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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Thursday 2 November 2017**

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# House of Commons

*Thursday 2 November 2017*

*The House met at half-past Nine o'clock*

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Oral Answers to Questions

### EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Citizens' Rights

1. **Luke Graham** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to maintain the rights of non-UK EU nationals resident in the UK in negotiations on the UK leaving the EU. [901552]

5. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What steps he is taking to maintain the rights of EU citizens living in the UK after the UK has left the EU. [901557]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker):** We have made a lot of progress through five rounds of constructive negotiations, and we are now within touching distance of an agreement on citizens' rights. Providing swift reassurance and certainty to citizens as quickly as possible is a shared objective. With flexibility and creativity on both sides, I am confident that we can conclude discussions on citizens' rights in the coming weeks.

**Luke Graham:** Universities UK and Universities Scotland have expressed concerns about accessing skilled labour after Brexit. Does my hon. Friend agree that the mutual recognition of professional qualifications should be a priority in the forthcoming negotiations?

**Mr Walker:** I agree heartily with my hon. Friend. Of course, our science and research paper sets out the importance of continuing to meet the talent needs of our country. In the negotiations, we have set out a positive approach to the mutual recognition of professional qualifications, and we would like to see broader definitions for the professions and individuals in scope.

**Sir Desmond Swayne:** Is our offer more generous than that of the other side?

**Mr Walker:** My right hon. Friend is right to characterise it as such, particularly as regards the mutual recognition of professional qualifications but also in other areas, such as the voting rights that we would afford EU citizens in the UK. We would like those rights to be reciprocated for UK citizens across the EU.

**Ian Murray** (Edinburgh South) (Lab): At Edinburgh University, 25% of the senior academic staff are EU nationals. What is the Minister saying to institutions such as Edinburgh University, which needs those staff to be able to compete as one of the world's leading universities?

**Mr Walker:** I have met representatives of Edinburgh University and visited them to discuss exactly that issue. I recognise the benefit that the university receives from EU nationals working there; indeed, nationals of countries from across the world contribute to the university's research. The university has welcomed what we set out in our science and research paper, and we will continue to work closely with the university sector to make sure that we can meet its needs.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): EU nationals living in my constituency who are seeking permanent residency or settled status are being advised that currently there is no process and they will have to wait for a letter telling them to leave the country, which unsurprisingly causes a great deal of anxiety and distress. Is that the official advice? If not, what is the official advice?

**Mr Walker:** The official advice is that the Home Office is clearly working on a process to ensure that settled status can be achieved as straightforwardly as possible. There is no need for anyone to apply for that status as yet, because it is very clear that EU nationals living in the UK have the right to be here under EU freedom of movement rules. What we are talking about is putting in place a process for when the legal order changes. As the Prime Minister says, we want them to stay, and we want to make that process as straightforward as possible.

**Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** (The Cotswolds) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that not only do EU citizens in this country need rapid reassurance of their status, but the very large number of British citizens living in a host of EU countries need the same reassurance? When does he expect to conclude this agreement?

**Mr Walker:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why it is very important that we work through the detail of this agreement to show how it works on both sides, and that it can deliver both for EU citizens living in the UK and UK citizens living in the EU. As I have said, the talks have been constructive and we believe that we are within touching distance of reaching a full agreement.

**Keir Starmer** (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): Last night, this House unanimously passed a binding motion requiring the Government to provide 58 sectoral impact assessments to the Brexit Select Committee. Non-EU UK nationals work in many of those 58 sectors, and you indicated, Mr Speaker, that it was not a motion that needed to be deliberated over for a long time. When will the papers be handed over?

**Mr Walker:** The right hon. and learned Gentleman was present for the whole of yesterday's debate. As he noted, I said that we would respond appropriately, and we will do so as soon as conceivable.

**Keir Starmer:** “As soon as conceivable”, I would hope, means by the end of the week, and certainly before this House goes into recess. I think that that was the period we were discussing last night. But the motion was clear: it is the impact assessments that must be provided—not redacted copies, but the assessments. The Government could have amended the motion, but they chose not to. Can it now be confirmed that the full copies will be handed over, and that it will then be for the Brexit Select Committee to decide to what extent, and in what form, the assessments are published?

**Mr Walker:** I gently point out to the right hon. and learned Gentleman that the first use of the word “redactions” in the debate came from him, on the Front Bench, speaking for the Opposition. We take very seriously the motion of Parliament, and we will be responding to it. The Secretary of State has already spoken to the Chairman of the Select Committee for Exiting the European Union and will be discussing this matter with him further in due course.

### Workers’ Rights

2. **Laura Pidcock** (North West Durham) (Lab): What steps he is taking to maintain workers’ rights in negotiations on the UK leaving the EU. [901554]

13. **Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): What steps he is taking to maintain workers’ rights in negotiations on the UK leaving the EU. [901565]

19. **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What steps he is taking to maintain workers’ rights in negotiations on the UK leaving the EU. [901571]

**The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis):** The Government have firmly committed to protecting workers’ rights and to extending those rights when that is the right choice for the United Kingdom. The European Union (Withdrawal) Bill will ensure that workers’ rights enjoyed under European Union law will continue to be available in UK law after we have left the European Union. However, we do not need to be part of the European Union to have strong protection for workers. The UK already goes well beyond EU minimum standards in a large number of employment areas.

**Laura Pidcock:** The Trade Union Act 2016 shows something different: the UK has some of the most restrictive trade union rights and freedoms in the western world, and even these could be compromised post-withdrawal. Will the Secretary of State give a cast-iron guarantee that my constituents in North West Durham will have as a minimum the same, if not more, workers’ rights when we have left the European Union?

**Mr Davis:** Yes, I can give that guarantee. The hon. Lady’s constituency voted overwhelmingly to leave the European Union, and it did that with open eyes. This assertion that our trade union rights and, more importantly, our employment law rights are somehow less good than in the rest of the European Union is simply untrue. My first meeting as Secretary of State was with the general secretary of the Trades Union Congress. The reason for that was that I knew her, because I had been co-operating

with her on trade union law reform just a few months earlier. If the hon. Lady wants a single test of employment protection in the United Kingdom versus the European Union, she should look at the most fundamental right, which is the right to safety at work. We have one of the best records in the European Union for safety at work—much better than Germany, much better than Italy, much better than nearly all European countries.

**Ian Mearns:** I am very grateful to the Secretary of State for saying that he intends to extend workers’ rights when it is right to do so, but my great concern is that some in the Conservative party may see this as an opportunity to deregulate further the rights of our citizens at work. Will he look at doing away with employment tribunal fees, which prevent young workers, particularly women, from taking sexual harassment claims against their employers?

**Mr Davis:** The first thing to say to the hon. Gentleman is that in the first three speeches I made after taking this job, I made it very clear that we were not going to use departure from the European Union as a way of reducing employment rights.

In addition, independently of this process, the Prime Minister initiated the Matthew Taylor review. The point of that review was to report back on employment rights—security, pay, progression and training, as well as the balance of rights and responsibilities, representation, opportunities for under-represented groups, and new business models in the gig economy and such things. The Prime Minister actually intends to improve employment rights, not reduce them.

**Vicky Foxcroft:** I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State has said he wants to extend workers’ rights. With that in mind, will the Government look at the hard work done by my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), whose private Member’s Bill sought to enshrine workers’ rights in UK law immediately?

**Mr Davis:** The nature of the British constitution is that Parliament is always the last to decide—we cannot entrench anything in British law in perpetuity—so as a party and as a Government, we will be seeking to extend workers’ rights, and it will be in our control for us, as a Parliament representing our constituents, to do that.

**Antoinette Sandbach** (Eddisbury) (Con): The European Union charter of fundamental rights contains protections—for example, equality and children’s rights—not contained in the European convention on human rights. Will the Secretary of State give this House a commitment that these rights will be protected as we leave the EU?

**Mr Davis:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. I have said all along from the beginning—in fact, from the White Paper that presented what was then the repeal Bill and is now the withdrawal Bill—that we believe that all the rights enjoyed under the charter are rights that come either from European Union law, the ECHR, British domestic law or EU law that we are going to carry forward. I said to the shadow Secretary of State when the White Paper was presented that if any rights had been missed we would seek to put them back,

so that is what we will do. We will of course discuss this at great length during the Committee and Report stages of the Bill. My undertaking to my hon. Friend is that we will protect all those rights.

**Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): I know from personal experience that my right hon. Friend takes workers' rights extremely seriously. However, one right that British workers may not have is the right to go and work in the EU without a visa. The idea of associate citizenship has been raised by the President of the European Parliament and others. Will my right hon. Friend look at that seriously so that British workers—particularly younger British workers—have the opportunity to work in the European Union without a visa, certainly for a limited, if not for an extended, period?

**Mr Davis:** It is nice to have a question from a co-conspirator from my freer days on this subject. Yes, we will look at these issues together. I have spoken briefly to Guy Verhofstadt about this, although not at great length, and I will be interested to hear from him what is being proposed. Of course we will listen to anything of this nature. The aim of this exercise is to be good for Europe and good for Britain, which means good for the citizens of Europe and Britain. That is what we intend to do.

**Michael Tomlinson** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Is this question not somewhat ironic, coming from the Labour party that voted against the withdrawal Bill on Second Reading—the very Bill that will protect workers' rights? We do not need to be in the EU to protect workers' rights; we pass legislation in this place to protect those rights, and will continue to do so.

**Mr Davis:** My hon. Friend is of course exactly right. I remember that the last time he asked a question on this subject he reminded the House that it was the Conservative party that introduced the first employment protection legislation, way before the Labour party was created, and it will still be doing that way after the Labour party is gone.

**Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am sure we all take great comfort from the Secretary of State's assurances about the Prime Minister's change of mind. What he now attributes to the Prime Minister is very different from what she said about workers' rights as Home Secretary. Given that there is no intention whatsoever to reduce workers' rights as a result of our leaving the European Union, will the Secretary of State undertake to table a Government amendment to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, so that the unprecedented powers given to Ministers in that Bill cannot by statute be used to reduce workers' rights?

**Mr Davis:** The point I have made time and again about the powers in that Bill is that they are not intended to remove or reduce any law; they are intended to make all the laws practical, and that is what they will do. If we have not got it quite right, we will talk to everybody involved, in Committee and on Report, and ensure that we do get it right.

**Peter Grant:** As well as the potential threat to workers' rights, there is a much wider threat in the Bill with the removal of the EU charter of fundamental rights from domestic legislation. Last week, the junior Minister was

unable to give the Select Committee an example of anyone whose interests would be damaged by retaining that charter in domestic legislation. Will the Secretary of State tell us whose interests will be damaged if we just leave that charter in place?

**Mr Davis:** I have made this point over and over again. The charter of fundamental rights is essentially a list of existing rights and does not, as far as we can see, generate any new ones. I have said that if the shadow Secretary of State can identify a right that will be lost, we will put it back.

**Matthew Pennycook** (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Of all the people the Prime Minister could have chosen to fill yet another vacancy in her Brexit team, last week she settled on someone who has openly called for the scrapping of the working time directive, the temporary agency work directive, the pregnant workers directive and, in his words,

“all the other barriers to actually employing people.”

What signal does the Secretary of State think Lord Callanan's recent appointment sends to workers across the country about how this Government will approach maintaining their rights at work?

**Mr Davis:** The new Minister in my Department, the noble Lord, is a brilliant appointment, and he will deliver the Government's policy incredibly well.

**Matthew Pennycook:** The public will rightly be suspicious about the commitments that the Secretary of State has given because they know that the sentiments that Lord Callanan expressed are widely shared on the Government Benches. There is an easy way to solve this: the Secretary of State could accept the amendments to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill that provide for enhanced protection for workers' rights, not just transposition. Will he think about making a commitment to that principle today?

**Mr Davis:** I am afraid I will take no lectures from somebody who voted against the entire Bill and therefore undermined the protection of all workers.

### Support for Farmers

3. **Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on support for farmers after the UK leaves the EU. [901555]

7. **Victoria Prentis** (Banbury) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on support for farmers after the UK leaves the EU. [901559]

22. **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on support for farmers after the UK leaves the EU. [901576]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker):** We have been working closely with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on support for farmers.

The Government will provide the same cash total in funds for farmer support until the end of the Parliament. As my hon. Friend knows, we continue to work with a range of stakeholders to provide stability for farmers.

**Scott Mann:** I thank the Minister for that response—it is important, particularly for my constituents, that he is having those discussions with DEFRA. May I seek his assurance that farmers will be provided with confidence, so that they can plan their financial arrangements for the years to come, and for their future crop rotations and animal stocks?

**Mr Baker:** In making our pledge to maintain the same cash funds to the end of the Parliament, which we expect to be in 2022, we are giving a greater level of security and certainty for farmers and landowners than anywhere else in the EU where funding is guaranteed only until 2020.

**Victoria Prentis:** It is clear to me that Banbury cake should be enjoyed the world over. Will my hon. Friend give me an idea of the analysis of the opportunities for global trade in the food and farming industry post-Brexit?

**Mr Baker:** I agree with my hon. Friend that Banbury cake should be enjoyed the world over. We continue to work with the Department for International Trade to identify opportunities for such sales.

**John Lamont:** I strongly support the call from my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack) for an independent review of the convergence uplift for Scottish farmers. When might the Government be able to respond to this request? Can the Minister reassure farmers in my constituency that any future support system that is developed post-Brexit will reflect the challenging conditions faced by some farmers in Scotland?

**Mr Baker:** My hon. Friend represents the interests of Scotland with characteristic attention to detail and force. We have received the letter from my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway, and I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment is looking into the issues raised and will respond in due course.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I encourage the Minister to wake up early in the morning and listen to my favourite programme, “Farming Today”? Did he today hear farmers and experts saying that farmers are going to go bankrupt? Farmers, like those in other sectors, want to know what the prognosis is for the farming sector. Wake up and listen to the BBC’s “Farming Today” and do something decent for the people of this country!

**Mr Baker:** The hon. Gentleman makes his point with his characteristic style. If I recall correctly, my first interview in the referendum campaign was for “Farming Today”, and I have always taken it very seriously.

**Mr Sheerman:** Was it recorded?

**Mr Baker:** No, I don’t think it was. I would have to go back and check for the hon. Gentleman. I do not always rise in time to listen to “Farming Today”, but we have

given our guarantees, and I reiterate that we expect them to last until 2022—a better guarantee than anywhere else in the EU.

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Sheep farming is integral to the landscape and economy of Cumbria and much of the rest of the country. Some 40% of lamb products are exported, 90% of which go to the European Union. World Trade Organisation rules state that the tariff for sheep products is 52%, so what can the Minister say to encourage and give confidence to our sheep farmers?

**Mr Baker:** The hon. Gentleman knows that we wish to have a deep and special partnership with the European Union, including a free trade agreement of unprecedented scale. I very much hope and expect that we will be able to conclude tariff-free trade.

**Jenny Chapman** (Darlington) (Lab): The Government are letting farmers down. They cannot even agree on what type of chicken we should allow to be imported after we leave the European Union: the International Trade Secretary says he is relaxed about lowering animal welfare and food standards, and the Environment Secretary has said the opposite. What is the Government’s position on the importation of chlorinated chicken?

**Mr Baker:** In due course, when we have left the European Union and we are fully free to operate our own independent trade policy, I look forward to the debates in this House on all these matters.

