on LGBT+ rights, it is important, given that we are discussing the global situation and as the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) has just said, that we in the UK get our own house in order. People fleeing persecution often end up on our shores. Therefore, how we treat people fleeing violence, persecution and death is vital in the battle for human rights.

Like the hon. and learned Lady, I was disappointed to read the article in *The Guardian*, which reported that deported gay Afghans were told to pretend to be straight. Yesterday, the Prime Minister said on the Floor of the House that it was her Government who changed the rules on asylum seekers who face persecution in their home of origin because of their identity. That is true, because the Supreme Court found in June 2010 that it was not lawful for the Home Office to apply a “reasonably tolerable test” to determine whether an individual could avoid the risk of future persecution by concealing their sexual identity in their country of origin.

Although the coalition Government welcomed that decision, this Government are still sending out letters such as this from the Home Office to a frightened LGBT+ person:

“You claim to have a well-founded fear of persecution in Bangladesh on the basis of your sexual orientation. I have considered your claim on behalf of the Secretary of State... You have not shown that there are substantial grounds for believing that you face a real risk of suffering serious harm.”

The letter acknowledges that Bangladesh is a Muslim country where homosexuality is lawfully forbidden, but

it ends—I am embarrassed and ashamed to read this out, given what has been said in the debate—with the following:

“It is considered that you do not have such a high profile in Bangladesh”.

I am stunned and shocked by that and do not know what it actually means in its entirety. Our asylum policy should be based not on whether someone has a high profile, money or anything else, but on the laws of our country being applied equally, fairly and compassionately.

There is an argument known as the Anne Frank principle, about which Lord Justice Pill said:

“It would have been no defence to a claim that Anne Frank faced well-founded fear of persecution in 1942 to say that she was safe in a comfortable attic. Had she left the attic, a human activity she could reasonably be expected to enjoy, her Jewish identity would have led to her persecution. Refugee status cannot be denied by expecting a person to conceal aspects of identity or suppress behaviour the person should be allowed to express.”

This Government’s action puts them at odds with the United Nations guidelines on refugees and the 2012 UN “Born Free and Equal” report, whose five pillars are protect, prevent, repeal, prohibit and safeguard.

Despite positive developments in most countries, including ours, there remains a lack of comprehensive policies to address rights violations against LGBT+ and intersex people. There is a concern that cases that have already reached the appeal rights exhausted stage are not exhausted and need to be revisited. I hope that the Minister will address that issue when he gets to his feet.

On domestic politics, it is always necessary in these circumstances to talk about what a Labour Government would do on LGBT+ rights. Our manifesto said:

“A Labour government will reform the Gender Recognition Act and the Equality Act 2010 to ensure they protect Trans people by changing the protected characteristic of ‘gender assignment’ to ‘gender identity’... Labour will bring the law on LGBT hate crimes into line with hate crimes based on race and faith, by making them aggravated offences.

To tackle bullying of LGBT young people, Labour will ensure that all teachers”

and health and social care workers

“receive initial and ongoing training”.

The hon. Member for Reigate will be interested to hear that a Labour Government

“will ensure that NHS England completes the trial programme to provide PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) as quickly as possible, and fully roll out the treatment to high-risk groups to help reduce HIV infection.”

Labour will also

“appoint dedicated global ambassadors for women’s rights, LGBT rights and religious freedom to fight discrimination and promote equality globally.”

Three months ago the Prime Minister said of her own party’s record on LGBT rights:

“I acknowledge where we have been wrong on these issues in the past. There will justifiably be scepticism about the positions taken and votes cast down through the years by the Conservative Party, and by me”.

This has been a very conciliatory debate; I would like to help the Prime Minister and the Government to ease that scepticism. The Government now have a close working relationship with the Democratic Unionist party. When the Minister rises to his feet, will he make it clear

[Dawn Butler]

to the House that he will help to legalise same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland? Human rights are important to all humans. Let us lead the way in the UK.

4.45 pm

The Minister for Equalities (Nick Gibb): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) on securing this important debate and on a powerful opening speech. As the chair of the all-party group on global LGBT rights, he knows just how important it is that we tackle widespread violence and discrimination against LGBT people around the world. I pay tribute to him for the commitment and energy that he gives to this cause. This has been an excellent debate, with many powerful and moving speeches, including by my hon. Friends the Members for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) and for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) and the hon. Members for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) and for Hove (Peter Kyle).

This year we are marking 50 years since the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in England and Wales. Over the past 50 years, this country has made considerable progress, including by introducing same-sex marriage in 2013, equalising the age of consent and introducing the Gender Recognition Act 2004. The effect of successive Governments' efforts in recent decades means that the UK has one of the strongest legislative frameworks in the world for LGBT people. Yet we also know that LGBT people still experience discrimination in their day-to-day lives. The Government are committed to eliminating all prejudice and discrimination against LGBT people in this country, wherever its last vestiges remain.

As the hon. Member for Livingston pointed out, achieving that begins at school. It is important that all schools are truly inclusive for LGBT pupils. The Government want to tackle the bullying of LGBT pupils that, sadly, happens all too often. That is why we are currently running a £3 million anti-bullying programme to tackle homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying. Young people should feel safe and able to be open at school so that they can focus on their studies.

Tom Brake: I seek some clarity on the issue of sex education, which the Government are making compulsory. I welcome that, but what does the Minister think should be done on LGBT rights within that, including in faith schools, which take a different approach to the issue?

Nick Gibb: We will consult on the content of relationships and sex education shortly, but we want to ensure that it is LGBT-inclusive.

We announced in July that the Government also want to consult on reforming the Gender Recognition Act to ensure that we are providing the best possible support for transgender people. We know that many trans people now find the focus on medical checks in the gender recognition process very intrusive and stigmatising. In July, the Government launched a national LGBT survey, to help us to understand the experiences of all LGBT people in the UK. The survey closed earlier this month and the response we received was unprecedented, with well over 100,000 responses. That makes it one of

the largest surveys of its kind in the world. The survey will be hugely important in policy development on LGBT issues.

One area of focus for the all-party group was LGBT asylum seekers, an issue also raised by the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald). We are focusing on building an inclusive society. An important element of that is ensuring that Britain is a safe haven for those who may be experiencing persecution and abuse because they are LGBT. We must ensure that LGBT people seeking to escape extreme discrimination are safe in this country while their claims are processed. In September last year, the Government introduced the "adult at risk" concept into decision making on immigration. This concept acts on the assumption that vulnerable people who may be at risk of particular harm in detention should not be detained. That builds on the existing legal framework already in place. We have worked closely with organisations such as Stonewall, the UK Lesbian & Gay Immigration Group and the UN High Commission for Refugees to develop guidance and training for staff in detention centres. We continue to liaise with these groups to consider what further improvements can be made.

As a world leader on LGBT equality, this country has a moral duty to work to improve the lives of LGBT people living in other countries. Sadly, homosexuality is still illegal in 72 countries and punishable by death in eight. The Government remain committed to working with like-minded countries and with the Equal Rights Coalition, of which the UK is a founding member, to stand up for LGBT rights internationally. At the very highest levels of government, we are challenging those who inflict or allow discrimination against LGBT people. We urge those countries that continue to criminalise same-sex relations to take steps towards decriminalisation, and we urge all countries to ensure that they have legislation that protects LGBT people from all forms of discrimination.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs raised the issue of funding of local LGBT groups internationally. We have committed over £1.6 million from the Magna Carta Fund for Human Rights and Democracy to projects working to promote and protect LGBT rights. That includes about £350,000 for the UN Free & Equal campaign. Last year, the UK supported the establishment of the UN's first ever independent expert on sexual orientation and gender identity, and we vigorously defended his mandate when it was challenged by other states. We truly regret the resignation of the independent expert due to ill health and commend Professor Muntarhorn for his work. It is vital that a successor be found quickly to continue this important work. We will continue to support that mandate.

My hon. Friends the Members for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) and for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) raised the issue of rainbow flags. We are proud to fly the rainbow flag on our buildings both at home and abroad for key events in the LGBT calendar, such as Pride. We work closely with our heads of mission around the world to ensure that flags are flown. We will continue to do so. I hope the flag will be flown in as many countries as possible.

Hannah Bardell: Will the Minister give way?

Nick Gibb: I am sorry, but I am running out of time.

Turning to the Commonwealth, 36 out of 52 Commonwealth countries still criminalise homosexuality. The UK Government have a special duty and responsibility to help change hearts and minds in our fellow Commonwealth countries. Next April, we are hosting the Commonwealth summit in London and Windsor. We will be using this opportunity to make sure that we discuss the important issue of LGBT equality in the Commonwealth.

Many hon. Members raised concerns about particular countries and the tragic difficulties faced by LGBT people in countries around the world. This year, there have been numerous reports regarding the horrific situation in Chechnya for LGBT people. The UK was among the first countries that expressed concern about the persecution of LGBT people in Chechnya. We continue to lobby the Russian Government to investigate properly and to hold perpetrators to account. On 13 April, the Foreign Secretary co-signed a letter to Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov calling on the Russian Government to investigate and ensure the safety of journalists and activists investigating those abuses. Officials at our embassy in Moscow have also raised concerns at a senior level with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

We are also concerned about the recent crackdown on LGBT rights in Egypt. The Egyptian Government are well aware of our position on LGBT rights and we have called on the Government of Egypt to uphold and protect the rights of all minorities in the country. We are concerned about reports which suggest that some LGBT people detained in Egypt have been tortured, and we are continuing to monitor human rights there. We also continue to urge the Egyptian Government to implement the human rights provisions in their own constitution, and to investigate all reports of abuse against detainees.

We are also deeply concerned about reports that some members of the LGBT community in Azerbaijan have been arrested and detained by the authorities. We are monitoring the human rights situation in that country closely, and we regularly press its Government to meet their international obligations to protect the rights of all its citizens, including those who are LGBT. Officials from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office have raised those specific reports with the Government of Azerbaijan, and we have received assurances that those who were arrested have now been released.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) expressed his concerns about Tanzania. We are, again, very concerned by the increased anti-homosexual rhetoric and the deteriorating environment for LGBT people there. Our high commission, along with partners and international LGBT organisations in Dar es Salaam, are monitoring the situation closely. As a close friend and partner of Tanzania, we have conversations about this and many other human rights issues with its Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) raised the issue of pre-exposure prophylaxis, or PrEP. In December last year, NHS England and Public Health England announced that up to £10 million would be made available for a three-year trial of PrEP to answer outstanding questions about future access and implementation. The trial is intended to establish the most effective way in which to distribute the drug in order to have the greatest possible impact on reducing the spread of HIV.

The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) referred to the action plan on business and human rights. Last year the Government published guidance for businesses to implement the United Nations guiding principles on business and human rights, and that update reaffirms the UK's commitment to the implementation of those principles.

This has been a hugely important debate. It has sent a united message from this Parliament to all the countries that criminalise being LGBT to take steps towards the decriminalisation of something that is simply a part of an individual's nature.

4.57 pm

Nick Herbert: During the debate, I learnt that 13 lawyers and activists in Tanzania had just been released on bail. They had been arrested last week and charged with the so-called crime of promoting homosexuality, which crime does not exist under Tanzania's penal code. They were released on bail, and then rearrested. Their so-called crime was simply to challenge the country's arbitrary ban on HIV care centres. During their detention in Dar es Salaam, the police applied to the courts in Tanzania to carry out forced medical examinations to establish whether or not those individuals were homosexual. Fortunately, the courts denied the application. There could not be a more sobering reminder of what is happening around the world in countries that, as my right hon. Friend the Minister just said, are friends of our own country, are members of the Commonwealth and have signed up to UN and Commonwealth charter commitments.

It is right that across the House, on an entirely non-partisan basis, Members of all parties have spoken out against these terrible abuses of LGBT rights, which are abuses of human rights. We have sent a signal today—and I am grateful that both Her Majesty's Opposition and the Government have reinforced that signal—that abuses of LGBT rights cannot be tolerated, and that we expect and look to the authorities in the countries concerned to uphold the universal commitments to which every country has signed up.

We should not be fearful of taking a stance on these issues, because activists in those countries are looking to us—their friends and allies—to take such a stance. I am grateful to Members in all parts of the House for doing so today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered global LGBT rights.

Business Without Debate

COMMITTEES

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With the leave of the House, we will take motions 2 and 3 together.

Ordered,

PRIVILEGES

That Sir Kevin Barron, Douglas Chapman, Mr Christopher Chope, Kate Green, Simon Hart, Bridget Phillipson and John Stevenson be members of the Committee of Privileges.

STANDARDS

That Douglas Chapman, Mr Christopher Chope, Kate Green, Simon Hart, Bridget Phillipson and John Stevenson be members of the Committee on Standards.—(*Rebecca Harris.*)

RHS Wisley/A3

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Rebecca Harris.)

5 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I offer special thanks to the Minister. I know from my own past experience that notice arriving on a Minister's desk saying that they are answering the last debate of the week is met with a groan; he is smiling now, but there might have been a groan at the time.

As the Minister is aware, M25 junction 10 is where the A3 and M25 link. The growth of traffic on both roads is such that this is probably the busiest interchange in the UK; it has the highest accident record, I believe, and experiences frequent disruption and car jams in both directions on the A3, contributing to M25 jams. There are delays for miles around. As a main link between the south-east and London, the demand pressure on the A3 and the junction is growing and will continue to do so.

On the western border of the A3, just south of junction 10, is the world-famous Royal Horticultural Society Garden, Wisley. To those without a compass—or any understanding of a compass—it is on the left of the A3 after Ockham, just before the M25 as one drives to London. Access is currently off the A3, either directly if driving towards London on the A3, or via the Ockham roundabout. There is a slip road off the A3 to the entrance and a similar slip road on to the A3 on exiting. It is adequately, but not obtrusively, signposted.

I am sure the Minister is aware of the importance of the gardens. RHS Wisley is the United Kingdom's centre of excellence for horticultural science, research and education. I am referring not only to the world-class high-standard horticultural education and research, but also the annual influx of 18,000 schoolchildren from over 450 schools and the 1.2 million of the general public who flood in annually. I suggest to the Minister that if he ever visits, he gets there and parks his car early, because he will walk for about half a mile to get in, such is the demand. I must declare an interest, as most of my family belong to the RHS and visit regularly. They find the miniature insects absolutely fascinating, and they tear around the garden and try not to fall into the pools and ponds.

Wisley is a grade II-listed park and garden of about 240 acres of historical and horticultural delight. It employs 400 full-time staff and about 250 volunteers. The RHS is a third of the way through a £160 million investment development programme; £160 million for a charity in this country is some programme. That will lift the number of full-time jobs at Wisley by 60 and the anticipated visitor numbers will lift to not far short of 1.5 million annually. That will bring an accumulated benefit impact locally of about £1 billion over 10 years.

Because of the garden's location, there is no public transport and no realistic prospect of public transport. As one drives, or often crawls, along the A3 one could be forgiven for not knowing the gardens are next to the A3. The gardens and their ancient woodlands are buffered by a well-planted shield with over 500 mature trees, many, if not most, over a century old.