## Scotland

4. **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the economic effect on Scotland in the event of the UK leaving the EU without a withdrawal agreement. [901556]

17. **Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the economic effect on Scotland in the event of the UK leaving the EU without a withdrawal agreement. [901569]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker):** The Government are committed to the best possible deal for the whole United Kingdom, a deal that works for Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and all parts of England. We have been engaging with the Scottish Government and have been clear from the start that the devolved Administrations should be fully engaged in this process. The Government are undertaking a broader range of sectoral analysis covering the entirety of the UK economy, including Scotland.

**Martyn Day:** A London School of Economics report concluded that Scotland faces losing £30 billion in the event of a hard Brexit. Will the Minister advise how that compares with the Government’s own Brexit impact assessment for Scotland, and when will it be published?

**Mr Walker:** As we have said, the Government are undertaking a wide-ranging analysis covering the entirety of the UK economy, including Scotland. This will ensure that we take into account the individual circumstances

of each part of the UK to inform our negotiating strategy. With regard to the content of that analysis, we have to reflect on the implications of yesterday's motion and how best we meet the requirements set by the House for information to be passed on to the Select Committee, keeping in mind the fact that the documents they have requested do not exist in the form suggested in the motion.

**Dr Whitford:** Scotland—indeed, the UK—has a significant pharmaceutical industry. The Government repeatedly talk about the option of leaving the EU without a deal, but is the Minister aware that the WTO drug list was last updated in 2010, so any drugs developed since then would face tariffs?

**Mr Walker:** The hon. Lady makes an important point. We have been engaging closely with the pharmaceuticals industry in Scotland and across the UK. Of course, she will have noted the joint letter from the Secretaries of State for Health and for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy setting out our intention to establish close co-operation with the European authorities, and there is huge mutual benefit in continuing to do so.

**David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con):** My hon. Friend will be aware of the importance of the food and drink industry across Scotland, not least in my constituency in the north-east. What recent discussions has he had with the Scotland Office and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on ensuring the best deal for Scottish fishermen and seafood processing businesses in the UK as we leave the EU?

**Mr Walker:** My hon. Friend raises an important point. I assure him that we have been meeting regularly with the Scotland Office and with DEFRA colleagues to discuss these issues, which have also been discussed in the Joint Ministerial Committee (EU Negotiations) in relation to important principles that were agreed about where shared frameworks might be required and where they will not.

**Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD):** Scotland is a significant beneficiary of the European Investment Bank. If Britain leaves the EIB after Brexit, will the Government replace it with a British investment bank, with equivalent resources?

**Mr Walker:** As the right hon. Gentleman will know, the UK is a significant shareholder in the European Investment Bank, as well as a significant beneficiary of its lending. As the Chancellor set out in his Mansion House speech, we will look at the opportunities for co-operation in this area when we come to the talks on the future relationship, but the UK will of course take whatever steps are necessary in the event that there is no deal. That is not our central scenario; we are working towards a constructive deal for both sides.

### Leaving the EU: Agreement

6. **Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab):** If he will publish the assessments carried out by his Department on the potential effect on the UK of exiting the EU without an agreement. [901558]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker):** A future partnership between the UK and the EU is in the interests of both sides and I am confident that we will secure a good deal. A responsible Government should prepare for all potential outcomes, and we are undertaking work across a range of scenarios. We will share as much information as possible, but we will not walk into this negotiation risking our negotiating position.

**Jeff Smith:** The Government are hiding the true facts about Brexit from the British people. Using this information, the Government are making contingency plans for a failure to make a trade deal, but how can businesses, public services and devolved Administrations make their plans if they do not have the same information?

**Mr Baker:** The hon. Gentleman mentions “true facts”, but there seems to be some misunderstanding about what the sectoral analysis is. It is not a series of 50-plus quantitative forecasts and, even if it were, forecasts could not be said to represent true facts. We have made our position clear and we will continue as we have set out.

**Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con):** The EU's refusal to discuss the future relationship is clearly founded on the belief, which no doubt the assessments will show to be mistaken, that it may thereby panic the United Kingdom into handing over large sums to avoid what the EU perceives to be the horrors of no agreement. Will the Secretary of State and his colleagues assure the EU that although the UK is clearly anxious to have a free trade agreement, it is also entirely happy to trade with the EU on a WTO basis?

**Mr Baker:** I am grateful for my right hon. Friend's question—he is of course an expert in these matters. I assure the House that President Tusk has said “we are all working actively on a deal,”

and that Mr Barnier has said the EU wants to build an “ambitious, long-lasting partnership” with the United Kingdom. Of course we all want to deliver that partnership, but my right hon. Friend's point is well made.

18. [901570] **Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP):** The Government recently published a security, law enforcement and criminal justice negotiation paper without consulting the Scottish Government. What engagement did Ministers have with the Scottish legal profession before the paper was published?

**Mr Baker:** The Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), has met them, and I am sure that were he to be asked a question, he would give a fuller answer.

**Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con):** It was very wise of the Government to prepare dossiers on the impact of Brexit on sectors in the United Kingdom. I assume that the European Union has done something similar regarding what it is going to do when it loses £10 billion to £12 billion a year. Indeed, the German Government might have prepared a dossier about the impact on their car industry, and the French might have

prepared one on their wine industry. Has the Minister received any representations from Opposition Members about pressing those Governments to publish their dossiers?

**Mr Baker:** My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. I feel sure that all sides in this negotiation are conducting their analyses of everyone's negotiating capital. The electorate of all Members of this House will note who is asking for which negotiating position to be revealed, and what that says about their acceptance of the referendum result.

#### Horizon 2020/Erasmus Programme

8. **Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What steps he has taken to maintain UK access to the Horizon 2020 programme and the Erasmus+ programme after the UK leaves the EU. [901560]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker):** As the Prime Minister set out in her Florence speech, the Government would like to continue working with the EU on ways to promote the long-term economic development of our continent. That includes continuing to take part in specific programmes that are greatly to the UK's and EU's joint advantage, such as those promoting science, education and culture, and those promoting our mutual security. This will be a matter for the negotiations.

**Catherine West:** Why has the Secretary of State not engaged on the issue with more energy with the Commission? If access is not maintained, will there be a commitment to funding UK researchers as third-country participants?

**Mr Walker:** We are engaged with great energy on this issue, but of course the structure of the talks means that this is for the future partnership. We have published a paper on these issues setting out our intention and a very open offer to the EU to discuss these issues. We look forward to seeing its papers in response, but they have not been published yet.

**Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The Minister does not seem to get it: the time for fudge is over. UK researchers are being excluded from Horizon 2020 projects now because the Government have failed to confirm our position after March 2019. UK students who are considering applications now for Erasmus programmes starting in 2018 do not know whether they will be able to continue for those programmes' duration. The Government can sort this out. Ministers should stop sending conflicting signals about the transitional period and commit to both programmes for the duration of the multi-annual financial framework. Will they do that?

**Mr Walker:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his list of questions. The UK has already protected funding up to 2022. The research and development funding provided through EU programmes is additional to the protection of science resource funding announced at the autumn spending review. We will also underwrite successful bids to Erasmus+ that are submitted while the UK is still a member state, so the hon. Gentleman's suggestion is simply not right.

#### Children's Rights

10. **Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): What steps he will take to maintain children's rights contained in the EU charter of fundamental rights in the event that that charter no longer applies in the UK once the UK leaves the EU. [901562]

**Mr Speaker:** I call Minister Walker.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker):** I apologise for the delay, Mr Speaker; the question numbers have caught me out. With permission, I will answer Questions 10 and 17 together.

Reaching a reciprocal agreement to safeguard the rights of EU citizens in the UK, and UK nationals in the EU, is our first priority—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The Minister is in rather a pickle and I am sorry for him—I feel his pain—but there is no grouping of Questions 10 and 17. [*Interruption.*] As in American football, the hon. Gentleman can have a brief timeout.

**Mr Walker:** Our commitment to children's rights will remain unwavering after we have left the EU. The charter of fundamental rights did not create any new rights; instead it catalogued rights that already existed in EU law. These rights will be preserved by the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill and case law relating to them will be retained in UK law at the point we exit the EU.

**Kate Green:** It is clear that Ministers take children's rights after Brexit very seriously.

The Minister will know that EU mechanisms such as Europol and the European arrest warrant have played a significant role in protecting children from serious and complex cross-border crime. In negotiating future arrangements on crime and security, what assurances can he give the House that children's interests and safeguarding will be paramount?

**Mr Walker:** The hon. Lady makes a good point. I refer her to our future security paper, which makes clear our interest in co-operating on these matters. This House takes children's rights extremely seriously and we will ensure that we establish the best approach to them in both the negotiations and our own domestic law.

#### Euro Clearing Market

11. **Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): What representations he has received on the future of the euro clearing market. [901563]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker):** Since the creation of our Department a year ago, my colleagues and I have engaged widely with the financial services industry and others with a stake in London's euro clearing market. We have received representations from, and had meetings with, a wide variety of stakeholders, including UK Finance, TheCityUK, the Association of Foreign Banks and the Investment Association, and we will continue to do so.

**Robert Neill:** Because of our current ability to access European markets, the London financial services sector processes transactions worth about £880 billion every day. For context, that is about 100 times our net annual contribution to the EU, and about 15 times the highest sum that has been spoken of as a potential financial settlement. Against that background, does not my hon. Friend agree—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I am glad that the question mark is coming. Questions are terribly long-winded today; it really is very poor. Anyway—blurt it out, man!

**Robert Neill:** Against that background, is it not imperative that we secure a deal on leaving the European Union that will protect access to European markets for our financial services?

**Mr Walker:** My hon. Friend draws attention to the huge importance of the global financial centre in London to the whole of Europe. The Government are well aware of the importance of financial services market access. Our access brings benefits to businesses and customers across the UK and Europe, and we are determined to maintain the City's competitiveness now and into the future. That is why we are working closely with the Treasury to ensure that we have the strongest possible offer on reciprocal market access in this space.

**Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab):** But it is not just that the euro clearing houses deal with transactions worth €1 trillion a day; it is also the fact that 100,000 jobs in the financial sector could be at risk if Brussels decides that, because of systemic risk, the clearing houses have to move within the EU. May I urge the Minister to take this seriously and to enter into negotiations to ensure that we protect this vital industry?

**Mr Walker:** We absolutely do take this issue seriously. Neither the Council nor the European Parliament has yet reached a position on this proposal. Negotiations are ongoing, and the Council is still discussing the merits of location policy. The UK is very much involved in those discussions. As the hon. Lady knows, the Treasury leads on financial services, including ongoing business-as-usual EU negotiations, and this is an issue on which we continue to work with it very closely.

**Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD):** Of the 75,000 people that the Bank of England predicts could lose their jobs, what percentage might come from the euro clearing sector? Would the Minister support the call from the Bank of England for an amendment to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill to protect derivatives?

**Mr Walker:** The right hon. Gentleman refers to a figure that I understand the Bank of England discussed but did not produce. With regard to amendments to the repeal Bill, we look forward to debating all of them during its upcoming Committee stage.

#### **UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement: European Parliament**

12. **Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con):** What assessment he has made of the powers available to the European Parliament to block a UK-EU withdrawal agreement. [901564]

**The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis):** Article 50 of the treaty on European Union stipulates that the final withdrawal agreement should be concluded on behalf of the Union by the Council after obtaining the consent of the European Parliament. The European Parliament is entitled to a straight yes or no vote. It does not have the power to amend the withdrawal agreement between the UK and the EU. As the Prime Minister has said, we are confident that we will be able to conclude the negotiations and agreement in time to honour the voting commitments made in our Parliament and in the European Parliament. We do not approach these negotiations expecting failure; we are expecting success.

**Mr Hollobone:** Given that crazed Europhile MEPs such as Guy Verhofstadt are seeking to punish the United Kingdom for daring to vote to leave the European Union, and given that these same people are under the deluded impression that no deal would actually be worse for the UK than a bad deal, it seems likely that the European Parliament will seek to veto any such agreement. Should we not therefore redouble our efforts to prepare for a no-deal situation?

**Mr Davis:** The last time I used the phrase “Get thee behind me, Satan” in answer to a question about Guy Verhofstadt, he thought that I was calling him Satan, so I will stay off that one. Of course the European Parliament is very enthused about the institutions of the European Union, but when it comes to this vote, the deal that we have agreed with the European Union will be clear, and MEPs will have to reflect on their responsibilities to their constituents in their own countries. What he and I have always agreed is that the best outcome for everybody is a free trade arrangement that will help not just us but Holland, France, Germany and all the other 27 member states.

**Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab):** The Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), told the Select Committee that the deal would cover permission to communicate personal data between the UK and the EU, so if there is no deal, there will no longer be a lawful basis for the large part of the British economy that depends on European data communications. Should we not therefore take steps now to secure a data adequacy declaration from the European Commission and, in the light of that, may I commend to the Secretary of State amendment 151 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, which I tabled?

**Mr Davis:** It is always nice to get another preview of our upcoming consideration of the Bill.

When I was talking to the relevant Commons and Lords Select Committees in the past week or so, I made it plain that a so-called no deal is not probable; a deal is by far and away the most probable thing for our country's future. However, even no deal is not likely to mean a complete blank slate, and I have talked about what is called a basic deal. In any event, I would expect there to be a deal for data, aviation, nuclear trade and a whole series of other areas where there are massive amounts to lose on both sides. In our contingency planning exercises, we are looking at all options, including the one that the right hon. Gentleman outlines, and we will have plans for that, too.

### Universities

14. **Alan Mak** (Havant) (Con): What representations his Department has received from UK universities on negotiation priorities for the UK leaving the EU.

[901566]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker):** As we leave the EU, the Government are committed to ensuring that Britain remains a global hub for education, science and research. Our future partnership paper on collaboration in science and innovation sets out our aim for an ambitious agreement with the EU that ensures that the valuable research links between us continue to grow.

**Alan Mak:** The Prime Minister rightly established in her Lancaster House speech the Government's priorities for science and technology, particularly as the fourth industrial revolution accelerates. Will the Minister update the House on the Government's plans for future collaboration with the EU in that area?

**Mr Walker:** My hon. Friend, who is a champion in this House for the fourth industrial revolution, is absolutely right. The Government published a paper that set out that the UK will look to build on its unique relationship with the EU and establish an agreement on science and innovation to ensure that valuable research links between us continue to grow. That will deliver shared UK and European prosperity, and social, environmental and health benefits. The UK would like to work with the EU on designing the agreement and would welcome a full and open discussion about all options for continued collaboration.

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The United Kingdom has a world-beating universities and research sector, and Newcastle University, which is in my constituency, and its world-leading research are an excellent example of that. The university has repeatedly emphasised to me that successful research and innovation depends on collaboration with people from all disciplines who come to the UK. What will the Minister do to ensure that that is possible and to reassure researchers who are here in the UK now that they will continue to be able to work?

**Mr Walker:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right. We have been clear that we do not see the referendum result as a vote for the UK to pull up the drawbridge. We will remain an open, tolerant country that recognises the valuable contribution that people coming to our country can make. We will welcome those with the skills, drive and experience to make our nation better still. Our science and research paper and our citizens' rights paper set that out, and it is important that we continue to send that message.

### Citizens' Rights

15. **Will Quince** (Colchester) (Con): What progress has been made on the matter of citizens' rights since withdrawal negotiations began with the EU. [901567]

**The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis):** We have made great progress through five rounds of constructive negotiations, and we are

now within touching distance of an agreement on citizens' rights. Right hon. and hon. Members can track the progress of the negotiations through the joint table published by the United Kingdom and the European Union. Over two thirds of the most recent table is green, signalling areas of significant convergence. That progress has been built on further in the latest round of negotiations, where we reached agreement on the majority of key issues, including a broad framework for residents, all aspects of reciprocal healthcare arrangements, the vast majority of social security co-ordination, protection for frontier workers, and a commitment to incorporate anything agreed in the withdrawal agreement fully in UK law to enable citizens to rely directly on the terms of that agreement in the UK courts. With flexibility and creativity on both sides, we are confident that we will be able to reach a final agreement shortly.

**Will Quince:** I thank my right hon. Friend for that extremely comprehensive response. EU citizens living in Colchester are an important part of our local community. What assurances can my right hon. Friend give me and them that reaching an agreement on their rights before our departure from the EU will continue to be the utmost priority in our negotiations?

**Mr Davis:** I reassure my hon. Friend and his constituents that protecting the rights of EU citizens in the UK, and of UK nationals in the EU, is our first priority in these negotiations. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made clear repeatedly at the Dispatch Box, and again in her recent open letter to all EU citizens in the UK, we want people to stay and we want families to stay together. We continue to seek a reciprocal arrangement that will work in the interests of EU citizens in the UK, and of UK nationals in the EU. As I said before, we are confident that with flexibility and creativity we will be able to conclude the discussions on citizens' rights swiftly.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Secretary of State outline the discussions he has had with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Home Secretary about EU citizens' rights in relation to the visa system for seasonal workers, who are desperately needed to ensure that farmers' crops are brought in at the right time of the year.

**Mr Davis:** We have had a number of conversations about the labour market generally and about Northern Ireland in particular, because it is an important area with unique characteristics. We have commissioned the Migration Advisory Committee to produce a report that will cover this issue. However, if the hon. Gentleman has specific issues he wants to raise with me directly, I would be very happy to hear from him.

16. **Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the effect on the rights of UK citizens living in the EU and of EU citizens living in the UK of no deal being reached with the EU.

[901568]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker):** As I touched on earlier, reaching a reciprocal agreement to safeguard the rights of EU citizens in the UK and UK nationals in the EU is our first priority for the negotiations. It is

clear that it is a shared priority for both sides and that there is a lot of common ground between us. We are confident that we will reach a deal and we have held five rounds of constructive negotiations so far.

**Nic Dakin:** There are lots of words, but despite the Foreign Secretary telling EU nationals that their rights would be protected “whatever”, they remain unsure and their morale remains challenged. Why do the Government not just accept Labour’s suggestion of a unilateral recognition of EU citizens’ rights, which would transform the tone of the negotiations and be a giant step forward for this country and the people we serve?

**Mr Walker:** I repeat from the Dispatch Box what the Prime Minister has said: we want them to stay and we want to protect those rights. If the hon. Gentleman looks at the detail of the negotiation on citizens’ rights, he will see that it is about making sure that this works and making sure that people have their rights properly protected. He will see that we have reached agreement on a large number of areas and that on the remaining areas, the UK offer goes beyond that of the EU in many respects. What we want to do now is seal the deal and make sure that we end up with a deal that provides certainty to citizens both in the EU and in the UK.

#### Transitional Arrangements: Timetable

20. **Eleanor Smith** (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): What the timetable is for agreement on transitional arrangements for the UK leaving the EU. [901573]

**The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis):** We will build a bridge from our exit to our future partnership to allow business and people time to adjust, and to allow new systems to be put in place. It makes sense, therefore, for there to be only one set of changes. The Prime Minister’s Florence speech laid out our proposal for a strictly time-limited implementation period, based on the existing structure of EU rules and regulations, to provide certainty to individuals and businesses. The European Council has set out the possibility of such a period in its guidelines. We intend to get the form of the implementation period agreed as early as possible.

**Eleanor Smith:** The Chancellor has described the proposal for a transitional arrangement as a “wasting asset” for businesses: the arrangements will become less valuable the longer it takes to negotiate them, as they will cease to provide certainty about the future. Does the Secretary of State agree with that assessment? Will he therefore rule out lengthy negotiations over the terms of the transitional arrangements?

**Mr Davis:** The hon. Lady makes a good point. There are three reasons for the implementation period. One is to give businesses a significant amount of time after the decisions are made, so that they can make their decisions on the basis of clarity and certainty. The second is to give the Government time to prepare changes in the regulatory structures, regulations, customs and all the other things we have to do. The third is to give foreign Governments time to make accommodations too, because we will depend on, for example, French customs arrangements. Those are the three reasons. The first is,

as the Chancellor says, a wasting asset if it goes on for very long—not immediately, but if it goes on for very long.

The European Council is, I think, on 13 or 14 December—anyway, it is in the middle of December. If it finds that there has been sufficient progress at that point, we will start straightaway and conclude as fast as we can. However, it is a negotiation and there are two sides to make the decision. The hon. Lady can take it as read that we will be as quick as we can on that to give as great an amount of certainty as early as possible to British business.

**Mr Speaker:** We are better informed as a result of the insistence of the right hon. Gentleman on including in his answer any consideration that might be thought, in any way at any time, to be in any degree material.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): In the event of a no deal, why would the EU agree to a transitional period?

**Mr Davis:** In the light of your comments, Mr Speaker, the hon. Gentleman will have to ask the European Union that.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Stephen Kinnock. Not here—where is the feller?

#### Topical Questions

**Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I am hoping—

**Mr Speaker:** We are eagerly hoping to hear the hon. Lady’s question, but Question 1 will do for a start.

T1. [901577] **Stella Creasy** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis):** I am glad it is not just me that makes those mistakes, Mr Speaker. I have been here a lot longer than the hon. Lady, so I have got less excuse. Since our last oral questions, the Prime Minister’s speech in Florence has provided a new dynamic for the EU negotiations. That was recognised at the EU’s October Council, where leaders confirmed the intention to begin their internal work on future partnership. We are ready for that discussion to begin as soon as they are. In the meantime, we are making good progress on a raft of separation issues—the financial settlement, Ireland and citizens’ rights—and I look forward to further hard work when I travel to Brussels to continue talks next week. As we do so, I will continue to engage with member states across Europe to talk about the deep and special partnership we seek to strike. To that end, I am meeting my counterparts from the Irish Government later today and others later next week.

**Stella Creasy:** I thank the Minister for showing that time does not always mean talent. I am hoping he can help answer a question that my constituents keep asking: how much is all of this going to cost us? Departments do not seem able to answer that, and I have been asking them. Some of them think they are not paying anything at all, whereas others think everybody else is paying.

The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy says it has received extra cash to pay for the impact of the Brexit negotiations; the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport says it does not know how much any of this is going to cost; the Department for Communities and Local Government says it is expecting the Treasury to pick up the tab; and the Ministry of Defence says it is not spending anything because it expects there to be a deal and so no funding is required. This is a bit of a mess, so can this Secretary of State commit to publishing, by Department, by year, details on how much money has been put aside for the cost of negotiations and whether that money is from the Department or from another budget?

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I know the hon. Lady is an academic doctor, but it is not necessary to treat Question Time as the occasion for the presentation of a thesis.

**Mr Davis:** The hon. Lady demonstrated the second half of her original quip; speed of wit does not equate to speed of question. The simple answer to her question is that, as we have already said, the Treasury is putting aside £250 million for contingency planning this year and a total of £500 million overall. That money will be spent where it is necessary, and that will change depending on the progress of the negotiations.

T2. [901578] **James Morris** (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that the regions, particularly the Black country, which I represent, need a voice in the negotiations, so that the voice of business in the Black country can be firmly put on the agenda in terms of the priorities of a growing manufacturing area seeing a great revival in employment and growth?

**Mr Davis:** My hon. Friend is right to say that this is about all the regions and all the nations of the United Kingdom—not simply the Black country, although that is very important. I have already seen the London Mayor to talk about London and northern mayors to talk about the north, and I am about to see Andy Street. We will continue our ongoing discussions with the regions of the UK, both through local government and the businesses in these sectors.

T3. [901579] **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Earlier this week, Calum Steele, the general secretary of the Scottish Police Federation, said that a failure to be a part of Europol after Brexit will hinder our ability to investigate horrendous crimes such as people trafficking, drug dealing and prostitution. Obviously, the Secretary of State will recognise that organised crime does not respect national borders, so will he categorically assure the Scottish Police Federation and this House that co-operation through Europol will continue after Brexit?

**Mr Davis:** We are at the beginning of a negotiation, as the hon. Gentleman knows. *[Interruption.]* I cannot hear his heckle from a sedentary position. The Prime Minister has made it clear that the whole issue of security, counter-terrorism and foreign policy will make up a second treaty which we intend to put to the European Union. Every member state I have spoken to has welcomed that, so I expect that we will be able to make the Scottish Police Federation very happy.

**Matt Warman** (Boston and Skegness) (Con): A superb event last night in this House celebrated the contribution of Lincolnshire's great food sector. One question our fine producers asked was about their wish to have access to labour continue as free movement ends. Can the Secretary of State reassure those great businesses that he will continue to work with the Home Office to make sure that some version of a seasonal agricultural workers scheme continues as free movement ends?

**Mr Davis:** This is similar to the question put to me earlier about Northern Ireland, and I will make a final point to add to the one I made earlier about the Migration Advisory Committee looking at this. Throughout the past year I have said time and again that taking back control of migration does not mean a sudden stop on migration or migration being managed in such a way that damages the economy. So my hon. Friend can take comfort from that.

T4. [901580] **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Given the House's clear expression yesterday of its will that the sectoral analyses should be provided to the Select Committee, does the Secretary of State agree with the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), who said that the Government "must publish these papers to the Brexit Select Committee in full"?—*[Official Report, 1 November 2017; Vol. 630, c. 922.]* Or does he not trust the Select Committee?

**Mr Davis:** I was not here yesterday; by the sounds of it I missed a good debate, and one that would have suited my character, but there we are. I have already spoken to the Chairman of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn)—he sends his apologies for not being present today; I think he has to be in Leeds—and I am organising discussions with him about how we handle the confidentiality of the documentation that we hand over. I reiterate the point made by the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), which is that these documents are not some sort of grand plan; they are data about the regulations and markets of individual sectors, which inform our negotiation. Of course we will be as open as we can be with the Select Committee—I fully intend to be.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): Has the Secretary of State been made aware of the evidence given by people from the aviation industry to the Transport Committee on Monday? They spoke positively about the future of their industry post-Brexit and were very satisfied with the Government's approach. Talk of aircraft being grounded is nonsense.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker):** I thank my hon. Friend for that important question. Yes, we are aware of that important evidence. We will of course continue to work with the industry to ensure we have the best approach to future negotiations on this front, but it is reassuring to hear that confidence from the aviation industry, which is very important to the UK.

T5. [901581] **Seema Malhotra** (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Ministers have kindly committed today to coming back to the House with their response to last night's vote "in due course". We know that "shortly"

meant four months. Will Ministers confirm what they mean by “in due course”, and if they do not know yet, when will they?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker):** As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said moments ago, he has already spoken to the Chairman of the Select Committee, and I spoke to him briefly last night. We are fully apprised of the will of the House and we will move as swiftly as possible in all the circumstances.

**Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con):** Bass has been fished in the Solent for centuries, and the exceptionally resilient fishermen of today are based in Warsash in my constituency. For decades, they have seen their livelihoods and freedoms eroded by EU regulations. Will the Minister explain to and reassure the fishermen in Warsash about the opportunities they will face once we have left the EU and taken back control of our fisheries policy?

**Mr Baker:** As I have travelled during my duties, I have met a number of fishers who have been very keen to make sure that we take back control of our waters. I assure my hon. Friend that the Government will be seeking a fairer share of quota as we take control of our fisheries policy.

T6. [901582] **Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab):** Will the Secretary of State undertake to publish a list of all the regulatory and supervisory agencies that currently operate under the auspices of the European Union that he believes will need to be replicated by the United Kingdom on the day of Brexit?

**Mr Baker:** That work is currently ongoing. Departments have set out that, together, they will expect to introduce between 800 and 1,000 statutory instruments in order to carry forward the degree of certainty and continuity that we expect to deliver through the repeal Bill. In due course we will of course put all those instruments before the House.

**Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con):** The president of the European Free Trade Association court will visit London later this month. Will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State take that opportunity to explore with him the potential that that court might offer a means of resolving potential legal disputes and other matters of resolution in a transitional future arrangement?

**Mr David Davis:** Actually, I have already met the president of the EFTA court. He has come to see me before and is a very—how can I say it?—enterprising individual who I think wants to get more business for his court. We will of course look at all options. I do not think the EFTA court is likely to be the one that we land with, but when we go through the whole question of arbitration mechanisms, which we will need to have, we will of course look at all options.

T7. [901583] **Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab):** What steps are Ministers taking in the negotiations on the UK leaving the EU to protect environmental standards?

**Mr Robin Walker:** We take the UK’s commitments to environmental standards extremely seriously. As the hon. Gentleman will know, the Government have promised

to be the first ever to leave the environment in a better state than the previous generation, and that commitment applies across Government. We are looking forward to discussing environmental standards with the EU as part of the discussions on the future partnership.

**Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con):** While aiming for an open free-trade arrangement with the EU, is it not simply sensible planning to prepare also for a no-deal scenario?

**Mr David Davis:** Yes, my hon. Friend is exactly right, and that is precisely what we are doing. As I said to a Labour Member earlier, we are planning for all options: the deal option; the bare bones, or basic deal; or the incredibly improbable no-deal option. We are prepared for all of them.

T8. [901584] **Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op):** Speaking on behalf of small businesses in my constituency, let me ask the Minister what plans his Department has to protect supply chain small and medium-sized enterprises when the UK leaves the EU.

**Mr Robin Walker:** Small businesses will of course benefit from the frictionless market access that we set out in our customs paper, and we look forward to discussing it further as we move on to conversations with the EU about our future relationship and a strong deal on market access for both goods and services.

**Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con):** There have been reports that senior current and former parliamentary figures have been engaged in private discussions with the EU’s chief negotiator and that some of those individuals are members of Her Majesty’s Privy Council. In the interests of transparency, have transcripts of those meetings been made available, and does the Secretary of State regard such extra parliamentary activity as helpful or a hindrance to the UK’s national interest?

**Mr David Davis:** There are no such records. As for helpful or a hindrance, let us say that it adds to the gaiety of nations.

T9. [901585] **Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op):** The Secretary of State will be aware that a series of amendments have been tabled to the Bill to protect the place of Scotland and Wales in the constitutional settlement as it stands. Has he had any representations from the Scottish or Welsh Conservative leaders about areas in the Bill that need to be changed to protect the place of Scotland and Wales?

**Mr Davis:** We are in constant discussion with the Conservatives in both Scotland and Wales over their future after Brexit, and they have been very active.

T10. [901586] **Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op):** Again today, the Government have completely failed to understand the urgent need for a transition agreement as soon as possible. Apart from being out of the European Commission, the Council and the Parliament, will the Secretary of State say which other EU institutions will not be included in a transition deal?

**Mr Davis:** I can say two things. First, let me deal with the premise of the hon. Lady’s question. We are in a position in which the European Council will come to

a conclusion in the middle of December—I think that it meets on 13 and 14 December. I have said at this Dispatch Box today, while she was listening, that we will undertake the negotiation as fast as possible thereafter. How much more urgent we can be, I do not know.