I accept that major improvements to junction 10 and the A3 are a necessity; that is glaringly obvious. The RHS accepts this, and Highways England engineers

have been working on plans to sort the problem out. The plan that it appears most likely to favour, however, will hit Wisley gardens hard and dramatically. The buffer provided by all the trees will go, and the entrances and exits will be complicated, adding about 7.5 miles to the round trip per visitor car. I believe, as does the RHS, that this complicated entrance will be a deterrent for visitors. Just as the investment is expected to increase, and just as it is going to help to fund the attraction, the deterrence will come in. The need for direct access and exit from the A3 is obvious. The effect on local traffic through our local villages and surrounding countryside will be significant if the possible preferred plan goes ahead.

There has been considerable discussion with Highways England, which is still meeting and discussing the prospects with the RHS. That is very helpful. Indeed, Highways England has told me that it is not against what the RHS and I see as the required south-facing slip roads at Ockham, which would meet many of the problems. However—this is where the crunch comes for the Minister—that would apparently be outside the geographical perimeters of the current scheme: the A3 road improvement scheme. New funding would be required—compared with the size of the programme that we are looking at, which is not great—as well as a business case and further consultation with local authorities and perhaps landowners. It is a further problem, but it offers a solution that goes with the grain, rather than against it. A relatively small delay to produce a sensible scheme is better than blundering on and then looking back in time and asking why we did not do this right when we had a chance.

I was going to ask the Minister if I could bring a couple of RHS representatives to his office, but I have changed my mind. Better than that, I am inviting him to come down to Wisley to see it for himself. If necessary, I will personally drive him from his office, or better still—for a Minister in the Department for Transport—from the local station. We will arrange an on-site visit with free entry, a short tour with a photo opportunity, and a cup of coffee with an RHS bun. Actually, because it is an old charity of long standing, we will get some Victoria cream sponge sliced for him. Seriously, though, an on-site visit is the only way for him to put this whole problem in perspective. Looking at maps is not the same as looking at the trees. I want us to get this right for generations to come, over the next decades and running into the next century, bearing in mind that Wisley gardens have already been going for a century. I would hate my hon. Friend the Minister to be the one to be named by Wisley visitors as they ask why he did not get it right when he had the chance.

5.7 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) on securing this important debate about Highways England's planned improvements to junction 10 of the M25 near Wisley. The scheme has attracted a great deal of public and parliamentary interest, and I know that Highways England has been listening carefully to all that has been said, including, I am sure, the eloquent words of my hon. Friend tonight.

As the Minister for roads, I am delighted that this Government are delivering the most ambitious modernisation of England's motorways and major A roads

in a generation. Good transport links are critical to our economy and its growth, and that is why this Government are investing in transport infrastructure up and down the country. Between 2015 and 2021, we are spending £15 billion on schemes across England that will connect people and businesses, creating the right conditions for economic prosperity and growth. As the House will be aware, planning is already well under way for the second road investment strategy. These great programmes of investment must be delivered in a way that respects our environment, keeps the road network free-flowing and makes our roads as safe as possible for those who travel and work on them. These are all considerations that Highways England is taking into account in the development of this proposed scheme.

In December 2014, the Government launched the first road investment strategy, which outlined the scope of investment up until 2021. The M25 junction 10 scheme near Wisley is a critical component of that national programme of investment, which the Highways England plan shows will start in 2020-21. As my hon. Friend said, the junction is one of the busiest road interchanges in the country and has one of the highest accident rates anywhere on the strategic road network. Our investment here is therefore important by any measure, and we are committed to delivering a scheme that will deliver a lasting benefit in the region.

I reassure the House that I understand the importance of RHS Wisley. The land around junction 10 and in the vicinity of this scheme is of a high environmental designation, including a special protection area, sites of special scientific interest, common land, ancient woodland, scheduled monuments, registered parks and gardens. It is home to unique habitats and, as my hon. Friend said, RHS Wisley is of course internationally recognised as a world-class visitor attraction, bringing over 1 million visitors—he has said 1.2 million—every year to what is a renowned centre of horticultural excellence. The investments that are being made at RHS Wisley are exciting and ambitious, and I look forward to seeing the improvements that will be delivered in the coming years. The Government want to support those investments and the institution as a great national asset, and the plans being proposed by Highways England will, I am sure, do exactly that, as well improving safety and congestion.

I have already alluded to the levels of congestion on this road. On a daily basis, it causes significant delays to those travelling on both the A3 and the M25. The objectives of the scheme are to relieve that congestion, to provide more reliable journey times and flow and to improve safety for everyone at a key junction where the M25 meets the A3—not omitting the walkers and cyclists who may want to use the interchange. Highways England's proposals to improve the M25 and A3 interchange at junction 10 will also deliver much-needed additional capacity through the widening that is required as part of the scheme. Highways England has committed to delivering improved access for RHS Wisley itself. The improvements will increase the capacity of the roads leading to the gardens and make access safer for everyone who visits and works at RHS Wisley.

Highways England ran a non-statutory consultation on the scheme earlier this year, along with a number of public information events. As part of that process, Highways England has been continually engaging and working closely with the RHS as one of the key

stakeholders, rightly recognising the importance of the site regionally and nationally. That engagement has been constructive and helpful to both organisations. RHS Wisley has expressed three main concerns to Highways England in relation to access to the gardens: the potential for land-take and associated impacts on historic trees and habitats; the need to retain direct access from Wisley Lane on to the A3; and the additional distance that visitors to RHS Wisley would have to travel under the proposed new road layout. All three elements were mentioned by my hon. Friend. I recognise those concerns, as does Highways England, and they are being carefully considered.

We cannot use this debate to pre-empt the formal processes that Highways England is committed to undertake under process of law. It is important that they are not compromised, because they are designed to enable sound decision making on large-scale infrastructure investments. These due processes need to be fair to all parties. Within those constraints, I have little doubt that Highways England will find the optimal solution for all and one that minimises the impact on the unique habitats and trees found at RHS Wisley. As for access, I am advised that all options continue to be carefully considered, analysed and evaluated. That is an essential step ahead of Highways England's preferred route announcement for the scheme, which I expect in the coming weeks.

While I am sympathetic to the concerns that I have heard over the last few months, and of course from my hon. Friend this evening, I must be clear that it is not appropriate for either me or Highways England to consider any access options that do not improve the safety of this stretch of road or that do not provide value for taxpayers' money.

I recognise RHS Wisley's commercial concerns about the distances that some visitors may need to travel under a proposed new road layout, as well as its concern that there should be south-facing slips at the Ockham roundabout, as my hon. Friend mentioned. Of course, as part of any value-for-money consideration, the business case needs to demonstrate optimal use of resources to achieve the intended outcomes, but the key point for this debate, as my hon. Friend has noted, is that the commercial considerations do not form part of the current scheme proposal that Highways England has been asked and funded to deliver. They could, of course, be considered as a separate scheme in a future road investment period, if appropriate, and I am sure that they would be given close consideration.

As Highways England moves towards a preferred route announcement, I am assured that it will continue to engage closely with RHS Wisley. Highways England is carefully considering the responses to its consultation and will publish the results in due course. This will make sure that the potential impacts on the community and environment have been fully considered; that the final scheme design considers all relevant responses, where applicable; and that the final environmental statement takes into account those impacts and mitigation measures needed to address them.

Highways England will then produce more detailed designs for the scheme, and it will hold a second consultation in which the public will be able to give their views and influence the specific development of the design. I hope that encourages my hon. Friend in the view that the Government and Highways England are sensitive to the

[*Jesse Norman*]

concerns that he has so eloquently raised this evening, while recognising the critical importance of our roads, and specifically of this junction scheme, in building an economy that works for everyone and a highways network that is safe for all, as far as possible.

I have also asked Highways England to write to RHS Wisley to explain its current position in response to the numerous pieces of correspondence it has received, as I will be doing on behalf of the Department.

I cannot close without responding to my hon. Friend's final, very courteous and generous invitation on the matter of cake. To my knowledge, no Minister is resistant

to the charms of cake, and least of all to a piece of RHS Wisley Victoria sponge. A bun is one thing, but cake—I put it to the House—is an entirely different matter, especially when accompanied by tea and a tour. I will insist on paying for myself in either case, but I would be delighted to take up his kind invitation, provided that we are first able to see how the matter lands after this proper process of consultation has been completed.

Question put and agreed to.

5.18 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 26 October 2017

[MR NIGEL EVANS *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS COMMITTEE

International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day

1.42 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day.

It is only right to put on the record my thanks to you, Mr Evans, for making it down to fill the gap and chair this debate. That is much appreciated not only by me, but by all the other right hon. and hon. Members who have made it their business to come along and take part today.

I am delighted to have secured this important debate. Members will know that the issue is close to my heart. They will also know that yesterday, at Speaker's House, we launched the report, "Article 18: From rhetoric to reality". I am keen that Members who do not have a copy will be in possession of one before the day is out. The report is about moving from talking about the issue to the reality of it. Through the report we have tried to show how this House could best do that through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development. We want to mark International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day. It falls annually on 27 October, which is tomorrow, and was mentioned in the House today by the Second Church Estates Commissioner and by Mr Speaker.

The right to freedom of religion or belief is better known as FORB. I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, and have been for the past three years. The APPG is well supported by some 90 MPs and peers and is co-chaired by the hon. Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker) and Baroness Berridge. We thank all of them for their participation and support. One of our officers is the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy).

FORB is the jargon term used by those of us working on freedom of belief. The right is outlined in article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights, which states:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."

We stand up for the rights of those of a Christian belief, those of other beliefs and those with no belief. That is a key issue for us in Parliament and in the APPG.

The legally binding version of the right can be found in the international covenant on civil and political rights, which has been signed or ratified by 175 countries. Although some states have made reservations to article 18, stating that they will implement it in line with their interpretation of sharia law, the right can be restricted only in exceptional circumstances. There is a perception

that advancing the right strengthens male religious leaders' ability to control groups, rather than it being seen as a right of individuals, which it truly and legally is. There are no protections under the right for religions or beliefs to be free from adverse comments. As a result, there is no justification or protection for states seeking to criminalise the defamation or insulting of any religion or belief.

Just today in business questions in the House, I raised a point about Nepal, which has brought in a new and very strict law. The law is stricter than the corresponding law in Pakistan, India or any of the other countries close by. It will clearly restrict the rights of those of a Christian belief and other religious minorities. We tried to influence that change in law, so it is hard when we find that it will still go ahead.

I welcome the Minister, and I am pleased to see him in his place. He understands the issue well, and we talked about it before the debate. He has had sight of some of my comments, so we look forward to his response. I thank him for that. I also thank the shadow Minister in advance for her contribution, which I know will be just as good as everyone else's.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): I appreciate the hon. Gentleman securing this important debate. To reiterate what he is saying, if the new domestic legislation in Nepal does not align with international law and international mores, Nepal's constitution will essentially mean that the state can discriminate—quite viciously, if required—against any person who does not share the state's religious belief or who does not even have a belief. Is that correct?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely on the button; he has totally encapsulated the situation. Those of a Christian or other religious minority in Nepal are clearly second-class citizens. There is a caste system in many of these countries, and those minorities are below the caste system. That gives an idea of where they are. The law directly discriminates against those people. I thank him for his intervention. He has raised exactly one of the issues I want to speak about.

Recognition of FORB can be found throughout history. Over the years there has been greater recognition of the importance of freedom of religious belief. I feel almost like another Member in the Chamber, who waxes back into the centuries of history that he has knowledge of. I might repeat that slightly today. Freedom of religious belief has a history going back to 550 BC, when King Cyrus the Great declared that all subjects were free to worship as they wished. The Prophet Mohammed's constitution of Medina declared citizens equal and indivisible regardless of religion. FORB is a right that can be rooted and implemented within all religious and cultural contexts.

Just yesterday our APPG published its report, "Article 18: From rhetoric to reality", which was long in the making. It looks at how best to advance the right in different countries and makes several recommendations to the Government that I hope the Minister has read and taken note of, and will respond to.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is a strong champion for faith communities, as is well known in this place. I, too, welcome the report, which is a fantastic development in this policy area. Does he

[*Julian Knight*]

agree that fundamentally we need to have a certain linkage between the UK's aid programme and religious tolerance? We should not support regimes that, frankly, persecute minorities just because of their faith.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and that is why we are having this debate today. He makes a point that we are trying to put forward. He is vociferous on this issue in his constituency, as other Members are in theirs. I know that he will convey that point to parishioners in his constituency and let them know that we debated the issue in the House, that we supported those across the world who have been persecuted and that we were that voice for the voiceless—those people who have no one to speak for them and who we perhaps will never meet in this world, but will hopefully meet in the next. That is the duty we have.

The report talks about how best to advance the right of religious freedom in different countries. We made several recommendations, which I know the Minister will take on board. I am sure that colleagues will join me in welcoming recent developments from the Government, including yesterday's declaration by the Minister for the Commonwealth and the UN that freedom of religious belief was for him a political and personal priority. Hearing a Minister say that should encourage us greatly. We should be encouraged about where we are and how our Government are going to take this matter forward for us—I am not trying to anticipate the Minister's response today, but I know that there is an indication that will be the case.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I am sorry to have missed the start of the hon. Gentleman's speech—I was trying to corral a Chairman. I pay tribute to the considerable work that the hon. Gentleman does in this area, particularly in support of the Christian communities around the world that are under increasing—probably intensifying—pressure. However, we should not forget people's right in all societies to have no belief, and I think we should encompass those people in our concerns.

Jim Shannon: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his knowledge of these issues and for his intervention. If he had been here at the beginning, he would have heard me mention that we are here to speak about those of a Christian belief, those with other beliefs and those with no belief. That is important, and it was endorsed by everyone in the room. The right hon. Gentleman will be encouraged to know that that was the case.

We are not always aware of its work, but Christian Solidarity Worldwide—some of its representatives might be in the Gallery today—made it its business to speak on behalf of a person jailed in the Philippines because he is an atheist. Representatives of Christian Solidarity Worldwide went to speak to him, engage with him and help him. We should be aware that many organisations who are stakeholders in that group do that already.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I ask the hon. Gentleman—my good and honourable friend—whether, to his knowledge, there is any Christian country that does not allow all religions to flourish within its borders.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Truthfully, I am not sure I am in a position to answer that question, but wherever there is true Christianity—or true religious belief, whatever the religion may be—people should be able to practise other religions. That is what I wish to see. Does it happen in every country? No, but it happens in many.

The report's first recommendations are to ask the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for International Development to identify freedom of religion or belief as a political priority of both Departments, and to establish a FORB programming funding stream to support that work. In some of the questions that I and other Members have put forward recently, we have tried to focus on that and perhaps nudge the Government towards doing it. Hopefully, the Minister will give an indication of how that will work in his response. It is also important that our embassies around the world have the freedom of religious belief clearly in their psyche, and that they are able to respond well to those concerns. Some Members may have heard my co-chair Baroness Berridge raise those issues last week on BBC Radio 4's "Sunday" programme.