**David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): Will one of the Ministers give some early clarity over the issue of protected status for agricultural exports, including the 14 agricultural products in Wales worth more than £300 million?

**Mr Robin Walker:** I have answered questions on that issue in previous question sessions and I have been very clear that it is our intention to seek agreement with the European Union on mutual recognition of protected names of origin, and we will continue to work on its delivery with colleagues at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs as we enter the future partnership negotiations.

**Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): This week, the Committee of the Nuclear Safeguards Bill was told by many expert witnesses that the Bill was inadequate and the time insufficient to create an alternative structure for Euratom when we leave the EU. Given the risks, will the Secretary of State commit now to pushing for maintaining our membership of Euratom in the agreement?

**Mr Baker:** The institutions of Euratom are tightly coupled with the institutions of the European Union. Therefore, we need to leave Euratom as we leave the EU.

**Thangam Debbonaire:** That is not the advice.

**Mr Baker:** That is the advice that we have had. We will look carefully at the advice of those experts and take what steps are appropriate to the Government.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The young people of the Glasgow youth council are applying for Erasmus plus funding. I am sure that the Secretary of State would like to give them all his best wishes on their application. They are applying as part of the Year of Young People 2018. How will he ensure that that generation is not the last generation to benefit from freedom of movement across Europe?

**Mr David Davis:** First, I wish them well, through the hon. Lady. Secondly, Erasmus is one of the institutions that we may stay a member of—if we can negotiate that—as we leave.

**Karin Smyth** (Bristol South) (Lab): The west of England economy contributes £10 billion to the Treasury. Is it conceivable that, in due course, we will understand what the impact of leaving is on the west of England economy? Can the Secretary of State add the people of the west of England to his list of those he will meet to discuss the impact?

**Mr Baker:** As somebody originally from Cornwall, I was pleased recently to visit the county during the course of our regional engagement. I hope and expect that we will continue that engagement as we seek ways to ensure that the opportunities of leaving the European Union are enjoyed by all parts of the United Kingdom.

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): The Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Secretary of State for Wales have not been able to answer this question in the past week, so I wonder whether the Secretary of State for Brexit can. Can he name one power that will definitely be devolved to the Scottish Parliament as a result of Brexit?

**Mr Robin Walker:** As the hon. Gentleman well knows, a discussion is under way with the devolved Administrations through the Joint Ministerial Committee (EU Negotiations) led by the First Secretary of State. Agreement has been reached on principles where common frameworks will be required. I look forward to that discussion, agreeing a long list of powers, as we increase the competence of each of the devolved Administrations.

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Far from creating a global Britain, the Government have created a Britain in which EU citizens are having to seek counselling, and 10% of them who worked in the NHS have left. Why will the Government not ring-fence this matter or issue a unilateral declaration to provide certainty for those EU citizens?

**Mr Walker:** The Prime Minister has been very clear from this Dispatch Box that we want EU citizens to stay. We are negotiating to achieve certainty over the way in which that will work under the legal frameworks of the EU and the UK. It is very important that we do that and get that agreed as soon as possible.

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): The Government's paper on foreign policy, defence and security after we leave the European Union suggests that there are many areas where we want to maintain a very strong relationship with the EU. The paper seems to suggest that we should have some kind of observer status at the relevant Council meetings afterwards. Would it not be bizarre for us not to have that if we are still engaged in things such as Operation Atalanta, Operation Althea and many other projects? Otherwise, the rules and the determination of how those projects should be progressed will be determined by people in a room that we are not able to access.

**Mr David Davis:** The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. Indeed, I had dinner with the French Foreign Minister last week. Speaking to him, it was clear that member states see a very important role for Britain as a provider not just of military power, but of wisdom, skill, history, tradition and reputation.

## Catalonia

10.37 am

**Hywel Williams** (Arfon) (PC) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the political situation in Catalonia.

**The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan)**: The events of the past few weeks in Catalonia are a matter of public record. The Catalonian authorities held a referendum on independence on 1 October that was found by the Spanish courts to be illegal under the Spanish constitution. Holding it was, therefore, illegal and an attempt to undermine the rule of law. The Catalan Parliament then unilaterally declared independence on 27 October. Her Majesty's Government do not and will not recognise this declaration of independence. It is based on a vote that was declared illegal by the Spanish courts and we continue to want to see the rule of law upheld, the Spanish constitution respected and Spanish unity preserved.

The situation in Catalonia is an internal matter for Spain and its people. The Spanish Government have set a date—21 December—for regional elections. This provides a path to return to the rule of law, which is an important principle that the UK strongly supports, and it is for all the people of Catalonia to have their say through democratic processes that are consistent with the Spanish constitution. I remind the House that Spain is a close ally and a good friend whose strength and unity matter to us. We consider it essential that the rule of law be upheld and the Spanish constitution respected.

**Hywel Williams**: I am asking the Government to act in two ways: to call on the parties in Catalonia to enter into talks and to offer their good offices to facilitate progress. No one can doubt that this is eventually a political matter, rather than a legal one. Getting both parties to talk is the way forward. In this situation, the UK Government have a responsibility and an opportunity.

First, they must do all they can to ensure the safety and security of UK citizens living in Catalonia. Secondly, this is happening in our neighbourhood as we are a leading European power, and a member of the Council of Europe, the EU, NATO and the United Nations Security Council. Thirdly, uniquely, the UK Government have recent experience of an independence referendum carried out in Scotland, largely by agreement. We have some advice to offer. And, of course, the hard-won peace agreement in Northern Ireland rests partly on the opportunity there was for all to have their say in a referendum.

In my debate on Catalonia on 10 October, the Minister replying said that no request for advice had been made by the Spanish Government, and none had been offered by the UK Government. I now ask that that offer be made.

**Sir Alan Duncan**: I do not share the hon. Gentleman's view of how Britain should take an interest in the internal affairs of Spain. Talks for Spain are an internal matter. This is, indeed, a legal matter. We held an independence referendum, but it was within the law; in the case of Spain, it was not. In respect of UK citizens,

I believe I am right in saying that we have had no reported consular problems, and I obviously hope that that remains the case.

**Dr Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): May I just take up that point? Is it not a cause for celebration, first, that at least no violence has erupted of a significant nature in Spain? Secondly, is not the way in which we handle independence questions—whichever side we are on in relation to Scottish independence—a cause for satisfaction and an example to others?

**Sir Alan Duncan**: Obviously, there were scenes on television of some acts of violence, and they are not the sort of things we want to see, but the fundamental point is whether this declaration of independence or the referendum were legal, and they were not.

On the comparison between Scotland and Catalonia, no two situations are alike, and each needs to be considered in its own legal and constitutional context. What is clear is that, in this case, the vote and subsequent actions in the Catalan Parliament were neither legal nor constitutional.

**Emily Thornberry** (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for this urgent question. I also thank the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) for securing it. I was interested to hear his contribution, and I agree with some of the things he said.

We are currently in a very dangerous position, where the future of Catalonia has been turned into a binary choice—a false choice, an impossible choice—between, on the one hand, a unilateral declaration of independence and, on the other, direct rule from Madrid. I do not believe that either choice offers a satisfactory solution to this crisis or that either choice is what the majority of Catalans or Spaniards actually want. I believe that the majority want to see peaceful, sensible dialogue between the parties to try and find a resolution. That is what the socialist party of Catalonia and the socialist party of Spain support, and we support our sister parties in that endeavour.

But what we are currently seeing from the Government of Spain and the Government of Catalonia is as far from peaceful and sensible dialogue as it is possible to get. From Madrid, we see the use of officially sanctioned violence and intimidation by the police and scenes that are horrific to watch. That has been followed over the last month by equally heavy-handed political tactics. From Barcelona, we see a unilateral declaration of independence based on a referendum that had no constitutional basis in Spanish law and in which around 30% of Catalan residents were not permitted to take part and a further 40% chose not to take part.

Neither of those approaches offers a sustainable way forward and neither is a fair or democratic way to proceed; my fear is that the longer we are stuck with this false, binary choice, the deeper and more entrenched the divisions will become and the harder it will be to negotiate a peaceful solution. So, as a matter of urgency, we call on both sides to take a step back, to ease the confrontational rhetoric and heavy-handed tactics, and to start listening to what the majority of people in Spain and Catalonia actually want, which is peace, dialogue and an end to division.

[Emily Thornberry]

What are the UK Government doing to promote that, or does Brexit suck so much life from our ability to have any influence in Europe that the honest answer is, “Not a lot”?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** I agree with the second part, at least, of the right hon. Lady’s response—

**Emily Thornberry:** Not a lot.

**Sir Alan Duncan:** As usual, not a lot. I agree that these things were illegal and against the rule of law. However, I disagree with how the right hon. Lady portrays this choice. This is not a binary choice in the way she describes; it is a binary choice between upholding the rule of law or not.

**Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con):** I perfectly understand my right hon. Friend’s reluctance to interfere in Spanish internal affairs and I respect the Foreign Office’s view that the referendum was illegal, although my constituents were disturbed to see Spanish police removing ballot boxes and people being prevented from voting. We do, however, have a strong legitimate interest in how Spain regards our sovereign citizens in Gibraltar. Will he confirm that Spain respects their wishes to remain British?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** My hon. Friend draws a false parallel between Gibraltar and Catalonia. I repeat that we fully support Spain as it upholds the working of its constitution and will stand with it in opposing illegality wherever we see it.

**Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab):** A lot of fake news has come out of Catalonia, not least regarding the number of casualties, which was grossly inflated by the Catalan authorities. It was reported on the television that one woman had had every finger broken, one by one, by the police, but she later went on television herself to say that this was simply untrue—that none of her fingers had been broken. Will the Minister assure us that if in this country a councillor were to agree an illegal budget they would be pursued by the law, that being the law of this land, and that we will respect the law of other countries when it is pursued there?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** I agree very strongly with the hon. Gentleman. Each country has its laws, and those laws, having been made by a sovereign Parliament—do not forget that Spain is a properly working democracy—should be upheld. We have been robust in saying so. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has spoken to Prime Minister Rajoy, I have spoken several times to the Spanish ambassador in the UK, and we issued a very firm statement last week, when the declaration of independence was made, standing firmly with Spain as it upholds the workings of its constitution.

**Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con):** In the light of the situation in Catalonia, do the Government need to provide additional guidance not only to the tens of thousands of Brits living there but to the hundreds of thousands planning on holidaying there next year?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** I would like to think that much of life can continue as normal and I would not want to dissuade anyone wanting to be a tourist in Spain from going there. In terms of demonstrations or violence, things have very much settled down—they were tightly focused in the first place—so I hope that people will look on Spain as a properly working country to which they want to go as tourists. In the same spirit, we welcome Spanish people coming here.

**Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP):** Will the Minister accept that the most fundamental of all principles is the right of the people to determine their own future? Does he not recall that the unilateral declarations of independence by the United States of America, the Republic of Ireland, Norway and Slovenia were all illegal and unconstitutional, and that the actions of Gandhi, Mandela and many others were also illegal and unconstitutional? Does he agree that if the law makes it illegal to express an opinion, the law must be changed, not the people?

How can the Minister say that Spain is upholding the rule of law when there is conclusive evidence of the Spanish state sending people into demonstrations to incite violence against the police and of excessive police brutality against unarmed citizens doing nothing other than attempting to express a view? How can it be the rule of law to threaten to arrest a blogger who blogs an opinion that the Prime Minister or the King do not agree with? Will he accept that if this had happened in other countries outside the EU the UK would already be making representations that it had to stop, because the UK takes pride in not allowing national borders to stand in the way of respect for fundamental human rights? Will the Government agree to put pressure on the EU to offer to act as a mediator so that the wishes of the people of Catalonia and of Spain can be resolved in a way that does not involve any further unlawful acts by the Spanish state?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** By and large, in response to almost everything the hon. Gentleman said, the answer is no. I consider this an internal matter. It is not for other countries to instruct a country on how to perform within the proper workings of its constitution. Catalonia and Scotland are not exactly the same as countries horribly oppressed by the Soviet Union, and we should not draw parallels between quite different situations. As the Spanish courts have ruled, the vote was not held within the Spanish legal and constitutional framework. The Scottish referendum, on the other hand, was a legal referendum held following the signature of the Edinburgh agreement between the Scottish Government and the UK Government and was overseen by the Electoral Commission.

**Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con):** My right hon. Friend is aware that both Spain and this country are members of the Council of Europe and as such work with the Venice Commission, which has a code of practice on referendums. That code of practice is getting quite ancient: I think it was first drafted back in 2006. Does he agree that if a country is a member of the Council of Europe and subscribes to the Venice Commission, it is important that its referendums are held under the rule of law, and that that must be maintained and upheld?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** The House will be grateful to my right hon. Friend for the benefit of her wisdom. Indeed, yes—if that is what the code of conduct says and it is clear, then countries should do things within the rule of law. In the case of the Catalan referendum and the subsequent declaration, both were not.

**Dr David Drew** (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Like the Bourbon kings, the Spanish authorities have “learned nothing and forgotten nothing.”

Would it not be good, as a friend of Spain, if we, with the EU, were to suggest that the country holds a legally binding referendum on the future of Catalonia so that then everyone could be satisfied?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** The Spanish are entitled to do whatever they choose to do within the workings of their constitution, but it is not for us to tell them exactly how to go about it—it is for them to work it out themselves as a functioning democracy.

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): May I welcome the measured approach that my right hon. Friend the Minister is taking? Could he perhaps tell me how Her Majesty’s Government would approach a situation in which a foreign power was advising us on how to run our own internal affairs?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Indeed, I hope that his Committee might look in some respects at the comparative situations across the world. I am confident that if it were to do so, it would conclude things very much along the lines of what I have been saying to the House today.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): If the UK Government do not get involved in the internal affairs of foreign countries, does that not render the work of a lot of ambassadors and a lot of the work of his Department useless from here on in? Why do the Government pick and choose what unilateral declarations of independence or rights of self-determination they recognise?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** Because of the constitutions and the rule of law within which they work.

**Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): My constituents have sent me a number of emails about this, and I was visited in my constituency surgery by a Catalan/Spanish constituent. Does the Minister agree that the policing style of the original poll was heavy-handed, and that the only way forward is through peaceful dialogue towards a resolution?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** I am reluctant to speculate, but one interpretation that has been put on the violence is that the Catalan police declined to take orders from central Government. I do not know whether that is true, and it is not for me to pass judgment on it. It is clear, however, that this was an illegal referendum that is therefore invalid and against the rule of law, so it counts for nothing.

**Ian Murray** (Edinburgh South) (Lab): There are lessons that could be learned from this situation. There are many reports that the economic impact on Catalonia will be catastrophic, with many businesses leaving the region as a result. Will the Minister have a chat with his

Treasury colleagues and commission some work on the economic impact of this illegal referendum and what it will do to the Catalan economy?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** Again, it is not for us to deploy our resources to make such a calculation. Proper scrutiny of the economy of Catalonia will soon make the facts apparent one way or another.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Minister is right to be careful about drawing parallels between Catalonia and Scotland, but there is one similarity. The now-dissolved Catalan Parliament had a majority in favour of holding an independence referendum, just as Scotland did in 2011. The Scottish Parliament did not, under the British constitution, have the power to hold that referendum, but, to the UK Government’s credit, they agreed a process with Alex Salmond whereby a legal referendum could be held. All we are asking is for the Minister to use his good offices and his positive experience to suggest a similar approach to our Spanish allies.