Although there is now considerable talk about FORB and how to tackle violations of that right, there is an ever-pressing need for systematic and proactive actions and policies to move FORB from rhetoric to reality. The scope of FORB violations is extensive, as the report clearly states—if Members have not read it, please let us know and we will make sure they receive a copy. It sets out 10 examples of persecution—of Christians, of those with other religions and, indeed, of those with no religion—and where it is necessary to speak up.

According to the Pew Research Centre, nearly 80% "of the world's population lived in countries with high or very high levels of restrictions and/or hostilities"

towards certain beliefs. The violations are truly global. There is not just one type of perpetrator or victim. Groups that face persecution in one country may be the persecutors in others. In his comments at Speaker's House yesterday, Lord Ahmad noted that we want a society where Muslims speak for Christians, Christians speak for Hindus and Jehovah's Witnesses speak for Shi'as. That came out of the international conference held in September 2015, and if we all did that, that would encapsulate what we need to do across the whole world.

Since 1978, waves of violence carried out by the Myanmar state and military have been directed towards the 1 million Rohingya Muslims living largely in Rakhine state. The 1982 citizenship law made it almost impossible for the Rohingya to keep their citizenship, and temporary voting cards handed out in 1993 were revoked before the 2015 election. The Rohingya have no parliamentary representation and are largely viewed as illegal immigrants. Recent military violence against the Rohingya, killing more than 1,000 people and forcing more than half a million—I think that figure has now increased to nearly 800,000—to flee to Bangladesh, Indonesia and Thailand, has been described by the UN as ethnic cleansing. There are about 120,000 Christians among those 800,000, and they have also had to flee with nothing. None of us, inside or outside this Chamber, could fail to be moved by the fate of those people.

I also want to speak about the Baha'is. I was fortunate last week to be invited to an event in my constituency to celebrate the 200th anniversary of Bahá'u'lláh—I hope my pronunciation is okay, for an Ulster Scots man—the founder of the Baha'i faith. Its motto is:

“The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens”.

If we want to encapsulate what we should all be trying to do, when we look on all our brothers and sisters wherever they might be across the world, that phrase—“and mankind its citizens”—is something we should be aware of.

I was introduced to the Baha'i faith when I was mayor in 1992, in a different life, by Eddie and Mary Whiteside, who lived in my constituency. Eddie passed away a few years ago but his wife and family still live there. He introduced me to the Baha'i faith, and told me a lot about what they try to do. I have never before met such gentle people—gentle in nature, in how they approach people and how they see things across the world. I am very conscious of them, and they epitomise the resilience of faith communities. I celebrated the 200th anniversary of the birth of their founder. Bahá'u'lláh taught that religious prejudice destroys the edifice of humanity; peace and security are unattainable without unity. The brothers and sisters, sometimes literally, of those I joined at that celebration are, however, undergoing systematic oppression in Iran.

I do not want to be political—though perhaps it is hard being a politician not to be political—and I do not want to refer to the Iran nuclear deal. Members will know that when that matter came to the House—my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) will remember that night—I made my comments very clear. I felt that we should tie in any Iranian nuclear deal with human rights and equality. We should have done that. We did not do that the way that I wanted it done, and many Members on both sides of the House spoke equally strongly about it.

Those brothers and sisters are undergoing systematic oppression. Government authorities have killed or executed more than 200 Baha'is recently, and more than 10,000 have been dismissed from Government or university positions since 1979. As of February this year, at least 90 Baha'is remain imprisoned. They are not allowed to own property or have a job like we do, or organise, and their children are not able to get the opportunity of education, and healthcare is also restricted. That is the life of Baha'is in Iran. Today, in this House, we want to speak for the Baha'is, for the Rohingya Muslims and Christians, and for those people who are being systematically abused.

The Minister will no doubt have heard of the crimes of ISIS towards religious communities in Iraq and Syria, including an estimated 250,000 Yazidis, and they really “make you bad”—that is how we would describe it back home. They undermine confidence in the world and the people that live in it. The Yazidis have been particularly abused. They have been murdered, and Yazidi women have been subject to all sorts of attacks. Some 150,000 Yazidis fled to Mount Sinjar, where hundreds perished before a co-ordinated rescue operation could be carried out. Christian leaders estimate that there are now fewer than 250,000 Christians in Iraq, down from the pre-2003 estimate of 1.4 million—what a drop!

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his excellent speech and for bringing this important

debate to Westminster Hall. Does he share my concern about evidence presented to the International Development Committee in the previous Parliament, which showed that Christians, in particular, in the refugee camps in Syria are being persecuted and now often do not go to the camps? The Minister and the Department for International Development should work together to ensure people of all religious beliefs are safe and secure in the camps.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. She, like everyone else in the Chamber, has a particular interest in this debate. She is very active on these issues in her constituency, and we have discussed them at length.

This month, it has been estimated that there are 70 mass graves containing the remains of ISIS victims. There was an article in one of the newspapers the other day about one of the towns outside Raqqa, which has just been liberated, in which 20,000 Christian people had lived along the banks of the river. Of those 450—almost 500—families, there are just 50 left. They live in mud huts and are probably the lowest class in the whole society. They live on handouts from their families who live in America and elsewhere. Again, that is an indication of the problem that Christians face. Their villages were marked by elaborate churches and monasteries, but now the 35 Christian villages of the Khabur valley echo emptily. That illustrates what has happened.

I want to talk about Syria and Iraq. I understand that, in the last few days, the US Government have said that they want to stop the UN's funding for Iraq because it is not getting through to religious minorities. I find that very worrying, if that is what they are doing. If the funding is not getting through to religious minorities, I would want to make sure it does, but stopping it would mean that nobody got it, so we need to be careful about that. I had the opportunity to visit Iraq under the auspices of Aid to the Church in Need. I visited Irbil and Alqosh, and I got pretty close to Mosul, where battles were still ongoing. It was good to travel in places that the Bible spoke of, such as the plains of Nineveh. Will the Minister take up the issue of the US's very worrying indication that it intends to stop its aid?

We are glad that the UN Security Council announced that it will set up an international investigative team to gather evidence of ISIS crimes. We want that to happen, but we ask that the Government ensure that the team is adequately resourced, that its leaders have internationally recognised credentials, and that its evidence is used to bring the perpetrators of ISIS's crimes to justice.

In Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Pakistan and Malaysia, both the Shi'a Muslim and atheist communities face treatment amounting to persecution. In Saudi Arabia, the Shi'a town al-Awamiyah, in the eastern province, remains besieged by security forces. Legislation that came into force in 2014 declared the promotion of atheism in any form to be terrorism—how can the two be equated? Earlier this year, the death sentence of a 29-year-old man, Ahmad al-Shamri, on charges of atheism and blasphemy was upheld, even after two appeals. Despite the variation in the scale of violations, there are recognisable patterns, and “Article 18: from rhetoric to reality” outlines good practices, which the Government can use to tackle FORB violations in different countries and contexts.

[*Jim Shannon*]

I declare an interest: I am also chair of the all-party group on Pakistan minorities. That issue is very close to my heart. The violations in Pakistan and countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey include the spread of intolerant narratives and their use in school textbooks. A story in the press yesterday indicated that, in Saudi Arabia, one of the princes said he is going to make a change. I hope he will make the strong Islamic viewpoint more moderate and try to change society. That can only happen over a period of time, but if there is a mood of change, I welcome that. If that happens in Saudi Arabia, that is good news. Textbooks contain biased material, including hate speech about Hindus, Christians, Ahmadis, Sikhs and Shi'as have been found in a number of provinces in Pakistan, including Sind and Baluchistan.

The Ahmadis are a small minority Muslim group that lives in Pakistan and Indonesia. The hate speech that has been fomented against them has been incredible. When the state of Pakistan was first formed, Muhammad Ali Jinnah made a speech on 11 August 1947 in which he said—this was his hope for Pakistan—

“You may belong to any religion, cast or creed—that has nothing to do with the business of the state.”

How that has changed between 1947 and 2017! I speak, as we all do, for the right of the Ahmadis to practise their religion across the world—in Pakistan, Indonesia and elsewhere.

In recent years, there has been a resurgence in laws treating blasphemy as a criminal offence in countries including Indonesia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Mauritania, Russia and Nigeria. In Nepal, about which the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) spoke, there is a criminal code Bill that criminalises religious conversion and the hurting of religious sentiment. What does “the hurting of religious sentiment” mean? It can mean anything. If someone wants to interpret it strongly, they will do that. It is very worrying that that stringent legislation has now been signed into law. After all the parliamentary changes in Nepal, it is sad to see that the worst possible legislation has resulted.

[*JAMES GRAY in the Chair*]

The increased use of anti-terrorism legislation against religious or belief groups in countries including Iran, China, Russia, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, has resulted in a variety of FORB violations. In July, Russia declared the Jehovah's Witnesses a terrorist organisation and prosecuted scores of them for meeting and being in possession of their literature. In August last year, five Christian members of an Iranian house church were arrested at a picnic and charged with acting against national security. Such things are happening all over the world.

At the same time, we hear stories of churches growing. Three weeks ago, we had a missionary weekend at our church—the Baptist church at Newtownards. We hear of churches growing in Laos, where there is a Communist regime, and of people being saved and becoming Christians. People have religious liberty, even though it is very restricted. We hear some good stories, but we are here today to speak out on behalf of the people who do not have the opportunity to enjoy the freedom we have in this country.

The APPG's report recommends that the Government track and audit the overseas funding and investment of relevant Departments, including DFID, to ensure it is not being channelled directly or indirectly to Governments, organisations or individuals who do not support or demonstrate a clear understanding of and strong respect for FORB. The importance of that has been demonstrated by the fact that some of the UK's and US's education funding has been given to the provincial government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in Pakistan. In 2016, that government gave \$3 million to Darul Uloom Haqqania seminary, known as the “university of jihad”. That illustrates the problem. That religious institution supports the Taliban and religious radicalisation in Pakistan. It is not clear whether US or UK funds were included in the funds that the provincial government gave to it, but that example highlights the importance of auditing and tracking funding. In the report, we ask for such things to be looked at.

Action to tackle divisive and intolerant narratives about those with different beliefs in school textbooks and broadcast on radio and television is also greatly needed. That action is needed not just overseas but here in the UK, too. It is alarming that overseas media channels that broadcast messages legitimising violence towards people because of their beliefs continue to be broadcast directly into UK homes.

There are many good things happening. We have the right of freedom of religious belief across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Last week, I was fortunate to attend the 200th anniversary of St Mark's parish church in Newtownards, which was celebrating 200 years of doing Christian work in the town, of spreading the gospel, of encouraging people and the community, and of highlighting the physical, prayerful, emotional and spiritual part of Christian life. We are very pleased that the Church of Ireland church, as well as other churches, has been so involved in that.

Action to tackle divisive and intolerant narratives is important. The APPG report therefore recommends the establishment of a cross-departmental programme to create space across a range of media and educational platforms for pro-FORB messaging and narratives that delegitimise dangerous speech against those with different beliefs. Such action across a range of media platforms will also support measures intended to prevent violent extremism by helping to build respect and understanding between people and, in turn, cohesive communities.

Increasing religious literacy as well as FORB literacy is a crucial first step for UK embassy staff and all country-specific civil servants throughout the relevant Departments, including the country desk officers. Again, that is one of the recommendations of the report. That is one of the things that we are asking for because it will make a difference to people throughout the world. Training in one literacy or the other, or both, would vary depending on the official's role. Such training would provide officials with the confidence and necessary skill set, including the tools, principles and practice to monitor and track religious dynamics and to respond appropriately to conflict when it breaks out. We could be right there where it is happening to help directly through our Government, embassies and staff. That is one of the things that we are trying to achieve.

The frameworks and training are readily available. The report highlights them and the Government can ensure they are maximally used. To enhance embassy staff and civil servants' work overseas on FORB, local consultation with affected groups would increase understanding of the real causes, concerns and flashpoints, helping to find solutions for the many FORB violations. There is a balance to strike when consulting groups, to ensure that no one agenda takes precedence due to someone's lived experiences, but the people affected are often far more able to identify the most pressing concerns in complex situations, and they are sometimes able to provide more immediate solutions to their problems. If we have competent, well-trained embassy staff on the frontline, clearly they can affect change where it is needed and when it is needed.

A long-term vision beyond the immediacy of politics is needed for such work. Action would allow religious communities who have been in conflict to come together to share understanding and create a future vision for co-existence. I have tried to draw out a central theme for where we are—it is about co-existence, all the religions together, respect for each other, practising our religion as we wish to, and ensuring that we have the right to do so. Building networks of influential community leaders and organisations who are trusted within those communities and who can lead those mediations will allow that work to reduce conflict and human rights violations to be successful. We have an end goal and a target that we are trying to achieve.

Work is particularly urgent in the middle east. There has certainly been some talk—I am not sure how much substance it has—about the Government creating a middle east ambassador or envoy from this House. If so, there is a clear role for that person to play in this context. In Iraq and Syria, the building of an equal, multi-faith society that is represented in local and national government is critical to ensuring long-term stability in the region.

I am sure my colleagues welcome the FCO and DFID integrating use of the right to FORB into their work, such as that on preventing violent extremism. To continue that work, I ask that the extremism analysis unit carries out research to add to the evidence base that is outlined in the APPG report and to analyse the role of religion as a driver of extremism, as well as to find evidence of the role that the promotion of religious tolerance plays in building societies resilient to extremism. I hope that the Foreign Secretary and the Minister will agree to meet with me and my colleagues in and outside this House who are working on this to discuss how that work can continue in the UK and at the international level.

I hope that DFID Ministers and civil servants working to achieve the sustainable development goals will agree to meet us, too, to discuss how the right to freedom of religion or belief plays a role in achieving SDG 16, which is about building peaceful and inclusive societies, and how religious leaders and faith and belief-based organisations are key partners in that. As we can see, not only is FORB a fundamental human right of great importance for the more than 80% of us globally who say that we adhere to a particular religion or belief but, in making that right a reality, it would be helpful in building peace and stability, and so achieving UK Government goals and objectives.

Expanding networks globally recognise the importance of FORB, such as the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief, which I joined in New York in 2015. Globally, the IPP now has some 200 parliamentarians who have committed to raising this human right within their own countries. That process, which started in New York in September 2015, was replicated here in the APPG, which brings some 90 MPs and peers together, and in Africa, the Americas, the far east and the middle east. We are trying to build forums where people can come together. I met a Christian and a Muslim from Pakistan; the Muslim said she was speaking for the Christians, and the Christian said she was speaking for the Muslims—that is an example of the goal we should look forward to.

The private sector's work to promote religious tolerance is recognised in the Religious Freedom and Business Foundation's annual awards, which have been supported over the past few years by the International Olympic and Paralympic Committees.

To mark International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day tomorrow, I hope that the Minister will agree with the importance of this human right and commit to working with me, all my colleagues in the Chamber who have the same belief and commitment, the APPG, its staff and all stakeholders—we have 22 or 23 stakeholders who are part of the APPG. The work is to move, as the report says, from rhetoric to reality. That is what we want to achieve. Without Government support, this is a human right that will not be a reality for many people around the world and there is no better time than International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day to work towards that reality. That is where we will be tomorrow. As I said earlier, we are the voice of the voiceless—for those who have no one to speak for them, we do it here.

2.17 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the second time in two days, Mr Gray—

James Gray (in the Chair): We are both very hard-working people.

Bob Blackman: Yes! I welcome you to the Chair, Mr Gray, and thank you for volunteering to oversee our proceedings this afternoon.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate and on his tireless work in championing the cause of religious minorities around the world. He is well known for standing up for people who are voiceless and unable to speak for themselves in countries where those with their religious beliefs are oppressed. I endorse the report he mentioned, which was released yesterday. It sets out a commendable agenda, which I trust will be supported across the House, irrespective of political parties.

In the short time in which I wish to speak, I will concentrate on Hindus who are minorities in certain countries, in particular minority Hindus in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Russia. No doubt colleagues will raise the plight of other minorities throughout the world, and it is absolutely right that they do, but I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for British Hindus and am proud of that role. The APPG frequently raises particular problems faced not only by British Hindus but by Hindus in other countries.

[*Bob Blackman*]

An organisation called Human Rights Without Frontiers, which is based in Brussels and lobbies many of our European Union partners, has released a plethora of information highlighting the plight of Hindus across the world who are being oppressed in certain countries—in particular, I have to say, in Islamic republics that do not tolerate the Hindu religion. I believe that Governments, whoever they are, have a fundamental right to protect their borders and ensure that all citizens are protected, but after that, above all else, they should protect the minorities that live within those borders. People should have a fundamental right to celebrate their religion irrespective of what that is, as long as it does not offend or jeopardise the security of their country. We should speak up about that in Parliament—loud and clear.

In Pakistan over the past year alone, there have been countless acts of violence, persecution and discrimination against Hindus by the community but also by the Government and the army. I have highlighted several issues, not only in Pakistan but in Bangladesh and, I have to say, among the Rohingya. The hon. Member for Strangford highlighted the plight of the Rohingya generally, but as recently as 26 September 2017 a *Daily Mail* article highlighted the minority of Rohingya who are Hindu—the Rohingya are not just Muslims but Hindus as well. They fled violence in Myanmar and, in front of witnesses, eight young women were forced to either convert or die in refugee camps. To me, that is reprehensible; it is on the public record and I believe it should be condemned outright. Although I have every sympathy for the Muslim majority of Rohingya who flee in fear of their lives, it is reprehensible that the Hindus are picked on by that majority and are forced to convert or die in those camps.

There was a case in June in Thar of a Hindu girl of only 16 being abducted by men and forced to convert. The Hindu population was in outrage when that happened. That young girl was forced to convert to Islam and to marry a rather older Muslim boy. In this country we are not immune to that. As long ago as 2007, Sir Ian Blair, who was the Metropolitan Police Commissioner at that time, pointed out that the Metropolitan police and universities were working together to combat “aggressive conversions”. He produced evidence of the huge number of complaints that had been investigated by the Met police, which was working with university authorities on the problems experienced in this country. The Hindu Forum of Britain highlighted the plight of Hindu girls in this country at the time, and this is still going on. We have to protect the minority rights of people in our country as well as those in other countries. Just in October, we heard about the plight of a Coptic Christian family who were captured in Egypt earlier this year. They were eventually allowed to return home after being kidnapped and forced to convert to Islam. The reality is that that goes on in a number of places across the world and we all must speak up about it.

In Pakistan, the new developments in so-called online blasphemy laws have resulted in the imprisonment of peaceful Hindus—people who celebrate their religion and put it online are arrested. Prakash Kumar, who is in the Gadani jail in Pakistan, was arrested in May 2017 for allegedly sending blasphemous content through WhatsApp. As a result of the accusation, he was surrounded

by a mob that physically attacked him and, after the police arrested him, gathered outside the jail calling for him to be executed.

When we speak up for freedom of speech we have to face the fact that it should be a fundamental right for people to promote their religion. They should not be imprisoned or face execution for such activities. In Bangladesh, the arrival and activities of Islamic State and other violent extremist groups have contributed to increased attacks against the Hindu population and other religious minorities. The attacks have targeted not only individuals but places of worship. That is another of the insidious things going on across the world: places of worship are deliberately targeted and demolished because the majority population does not like a minority celebrating its religion.

Hindu communities have arrived in Bangladesh to escape persecution in Myanmar, as I have mentioned. They have had to set up Hindu refugee camps but have received very little attention from across the world and, more importantly, no aid from the Bangladesh Government. Indeed, I do not believe that they have received international development aid from our Government. If the Minister cannot respond to that specific issue today, will he look into it? Clearly, we need to protect all those minorities who are fleeing for fear of violence.

In Russia, Alexander Dvorkin, the vice-president of French-funded anti-sect organisation FECRIS, was behind the 2011 attempt to ban the holy scriptures of Hinduism in Russia. In February this year, a rally was held in front of the Russian embassy in the capital of India to protest against his anti-religious activities. It is quite right that we should confront people, wherever they are, who suggest that we ban religions and religious books, and say, “No.” We should speak up for all minorities and encourage them to celebrate the faith that they hold dear.

Bob Stewart: As I understand it, about 75% of Russians are, on the face of it, Russian Orthodox Christians, yet according to the report that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned, there is suddenly persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses and Protestants in Russia. I asked in my earlier intervention, “What Christian country actually persecutes?” In a way, we could say that Russia does.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. We always have to be careful when we talk about persecution of religious minorities. In this country, we are only 400 years from the time when someone who was the wrong version of Christian could be burned at the stake, so we must always be careful about pursuing this subject. I counsel him to remember that, not so long ago, religion was banned altogether in Russia; it was held under the radar. As he quite rightly says, the majority of the population of Russia purport to be of a Christian faith, but that does not mean that everyone is, and it certainly does not mean that the Government protect religious minorities. We should be careful about pillorying countries, but we need to zero in on the evidence, where it exists and where it can come forth, so that we can raise those issues and, indeed, so that the Minister can raise them with his counterparts.

Advocates of women’s rights across the world, of which I am one, cannot ignore the worldwide reports of Hindu and Sikh women and girls being kidnapped, forced into marriage against their beliefs and converted

to a religion that they do not share. The reality is that that goes on in a range of countries. We must confront that evil—because evil it is. I have nothing against people who decide voluntarily to enter a relationship or a marriage with someone of a different religion and opt to convert to that religion—that is of course their choice—but kidnappings, forced conversions and forced marriages of women and girls, against their will, occur systematically across the world. It is fundamentally wrong that that is hidden and is not spoken about enough.

I have challenged people about that numerous times, and I invite students in particular but also religious organisations to bring forward the evidence for public scrutiny, so that we can get a serious debate going and have transparency about this issue in this country and across the world. Specifically, I ask my right hon. Friend the Minister to take up the issue of the protection of religious minorities and particularly Hindus and Sikhs in countries around the world where they are under serious threat of oppression and forced conversion, and the threat of death if they refuse to convert.

2.30 pm

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I pay great tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is a doughty and tireless campaigner on this issue. He deserves great credit for all his work and campaigning on it and the way in which he raises it constantly in Parliament and beyond.

Religious freedom is the right to believe in something or nothing. It was one of our erstwhile monarchs who allegedly said she had no desire to make “windows into men’s souls”. However, as the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) rightly said, there was a time when that was not true on these islands and people were burnt at the stake for their beliefs.

Let me tell of an incident rather less grim than that but pretty bad none the less. Of course, it has to be a Welsh example: the Llanfrothen burial case of 1888. Hon. Members will be forgiven if they have not heard of it, but here is what happened. It was a case to ensure that the local rector complied with the Burials Act 1880, allowing a quarryman named Roberts to be interred in the consecrated part of the churchyard rather than a plot described by the lawyer of the day—a certain David Lloyd George—as

“a spot, bleak and sinister, in which were buried the bodies of the unknown drowned”.

That was where they put the Welsh nonconformists: the free Church people. Victory in that case for the dissenting Mr Roberts led to great civil liberties for Welsh nonconformists and free Church denominations. I suggest Mr Lloyd George had not forgotten that when he continued his campaign, which led to the disestablishment of the Anglican Church in Wales.

I do not claim to have the degree of expertise of the hon. Member for Strangford as he talks about the issues of concern in different countries, so I will not try to replicate that, but one aspect of the debate that intrigues me is how faith groups in this country are sometimes spoken about. When political parties are reported as having more than half a million members—something I really welcome—journalists report that as “soaring membership.” When Spurs get a crowd of 85,512 at Wembley, we are

told it is “amazing”—I do not know much about football, but that is what one of the papers said. When 72,000 people on average attend a Six Nations rugby game, it is “incredible.” Yet when Church of England attendances reach 760,000, in one report it is all about “downward pressure”. Some poor clergyman or woman quoted in the report said, in slightly macabre terms:

“We lose approximately 1% of our churchgoers to death each year.”

I find it interesting how the debate sometimes goes in this country. That figure, for one church among many and one faith organisation among many, in one part of the UK, constitutes a lot of people and shows that our faith communities are actually pretty vibrant.

In my defence, I will quote something Polly Toynbee wrote—I am not sure she will like that. In 2014 she spoke about the work of the Church of England and its concerns on welfare policy, describing it as being “good on food banks” as she discussed that particular aspect. What she said was quite intriguing:

“Faith makes people no more virtuous, but nor do rationalists claim any moral superiority. Pogroms, inquisitions, jihadist terror and religious massacres can be matched death for death with the secular horrors of Pol Pot, Hitler or Stalin.”

That is an interesting comment in a Polly Toynbee article—I expect a letter from her next week.

We need recognition of the importance of faith in this island and beyond by some of our more secular commentators. We need to welcome the role of faith communities. Of course, we need to welcome them in all our political parties. I was delighted to see the launching of Catholics for Labour at this year’s Labour party annual conference. It is my view that genuine multiculturalism and freedom of belief are not really possible without an appreciation of the importance of our faith communities.

If I may, I will throw two specific but totally unrelated thoughts into our discussion pot. It is right that we have laws against hate crimes of various kinds on our statute book. Freedom of thought and different beliefs is vital, but the discourse needs to be conducted with respect. I do not claim to be an expert on this, but I pose the question whether we should join the 16 other countries on the continent of Europe and make Holocaust denial an offence. Is that not a form of hate speech and something our law should reflect?

My second and unrelated point concerns the United States of America and the death penalty. One may ask, “What does that have to do with religious freedom?”. Quite a lot, I would argue. The death penalty is allowed in 31 of the 50 American states, although I welcome the fact that, of those 31, 12 have an official moratorium or have had no executions in the past 10 years. There are many arguments against the death penalty, but that is not my point today. My point is that perhaps no other nation has such a strong lobby fighting for the religious liberty of Christians across the globe, yet many of the countries where Christians suffer persecution suffer in such a way that their lives may end horribly through the death penalty. If the United States seriously wishes to advocate more powerfully on their behalf, all the states of that nation need to be serious about getting rid of the death penalty. I would be grateful to the Minister if the British Government took that up with the Americans.

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): We take that up with every nation. We are committed to the abolition of the death penalty around the globe and

[Mark Field]

it is an issue that I will take up at every opportunity with high commissioners and ambassadors from every nation, not just the United States.

Susan Elan Jones: I am most grateful to the Minister for his reassurance. Finally, I wish you, Mr Gray, and every Member here a very happy International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day tomorrow. I fear it will not be quite so happy for the many people who face persecution around the world, but it is our job to continue to take up this cause.

2.38 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a slightly unexpected surprise to have the pleasure of you chairing our debate, Mr Gray. It was welcome to see you, along with Mr Evans, swoop in as a superhero to make sure that we could have our debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing the debate and thank him for his assiduity in ensuring that these matters are regularly on the agenda in Westminster Hall and in the main Chamber. When I was on the Backbench Business Committee, we sometimes used to have a jokey point of order before the public session, in which we would ask, "Are we able to go ahead if we don't have an application from the hon. Member for Strangford?" as we seemed to have one at virtually every session. I say that not to be dismissive, but to compliment a parliamentarian who uses every method to get the things he passionately cares about on to the agenda, not least freedom of religious belief.

It is apt that we are having the debate today, given that tomorrow is International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day and that next week marks the 500th anniversary of the start of the Reformation, when Luther hammered his list of indulgences to the cathedral door, setting in chain a number of events that are almost unparalleled across our and European history. That happened at a time when states had a strong role in enforcing the king's religious belief on the whole country, and when one church in western Europe had a monopoly on Christian religious thought. That led to a lot of things that Luther listed and that the Reformation sought to address. Of course, Luther's actions did not immediately lead to a period of great freedoms. Indeed, some countries saw some of the worst crackdowns on people's religious beliefs ever seen in European history. We have touched on people facing horrendous penalties.

When I was a councillor in Coventry, I represented a ward that includes the martyrs memorial, which commemorates a number of people who had been burnt at the stake for being too Protestant, at a time when someone could be hanged as a traitor for being a Jesuit. The memorial allowed us to think about what that meant in our own area. We have seen the "Gunpowder" drama—I should not say drama, really; it is factual in some ways but a bit of a drama in others—that depicts the religious strife that was going on in this country just over 400 years ago. It was between people who believed in the same lord and saviour, Jesus Christ, who I believe in and who I know the hon. Member for Strangford believes in, but some were not able to express their beliefs, which led to conflict and much discrimination at the time.

As we stand here today, things have thankfully moved on and our societies have been greatly changed by the events that came out of the Reformation. Particularly in the UK, we now thankfully have the ability to express our faith freely. However, we are clear that this is about the right not only to express religious faith, but to express no faith. If someone thinks faith is nonsense and they do not agree with it, it is as important that they have the right to say that they are an atheist or a humanist as it is that they have the right to say they are a Christian, a Muslim or a Sikh. It is about the ability to find one's own path and make one's own decisions and beliefs and, hopefully—in my view—to approach God in the way one wishes. People have the fundamental right to express that, which the state will protect. Equally, those with faith should stand up and defend those who wish to express their right to have none.

However, that is still not the case around the world. In far too many countries holding a religious belief is seen as some sort of threat to a leader or regime. As I reflected on in a previous debate on this subject, political oppression all too often goes hand in hand with oppression of religious belief. The countries that most restrict their citizens' political rights almost always do the same for their religious beliefs. It is sadly no great surprise that North Korea regularly tops the league table for the persecution of Christians, just as it tops many league tables for political persecution. It is the idea of not wanting people to be their own person; that they do not have a soul of their own and are only part of a collective that must bend its knee to a ruler who wishes to put themselves in between their people and God, and in so doing use the power of the state to exact terrible retributions on anyone who wishes to challenge that.

It is not only in those open ways that we see persecution. We also hear about missionaries finding it very difficult to do their work in some countries. Again, that is not because there is a great objection to what they teach—the love and compassion of Jesus—but because they are seen as a sort of challenge to an established order, such as a dictatorship or one-party state. The idea of anyone having any type of free thought might start to undermine that system, not because there is any great philosophical disagreement, but purely because those established orders just do not like the idea of anyone being able to offer something beyond what their tyrannical system wishes to offer.