**Sir Alan Duncan:** That is entirely up to the Government of Spain. In the same way as this House is sovereign and agreed what to do with Scotland, it is up to the Parliament of Spain to decide how it wishes to proceed. It is not for us to tell Spain which course to take.

**Martin Whitfield** (East Lothian) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that notwithstanding the legality or otherwise of the referendum, there is an enormous duty on all parties to speak about reconciliation, peace and moving forward?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** The best way to get reconciliation is for politicians in Catalonia to start by saying that they will act within the rule of law and the workings of the Spanish constitution. Then, perhaps, they would stand a greater chance of getting somewhere.

**Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): What we are witnessing in Catalonia is the return of tyranny to western Europe, and history will not look kindly on those who turn a blind eye to the actions of the Spanish Government. Should not the British Government now defend the values of peace and democracy, and unreservedly condemn the repression of the Catalan people, their political leaders and their democratic institutions?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** I am afraid I consider the comments of the hon. Gentleman that Spain is returning to tyranny nonsensical, and somewhat ruder even than that.

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): As a Scot, the recent inexcusable violence—it is inexcusable, whatever prompted it—in Catalonia has brought home to me how important it was that the coalition Government enabled the legal referendum of which we have spoken and ensured that there was a proper democratic dialogue. Does the Minister not agree that perhaps he could speak to his Spanish counterpart, impart the wisdom of having taken that approach and counsel them that perhaps a reasonable and conciliatory approach might prevent more violence and further deterioration?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** I have enjoyed, for much of the last year, imparting enormous wisdom to many counterparts across the world.

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): On this issue, the UK Government have more faces than Big Ben. During the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence, they were quite happy for international Governments all over the world to comment on Scottish questions, so I think the idea that the UK Government are staying out of this is laughable. Will the UK Government follow the advice of the Scottish Government and at least allow people to recognise this and move towards some sort of legally binding referendum?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** I did not quite hear the hon. Gentleman. Was he asking us to recognise the independence?

**David Linden:** A legally binding referendum.

**Sir Alan Duncan:** I think this is an internal matter for Spain. Now that they have taken over the government of Catalonia, the next steps can be determined by the Spanish themselves, not by us.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Minister of State started by saying that Spain was a respected and good friend and ally. If any of our good friends and allies were to go around beating people in the street, we would step in and take action to stop them from doing so. Why will the Minister not do that for Spain?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** I believe I have already commented on that. I think the hon. Lady has rather lost perspective in making that judgment.

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The Minister and the Government like to hide behind Spain's rule of law and its constitution. How would he respond to Alfred de Zayas, a UN expert, who has said that Spain is in breach of several articles—relating to human rights—of the international covenant on civil and political rights, which is itself enshrined in the Spanish constitution? The Spanish Government are flouting the rule of law and their own constitution.

**Sir Alan Duncan:** We do not hide behind the rule of law. We undertake to abide by it, as should everybody in this House.

## Business of the House

10.58 pm

**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 6 November will include:

**MONDAY 6 NOVEMBER**—Debate on a motion on British membership of the European economic area followed by general debate on transport in the north. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

**TUESDAY 7 NOVEMBER**—Debate on a motion on temporary accommodation followed by general debate on matters to be considered before the forthcoming adjournment. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

The business for the week commencing 13 November will include:

**MONDAY 13 NOVEMBER**—Proceedings on legislation relating to Northern Ireland.

**TUESDAY 14 NOVEMBER**—Consideration in Committee of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill (day 1).

**WEDNESDAY 15 NOVEMBER**—Consideration in Committee of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill (day 2).

**THURSDAY 16 NOVEMBER**—Debate on a motion on the roll-out of universal credit followed by general debate on defence aerospace industrial strategy. The subjects for these debates were determined 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 13 and 16 November will be:

**MONDAY 13 NOVEMBER**—Debate on an e-petition relating to a referendum on Scottish independence.

**THURSDAY 16 NOVEMBER**—General debate on world antibiotics awareness week followed by general debate on Department for Work and Pensions support for care leavers.

This has been a difficult week for Parliament, but it has been even harder for those who have come forward to report their experiences of inappropriate behaviour, harassment or abuse. Their experiences are why we need to change. As I said on Monday, it is a right, not a privilege, to work in a safe and respectful environment. The Prime Minister has written to all party leaders, and I am pleased to say that they have all agreed to meet to discuss a common, transparent and independent grievance procedure.

In the meantime, as the shadow Leader of the House will know, I have met representatives of all political parties, and I can tell the House that I am confident that all sides will want to resolve this together. A cross-party solution is the only solution, and I want to thank everyone I have met for showing commitment to such a proper solution. I have also had further meetings on these issues, including with the Clerk of the House, and a discussion with the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. I told the House that action would be taken in days, not weeks, and that is exactly what is happening.

I want to remind the House that Parliament Week takes place across the country the week after the recess. Next Friday, we will kick-start those events, and I am looking forward to welcoming the Youth Parliament to this Chamber, as I know you are, Mr Speaker. At a time when Parliament is so critical to our future outside the EU, I am determined to get more people, especially young people, involved in what goes on in this place.

**Valerie Vaz:** I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business up to 17 November, and I think most people know that the Budget is on 22 November.

I note the Leader of the House's statement on the sexual harassment allegations. There is a commitment on behalf of the Labour party to find a common process that will deal with these serious issues, but also retain the rights of MPs as employers of their own staff. In your email yesterday, Mr Speaker, you reminded people that there is a confidential, anonymous helpline—24/7—for all staff on the estate. It is run by an organisation that has nothing to do with political parties and nothing to do with the House authorities. It gives advice on a free, confidential basis, and it signposts people to other agencies.

Any new process must put the complainants at the heart of it, which is why it is important for the House not to invent or impose a process—we cannot just take one out of our handbags and put it on the table—that does not have the confidence of complainants or is unable to deal with the issues that arise. In 2016, there were 163 calls, and I believe it is important to analyse the type of calls to see whether those who made them feel that their concerns have been addressed. There should perhaps be an anonymous survey on that, and I would extend that to a staff survey—a survey of every single person working in the House—so that we know what the issues are, and people do not feel that they have to stand back or not deal with them. I also suggest that we co-opt Bex Bailey, who has bravely spoken out this week. Mr Speaker, you asked the parties to publish their policies and processes, and I can confirm that the Labour party will be sending you our policies today.

There will be a House process, a party process and, if necessary, MPs as employers can make the grievance procedure part of their contracts, so if we are to get to the bottom of this, I think we need to look at those three different routes. However, a change of culture will take longer, and that must be done by education and training. Every Member and every employee should go on an equality training course. For new MPs, that could be part of the induction process, and existing Members and staff should also undertake the training, which can be provided by outside organisations. Will the Leader of the House confirm that there will be additional resources for the House, and will she ensure, in particular, that the Equality and Human Rights Commission has the resources to support such education and training? We know what to do when there is a fire, and we should know what to do about other issues.

In the anniversary of the week when 95 theses were hammered to the door of a church, the Government have finally hammered out the list of 58 sectors. The Labour party would settle for them giving the impact assessments to the Exiting the European Union Committee. That was set out in the motion, but it has not been done. A Select Committee cannot produce a report unless it

has all the information before it. Members have a right on behalf of the whole country to have that information, and to make sense of and correct some of the misinformation that came out during the referendum. This is so serious—the sectors make up 88% of our economy. Despite the request, the Government only provided the sector list on 30 October—two days before our Opposition day debate—and again they have refused to vote either in favour or against the motion. They have not even enacted the motion.

Last night the Minister said that Members of the Government are first and foremost parliamentarians, but they do not want to listen to Parliament. He said, “in the cool light of tomorrow, we will revisit exactly what was said in *Hansard*.”—[*Official Report*, 1 November 2017; Vol. 630, c. 930.]

In the cool light of today, the Minister got up this morning and said, “in due course”. Will the Leader of the House please explain the time limit for “in due course”? It cannot possibly be the 12 weeks that she suggested for Backbench Business Committee debates or Opposition day debates.

When I was a member of the Health Committee we heard in private powerful testimony from young people about their experiences of mental health services, and that was used to inform our report. May I ask the Leader of the House for a debate on the CQC report on the review of children and young people's mental health services? The CQC found that mental health care is funded, commissioned and provided by many different organisations that do not always work together in a joined-up way, and that the system as a whole is complex and fragmented. I hope that the Government will support the Bill presented by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) which will be debated tomorrow. It is on Seni's law. Seni Lewis died in a mental health unit, and the Bill aims to prevent the disproportionate use of force against mental health patients. Young people should be provided with the appropriate professional care; it is not a matter for the police.

Mental health was a topic of debate in the Youth Parliament last year, and as the Leader of the House said, Members of the Youth Parliament will be back on 10 November—it is hard to believe that it is their 18th year. I am sure they will be keen for us to vote for the Bill presented tomorrow by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) on votes for 16-year-olds, as that was also on their list of debates. I will have to explain to them what a resolution of the House is. When is a resolution not a resolution? Is it binding or effective? Is there a resolution on the Humble Address? Is it a Back-Bench resolution or a resolution by the Opposition? I will have to explain that and I cannot—I am having difficulty doing that.

Finally, we lost two of our colleagues, Candy Atherton and Frank Doran. I first met Frank in 1987 when he came to the House, and we send our love to Joan Ruddock who was also a Member of this House. Frank played a big part in the life of this House, and it is a shock to us all because they were both so young.

Next weekend as we go to our Remembrance Day services, we should all remember people who died in 2017: Keith Palmer who died on the estate, the eight people who died on London Bridge, and the 22 brilliant and talented young people who died in the Manchester attack. We also, of course, stand with New York. We will remember them. We will remember them.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I thank the hon. Lady for her considered remarks. We share her commitment always to remember those who were so brutally murdered and had their lives cut short by appalling acts of terrorism. We also owe a huge debt of gratitude to those public sector emergency workers and volunteers who came out and risked their own lives and safety in protecting us. We are very grateful to them.

I join in the hon. Lady's commiserations to the friends and family of those ex-Labour MPs who have sadly died in recent days. We commemorate them and thank them for their service to this House.

The hon. Lady talks about the need for a common process for us to resolve harassment, bullying and intimidation. I absolutely share her determination. She mentioned your letter, Mr Speaker, reminding all parliamentary passholders about the availability of a confidential helpline through which they can report their concerns. As the hon. Lady did, I urge all those with concerns to call the helpline. You have reminded colleagues of the phone number, Mr Speaker. I have included the number in my letter, which has been placed in the Library, written in response to a question last week about how many calls had been made to it. I urge all colleagues to use the helpline, or to speak to me or to my opposite numbers if they have particular concerns they would like to raise with us. I commend the hon. Lady for her suggestions. She will be aware that a number of people have talked about the need for better training, more induction, a better understanding of equalities and the need for the highest standards of behaviour in this place. I absolutely agree with her that that will be a part of the urgent review. It will be the case that more training will be provided in future.

The hon. Lady asked about the Humble Address and the remarks made earlier by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union. He has assured the House that he is already in discussions with the Chairman of the Exiting the European Union Committee. It is accepted that the motion passed by the House yesterday is binding and that the information will be forthcoming. However, as I think has been made very clear, it is difficult to balance the conflicting obligation to protect the public interest through not disclosing information that could harm the national and public interest, while at the same time ensuring that the resolution of the House passed yesterday is adhered to. I will contact the Department for Exiting the European Union later today to understand the progress on that point.

The hon. Lady raised the CQC report on mental health. I share her concern. It cannot be right that young people with mental health problems ever find themselves in police custody. The Government are taking steps to ensure that that cannot happen in future, but I commend her for raising the matter. It will certainly come under increasing Government scrutiny.

The hon. Lady mentioned votes for 16-year-olds. I can provide the House with a little anecdote of a school in my constituency that had a lengthy debate, between 16, 17 and 18-year-olds, on votes for 16-year-olds. At the end of the debate, there was an overwhelming vote against lowering the age at which people can vote. The reason, which I thought was quite amusing, was that 16-year-olds tend to go along with their parents, while 18-year-olds know that they talk a load of rubbish and are a little more independent in their thinking!

This discussion will continue to run. Personally, I am open to the suggestion of either lowering the age or keeping it where it is; I think there are arguments on both sides.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. May I gently remind colleagues who came into the Chamber after business questions had started that they should not be standing and should not expect to be called? People either get here on time and do take part, or don't and can't. That has always been the case. I think there has been a bit of latitude in recent times, but I have tried to indicate to colleagues that they ought to keep an eye on the time.

**Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con):** I wonder whether the Leader of the House could arrange a debate on car parks and their ownership, in particular at stations such as the London Underground station in Little Chalfont in my constituency, so that we can encourage car park owners to install charging points for electric vehicles. That would enable our commuters and others who use the car parks to take advantage of the new technology which is coming on stream so rapidly.

**Andrea Leadsom:** My right hon. Friend raises a very important point. Those of us on the Government Benches are determined to embrace new technology. We are committed to the greater use of electric vehicles to reduce pollution and deal with the problem of poor air quality. My right hon. Friend's suggestion is a really useful contribution to that debate.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** I call Barry Sheerman. [*Interruption.*] I apologise to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). I have Members wittering away to me on either side, because what concerns them at that moment is more important than anything else. That is always the case, but it is my fault. I call Pete Wishart.

**Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP):** I am grateful, Mr Speaker. I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week.

It is 50 years to the day since the stunning victory by Winnie Ewing in the Hamilton by-election—a result that transformed Scottish politics and has changed Scotland forever. The day that Winnie was elected, she said

“Stop the world, Scotland wants to get on”,

and we are closer than ever to achieving that ambition, thanks to the spark ignited by Winnie in that by-election.

I congratulate the Leader of the House on the leadership she has shown on the sexual harassment issue. We will work with her to help craft and put together an independent grievance procedure, so that everybody in this House will have a safe place to raise complaints and report any issue. It is encouraging to see people now coming forward and firm and decisive action being taken, but does she agree that this is a real opportunity to effectively tackle the in-built patriarchal hierarchy of this institution and the unsavoury entitlement culture that still pervades these corridors of power?

Last night's shenanigans on the Opposition day motion were deeply unsatisfactory and brought shame upon this House once again. There is no doubt whatsoever that the vote is binding, and I am grateful to hear the Leader of the House confirm that today. What we need today is a clear and unambiguous statement from the Government that they accept in full what was decided last night, without qualification, and that they will, without any redaction, just hand the papers over to the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union. That is what is expected of the Government. If they do not do that, as you said, Mr Speaker, the Government will be in contempt of this House, and if that happens, we will bring proceedings to hold them to account on that very basis.

Finally, last week there was yet another pitiful attempt to reform the unelectable circus that is the House of Lords. This was brought forward by the Lords themselves, which is a little bit like asking the vampire community to reform the local blood bank. Apparently, the ambition is to reduce their number to 600, making it only the third-largest, unaccountable, unelected Chamber in the world. When will the Leader of the House produce real and decisive plans to rid the nation of this unelected embarrassment?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am always delighted by how the hon. Gentleman never holds back in speaking his mind, certainly on the subject of reform of the other place. He will be aware that the Burns Committee report recommends reducing the size of the House of Lords by a quarter and limiting terms to 15 years. Some of us in this place believe that the other place has a vital role in scrutinising and revising legislation, so we will of course consider the recommendations carefully, but I encourage the hon. Gentleman to appreciate that comprehensive reform of the House of Lords involving legislation is not a priority. However, we will make sure that the House of Lords continues to perform its constitutional role, which respects the primacy of the House of Commons.

As for the hon. Gentleman's other remarks, I assure him that all parts of the United Kingdom enormously love and respect Scotland as a part of the United Kingdom, for the contribution it makes, for the amazing innovation and skills, for the fabulous scenery and for the wonderful food. It is a fantastic part of the United Kingdom.

I am personally grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his constructive contribution to the discussion about how we take forward this very concerning issue of harassment in this place. He has been extremely proactive in offering support from the Scottish National party, for which I am extremely grateful.

The hon. Gentleman makes the point that the vote of the House yesterday is binding on the Government. I encourage him to understand that, while this will be met, it is a case of balancing the public interest with the binding nature of the vote.

**Alec Shelbrooke** (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): On Friday, a constituent came to see me to describe how his 20-year-old son has inherited an eye disease, retinitis pigmentosa, which will cause him to go blind and for which there is currently no cure. May we have debate on mental health support networks available for young adults who have been diagnosed with degenerative diseases,

who require specialist support to overcome issues such as suicidal tendencies, which all too often accompany such an early diagnosis of such a terrible condition?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am so sorry to hear about my hon. Friend's constituent. It sounds like a truly awful case. All of us as constituency MPs hear of such tragic cases. I share his concerns about the mental health of young people who have to deal with those sorts of diagnosis and he is quite right to raise the subject. We know that people with such long-term conditions are at higher risk of mental illness such as depression, and I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate on the matter.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I was tempted to try my Scots accent, Mr Speaker, but, thankfully for the House, I did not have to.

I want to say something about our dialogue in the House on standards. People sometimes call this place the global village, but we are a community here, and I ask the Leader of the House to involve the media—the journalists here—because I know that some journalists and elements of the media do not treat women in the same way as they treat men, and I think the Press Gallery should be involved in this conversation.

Also, may we have an early debate on the manufacturing sector, which is much neglected? Manufacturing and services are bound together, and there is great fear in the manufacturing sector that going out of Europe will be very damaging to its future.

**Andrea Leadsom:** First, it is absolutely the case that all aspects of those who work in, and have close contact with people in, this place should fall within the scope of our consideration of how we address issues of treating each other with respect, so I assure the hon. Gentleman that what he asks for will be the case.

British manufacturing is doing superbly well; we are now the eighth largest manufacturing nation in the world. The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the very real concerns of businesses about the future. The future is, in my view, very bright. There will be many opportunities, starting right after the recess, to discuss the opportunities of leaving the EU for our manufacturing sector.

**Amanda Milling** (Cannock Chase) (Con): One of the many issues on the Chase line is fare-dodging, for which the fine is only £20, which is hardly a deterrent. May we have a debate in Government time about tougher penalties for fare-dodging on trains?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I know that my hon. Friend takes a close interest in what happens on the Chase line, and has even, I understand, helped staff from time to time with ticket checking. I know she will find ways to raise this matter, and I encourage her to do so.

**Jo Platt** (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): The Leader of the House has said that this House can expect a response to all Opposition motions that are carried, and confirmed in a written answer that that will apply retrospectively. Will she therefore confirm that we will have an oral statement in response to the Opposition motion on tuition fees, and can she give us any indication of when that will be?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I can confirm that there will be a response to the Opposition motion on tuition fees, and, as I set out in my statement last week, it will be made a maximum of 12 weeks from when the Opposition day debate took place.

**Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con):** I am currently researching coalfield communities such as my constituency of Mansfield and a strategy to rejuvenate their economies and infrastructure. These communities are among the most deprived in the country, and are characterised by low wages and lack of economic regeneration over decades. May we have a debate to share Members' experiences of coalfield development and regeneration and share that best practice to inform this policy area?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend is a strong voice for his constituents, and I assure him that the Government recognise the importance of regeneration in coalfield communities, as in all areas of the UK. He indicates that there is some useful research, and I agree that it should be shared across all communities facing this same challenge of regeneration, and I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate.

**Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab):** I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement, and for announcing the forthcoming Back-Bench business debates. Members across the House will welcome the fact that there is a general debate on Tuesday on matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment, in which any issue can be raised. I should also like to point out that the debate on Thursday 16 November on a motion on the roll-out of universal credit has been brought forward by the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field). It will deal with the Select Committee report on that issue.

It was remiss of me not to mention last week that in the previous week there had been a heavily subscribed debate on the plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar. We had asked the Leader of the House for protected time for that debate, and it was given. Unfortunately, however, the time granted was three hours and the House rose early on that occasion. May I ask that, if that happens in future, an order be put down for a minimum of three hours, so that if there is any more time, the debate can continue? On that particular occasion, Members were restricted to two or three minutes by the end of the debate.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that feedback, and I will absolutely take it into account. I am certainly happy to hear any requests from him for protected time.

**Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con):** Like you, Mr Speaker, I am about to attend the memorial service for that great parliamentarian Tam Dalyell, which happens to coincide with the upcoming statement on Northern Ireland. If that statement does not include a definite announcement on when the Government will introduce legislation along the lines of the ten-minute rule Bill introduced yesterday by my right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) to protect service personnel who served during the troubles from legal persecution, may we have a statement at the

earliest opportunity announcing exactly what the Government intend to do about this appalling persecution of our veterans?

**Mr Speaker:** Tam Dalyell was certainly a great man, as the right hon. Gentleman has said. He was a quite outstanding parliamentarian, and he was intelligent, doughty, indefatigable and utterly fearless. A lot of Members could learn from him.

**Andrea Leadsom:** Mr Speaker, I absolutely share your regard—and that of my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis)—for Tam Dalyell. I think my right hon. Friend was referring to the statement that is to follow business questions, which will relate to Northern Ireland processes and procedures. It therefore might not cover the issue that he has mentioned. However, I want to set out clearly the high regard of the Government—and, indeed, the whole House—for the amazing work done by our armed forces in ensuring peace in Northern Ireland. We remain absolutely committed to that continuing. I am sure that my right hon. Friend will find ways to raise this issue directly, if not through the statement.

**Mr Speaker:** By the way, I would just mention to colleagues en passant that in my recollection—and it is quite a powerful one—Tam Dalyell was always here on time for any statement in relation to which he wished to pose a question. If he was not on time, he would not be so discourteous as to stand. I think my point is pretty blindingly obvious.

**Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab):** I would also like to pay tribute to Frank Doran, who was a very close friend of mine. He served diligently on the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, and many of the policies that the Government advanced at the time were largely due to pressure from him. I do not know whether the Leader of the House reads “Erskine May” every night as she goes to bed, but there were references yesterday to pages 819, 133 and 203 of that publication. Is it not time that we put “Erskine May” online so that the whole country can read all of it?

**Hon. Members:** It is online.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am not sure what to say, Mr Speaker. I am hearing colleagues shouting that it is online, but I am not personally aware of whether it is or not. I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman that if it is not, it should be. I will certainly take steps to check, and if it is not online, it will be.

**Mr Speaker:** That was a wonderfully diplomatic reply, and I genuinely thank the Leader of the House for that.

**Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con):** Mr Speaker, I was one of those who was slightly late, and I apologise—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. *[Interruption.]* Too much information, as the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) observes. If the hon. Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) was late, I am grateful to him for his belated apology, but what he should not do is apologise and then just assume that he can take part. We will hear him another time; he can wait till next week. We are grateful to him.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): As ISIS is rolled back in Syria and Iraq, it has been revealed that more than 850 British nationals have fought with that organisation, often against Her Majesty's armed forces. I believe that some 400 have returned, but not one has been prosecuted. For the life of me, I do not know why these people are not put on trial for treason. What are Her Majesty's Government going to do about that? May we have a statement?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend raises an important, urgent matter. He will be aware that the Government are worried about returning jihadist fighters and are absolutely committed to investigating each and every case and, where possible, preventing them from returning to this country. When they do return, we are clear that if it is not safe to allow them to be in society, the appropriate steps will be taken. The Government have shown a total commitment to keeping our country safe and to taking all the necessary steps to ensure that.

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House and the Prime Minister involve the trade unions in any discussions about the abuse of staff and in any necessary decisions? Some of the trade unions do not have negotiating rights, yet many of our staff are union members, so they are entitled to a voice in all these discussions.

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman is right. We need to take advice from and understand the views of several different parties on how we can best resolve the issue, including the trade unions and the Members' and Peers' Staff Association. Others are already coming forward with suggestions, which will be helpful as we seek quickly to find a proper way forward that takes into account views from right across all political parties.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): I am pleased to have added my name as a sponsor of the ten-minute rule Bill soon to be introduced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) about abolishing car parking charges at hospitals. While the Bill will provide an opportunity to highlight the issue, the subject causes great anger and resentment among my constituents—I am sure it is the same for other Members—so may we have a debate to allow a wider discussion of the matter?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am fully aware of the difficulty of hospital car park charges and of the concerns that many constituents have about them. I encourage my hon. Friend to seek a debate on the topic. He will be aware of the challenges of reducing that source of revenue, but there is always a balance to be struck. It is right that we continue to debate the matter.

**Antoinette Sandbach** (Eddisbury) (Con): Will the Leader of the House schedule some time for a debate on the need-to-sell scheme in relation to High Speed 2? An analysis of applications in my constituency has shown an unusually high refusal rate. For example, where eight houses of a group of 10 have been sold, HS2 Ltd is for some inexplicable reason refusing to buy the last two, showing that it clearly has not learned the lessons from phase 1.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I congratulate my hon. Friend on standing up for her constituents, as I have had to do for my constituents and Mr Speaker has had to do for his. I have a great deal of sympathy with the issue that my hon. Friend raises. Many constituents face issues with HS2 Ltd, some of which are still to be resolved. I strongly urge her to consider an application for a Westminster Hall debate or an Adjournment debate to discuss the matter further.

**Mr Speaker:** The hon. Lady might find that her application is successful.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): The number of birds of prey across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland has risen astronomically to the detriment of songbirds. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs does occasionally grant licences to cull birds of prey, but many country people and landowners who want to avail themselves of such licences in order to achieve a balance in the countryside find the process to be off-putting. Indeed, sometimes they cannot get a licence. There are too many birds of prey and too few songbirds and mammals, so will the Leader of the House grant a debate on that or call for a statement from DEFRA?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman shares with me a love of nature and wildlife, but we have seen a reduction in this country's wildlife over many years. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has said, it is vital that we take steps as we leave the EU to improve our biodiversity and the prevalence of songbirds and mammals. He is taking steps to ensure that that happens, and there will be further opportunities as we leave the EU.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I did make a ruling that people who were late for business questions should not be standing.

**Sir Kevin Barron** (Rother Valley) (Lab): Ten seconds.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I have told the right hon. Gentleman what the situation is. If a Member is late, that Member should not be standing at business questions. I have the very highest respect for the right hon. Gentleman, but I—[*Interruption.*] Order. I made a ruling that if Members are not on time—if they are late for business questions—they should not seek to be called. There will be other opportunities for Members to be called. We have a very heavy load of business and somebody has to judge whether the rule has been observed or not. Manifestly, in several cases it has not been. Most people who were late have accepted that they should not contribute today. They may contribute on other occasions or later in the day, but not at business questions. I cannot see what is complicated about it.

**Douglas Ross** (Moray) (Con): Mr Speaker, you are a strong supporter of the thousands of volunteers in our constituencies across the United Kingdom. Will my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Euna Russell from Elgin, who has been

[*Douglas Ross*]

named Barnardo's national volunteer of the year, in recognition of her 27 years' tireless work at the Elgin store? We in Moray are all very proud of Euna's achievements.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in congratulating Euna on being named Barnardo's national volunteer of the year. I understand that he met Euna last December when he volunteered in the Barnardo's shop. It is incredible that at the age of 79, Euna is still dedicating 20 to 30 hours a week and rarely misses a day. I sincerely hope she enjoys the awards ceremony in London at the end of the month.

**Ian Murray** (Edinburgh South) (Lab): May I concur with the remarks you made about Tam Dalyell, Mr Speaker? He sent me a lovely gift when I won the election in 2015 of six boxes of parchment that he found while cleaning out his study. Little did he know that we just have to hit a button to print two copies on the computer these days.

May I ask the Leader of the House about the taxation of airlines? I had cause to complain to British Airways about a flight that I was unable to take. I was told by the chief executive's office that the taxation on the flight is not automatically refunded to the customer unless they make a complaint or ask for their money back. It therefore goes neither to the customer nor to the Treasury. May we have a debate on the taxation of airlines and how consumers can automatically be refunded the taxation that does not need to be paid to the Treasury because they have not travelled?

**Andrea Leadsom:** Personally, I have had a different experience, but it seems that the matter could easily be resolved with a parliamentary written question to the Department. However, I share the hon. Gentleman's concern that if a traveller does not travel, they should not be subject to the tax.

**John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): This morning, the Scottish Government published a paper that sets out a range of possible Scottish income tax rates. All the options, with the exception of the model proposed by the Scottish Conservatives, would mean that income tax would rise north of the border. Scotland is already the highest taxed part of the United Kingdom, thanks to the policies introduced by the SNP Scottish Government. May we have a statement on the impact of having higher taxes in Scotland compared with the rest of the United Kingdom?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend is a tireless supporter of his constituents' interests. As he is aware, the Scottish Government are now in control of income tax rates and retain about £12 billion of income tax revenue. It is a concern that the Scottish Chambers of Commerce has said that a higher tax rate would drive investment out of Scotland and that the Institute of Directors has said that the net long-term impact would be negative for the Scottish economy. Analysis shows that almost 400,000 Scots will pay £400 more in income tax than people working in other parts of the UK. I am sure that my hon. Friend will seek a debate on the Adjournment or in Westminster Hall on this very worrying subject.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The conflict in Yemen has been going on for more than two years. Many medical staff there have not been paid for more than a year because of the country's financial situation, and they are struggling to treat people who are dying of cholera every day. May we have a debate in Government time on the situation in Yemen?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I absolutely share the hon. Lady's concern about the situation in Yemen, which is creating terrible hardship for innocent people there. I also share her interest in it being further debated, and I would encourage her to seek a debate, perhaps through the Backbench Business Committee, if other Members would like to cover that subject.

**Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Although it is reassuring that various reviews are taking place, may we have a debate on the size and scope of Parliament's human resources function? Does the Leader of the House agree that any review should carefully consider the HR, hiring and staff grievance processes of other legislatures around the world, as we can perhaps learn from them?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. As we consider how we can improve value for money for taxpayers while using best HR practice from around the world, we will of course look at other legislatures. Especially with regard to resolving the question of how to keep people safe at work, it will be essential that we look at what is done elsewhere.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): On standards, I am deeply concerned about the bullying culture within Parliament, an issue that was actually dismissed by Mr Speaker when I previously raised it with him, terming it to be a "women's issue"—it clearly is not. It is absolutely vital that we use this opportunity to address bullying and to bring forward mandatory training for everyone in this House.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady and will happily work with any colleagues from across the House on making sure that we seize this opportunity to put things right. We must ensure that nobody is left out of the process—it should include all political parties, those with no political party, and all those who work in this place and come here to help us on temporary work placements, as interns and so on—so that we get this right once and for all.

**Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): May we have a debate on amending the process for registering births when a father passes away before the birth of a child? A constituent of mine who has a newborn baby is still coming to terms with the unexpected loss of her partner. Although the case is uncontentious, the whole family is distressed by the process, which involves DNA tests and applications to the court to seek recognition of the deceased father. Does not the Leader of the House think that the process for recognising the deceased father should be simplified, because not everyone can afford the bureaucratic, costly and traumatic process that currently exists?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am sorry to hear about the case of the hon. Gentleman's constituent—that is an absolute tragedy, and I am sure that everyone in the House would want to pass on our great sympathy.