It is still touching to talk to some of the missionaries working today and to hear stories that remind us of Europe's past, and to realise that to this day there are people who wish to preach the good news found in the gospels, but who find themselves being monitored by police forces. They know that although they might not be dealt with, due to the slight protection that a British or American passport provides, those who come to hear that good news face real risks—sometimes to their lives, but also to their jobs, economic prospects and what their families can do.

It is right that the Government look to promote people's rights under article 18. It is always a pleasure to see the Minister in his place. From some of the answers given in the other place to recent questions asked by the Lord Bishop of Coventry, I note that the Government are looking at what can be done, particularly at the Commonwealth summit, to raise the issue of religious persecution with those countries where it still exists.

Certainly, if the Commonwealth is to be a true Commonwealth, it is about not only trade deals and selling goods, but the values that we share and that underpin our whole societies. Freedom of religious belief must be one of those rights.

It is good to hear this debate again and I welcome the chance to talk. Some of the history is encapsulated in how places such as Paignton parish church in my constituency have been changed and shaped. The church has its original 14th-century font and a 15th-century pulpit, which has had various changes made to it, owing to the changing fashions of religious belief, with features that were originally desirable becoming less welcome at a later date. I remember as a child being taught the story of the church in Plympton St Mary, where I was christened, and the fact that, because of Cromwell's troops, there are statues above its main door that have no heads. Plympton had been a royalist stronghold and, because of its differing views, after the civil war the troops came and desecrated the church. They tried to pull the statues down but could only take off the heads. The rest of the statues are there to this day, minus their heads, as a reminder of what happened.

I welcome the fact that over the past 30 years people in many parts of eastern Europe have become free again to express their Christian belief. Some of the examples we hear are concerning, but the message that must come out from this House is that Members are speaking up and giving encouragement to those who hope perhaps one day to preach their faith in their own Parliament, council or market square.

Tomorrow is not about the freedom to express the religious faith that I believe in, that the hon. Member for Strangford believes in, or that anyone here believes in; it is about each person's freedom to express their faith as they choose, without fear or favour, knowing that they have a fundamental right to do so. I welcome the debate and the work being done, and I look forward to the Minister's response on how the Government are taking those views forward.

2.48 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Like others, I greatly enjoyed the opening speech by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and the contributions from other hon. Members. I love the historical context because, as I shall elaborate, it is extraordinarily important.

Mention has been made of statues losing their heads and of the brutality, on both sides, of the Reformation. One thinks of Mary Tudor and, as has been mentioned, of the gunpowder plot, which is currently being dramatized on television. In my country, Scotland, described by the Reverend Sydney Smith as

“that land of Calvin, oat-cakes, and sulphur”,

the town of St Andrews, where I went to university, saw the particularly brutal martyrdom of Patrick Hamilton, who was the Abbot of Fearn, which is near my home town in the highlands. In 1528 he was burned to death at the stake for his Protestant beliefs. He burned for six hours, from 12 noon until 6 o'clock at night, in a particularly cruel and brutal martyrdom. It is said that on his death an angel's face appeared in the tower of St Salvator's chapel in St Andrews University. To this day, due to a natural act of God through erosion, there

is a rather beautiful face in the stone. In the place where he was burned, the initials PH are set in the paving stones, and students at St Andrews make a conscious point of never standing on those stones. It was said at the time that

“the reek of Patrick Hamilton hath infected all those on whom it blew.”

It was a turning point in Scottish Reformation history.

It is easy to over-simplify this. We tend to think of the rebellions in 1715 and 1745 as having been Protestant versus Catholic, but it is not quite so easy. In the 1745 rebellion, Bonnie Prince Charlie took his troops south through Carlisle and got as far as Derby. If we examine who the Jacobites were, we find that among those from north of the border there were some Catholics, high Anglicans and Episcopalians. But an awful lot of them were Presbyterians—I look to the two Scottish National party Members in front of me, the hon. Members for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) and for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day)—of a nationalist persuasion who were not at all convinced by the 1707 Act of Union. We must remember that the rebellion of 1745 was during the time of Whig supremacy, in my own side's glory days. The people who joined Bonnie Prince Charlie's flag from the south were actually Tories who wanted to change the Government, so it was not nearly as simple as one might like to think.

I have an interesting anecdote about religious tolerance. One of the people who most strongly supported Bonnie Prince Charlie was Cameron of Lochiel, the chief of Clan Cameron, known as Gentle Lochiel. The Camerons were and are to this day of a high Anglican persuasion, but it is interesting that they protected their Catholic tenantry on their estates of Auchnacarry and Lochaber. A late gentleman who graced this place, Charles Kennedy, was of the Roman Catholic persuasion. His family had a croft on the Cameron estates but were allowed to worship in freedom, protected by the Cameron family. That is why they have their own graveyard, where Charles is buried today, on the Cameron estates. The future Cameron of Lochiel is a Tory Member of the Scottish Parliament. I would have loved to get him to the Liberal persuasion, but I did not prevail in that regard.

In Scotland it has been a journey towards tolerance. We learn from history, as other Members have said, but we must learn not to be too complacent. SNP Members may touch on this, but we know what can arise at an old firm match between Celtic and Glasgow Rangers. In the UK it is easy to pat ourselves on the back and say we are doing very well. However, the hon. Member for Strangford made mention of 1947. The question is: was Cyril Radcliffe too hasty when he drew the boundary lines between India and Pakistan? What if we had departed the Indian subcontinent in a way that was a little more considered? Goodness knows, but it was sadly a blot on this country's record. A British decision led to some of the most ghastly inter-religious murders, and we may never know the sum total of people killed.

In conclusion, it has been a journey. The point was very well made by the hon. Member for Strangford in his opening remarks that we must reach out via our embassies and everything we do through the FCO and the like. In my own small way, I am a member of the Church of Scotland, and I have learnt from this debate and found it absolutely fascinating. My days of saying that I am a newbie are drawing to a close, and I cannot

[*Jamie Stone*]

get away with that argument for terribly much longer, but it is great to learn and I will do what I can. To be perfectly fair to HM Government, I have no reason to doubt the good intention that they are pursuing in this regard, as far as I can see.

2.53 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. May I join the chorus of congratulations for the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing the debate and making such a passionate speech about his cause? He is a tireless campaigner on this issue and many others, and I thank him.

This is an extremely timely debate, particularly in the light of International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day tomorrow. I congratulate the APPG and the hon. Gentleman on their report. I have looked through it. Hon. Members who have had a chance to look at it will have seen on page 6 or 7 a picture of the memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin. If anyone has not had a chance to visit that memorial, I recommend they do so, because it is an extraordinarily moving experience that really illustrates everything we are talking about today. You start at ground level and descend into the centre of the memorial, as you are overwhelmed by the blocks on either side, which of course is deeply metaphorical for the horror that overwhelms societies—Europe in this century, and many other places, sadly, throughout the world today—when we see such religious intolerance. It is an extremely moving experience. The ground is also worthy of note, because it has bumps, to symbolise the bumpy path that all countries have to go down on the way to religious tolerance.

I dwell on that for a moment to echo the comments made by a number of Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), about recognising that it was not so long ago that we had religious intolerance in this country. The hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) quoted Elizabeth I's famous saying that she had no desire to have windows into men's souls. Without going into a history lesson, Elizabeth I was really speaking out of political expediency rather than religious tolerance, as Catholic emancipation was still to come.

Indeed, it was only the Roman Catholic Relief Act 1829—the Duke of Wellington's last great battle, as it were—that enabled Catholics to stand as Members of Parliament. That ought to give us all pause. In 1834, the whole Palace burned down, which means that very few Catholic MPs sat in the old Palace of Westminster and the vast majority of Catholic MPs served in the same Chamber that we all serve in. To me, that brings home that religious tolerance in this country is a relatively recent phenomenon. That tradition now is happily long standing, but it was not always so.

Around the world, there is so much more work to be done in so many areas. That is a reminder for us all that religious tolerance is not just a moral absolute, although clearly it is the right thing to do, but has a practical benefit as well. As my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) said, religious tolerance so often leads to political intolerance. If we have freedom of religion and expression of any religion or none, we also tend to

have free, prosperous and stable countries, and we see much less of the violence that has sadly blighted so much of the world and continues to do so today.

I will dwell in these short remarks on some of the areas around the world today where much more work needs to be done. One example is Egypt, which the Foreign Office has made a human rights priority country, as I hope the Minister will confirm. Daesh continues a campaign against Christians in that country. There were the Palm Sunday attacks only recently, where two churches were attacked, 44 people were killed and many, many more were injured and maimed. There is perhaps some promise in the fact that so many people from other faiths rushed to help in the course of those attacks, showing that tolerance is always there, in the human spirit. However, we need to work and use our good offices as much as we can in this place to ensure that Governments around the world allow people to do what, in my view, they naturally do, which is to allow others to worship in their own way.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way and sorry that I cannot stay for the whole debate. We have talked about the work done in this Parliament and by the APPG and my hon. Friend—I call him my hon. Friend—the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Does he agree that the fact that the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia has felt it necessary to make remarks about turning away from extreme interpretations of Islam is a measure of the importance of keeping up pressure on the human rights front on Governments that, until now, have been excessive and repressive?

Robert Courts: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for that excellent intervention and I entirely agree. There is a real job that we can do in keeping up the pressure. It just shows that when we do that, results can be achieved.

Another country about which there is much concern in this country and around the world in respect of human rights is Iran. President Rouhani took office in 2013, and we have seen an increase in the persecution of religious minorities—people imprisoned because of their faith—and an increase in harassment and arrests. Of course, that causes enormous concern to all of us in the House. There has also been an increase since the elections earlier this year.

[*ANDREW ROSINDELL in the Chair*]

The situation of Syria and Iraq has touched all of us in the House and, indeed, the entire country. I have met in my constituency in west Oxfordshire the six families whom we have settled. Of course, the situation has a special impact when one has met families and children who have had to flee their home and their country and find and make a new home elsewhere. It is also a fresh reminder to us—we have already touched on this—that religious intolerance is not just between faiths, but inside faiths. It has occurred between Christians, between Protestants and Catholics, in our own culture and among the different strands of Islam, which we have also touched on today. When we hear about the abduction, torture, rape, loss of property, destruction of property and forced conversions in Syria—500,000 Christians have been forced to flee that country, and I think I am right in saying that 230 are still in captivity—we realise

how much there is still to do in that country before we can see a happy and tolerant place where people are free to practise their religion as they see fit.

I welcome all the work being done in the House by the APPG under the chairmanship of the hon. Member for Strangford, and everything that the Government are doing. I am pleased that freedom of religion or belief is integral to everything the British Government do, and I thank the Government for all that they are doing. Of course the Minister will freely acknowledge that there is more to do—it is perhaps trite for me to say so—but I want to put it on the record that there is much more to do throughout the world. We all recognise that freedom of belief or religion and, indeed, the freedom to have none at all is the foundation of everything that we are in this House and in this country, and we must do all that we can to ensure that the blessings of tolerance are spread further throughout the world.

3.2 pm

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I thank the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) for his speech, and extend special congratulations to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this most timely debate. It is a celebration of what we want and what should be, and it is, I believe, a stepping-stone to achieving that.

The celebration on 27 October is of course to celebrate the passing in the USA in 1998 of the International Religious Freedom Act, which tasked the US Government with promoting religious freedom abroad. However, it is also a celebration of far more than that—the freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief, a freedom guaranteed under international law, including article 18 of the UN's international covenant on civil and political rights. Interestingly, that article cannot be derogated from even in times of public emergency. Of course, this freedom is also embodied in the universal declaration of human rights, the European convention on human rights and our own Human Rights Act 1998.

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and that right includes the freedom to change one's religion or belief and the freedom, either alone or in community with others, in public and in private, to manifest one's religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance. This most profound of rights allows the individual not only to hold to a faith, but to subscribe to their own views of a faith or a different theological school within a faith and also to hold non-religious beliefs. Indeed, it protects the individual from being compelled to state an affiliation with any particular religion or belief.

The establishment of a rule of freedom of religion or belief, as we have heard today, can be traced back in history to way before 1998. Without wishing to bore hon. Members with yet another history lesson, I would like just to draw attention to Thomas Jefferson. He viewed the varying institutional forms of religion and worship as a matter of personal opinion and saw any state involvement in religion as coercive or corrupting. In 1786, he advocated and enshrined his view in the Virginia state legislature. By 1791—only five years later—that would appear in the US constitution as the bill of rights and the first amendment. Looking at this issue as we are today, I think it is important to find out why Jefferson advocated that back in 1786.

Susan Elan Jones: Because he was Welsh!

Martin Whitfield: He was Welsh and learned. In 1786, the US was still a new country—indeed, many debates took place within these walls at that time—but immigrants from all around the world were flocking to that country, seeking a place of religious freedom. It would perhaps be unfair to say that the US at that time was such a place. Indeed, Jefferson was driven to seek an amendment in the Virginian state because he had seen the repression and oppression of Quakers. They were being attacked for their religious beliefs and marginalised for their ideas. Jefferson wanted that new country to be welcoming to all and free from the repression evident in the old world. His actions were to articulate the right to freedom of religion or belief.

Here we are today, and it would be wrong to say that the situation has improved across the world. Oppression is as widespread now as it was then. I pay huge tribute to Dr Ahmed Shaheed, the UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, and I would like to put on record what he has said:

“Given the increasing global interaction between peoples, allowing persecution across the globe to be immediately felt by others abroad, including diaspora communities, both foreign and domestic policy will be enhanced by developing an understanding of religious or belief dynamics which influence people's behaviour towards others. It is crucial that we try to see the world as others see it and that we invest more in translating our expressions of solidarity into operational action.”

That is why this debate is so timely and important. As much as it is a celebration, strictly speaking, of an event in 1998, it is much more than that. It is a demand that Governments declare the right of freedom of religion or belief, even where state religions exist, where religious tensions run high, where Governments profess the dangers of their children being led astray, where forced conversions take place, where apostasy is still a crime and where theocracy is the rule. The enactment in 1998 directed the US Government to promote freedom of religion abroad—a cry that has been listened to by other Governments, including ours. It is a desire that must be continually pushed through dialogue, treaty, trade and influence. Tomorrow should be not just a celebration of what should be, but a celebration of what is—a celebration of a move from rhetoric to reality.

I shall finish by returning to Jefferson. When it came to religious belief, he argued that everyone should be answerable to their own god or, I would add, no god. That freedom must be defended by everyone.

3.8 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I apologise that I came to the debate only recently because of attendance at a Select Committee, Mr Rosindell. I shall keep my remarks short in case other hon. Members have already covered what I want to say. And what I want to say comes very much from my own family's experience—not recent experience, but experience as a Huguenot family back in the 1600s, when the family came from persecution in France to the freedom that there was in England and, indeed, in other parts of the United Kingdom and other parts of the world.

There are three areas where I believe that the freedom of religion, of thought and of expression is vital and it is very important that our Government proclaim that in

[Jeremy Lefroy]

a modest, factual and responsible way around the world. It is not something to be ashamed or shy of, but something to be celebrated.