The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I urge him to raise it at the next Health questions because I am sure that Ministers will be interested in looking at ways of improving and streamlining the process.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My constituent, Mr McDonald, is a Falklands veteran who has stayed in the UK for 55 years. He has also served in the Territorial Army. His dad, born in Greenock, was a captain in the Navy, but because Mr McDonald was born in South Africa, he does not have a birth certificate and he has not been able to get one. With no birth certificate, he is not deemed worthy of a passport. As he says, it is hurtful that the Government do not think he is worthy of a passport. What steps can they take to rectify this?

**Andrea Leadsom:** As he often does in the Chamber, the hon. Gentleman raises a very concerning issue about a specific constituent. I obviously do not know the particular circumstances of this case, but it sounds very concerning, so I encourage him to take it up directly with Home Office Ministers, perhaps at oral questions, so that they can see what can be done.

**Tony Lloyd** (Rochdale) (Lab): The Leader of the House will not know that I wrote to North West Ambulance Service in August to point out that when Rochdale infirmary's accident and emergency unit was closed, a commitment was given that there would be paramedic cover on ambulances taking my constituents to other hospitals. I am yet to receive a reply, so may we have a debate on the ambulance service in the north-west? It is not good enough, and nor are its officers up to speed with the need to be accountable.

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise that issue. We all have challenges with and concerns about the way in which services are delivered in our constituencies. This is exactly the right way to raise them, so I commend him for doing so. He may well wish to seek an Adjournment debate so that that particular situation can be closely examined, with a Minister present to respond.

**Laura Pidcock** (North West Durham) (Lab): Following on from the Government's response to the Opposition motion on tuition fees, as well as the Leader of the House's earlier response to my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Jo Platt), that motion was about revoking regulations, but the Leader of the House said at the time that it would not be honoured because it fell outside the 40-day limit for statutory instruments to be annulled. Will she confirm that the Government will respect any annulment motion passed by the House within the 40-day limit?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The Opposition day debate on tuition fees was outside the 40-day period for praying against a statutory instrument. In a future scenario, were a statutory instrument to be prayed against during the 40-day period, the Government would follow parliamentary Standing Orders and procedures, and ensure that the matter was addressed in the normal way.

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): May we have a statement or a debate in Government time on the management and funding of the Equality and Human Rights Commission? Does the Leader of the House

agree that it is unacceptable for staff to be made compulsorily redundant while there are unfilled vacancies and the use of agency workers in the commission is widespread? Does she agree that the Government should step in to deal with this emerging crisis?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I was not aware of the situation that the hon. Gentleman highlights, but I absolutely agree that it is unacceptable to have under-utilised places and then to require agency staff to be brought in, potentially at greater expense to the taxpayer. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to take the matter up directly with Ministers, who I am sure will be keen to hear from him.

**Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Last Thursday, the Prime Minister told a journalist from the *Eastern Daily Press* that the Department of Health would no longer be the sponsoring body for the contaminated blood inquiry. We have not had a statement to the House—oral or written—to confirm that change, so is there anything that the Government would like to tell us this morning?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I again commend the hon. Lady for her work on this tragic issue. Many people have suffered as a result of the contaminated blood tragedy. I will look into this on her behalf, but I do not currently have the answer to her specific question.

**Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for her response to my question last week. My constituency case was followed up very swiftly by the Treasury.

I was particularly distressed this week to hear the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) inform the House that a Whips Office had not reported sexual abuse, but used the information to coerce Members. That appears to be particularly depraved on many levels. Will the Government reassure us about, or make a statement on, the protocols that apply to all Members of the House, no matter what their seniority or the importance of their role? Only then will culture change truly be possible.

**Andrea Leadsom:** As the Prime Minister has said, when there is evidence or allegations of criminal activity, all Whips Offices should encourage individuals to go directly to the police. The Conservative Chief Whip has absolutely assured me that when there have been any allegations of potentially criminal activity, he has always told—and always would tell—the individual to go directly to the police.

There was potential for a slight misunderstanding in the question from the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy). She is not in the Chamber, but I understand that she was referring to activities that were alleged to have been going on in the early 1970s. There was perhaps some misunderstanding that she was referring to current Whips Offices. As I say, she is not present to confirm or deny that, but I believe she was referring to a television programme about activities in the Whips Office in the 1970s. I cannot speak for the hon. Lady, but I want to be clear that, as I understand it, that was the genesis of her question to the Prime Minister.

**Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Leader of the House for her kind words about Candy Atherton, who was a true champion for Cornwall and the far south-west.

[Luke Pollard]

On 12 October, the Leader of the House described cross-party concerns about the risks of scrapping the Royal Navy's amphibious assault ships as "nonsense". Will she now agree to a debate in Government time, as I understand that two Type 23 frigates are facing the axe in the latest round of Government defence cuts?

**Andrea Leadsom:** We have made a commitment to meet our NATO pledge to spend 2% of GDP on defence every year until 2022. The hon. Gentleman will be aware of a cross-Whitehall review of all of our defence spend to ensure that it is absolutely appropriate to meet the needs of the 21st century. I encourage him to raise his specific points at Defence questions because the Ministry of Defence is looking into all the issues that he has quite rightly raised. I cannot answer his specific questions, but I can assure him that this cross-Whitehall review will take into account a balance of spending, which is going up every year in line with our NATO commitment, and the need to have a 21st century-appropriate response to all matters of defence.

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): To celebrate Paisley winning the competition to be UK City of Culture in 2021, as I have no doubt that it will, the Royal National Mòd, the fantastic festival of Scottish Gaelic culture, will again be held in the town in 2021 after we successfully held the event in 2014. May I encourage the Leader of the House to visit the Mòd and the town in 2021, and to schedule a debate on the important cultural and economic role that the Mòd plays in Scotland?

**Andrea Leadsom:** If enthusiasm for the hon. Gentleman's competitive entry is anything to go by, I am sure that he will be very successful. I commend him for standing up for his constituents in such a way. Of course we wish all the cities competing the best of luck. I am sure that there will be many visits to his constituency regardless of the outcome.

**Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure that the Leader of the House will join me in congratulating the St Paul's Youth Forum, which is based in my constituency. Representatives from Blackhill and Provanmill, one of the poorest parts in my constituency, are coming to Parliament today for a tour of the building for the first time ahead of an award ceremony tonight to celebrate their work to provide 200 young people a week with citizenship skills ranging from cycle repair, gardening and growing produce, through to running a local radio station called BOLT FM. This fantastic charity is a great testament to the charitable sector's work to empower our young people and create the citizenship skills that are so vital to their future success. Will the Leader of the House consider calling a debate in Government time on the charitable sector's vital role of working with our schools and educational providers to ensure that our young people are equipped for the future?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I commend the charity that the hon. Gentleman mentions for the work that it does, which sounds excellent, as well as all the many hundreds of thousands of volunteers who work for charities right

across the United Kingdom, often delivering real value to our communities, particularly for young people and in the areas of training and citizenship. I congratulate the people of the youth forum and hope that they enjoy their trip, and I sincerely apologise for all the scaffolding around the building. I must be honest that we are not looking our best, but we are working very hard to ensure that, in the fullness of time, we will once again be a very beautiful place to visit, although we remain a fascinating place to visit. I absolutely encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek a debate on the amazing work done by the charities sector.

**Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): There is real and growing concern among residents in Didsbury, Burnage, Chorlton and other parts of my constituency about crime and antisocial behaviour. I have met senior police officers and the deputy mayor to voice those concerns, but it is clear that they are really struggling as a result of the cuts and because they have lost 2,000 officers since 2010. May we have a statement or a debate on how we can get some extra resources to Greater Manchester police in the light of those concerns?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman and all hon. Members will be pleased to know that crimes traditionally measured by the independent crime survey for England and Wales have fallen by 9% over the past year, which is a continuation of a downward trend. That is a tribute to the excellent work of the police right across the United Kingdom. We have protected police budgets in real terms. I urge the hon. Gentleman to take up his specific concerns about policing in Manchester with Ministers at Home Office questions.

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): May we have a debate in Government time on the inaccuracies of work capability assessments? My Baillieston constituent, David Stewart, who receives morphine six times a day, was found fit for work. It was only through the help of my caseworker, Emily, that we managed to get that decision overturned, so may we have a debate on the folly of work capability assessments, which cause so much distress to our constituents?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman raises an important constituency issue. The general public will be pleased to hear that such issues can be resolved as a result of a Member of Parliament's intervention, and I commend the hon. Gentleman for that. I absolutely defend the policies, but the implementation is not always right. It is vital that we all defend our constituency cases to ensure that constituents receive the right solution for them.

**Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): The Leader of the House will be aware that the Secretary of State for Transport announced before the summer recess the cancellation of the electrification of the line between Cardiff and Swansea. Will she request that the Transport Secretary now makes a statement about the lost infrastructure funding that would have come with electrification, but would not be directly for electrification, such as for the closure of dangerous level crossings and highway widening? In my opinion, that funding should be separate so that we can ensure that dangerous level

crossings can still be closed, for example, and it should come from the UK Government. I hope that the Leader of the House agrees.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I urge the hon. Gentleman to take up his important point about safety at level crossings at Transport questions. He will be aware that the Government continue their record investment in the railways, with about £48 billion to be spent between 2019 and 2024. In many cases, the issues around upgrading infrastructure are ones of technology, and it has been possible to bring forward solutions to deliver better service to customers and passengers in a shorter space of time, and with less disruption. That is a win-win for his constituents, but I urge him to take up his important point about other infrastructure with the Department for Transport.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Let us hear from the north-west champion, Justin Madders.

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Saving the best till last, as always, Mr Deputy Speaker.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** At least you now know where you need to be.

**Justin Madders:** Indeed.

A number of planning applications for fracking have recently been submitted in my constituency, causing much consternation locally. That has not been helped by a local political group arguing that councils should determine those applications by way of a local referendum. As the Leader of the House knows, that would be a deeply irresponsible move. Not only would such a decision not be effective, but it could leave a council open to a costly legal challenge. May we have a debate on the precise discretion that is available to councils to consider such controversial planning applications?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I find myself instinctively agreeing with the hon. Gentleman. We need to find a way forward that takes into account strong local views about fracking while also weighing up the benefits to our economy.

The economy absolutely needs to continue depending on gas as we transition to sources that involve lower carbon dioxide emissions, as we will need make that transition through a greater use of gas. There is a strong case—in terms of economics and climate change—for fracking, subject to very strong regulation, given that gas is available as a natural resource in the United Kingdom. We need to properly assess the balance between local views, which can be very negative, and the economic imperative for the nation. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek a Back-Bench debate so that others who have the same dilemma can also be heard.

**Chris Bryant:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Points of order would normally come after statements, but I will use the Chair's discretion and take the hon. Gentleman's.

**Chris Bryant:** I am grateful to you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I wanted to raise this now because it relates to our earlier discussion about “Erskine May”. There was a bit of a difference of opinion as to whether “Erskine May” is online. It is available on the intranet, as a 1,000-page PDF, which expressly says it is not to be used by the public. What I am asking—I hope the commitment from the Leader of the House is clear—is that we now make it available to the whole country, because the people of this country are demanding that “Erskine May” be available to them without their having to buy a copy.

**Andrea Leadsom:** Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Perhaps the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) might like to start a petition. Once he is able to show 100,000 signatures—no, I jest. Obviously he is absolutely right: everybody is clamouring in their living rooms for their own online copy of “Erskine May”. As I said to him earlier, I will look into this. I agree that it should be available online, and I will see what can be done.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I think Mr Bryant needs a new copy—his must be so well thumbed.

## Northern Ireland Update

12 noon

**The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire):** With permission, I would like to make a statement about the current political situation in Northern Ireland.

As the House is aware, Northern Ireland has been without a properly functioning devolved Executive and Assembly for nine months. During this time, the Democratic Unionist party and Sinn Féin, as the two largest parties in the Assembly, have been engaged in a series of discussions to restore inclusive, power-sharing government at Stormont. The latest phase of the discussions began in August and has run for the past nine weeks.

It is the responsibility of the parties to reach an agreement, and the Government have been working tirelessly to support this process. In addition, I have kept in regular contact with the Ulster Unionists, Social Democratic and Labour party and Alliance, as well as with representatives of business and civil society. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has also remained closely involved throughout the process and has held a number of discussions with the leaders of the DUP and Sinn Féin, as well as keeping in contact with the Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar. In addition, the Irish Government have been involved in the process, in accordance with the well-established three-stranded approach to Northern Ireland affairs. I would like, in particular, to acknowledge the contribution of the Irish Foreign Minister, Simon Coveney.

Our efforts have been focused mainly on bridging a small number of differences between the two largest parties—particularly around language and culture—that have prevented a sustainable Executive from being formed. While important progress has been made, the parties have not yet reached an agreement. Therefore, I am not in a position to bring before the House the legislation necessary for an Executive to be formed this week.

The consequence of this is that it is now highly unlikely that an Executive could be in place within a timetable to be assured of passing a budget by the end of November, which is the point at which we and the Northern Ireland civil service assess that Northern Ireland will begin to run out of resources. No Government could simply stand by and allow that to happen, and we would be shirking our responsibilities to the people of Northern Ireland were we to do so. That is why the Government will take forward the necessary steps that would enable a budget Bill to be introduced in the House to protect the delivery of public services in Northern Ireland.

This budget Bill would deal only with the current financial year. It would incorporate figures provided by the Northern Ireland civil service, reflecting its assessment of the outgoing priorities of the previous Executive. It would not set out any spending decisions by me or the Government. As my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House has indicated, I would expect the budget Bill to be considered in this House shortly after the November recess.

Subject to parliamentary approval, this Bill would give the Northern Ireland civil service certainty to plan for the rest of this financial year, by giving the necessary legal authority to spend to existing plans. I would like to

take this opportunity to put on the record my deep appreciation for the professionalism of the Northern Ireland civil service in maintaining public services during this very difficult time.

The Government's strong desire would be for a restored Executive in Northern Ireland to take forward their own budget, so I am taking this step with the utmost reluctance and only in the absence of any other option. I want to make it clear to the House that passing a budget in Westminster does not mark a move to direct rule any more than the passing of legislation by this House to set a regional rate did in April. Furthermore, it is important to emphasise that this is not an obstacle to continued political negotiations and that the Government will continue to work with the parties with that clear intent.

Even now, however unlikely it may be, should the parties demonstrate that an Executive can be formed in the immediate future, I would clearly wish to proceed with legislation to allow that to happen, on the condition that a means could be created to provide an expedited procedure on an exceptional basis to enable the budget to be passed by the end of November.

In addition to preparations for budget legislation and in recognition of the strength of public concern, I will reflect carefully on the issue of salaries for Assembly Members. This is a devolved matter and I cannot intervene without primary legislation in Westminster. As I recently told the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, in the continued absence of a functioning Assembly, the status quo is not tenable. I will therefore be seeking independent advice on MLA pay and on what steps may be taken to reflect the current circumstances.

I still hope that the parties can resolve their differences and that an Executive can be formed. We will continue to work with them and support them in their efforts. Together with the Irish Government, we remain steadfast in our commitment to the 1998 Belfast agreement and its successors and to the institutions they established. It remains firmly in the interests of Northern Ireland to see devolved government restored—to see locally elected politicians making decisions for the people of Northern Ireland on key local matters, such as health, education, transport and economic development.