The first area concerns the economic consequence of freedom of faith or religion. The Huguenots were industrialists in France. When they were driven out, it cost France a substantial industrial base, particularly in textiles, but they brought that industrial base to England and other parts of what would become the United Kingdom. As a raw material producing country with the great wool barons of East Anglia, England became a textile-producing country and was one of the bases for the expansion of industry in these islands. So a practical reason for toleration is that it allows people with initiative, imagination and drive to come to your country. We have seen that on so many occasions.

One of the most recent examples in the United Kingdom was when Uganda, under the dictatorship of Idi Amin, decided that it did not want its Asian community any more. The Asian community that came from Uganda to the UK and other parts of the world—but mainly to the UK—as a result of that expulsion has been of enormous benefit to this country. The welcome that this country and other countries gave was both the right thing to do and very much in our interest.

Bob Blackman: My hon. Friend is making a good contribution to this debate. Does he also recall that the wonderful people expelled from Uganda, whom I regard as Britain's gain and Uganda's loss, were denied access to return to India, the nation of their birth, by the Indian Government at the time? That is why a Conservative Government in this country encouraged them to come here, and they have contributed tremendously to the economy and wealth of this country.

Jeremy Lefroy: I am most grateful for that intervention; I was not aware of those details. I would point out that the same people who were welcomed here are now contributing greatly to the economy of Uganda and other parts of the world. The blessings that they have received in this country, very much by dint of their own hard work and application, they want to spread around the world. They are a fine example of what can be done when a people who are persecuted in one country and welcomed into another then decide to share the benefits of their prosperity with other countries around the world. I would also say that about Huguenots, who have made a great contribution in this country, in Canada, Australia, South Africa and Germany, and in what were then the Low Countries and now the Netherlands and Belgium.

Religious persecution is counterproductive. It drives out people who have a strong faith. Often with a strong faith comes a strong commitment to the community and therefore the economy, and to the common wealth of the nation, so I urge all Governments that persecute religious minorities to simply look to their own interests. They are absolutely doing the wrong thing for the future of their own country. They are narrowing the economic interests of their country and narrowing the culture and political space within their own country.

Secondly, I would look at the benefits to science. It has often been said that there is not much contact between science and religion, but I would say absolutely the opposite. What often drives scientific investigation

is a desire to know more about this wonderful creation of God. My own father-in-law, the late Professor Donald MacKay, who was from the north-east of Scotland, always proclaimed that that was the most wonderful part of these islands. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] I will not comment on that, but I can hear some affirmation. He worked with Alan Turing and many other distinguished scientists. He was a physiologist and brain scientist and also a very strong believer who wrote many books on the relationship between science and faith, which are well worth reading. I could give many other examples of scientists who have derived their desire for the investigation of this world from their faith and trust in God.

Thirdly, I want to stress what religious persecution takes from a country in terms of its culture. If some of the most creative people—those who have a faith or no faith—are persecuted and driven out, a huge amount of the country's culture is lost, whether it is in its literature, music or graphic arts. There are many examples, but I will give just one small example of how our great writers and artists in this country have drawn upon their faith. Jane Austen grew up in a vicarage in Hampshire and the next-door parish was the parish of the Reverend Lefroy, hence the connections between her family and the Lefroy family over the past 200 years. It is clear that that experience of growing up in an atmosphere in which there was a strong and vibrant Christian faith had a great influence on Jane Austen's writing.

Would Jane Austen's novels have been written in a country in which there was repression? Possibly. We have seen examples of great literature that has come out of repression, but I would argue that a free country where people are allowed to follow their faith and to express themselves in a way they believe is right, and where there is no fear of the law coming down on them because of what they think or believe, is the best possible environment in which to produce great literature or great music. Thank you, Mr Rosindell. I appreciate the opportunity to say those few words.

3.16 pm

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this important debate, Mr Rosindell. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing the debate and, as many others have recognised, for being a great champion for these issues, not only in this House but elsewhere. I know that he will continue that work. He has been tireless in raising the persecution and oppression of religious minorities and others all over the world. Long may that continue. We have heard interesting contributions today, some historical and some on where we need to reach. That has been welcome and, certainly from my perspective, educational.

I will make some general remarks rather than go into details. I said in my maiden speech that I was incredibly proud to be part of this Union: not just proud but hugely privileged because in our democracy we have the right to private belief, public opinion and the protected ability to argue, discuss and persuade others in relation to our belief, our faith and our views. It is the right to all beliefs and, as rightly pointed out, to none at all that makes the United Kingdom and our democracy great. From my earliest memory those were the principles that were emphasised and articulated.

In Northern Ireland the term “civil and religious liberty” is often used, and it was used very much when I was a child. One of my earliest memories is when I was seven or eight years of age and looking up at the banners and bannerettes at the loyal order parades. This may seem a strange analogy or reference to some, but many of those bannerettes and banners showed scenes of religious persecution and the battles fought for religious liberty. They emphasised for my generation that those liberties, won through pain, death and battle, must always be celebrated and protected.

Some may perceive such celebrations and parades in Northern Ireland and Scotland in terms of the dominance of one religion over another, but in fact they are a celebration of religious and civil liberty. As a child I sat on my mother’s knee, looking at the parades and banners, and asked her what the pictures on the banners meant. My enthusiasm for going to church, like most children’s, could only have been described as variable; but when she explained to me that the pictures represented stories of the battles and challenges that we went through in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and, at the time that they happened, Ireland in trying to get religious liberty, it gave those things a different emphasis, and put them in a different perspective for me—even as a child of seven or eight. She made it clear that it was not a matter of the dominance of a religion; it must go all ways, and those hard-fought liberties must be extended to all.

We have heard in the many contributions so far that the journey of the past 400 years has not necessarily been smooth; there have been challenges, which we have overcome. However, we should be proud of the fact that we are where we are today, and that the rights in question are the core and cornerstone of our democracy. I believe we are in the best position to push forward, to be at the forefront of ensuring that the principle of freedom of religious belief and opinion is spread throughout the world, and to tackle oppression and persecution. The importance of educating each new generation lies not just in educating them about the history of what we have been through, lest we return to intolerance and persecution; it is also a question of defending liberties within the United Kingdom, and doing our part, working with other countries across the globe, to extend fundamental liberties to others.

I pay tribute to the report by the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief, and to the incredibly hard work that has gone into it, and I want to highlight some of the issues that have been mentioned. Although I have long had an interest in the subject, I was still surprised to read the statistic that

“80% of the world’s population live in countries with ‘high’ or ‘very high’ levels of restrictions and/or hostilities towards certain beliefs”.

That should shock and dismay us, and it shows how far we have to go. It was interesting that, in highlighting the oppression and persecution that must be tackled, the report included people’s ability to leave their religion. Although I am hugely proud of the democracy and freedoms in the United Kingdom, we should be aware that there are still challenges. One appalling example is so-called honour killings. Very often, young women may not even want to leave their religion, but perhaps want to leave a particular shade, aspect or interpretation of their religious belief, or to display and express their

belief in a different way. In the United Kingdom, there are young women who are killed for that decision, right now. At the heart of article 18 is the right to change or leave one’s religion. We have come far, and our experiences of the past 400 years should motivate us to be at the forefront of tackling oppression and persecution around the world, but we must also be incredibly careful that intolerance and persecution do not creep into the United Kingdom. It must be tackled, and a clear message must be sent. Young people, no matter what their religion, should be able to grow up in the United Kingdom and make the decisions that are the cornerstone of British democracy.

I repeat my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford for securing the debate. I entered the House only in June, but I assure him and the all-party group that I want to do all I can to support the work they do through my own experience. That is at the core of things for me; yes, I am a strong Unionist and that is at the core of my political ideology and beliefs. However, what underlies that for me, and has done from a young age, is the basic concept of freedom—of civil and religious liberty. I will do all I can in my role to bring that about not just in the United Kingdom but for our sisters and brothers all over the world, regardless of their views or religion, or their decision to have no religion.

3.24 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. It would have been a pleasure to serve under anyone’s chairmanship at one point, when we thought we did not have a Chair, and I think we are setting a record for the number we have had during the debate. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this timely debate. I acknowledge the work he has done on the issue over a long period of time and I look forward to working with him in future.

Freedom of thought, religion and belief is an essential human right. No one should ever be persecuted for practising their religion or no religion, but we know that religious persecution is growing around the world. It is more important than ever that we stand up for freedom, particularly freedom of religion and belief, and that we set an example and provide leadership across the globe. From the contributions to the debate, I think everyone agrees on that across the Chamber, which is encouraging.

The world is watching us—certainly my constituents are. Since January, I have been contacted by constituents about a varied list of such issues: the plight of atheists and non-believers in Malaysia, the treatment of Christians in India, the persecutions of Christians globally, the execution of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, the persecution of Christians and minority faiths in Iran, hate crimes in the UK against apostasy, the treatment of the Christian community in the middle east, and anti-Semitism against Jewish and Israeli students in the UK during Israeli Apartheid Week. That list comes from a quick look through my case files last weekend so it is probably not exhaustive.

I am concerned that anti-Semitic sentiment is growing as the far right gains a voice in contemporary culture. Since Donald Trump’s election as President of the

[*Martyn Day*]

United States, there has been a notable rise in anti-Semitic attacks with swastikas and Nazi imagery increasingly prevalent. That is very worrying. Trump's comments on Islam have added to that picture of the creation of a religiously intolerant society. His so-called Muslim ban sparked outrage across the world but, at the same time, gave a seemingly mainstream voice to people with abhorrent views.

Against that backdrop, I am pleased that positive steps have been taken in many places. I will mention Scotland in particular, and the work of ecumenical groups in my constituency, whose very existence fosters an attitude of openness and discussion. Inter-church groups and Churches Together in Bo'ness, Linlithgow and Bathgate gather to share their faiths and to engage with local communities. I have visited events organised by the local Muslim community in my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally). The events are targeted at the entire Falkirk district, which includes a sizeable part of my constituency, and offer a real opportunity to engage in religious pluralism and inter-cultural dialogue.

One such event was the recent Eid in the Park, which is now an annual event, publicly celebrating Eid in Callendar Park, a public open space in Falkirk. It is a hugely valuable opportunity for the wider local community to learn about Islam, and a great family fun event. I have attended for the past two years and I hope it continues for a lot longer. I am also looking forward to visiting the Falkirk Islamic Centre tomorrow. I made that diary date prior to knowing that it was International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day, but that will give me something to talk about when I get there.

I have tabled a number of questions on the issue of anti-apostasy. Individuals who leave their religious community or convert to another faith sometimes face significant challenges or rejection as a result of that decision. I sincerely hope that it can be given much greater attention and that people who suffer as a result can receive the support they need. Sadly, at a UK level the Government do not collect data on hate crimes motivated by anti-apostasy, so there can be no accurate assessment of the issue locally. I do not disagree with many of the Government's answers, which say that they treat it as a hate crime, as it clearly is, but it would be nice to get the numbers and see how significant it is in our communities. I hope the Minister will reconsider the Government's stance on the collection of necessary data in the UK, because a Home Office action plan could then be drawn up for that specific group. These people are vulnerable when they leave their religious community, particularly if they go to no faith and do not have the support of another religious community. High profile cases have been reported in the press where people have converted between faiths, but statistically it is more of an issue for people who go to no faith.

On 25 August, I wrote to the Foreign Secretary to raise a constituent's concern about the persecution of atheists and non-believers in Malaysia. I have not yet received a response, so I would be grateful if the Minister would give his colleague a wee nudge to get me a reply. It would be well received by my constituent and my office. The UK Government's commitment to religious freedom both here and abroad has been stated many

times in this place. It would be welcome if the Government continued their strong lead on the issue by seriously addressing anti-apostasy hate crime across the globe and within their own country, and by ensuring stronger diplomatic interventions with foreign Governments where human rights issues of religious freedom and the freedom to have no faith have been highlighted.

Thankfully, I live in and am proud to represent a very open and welcoming constituency. There is a clear message from the communities I serve and Scotland as a whole that we welcome people from diverse cultures and backgrounds and we are a truly welcoming and diverse nation. I suggest that such openness to discussion is the way forward. We cannot simply bury our heads in the sand amid an increasingly religiously pluralistic society. Instead, we must seek to develop a religious literacy, which will enable us to engage in constructive intercultural dialogue and so better understand and live alongside one another.

I have friends from pretty much every major religious faith—I am not saying from every religious faith—and the one common factor that people of genuine religion have is that they are very tolerant and fair minded and really support their society. It is the people who exploit religious differences we need to guard against—not those of religious faith. Before I close, I wish to praise again the honest and hard work of the hon. Member for Strangford and the APPG in this regard. I want to take this opportunity to make my own personal commitment that I will strive to do anything and everything I can to help to protect this very important right. I hope we can all unite behind that.

3.31 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. As my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) just said, we have had a veritable feast of Chairs today, but I am glad we have been able to make progress.

I join in all the congratulations that have been paid to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is a real champion for this issue in the House. He rightly enjoys cross-party support, which has been demonstrated in the speeches and contributions that we have heard today. I welcome the re-establishment of his all-party group. I am pretty sure I am a member of it; but if I am not, he will make sure I am. This morning, I received from his own hands a copy of the latest report—a very substantial piece of work. As he said at the start, it stresses the need for a concerted and continued effort to protect the rights to freedom of religion and belief all around the world. We will come back to some of the report's recommendations later.

There are three key areas I want to cover in putting forward the Scottish National party's position: the key principles of religious freedom and the importance of marking the day; reflections on some of the different examples we have heard of religious freedom's current relevance; and then some questions for the Government and some action they can take.

As the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) noted, the International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day on 27 October began as a commemoration of the US International Religious Freedom Act 1998. Unfortunately for the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and

Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), this day was not celebrated in Jacobean times. We have had to wait all these years for it to come round. The historical perspectives that we heard from him, the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) and other hon. Members are very important. They demonstrate the role that different religions and faiths have played in our societies for literally thousands of years. Now, in the modern world, we have what we might call a secular framework in the ECHR and the UN declaration of human rights. That secular framework should protect all religious beliefs and those with none and provide that level playing field for engagement.

I think it is fair to say that, in their purest form, there is not a single major world religion that allows for intolerance or persecution. The golden rule, as it is known, which can be found in over a dozen of the world's largest religions, can be summed up as, "Do unto others as you would have done unto you." That should be the fundamental basis and principle on which we conduct all our human relationships. When we see states or societies corrupting and perverting a religion in a way that allows them to persecute minorities, of whatever kind, they are not respecting the religious freedom that we all ought to enjoy.

The hon. Member for Stafford demonstrated that religious persecution and intolerance can be counter productive on many different levels: economically, culturally and, importantly, scientifically. The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) mentioned the right to no belief and the place of atheism and secularism. It is a duty of states to protect those rights too.

Unfortunately, during this debate we have heard so many examples of situations around the world. The situation of the Rohingya in Myanmar has been discussed many times recently in this Chamber and the main Chamber. The brutal treatment and oppression of the Rohingya minority is a huge disappointment to all of us, particularly those who looked up to the struggle for freedom and democracy in Burma. We can only hope that progress is made. In 2016 this House voted to describe the atrocities perpetrated against the Yazidis in Syria and Iraq as genocide. In those days, the Government perhaps paid a little more attention to resolutions of the House than they have recently—I hope they will live up to those standards.

We also heard about the persecution of Christians. The hon. Gentleman spoke about the role of missionaries in different societies. Missionaries exist in all religions and should be free to evangelise. St Francis is attributed with the saying, "Preach the gospel at all times, and if necessary use words." We should be known first by our actions, and the first action ought to be tolerance, peace and solidarity. Some of the most incredible people I have ever met were religious missionaries who gave up their lives and their homelands to make other countries their homelands and to live out their faith. If that has the effect of converting people to their faith, they will be very pleased, but their first instinct is to serve the poor and the oppressed in the countries they live in.

I have written to the Home Office, rather than the Foreign Office, about missionaries who are UK citizens, but have lived abroad for many years—decades, often. When they come back to the UK, perhaps for their final years, they sometimes have difficulty accessing medical

treatment or the NHS because they have not been paying tax. I think that is something the Government could helpfully keep under review.

There have been a number of studies about the oppression of Christians. I pay tribute to some of the organisations that have been mentioned such as Christian Solidarity Worldwide. Aid to the Church in Need produces a hard-hitting report on a worryingly regular basis, highlighting that experience. In this part of the world we think of Christianity as the establishment—we begin our day in Parliament with Christian prayers—but that is not true in other parts of the world. It is important that those persecutions are highlighted, but indeed that applies to a range of different minorities.

We also heard about the Ahmadi community. Very sadly, in my city of Glasgow last year, a member of the Ahmadi Muslim community posted on his Facebook page to wish a happy Easter to his Christian friends and the Christian customers of the shop he ran, so he was killed by someone who subscribed to a different branch of Islam. That was an absolutely shocking and dreadful occurrence. It shows we cannot be complacent about religious intolerance in our own societies. What happened was particularly ironic given that the Ahmadi community's mantra, as I have seen when I have visited their mosques, is, "Love for all, hatred for none." We could not really come across a more peaceable community.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he just said. After the attack in Glasgow, the law of this land made the person responsible accountable for their actions, but in Pakistan, perpetrators are given free rein to attack innocent Ahmadis in the knowledge that they will never face prosecution for their actions. We are here today to speak for them. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that Pakistan also needs to step up to the mark?

Patrick Grady: As I said, given the defining mantra of the Ahmadi community, the persecution of them is almost inexplicable. My understanding of the meaning of the word Islam is that it is a form of submission, of peaceful understanding and of coming to terms with oneself and one's place in the world. That ought to apply around the world.

In a debate on religious freedom, we should touch on anti-Semitism. The hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) spoke powerfully about visiting the Holocaust memorial in Berlin. I have also had the privilege of visiting it on a couple of occasions and it never fails to make people stop and think. The Community Security Trust has reported 80 violent assaults targeting Jews here in the UK this year. A total of 767 anti-Semitic incidents were reported between January and June. The CST sees that as a rise over recent years. We have to question why that has happened, call it out for what it is and ensure that it is condemned.

The UK Government have a number of opportunities to respond. Some are outlined in the all-party group's report, which asks what priority the Foreign Secretary is giving to freedom of religion or belief, and whether the Government are willing to look at providing appropriate funding and how they are reviewing the existing funding streams and particularly the training that is provided, for example, in embassies and to diplomatic staff.

There was discussion at the start of the debate about whether DFID funding should be given to regimes that support religious persecution. We have to be careful

[Patrick Grady]

about using aid as a political tool, but equally, it should not be used in any way to support persecution. That does not mean that aid cannot be given to other organisations, such as grassroots organisations, NGOs and, particularly, faith-based organisations in developing countries or fragile or conflict-afflicted states. In fact, there is perhaps even more of a case for ensuring that organisations working on an ecumenical basis—working for peace, security and justice—are appropriately resourced.

It would be useful to hear the Government restate their commitment to human rights conventions, and particularly to the ECHR given the context of Brexit. I reflect on the fact that the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross raised the issue of sectarianism, which still blights our society. Being a neighbour to the amazing, mighty Partick Thistle FC, I am fortunately not required to have any view on the success or otherwise of members of the old firm, but sectarianism must be called out and condemned as unacceptable. We should work on a cross-party, cross-Government basis to tackle that in our society.

In conclusion, I commend the different initiatives here in the United Kingdom to promote religious tolerance, some of which were spoken about by the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) and my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk. After International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day tomorrow, in a few weeks' time we will celebrate Scottish Interfaith Week—I believe there is a UK equivalent. Speaking about the week last year, the First Minister noted:

“Scotland is a modern multi-faith and multi-cultural country where all people can live together in harmony, and where people of all faiths and ethnic backgrounds can follow their religion or belief and achieve their potential. These events are tremendously important in bringing together different communities united in a common purpose.”

I finish by quoting one of the great spiritual leaders of our time, Pope Francis. In a meeting on religious liberty that he held in the Independence Hall in Philadelphia in 2015, he described religious freedom as

“a fundamental right which shapes the way we interact socially and personally with our neighbours whose religious views differ from our own.”

He went on to say:

“Let us preserve freedom. Let us cherish freedom. Freedom of conscience, religious freedom, the freedom of each person, each family, each people, which is what gives rise to rights.”

I look forward to hearing from the Minister.

3.45 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell, and to follow the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady). Like everybody who has spoken, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this important debate. We all know that, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, he is a tenacious campaigner for these rights. He always makes a thoughtful and extremely knowledgeable contribution to these debates, and I thank him for that.

The hon. Gentleman secured a similar debate earlier this year on the persecution of Christians and the role of embassies. Many issues raised today were raised in

that important debate, including violence against the Rohingya Muslims, which the United Nations has described as “ethnic cleansing”, and the subsequent refugee crisis in Bangladesh—a very current issue that we have had many debates on. In this debate, hon. Members have talked about our words becoming actions, and we have to keep up the pressure on Bangladesh to provide aid to the refugees and to allow international aid agencies into the country. We need to do whatever is in our power to help the plight of the Rohingya Muslims. It is a real issue.

Other issues raised in the previous debate included: the persecution of Christians in Syria and Iraq; the restrictions on freedom of religion or belief in Russia, which have led to the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses; and the attacks by Daesh on Coptic Christians in Egypt. The hon. Member for Strangford raised the issue of a new law in Nepal, which creates a caste system whereby Christians are relegated to the status of second-class citizens.

[IAN PAISLEY *in the Chair*]

The Archbishop of Canterbury, while on a visit to Jerusalem earlier this year, spoke of the persecution of Christians in the middle east. He said that in the conflict zones of the middle east, every part of life was dominated by suffering:

“That is true whether you are a Christian or not but in this region in addition to the suffering of war, conflict and the tragedies of death and injustice, Christians especially are experiencing persecution, are especially threatened.”

Many hon. Members raised the issue of religious intolerance within the UK. In London alone the number of hate crimes against Muslims has increased from 343 in 2013 to 1,260 in 2016—the number of incidents has almost quadrupled in three years.

As has already been referred to, the APPG has produced a report on freedom of religion or belief, which I read with great interest. It is obviously timely that we should be discussing the report on the eve of International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day. The report states that “acts of intolerance involving religion or belief are on the rise globally. A climate of intolerance is being fostered in many nations by xenophobic and nativist narratives, which are also de-sensitising the general public to dangerous practices such as stigmatisation and incitement to hostility against those with different beliefs.”

The report centres on article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights—on the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion—and many hon. Members have rightly referred to that today. Despite 243 states signing international human rights provisions on freedom of religious belief, violations still go on and, as has been said, nearly 80% of the world's population live in countries with high or very high levels of restrictions on and hostility towards certain beliefs.

The report makes 14 recommendations, which I hope the Minister will address when he sums up. Of particular interest to me are recommendations 1 and 2, which call for freedom of religious belief to be identified as a political priority for the Foreign Secretary and as a strategic priority in the work of the Department for International Development. The report asks about funding, and calls for funding to be transferred from DFID to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in order to establish a freedom of religious belief funding stream within the FCO. I would be interested to hear his views on that recommendation.

I would also like to press the Minister on recommendation 12, which calls for the FCO to recognise the role of freedom of religious belief within prevention of violent extremism measures across the UK Government. It recommends that the extremism analysis unit should carry out research to analyse the role of religion as a driver of extremism and provide evidence that promoting tolerance on the basis of religion or belief helps build societies that are resilient to extremism. Interesting and far-reaching suggestions are made throughout the report, including about sharing best practice internationally. I hope that the Minister can comment on its ambitious recommendations.

We in the UK must do everything in our power to ensure that people of faith or no faith the world over have the freedom to pursue their beliefs without fear of harassment or victimisation. Where there are humanitarian issues and breaches of human rights, the UK should use all diplomatic means available to ensure that international law is adhered to, including bilateral relations and multilateral forums such as the UN Human Rights Council.

The all-party parliamentary group's report is to be commended and noted for its recommendations on initiatives to tackle violations of freedom of religious belief at the international level, including the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief. Finally, the support of the new UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Dr Ahmed Shaheed, is also vital in tackling incitement to violence on the basis of religion or belief.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): So that the Minister does not have to rush the fences, I inform him that he will have sufficient time to make all the points that he wishes in responding to this detailed debate. The Chairman of Ways and Means has given us permission, if we desire or require it, to extend these proceedings by a further 12 minutes. The hon. Member for Strangford will also want to respond, and we will have sufficient time for that.

3.52 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): It is a great pleasure to work under your chairmanship as well, Mr Paisley. I am not sure whether there are planes to be caught and other things beyond 4.30 pm, but I will endeavour to respond to all aspects of the debate.

I am delighted to represent the Government in this debate and, along with everyone else, to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing it on such an important occasion. I pay tribute to him and to all the members of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief for their continued strong commitment to promoting this universal human right. We welcome the views of parliamentarians and civil society groups on what more we might do, and we seek to act on those views where possible.

I was going to thank the new boy and the new girl who have made speeches today, but unfortunately the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) has now left the Chamber. Perhaps he took to heart the idea of catching a plane home—he has a slightly longer commute to his constituency than I do, of course. He and the hon. Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) made good and heartfelt speeches, as indeed did all Members who contributed.

To speak slightly personally, I have spent all but four months of my 16 years in this place as a Back Bencher. Although I believe firmly that I must speak today on behalf of the Government, I am also aware, as the Government need to be aware, that we do not have a full majority in the House of Commons. Therefore, the opinions of Parliament in this and many other matters have increasing importance. I take seriously this sort of debate. In my role as a Foreign and Commonwealth Office Minister, I will endeavour to pass it on to the high commissions and embassies within my bailiwick, in order to ensure that the concerns expressed by parliamentarians do not just die in the ether or appear on a few pages of *Hansard* for a particular day, but are given practical effect. I give my word to everyone here that I shall endeavour to do so and to boil down the issues debated, as well as the important report, to make a practical—if not life-changing—day-to-day difference in how our embassies and high commissions operate. I will ensure that the concerns addressed by parliamentarians, not just in this debate but in numerous others, are brought to bear.

To an extent, that has already been done in relation to Burma, as the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) pointed out. As my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford rightly said, more than 600,000 Rohingya have been forced to flee to Bangladesh since 25 August. Parliamentarians' active role has contributed to the UK's continuing leading international position on the matter. The issue is evolving, and I know that frustration has been expressed at various times, not least by the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton, and rightly so; it is her role in opposition to provide a practical sense of concern about the pace of reform.

I spoke about the issue yesterday at a Foreign Affairs Committee hearing. The situation continues to evolve, in diplomatic and political terms. As recently as Monday I was at the United Nations in Geneva to pledge on behalf of UK taxpayers an additional £12 million, bringing to £47 million, or \$62 million, the UK's contribution to the heartfelt international efforts in response to this terrible humanitarian catastrophe, which at the moment is occurring predominantly in Bangladesh. The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton is absolutely right that we are doing all we can to ensure that the displaced can return to Burma, and one hopes that some of the money will be spent to rebuild lives and villages on that side of the border.

That is an example of what is going on; no doubt in three or four months' time there will be other issues for me, as a Foreign and Commonwealth Office Minister, or one of my colleagues, to deal with. That is why we appreciate the work of the all-party parliamentary group and parliamentarians to raise the temperature of such important issues; it informs and complements our work overseas. I stress that I will, in my own small way as a Minister, take it seriously. If we hear such representations, we will try to ensure that we can act on them in our embassies and high commissions elsewhere.

Tomorrow our posts across the diplomatic network will mark International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day in various ways. I want to mark the occasion by reiterating the Government's commitment to promoting and protecting freedom of religion or belief, reflecting on the situation in a number of countries of particular concern and setting out what action the Government are taking on the issue.

[Mark Field]

Article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights is the fundamental principle underpinning our work. It defines freedom of religion or belief as “the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion”.

As a number of hon. Members have pointed out in this debate, the article states that everyone has the right to choose a religion or belief, or to have no religious belief at all. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister spoke earlier this year about her

“determination to stand up for the freedom of people of all religions to practice their beliefs in peace and safety.”

I set out my own personal commitment on this issue when I last spoke on it in a debate in July, and I know that Lord Ahmad, the FCO Minister with responsibility for human rights, regularly expresses sentiments similar to mine, both in the other place and in his engagements in London and overseas. I also know that he was with many Members yesterday in Speaker’s House for the launch of the APPG’s report, which is a genuinely impressive piece of work that will further inform our efforts in this area.

We make those efforts not just because the right to freedom of religion or belief is a principle worth defending for its own sake. I entirely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), who said that we also make those efforts because we believe that societies in which people are free to practise their faith or belief are, by their very nature, more stable, more prosperous and more resilient to extremism.

Sadly, however, the situation in a number of countries around the world continues to cause grave concern, and as I have a little more time than I had anticipated I will give some specific examples. The information provided by the Pew Research Centre shows that Christians have been harassed in more countries than any other religious group. The middle east is the cradle of the religion, although obviously it is also the cradle of other religions, namely Islam and Judaism. However, Christians in the middle east are particularly suffering from harassment. In Iraq the Christian population has fallen from over 1 million in 2003 to a current estimate of 250,000. We are also concerned about the plight of Christians in Syria, Burma and a number of other countries.

However, followers of all faiths and religions suffer persecution, as at times do people of no faith, so I will set out what the UK Government are doing in some specific cases. Essentially, our approach is to tackle the issue on two fronts: first, working with and strongly lobbying countries individually; and secondly, working within organisations such as the United Nations.

A recent example of our bilateral approach is our work to defend the rights of Christians in Sudan, and we welcomed the release of several pastors earlier this year. We have also called for the release of the Eritrean Patriarch, Abune Antonios, and we are supporting the rights of many faith groups, including the Baha’i in Iran and, as has already been said, the Rohingya Muslims in Burma. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) made the important point that some Rohingya are actually Hindu and that some have no religion at all, but they too have been persecuted during these terrible times. What I am saying also applies to Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia and Shi’a Muslims in several countries, including Saudi Arabia.

Lord Ahmad recently visited an Ahmadiyya mosque in Dhaka in Bangladesh for a multi-faith gathering, at which he made a call for universal religious tolerance. Most recently, we have expressed concern about proposed amendments to the law in Nepal, which my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford rightly said would restrict religious freedoms. Only last month I had the opportunity to speak about that issue directly with my US counterpart at the UN General Assembly.

As an example of our multilateral work to defend and protect religious freedoms, I draw the House’s attention to the UK’s leading role in the global efforts to bring ISIS or Daesh to justice. All of us here are only too aware of the absolutely appalling treatment that that paramilitary group has meted out to anyone who does not subscribe to its extremist ideology. That has included religious minorities in Iraq and Syria—Christians and Yazidis—and of course the majority Muslim populations in those countries.

The UK is determined that Daesh will not get away with it. That is important not only in countering extremism, but in defending the right to freedom of religion or belief. We have led the multilateral response to Daesh. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, together with his Belgian and Iraqi counterparts, got the ball rolling last year with a UK-led initiative to bring Daesh to justice. Just last month a new UK-drafted UN resolution, co-sponsored by 46 member states, including Iraq, was adopted unanimously by the Security Council, as Daesh accountability resolution 2379. The resolution calls on the UN Secretary General to establish an investigative team to collect, preserve and store evidence of crimes by so-called Islamic State, beginning in Iraq. I know that we will be supported by members of the APPG, who focused on the issue when their report was launched yesterday.

That UN investigative team will be led by a special adviser with a mandate to promote the need to bring ISIS to justice around the globe. We have contributed, as a down-payment, £1 million to support the establishment of the team, to ensure that it is adequately resourced at the outset and that the evidence collected is used to bring the perpetrators to book.

However, our work on promoting freedom of religion or belief goes beyond bilateral or multilateral efforts overseas. We are also now committed to stepping up our engagement with faith leaders here in the UK. That is why Lord Ahmad has established a regular roundtable with a variety of faith leaders and representatives, the first of which he hosted as recently as Monday. The aim of the roundtable is to discuss how the Government and faith leaders can work together to address issues of religious freedom. We want faith groups to play a bigger role in seeking solutions to international crises and to broader international challenges. That international network will be of critical importance. Also, when the Foreign and Commonwealth Office marks International Human Rights Day in December, we will focus particularly on promoting freedom of religion or belief, and on the important role that faith leaders can play in driving that agenda.

We shall continue to support religious freedom and tolerance through our project work under the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s Magna Carta fund for human rights and democracy. I must confess that I am particularly proud of a project that is helping secondary

schoolteachers in the middle east and north Africa to create lesson plans that promote tolerance and freedom of religion or belief among all their pupils. The project is being implemented by an organisation called Hardwired Inc, which, along with other civil society organisations, is a vital partner in our efforts to make article 18 a reality. I pay tribute to its dedicated work.

We continue to strive to be as effective as possible in promoting freedom of religion or belief. Ensuring that our embassy and high commission staff are properly trained is an essential part of that programme, and I know that the APPG's report rightly highlighted such training. I will continue to look for ways to improve religious literacy among our staff. We already provide a set of resources to support their work, which we will promote more widely to our posts overseas. Earlier this month the FCO launched a new religion and diplomacy course. We will continue to review actively both that course and the feedback it receives from our staff, to ensure that it meets our needs in a fast-changing world.

In addition, my noble Friend Lord Ahmad will write to all our ambassadors and high commissioners tomorrow, reissuing our freedom of religion or belief toolkit and instructing them to give serious consideration to freedom of religious belief in their diplomatic engagement with host Governments. Where there are violations of religious belief, Members can be assured that the FCO and its Ministers are clear that they will be addressed through our diplomacy with international partners.

In partnership with Lord Ahmad, I will also write to the embassies and high commissions in key countries for which I have responsibility, asking them to report on precisely what they are doing to promote freedom of religion or belief. I will ensure that our embassies are aware of the strength of both parliamentary feeling and my own personal feelings on this issue.

As recently as 2011 there were 150,000 Christians in the city of Aleppo in Syria, which is a country I visited in my first term as a Member of Parliament. Now, as far as we can understand, there are fewer than 35,000. Religious persecution has increased in other Muslim countries, such as Pakistan, Sudan and Iran. In Nigeria, 1.8 million people have been displaced by Boko Haram. In India, it has been suggested that the harassment of Christians has increased with the current rise of Hindu nationalism. However, I also take on board what my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East said on that issue, namely that Hindus and Sikhs themselves are under day-to-day threat in parts of the subcontinent. In China there are now no fewer than 127 million Christians, which I fear has upset the authorities there, who see Christianity as some form of foreign infiltration and seek to Sinicise it in some way.

I will now take the opportunity to address one or two issues that were specifically raised by a number of Members. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford that there are concerns that some provisions of the new penal code in Nepal may be constructed to limit the freedom to adapt, change or practise a religion. I have already raised those concerns with the Government of Nepal and will continue to do so.

My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) mentioned Egypt, which is a human rights priority country. Her Majesty's Government have been clear that freedom of religion or belief needs to be actively

protected. The Government of Egypt have stated their commitment to protecting the rights of minorities and the need for religious tolerance. We regularly raise concerns with the Egyptian Government about the deteriorating human rights situation, including issues that affect Christians. The Coptic Christian community is made up of 8 million to 9 million people and has been around as long as any other Christian group, but there are great fears for its future, and certainly for its future stability.

May I take this opportunity to apologise to the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), who has not yet received a response to his letter on behalf of his constituent from 25 August? I will endeavour to find out where the letter has gone in the system. He made some interesting comments about the apostasy issue. I will contact the Home Office to request that it finds a way to include such cases within the hate crime statistics, if that is at all possible. I will get back to him when I have a reply.

There was a slightly discordant shot from the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) on genocide. Genocide is strictly a legal term. Whether a parliamentary motion or Ministers refer to it as genocide is neither here nor there; it is strictly a legal term. With what has been happening in Burma and various other parts of the world, it is clear that a process has to be gone through in the UN and finally in the International Criminal Court before a genocide can be proven.

I want to reassure those Members who raised the issue of funding. All DFID's support to Governments involves discussions on human rights, and we will continue to give serious consideration to adopting recommendations 1 and 2 from the report to take account of DFID and FCO funding streams. I do not want to commit my Department on the Floor of the House without it having had a proper look through all the recommendations. To be brutally honest, many of them relate to issues that we already address on a day-to-day basis, but we will give the report serious consideration. Once we have had a chance to look through all the recommendations, I will get back to the shadow Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford to say which ones we are in a position fully to adopt and what action we would look to take elsewhere.

Bob Blackman: During my speech I raised the plight of a particular prisoner in Pakistan. Will the Minister take that issue up with the ambassador, the high commissioner and the Pakistani Government?

Mark Field: My hon. Friend did raise that case. If he is happy, I will take it up in writing. We will ensure that the matter is taken up.

In conclusion, the Government believe strongly that whole societies benefit when the fundamental rights of all their citizens are respected and protected. That includes the right to religious freedom or belief, or to have no religion at all. That is why we will continue to work with individual countries, with the international community and with faith leaders and civil society organisations to promote and defend this fundamental right. The UK Government's position is to remain absolutely committed to promoting freedom of religion or belief as enshrined in article 18 of the international covenant on civil and political rights, supported by article 2 on non-discrimination and article 26 on access to justice. I think I speak for

[Mark Field]

everyone who has contributed to this important debate when I say this: only when these universal rights are universally respected can there be religious freedom for everyone, everywhere.

4.14 pm

Jim Shannon: I am not sure if we hold the record this afternoon for the most Chairs involved in one session; perhaps *Hansard* could check that record to see whether we do. For whatever reasons, we have had four Chairmen. We are very pleased to have had them all, and I am pleased to have you, my friend and colleague, in the Chair for the final part, Mr Paisley.

I sincerely thank all those who came to the debate. I did a quick headcount, and some 23 right hon. and hon. Members contributed and came to give support. It is always good to have that and to have had cross-party support, which is so important. We are trying to encapsulate in the debate the idea of international freedom of religion or belief for those with Christian beliefs, those with other beliefs and those of no belief. All the parties have come together to encapsulate that theme and I again thank each and every one of them for their participation.

It would be remiss of me not to thank the staff of the all-party parliamentary group, which the Minister also referred to, and some are here—Katharine Thane, Amoro and Lesley. I also thank Baroness Berridge. I thank them for their hard work and the effort they have put into this. I also thank the stakeholders who make it happen through their contributions.

I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) for encapsulating what we are thinking in all parts of the House. Let me say to the Minister what a pleasure it is to have a Minister come to a debate who is knowledgeable, understands the issues, is compassionate and replies in a positive fashion. We can all take heart that we have a Minister who can do that so well and we look forward to working with and alongside him. He should let us know if he needs anything at all from us as individual Members in this House—from all of us who have participated and from the all-party parliamentary group. There is one wee thing we would like to ask for as a PS: we hope that the all-party parliamentary group might have a meeting with the Minister and perhaps, if it can be organised, with the Department for International Development as well. I leave that wee thought with him, and I do not expect to hear a reply today.

I will finish with a biblical message, and it is from the beatitudes. Everyone in the House will know the beatitudes. The message is:

“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

We are here to be a voice for the voiceless—a voice for all those people across the world who we will probably never meet, but who we speak for.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day.

4.17 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 26 October 2017

TREASURY

Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Stephen Barclay): The UK is one of the world's largest and most open economies. The Government are committed to tackling the risk of illicit financial flows from money laundering and terrorist financing, and to protecting the UK as an attractive country for legitimate business and a leading global financial centre. As the threats from illicit finance and terrorist financing continue to evolve, so must our understanding of the risks and our response.

Today, the Government are publishing the UK's second national risk assessment of money laundering and terrorist financing. This 2017 assessment, jointly published by the Treasury and the Home Office, shows how our understanding of and response to money laundering and terrorist financing have developed since the first assessment in 2015.

The key findings of the 2017 assessment are as follows:

High end money laundering and cash based money laundering remain the greatest areas of money laundering risk to the UK. New typologies continue to emerge, including money laundering through capital markets and increased exploitation of technology.

The distinctions between money laundering typologies are becoming increasingly blurred. Criminal funds are progressing from lower level laundering and are being accumulating into larger sums to be sent overseas using more sophisticated methods.

Professional services are a crucial gateway for criminals looking to disguise the origin of their funds.

Cash, alongside cash intensive sectors, remains the favoured method for terrorists to move funds through and out of the UK.

A wide-ranging set of reforms by Government and law enforcement over recent years is still in its early days, but is starting to take effect.

The UK has been at the forefront of recent global efforts to shut down money laundering and terrorist financing. The 2016 London anti-corruption summit led to over 600 specific commitments made by more than 40 countries and six major international organisations.

In 2015, the UK published its first ever national risk assessment of money laundering and terrorist financing. This set out candidly the areas where action was needed. In 2016, the Government published an action plan and committed to the most significant reforms to our anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing regime in over a decade.

Many of the actions in this plan have now been delivered or are underway. The Criminal Finances Act 2017 will provide tough new powers such as unexplained wealth orders. The Money Laundering Regulations 2017 bring the latest international regulatory standards into UK law. The publicly accessible register of people with significant control (PSC) was introduced in 2016, and records the beneficial owner of a company, thus improving corporate transparency. Progress continues with reforms to the suspicious activity reporting and supervisory regimes.

This 2017 assessment provides a critical component of continued partnership and prioritisation between Government, law enforcement, supervisors and the private sector.

A copy of the report has been deposited in the Library of the House.

[HCWS200]

LEADER OF THE HOUSE

Opposition Day Debates

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): As I have made clear, the Government are determined to listen and take account of views from all sides of the House. Where there is opportunity for the Government to listen and better enable the effective work of Parliament, we will do so.

To that end, I am today updating the House on the Government's approach to Opposition day debates. Where a motion tabled by an Opposition party has been approved by the House, the relevant Minister will respond to the resolution of the House by making a statement no more than 12 weeks after the debate. This is to allow thoughtful consideration of the points that have been raised, facilitate collective discussion across Government, especially on cross-cutting issues, and to outline any actions that have been taken.

This is in line with suggestions made by Members across the House and I hope colleagues will welcome the new initiative and the opportunity for accountability this provides.

[HCWS199]

Petition

Thursday 26 October 2017

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

Warwick Road, Carlisle

The petition of residents of Warwick Road, Carlisle,

Declares that they are against proposals from Cumbria County Council to construct a third lane along a section of Warwick Road, Carlisle.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges Cumbria County Council to withdraw proposals to construct a third lane along a section of Warwick Road, Carlisle, as it will provide none of the stated benefits to the city and cause an unacceptable negative impact on the quality of life of Warwick Road residents.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by John Stevenson, *Official Report*, 11 September 2017; Vol. 628, c. 608.]

[P002054]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman):

The Department for Transport provided funding through the National Productivity Investment Fund to all local highway authorities in England, outside London, for the 2017-18 financial year. This included a funding allocation of £4.6 million to Cumbria County Council.

The Fund is to help local highway authorities to improve roads, reduce congestion and improve journey times.

The proposed scheme as outlined in the petition to the House of Commons falls under the responsibility of Cumbria County Council, as local highway authority. It is for the council to determine how they utilise the funding provided by central Government based on their needs and priorities.

The A69 Warwick Road is one of the key arterial roads into the City of Carlisle, adjacent to junction 43 of the M6. Highway improvements to this area were originally identified within the Carlisle transport improvements study which was used to inform the infrastructure deficit plan, a key document supporting Carlisle City Council's adopted Local Plan (2015-2030).

Traffic modelling undertaken by the council identified congestion in peak periods in the current year and in future years due to planned residential and industrial developments. To alleviate this congestion, the infrastructure deficit plan identified the requirement to improve the capacity at two significant junctions adjacent to the M6 junction 43 (Warwick Road /Montgomery Way and Warwick Road / Eastern Way) and widening to Warwick Road to provide two lanes inbound between these two junctions.

The concept designs for the scheme were identified in the infrastructure deficit plan and suggest the improvements on Warwick Road could be delivered within the existing carriageway boundary. During the outline design process, it became apparent that to accommodate two lanes safely, carriageway widening was necessary.

During public consultation that took place in June and July 2017, Cumbria County Council recognised the proposed scheme which incorporated widening the carriageway was strongly opposed by local residents, although aspects such as increased pedestrian provision was welcomed.

Recognising the concerns raised by the consultation respondents, Cumbria County Council modelled alternative schemes to the existing proposals and these are currently being considered. The alternative schemes incorporate the changes to both the Warwick Road/Montgomery Way and Warwick Road/Eastern Way junctions, with and without the widening to Warwick Road. Although the two junction improvements do not deliver the capacity benefits that the full widening scheme would achieve, it does provide some benefit and alleviate congestion at key locations where there is known development.

The Department for Transport understands that Cumbria County Council are now awaiting responses from Carlisle City Council and the local MP prior to making a decision as to how the scheme is taken forward.

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