We are clear that Northern Ireland needs a properly functioning and inclusive devolved Government, along with effective structures for co-operation north-south and east-west, but ultimately the Government are responsible for good governance in Northern Ireland and will do whatever is necessary to provide that. I commend this statement to the House.

12.6 pm

**Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab):** I thank the Secretary of State for early sight of his statement and for his great efforts in keeping me briefed at all crucial points during the talks. I know he agrees that it is profoundly disappointing that 10 months after the breakdown of Stormont, and following two elections and countless and—I hate to say it—increasingly meaningless deadlines, the larger parties remain deadlocked, unable to agree with one another on the agenda for change and unwilling to show trust in one another.

I also put on the record my support for the work of the Northern Ireland civil service in keeping services going and for the work of the Irish Government, particularly

Simon Coveney, the Foreign Minister, alongside the Secretary of State, in trying to bring about a resolution. We agree on all of that, but we disagree, I suspect, over what more could have been done during those 10 months—and could still be done—to bring about a resolution.

First and most importantly, we believe that the Prime Minister of Great Britain and Northern Ireland could get stuck into this problem and try to bring about a resolution of the impasse. It is inexcusable and completely inexplicable that she has only visited Northern Ireland once during her 15 months in office—and that for a 15-minute photo call at an agricultural show during the election campaign. She has not attended a single substantive session of the talks in Belfast or made a single substantive intervention to try to move things along. I know that things have been difficult recently, but the odd phone call to the Taoiseach is just not good enough. The days of Prime Ministers—or Presidents—flying to Northern Ireland to fix things might be past and overstated, but they could at least give it a go. Our Prime Minister, the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, has not done that. The Opposition want her to make a greater effort.

Secondly, the time must have come to consider drafting in some outside help for both the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State. The Labour party has a proud record of bringing about progress in the Northern Ireland peace process, and independent chairs and observers have proved useful in the past. At this juncture of the impasse, will he consider doing likewise and bringing in a fresh pair of eyes?

Thirdly, will the Secretary of State tell us any more about his intentions now that this round of talks has failed? We will support him wholeheartedly, of course, in bringing forward a budget. Public services in Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, need investment, not cuts. He will have to tell the House how he intends to consult with the parties on priorities and ensure that funds are spent equitably.

There are reports in the press that the Secretary of State has been discussing with the parties other ways to sustain and find a role for the Assembly, even under direct rule. Can he tell us what that might mean? Let me be clear: direct rule will be a profoundly damaging, retrograde step in the peace process. A shadow Assembly of some sort, perhaps scrutinising or even advising direct rule Ministers, would be a way to sustain vital north-south and east-west relations and institutions—things that are crucial to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. That might provide some mitigation. It is certainly an idea that Labour Members will be willing to explore as a means of sustaining the talks, and perhaps as a bridge back to devolution.

Given that ultimate objective that we share, may I urge the Secretary of State to resist, given what he has said today, short-term pressure to cut MLAs' pay? Cutting politicians' pay is always a popular thing to argue for, but we need this generation of Northern Irish politicians to work and talk together to try to bring about power-sharing. While he is right that patience is wearing thin in Northern Ireland, he should resist steps that would undermine the ability of the parties, particularly the smaller ones, to negotiate and engage.

Finally, may I give the Secretary of State a foretaste of what life will mean for him under direct rule and ask him to agree that this morning's report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies makes shameful reading for his

Government, particularly in respect of Northern Ireland? It shows that more children will be driven into absolute poverty in Northern Ireland by the universal credit changes and the pernicious two-child policy than in any other nation of the UK. Will he therefore commit to using his forthcoming budget to undo that harm to the children of Northern Ireland?

**James Brokenshire:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments in support of the proposals to bring forward a budget Bill and about the necessity of having the financial stability that will help the Northern Ireland civil service to continue with the work that it has already been doing in ensuring that public services are delivered and that there is that focus on the people of Northern Ireland. I acknowledge the rightful support that he has given to all those in the Northern Ireland civil service engaged and involved in this important work.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the profound disappointment at not finding a resolution to date. Northern Ireland needs devolved government. I profoundly believe in devolution and the sense of locally elected politicians making decisions locally and being held accountable by an elected Assembly locally. That is profoundly in the best interests of Northern Ireland. He talks about other options. My focus remains very firmly on how we see devolution restored; I think that anything else is a backward step. There are, yes, concerns about the delivery of public services while we are taking the step that we have outlined today. Ultimately, this simply cannot carry on for ever. We need to ensure that political decision making is taking place.

The hon. Gentleman highlights issues around the process and the steps to follow on from it. I stress that bringing forward the budget Bill should not mark an end to the talks. Indeed, the parties themselves have indicated that they remain committed to finding a way forward in seeing how discussions between the DUP and Sinn Féin can continue in order to find resolution on, yes, a small number of issues where difference firmly remains between the two parties. While there has been positive progress on a number of fronts during certain weeks, we are not, as I have indicated to the House, at the point of reaching agreement.

The hon. Gentleman highlights the potential role of the Prime Minister. She has been actively involved in talking to the parties. She has had meetings with the parties at No. 10, bringing them together. She does remain actively involved, including through continued discussions with the Taoiseach, in finding the right way that we can work together as two Governments to ensure that there is a co-ordinated approach that is respectful to how these issues in respect of Northern Ireland are undertaken.

The hon. Gentleman makes points about interventions and suchlike. Clearly, we do keep these issues under careful review, and I do not rule anything out in respect of the way forward. We want the engagement between the two parties that has been undertaken in earnest, in a concerted way, to continue. They have shown that they can make progress in that format, and we want to support them in continuing with that. I earnestly want to see the restoration of the devolved settlement—of the institutions that are at the heart of the Belfast or Good Friday agreement and underpin the framework

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that we have in Northern Ireland. I want that to be restored at the earliest opportunity, and we are doing all that we can as a Government to see that it is brought about.

The hon. Gentleman makes certain points in relation to the economy and various other things. Universal credit is about making work pay. It is about how we get people back into work, seeing those pathways, and seeing that things are supported. We are looking very carefully at how it is implemented in Northern Ireland. In response to his comments about the position of Northern Ireland, I would point to the picture of prosperity, of jobs, and of an economy that is growing—and to tourism, with more people coming to Northern Ireland. That is a positive picture of what Northern Ireland is and what it can be. I encourage him to underline that in the messages that he gives.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): With a due sense of disappointment and weariness that I know my right hon. Friend shares, I welcome today's statement. I commend him for his patience and fortitude during this process.

Last week, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, which I chair, visited Newry and spoke to businessmen. Nowhere in the United Kingdom are the effects of Brexit going to be felt more acutely than in Northern Ireland, yet that region stands to suffer in the negotiations because its voice will not be heard clearly enough alongside the voices of other home nations. Given that the Executive are likely to be in abeyance for the balance—or a large part—of the negotiating period, what measures will be put in place to ensure that Northern Ireland's voice is heard?

**James Brokenshire:** I commend my hon. Friend for the work of his Committee, which has had a clear focus on and interest in the issues around Brexit and Northern Ireland. I am sure that it will continue to do so. The evidence that it has been producing has been very helpful and informative. This Government want to see the most positive outcome for the United Kingdom as a whole, very firmly including Northern Ireland. That is why we published the paper during the course of the summer highlighting how we can deal with this effectively to see the positive outcome that I know can be achieved for Northern Ireland as the United Kingdom leaves the European Union. We will certainly continue, as we have done throughout the first phase of the negotiations, to underline the specific factors and elements in Northern Ireland to ensure that they are addressed effectively and that the unique circumstances of Northern Ireland are recognised. We will continue to work with the Northern Ireland civil service, and the parties in Northern Ireland too, to ensure that those unique factors are addressed. I am determined that that is what the outcome will be.

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The people of Northern Ireland have every right to be disappointed with the politicians who should have been negotiating and achieving a return to a functioning Executive. It will now fall to this place, which lacks the detailed knowledge that Stormont politicians have, to set a budget for Northern Ireland, when it should be a matter for Stormont.

It is essential that control is passed back to Belfast as soon as is politically possible. What exactly are the insurmountable barriers that the Stormont politicians face, and how does the Secretary of State intend to break them down? Reimposing direct rule would be a foolish thing to do in any event, but, as has been referenced, Brexit and the coming border issues make it ridiculous. How, exactly, will he avoid that and ensure that Northern Ireland moves forward? Is he considering changing the legislation governing power sharing to ensure that future elections cannot result in stalemate negotiations that harm the people Stormont should be helping? What timescale will he put on getting an Executive up and running before calling new elections?

Unfortunately, I must express my disappointment at the fact that, highly unusually, I received the Secretary of State's statement by email with only 50 seconds to spare, and the written statement six minutes after he began to speak. I would be very grateful for an understanding of how that occurred so that it does not occur in future.

**James Brokenshire:** I will follow up with the hon. Lady on that point after the statement. It is certainly not my intention to prevent her from being properly briefed in advance of statements; that is not how I operate. I will make inquiries after the statement and revert to her to ensure that she is kept properly informed, in the usual way. I take seriously the point that she has raised, and I will pursue it to ensure that there is no repetition of the situation.

The hon. Lady made several points about the outstanding issues. As I have indicated, I think we are talking primarily about sustainability in respect of the Assembly and the Executive, and about issues of language, culture, identity and respect. Those have been underlying elements in our discussions, over many weeks, and it is important to get them right to provide a sense of sustainability and allow the Executive to get on with the job of serving Northern Ireland. I think that politicians on all sides seek earnestly to get those things right.

It is, ultimately, for the parties to reach agreement. Yes, we have worked with them and encouraged them, and we recognise our responsibilities as a Government under the various agreements that we hold, but the parties need to be accommodating and reach agreement. No agreement has yet been reached, so we are having to take the next step that I have set out in the statement today. The budget is necessary to put Northern Ireland's public services and finances on a sound footing. We will continue to support the parties to find agreement, in the knowledge that the situation cannot continue indefinitely.

The hon. Lady highlights the election duty that I continue to be under, in legislation. I have to keep the matter under review, knowing that that is the only power that I have in law. I want resolution and agreement, because that would be the best possible outcome.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): My constituents in Kettering find it absolutely abhorrent that threats of prosecution should hang over armed forces veterans for events that happened 40 or 50 years ago, while known terrorists have effectively been told that they will never be prosecuted for their known crimes. If the Secretary of State is bringing legislation to the House, will he ensure that it contains clauses designed to stop this witch hunt?

**James Brokenshire:** I pay clear tribute to the incredible service, bravery, dedication and sacrifice of all who served to uphold the rule of law and secure the political freedoms in Northern Ireland that we enjoy today. I hear the point that my hon. Friend makes about the concern about witch hunts and the operation of the system. I want to move forward with a consultation around the Stormont House agreement that sets out new institutions and bodies that are firmly intended to be balanced, proportionate, transparent, fair and equitable, thereby ensuring that soldiers are not unfairly treated. That, I believe, is the right way forward, and it will give everyone the opportunity to contribute and express their point of view. Ultimately, it will allow us to move forward with those institutions, which I firmly believe represent the best way forward.

**Nigel Dodds** (Belfast North) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, for the advance notice of it and for the consultations that he has had with us here, and with our party, as the process has developed. The contact and interaction with him, his office and the Government more generally have been very good.

It is worth reminding the House how we have got to this point. As recently as December, the Democratic Unionist party and Sinn Féin had an agreed programme for government. None of the issues that Sinn Féin is now citing as critical preconditions were raised by the party in December. Sinn Féin pulled the Government down and walked out, and it is now setting new preconditions for the formation of a Government. The DUP, the Ulster Unionists, the Social Democratic and Labour party and the Alliance party—the other parties eligible for Government—would set the Government up tomorrow, but Sinn Féin is blocking it. The Secretary of State is perfectly right to come to the House, as we have urged him to do, and get the budget set.

We cannot allow the drift to continue. At some point in the very near future, we will need to have Ministers. If they are not Northern Ireland Executive Ministers—we and other parties want them to be, but Sinn Féin is blocking that—they will have to be Ministers from here. They will have to take decisions, because we cannot allow the economy or Northern Ireland to drift. We will work with them in this place to ensure that the good governance of Northern Ireland continues, alongside Northern Ireland politicians in a consultative role back home at Stormont.

Let us get on with the job of removing the new preconditions and demands that Sinn Féin has set out since December. Let us get on with the job of governing Northern Ireland from Stormont. If that is not possible, we must get on with the job from here, in consultation with our politicians back home.

**James Brokenshire:** I support the right hon. Gentleman's message about the need for Northern Ireland to get on with the job and the need to restore devolved Government. He makes several points about how that can be done. His party is closely involved in the negotiations with Sinn Féin, and in the work that has been done and the efforts that have been made to restore devolution. I say again that that has to be the focus. The optimum outcome is to have a functioning locally elected Assembly and Executive serving the people of Northern Ireland.

I encourage the right hon. Gentleman and his party to continue the efforts that they have made over an extended period to find the way forward, look for a space of agreement and provide a sense of stability for Northern Ireland. We all want agreement to be reached to make it possible to deal with public services, deal with the economy and encourage jobs and growth. The public in Northern Ireland want that service and positive movement. I underline the fact that we must all have that resolute focus in our minds in the weeks ahead and work to achieve that outcome, so that decision making can progress in Northern Ireland.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for his pragmatic, diplomatic and calm approach to the negotiations, and I commend the Prime Minister for placing trust in him and getting involved when required to assist in getting the process under way. Will he confirm that he will cease this legislation immediately the parties agree to form an Assembly and a proper devolved Government in Northern Ireland; and that while he has the powers in the legislation, he will take input from the Northern Ireland parties to ensure that spending decisions are made in the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland?

**James Brokenshire:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the point that he has made. As I indicated in my statement, should an agreement be reached that enables an Executive to be put in place quickly—however unlikely that is—I would obviously not want to introduce the budget Bill. There are important steps that we have to take, however. The civil service has underlined to us that the end of November is a crucial time, by which they need the budget to be in place. That is why I am taking the steps that I have outlined today. This is not about the UK Government setting the spending priorities; that remains firmly with the Northern Ireland civil service, which will continue to get on with that job, as it has done over recent months. That is why I have made the point that this is not about direct rule or UK Government Ministers setting the individual priorities. It is important to resolve the issue quickly for all the reasons we have heard today, and that is where our earnest focus must lie.

**David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): As one of the last direct rule Ministers, may I tell the Secretary of State that however engaging it is for those involved, direct rule is not a good form of government? I wish him well in re-establishing the Assembly in Northern Ireland. Will he indicate how the extra money agreed between the DUP and the Government is involved, and whether it is part of the budget settlement? If I were to table parliamentary questions about the details of the budget after it has been agreed, would he answer those questions, or will he find another mechanism of accountability?

**James Brokenshire:** I acknowledge the presentation that the right hon. Gentleman, with the experience of his role in Northern Ireland, makes about the challenges and the fact that this is not the outcome we want. As we have made clear throughout the process, the budget Bill speaks to the main estimates that were put in place earlier this year. We are operating within that framework. It is open to the House to vote, through supplementary estimates, for further moneys to be made available to

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Northern Ireland during the course of the financial year; and votes in this House obviously matter. As a Government, we stand by our commitments, and as a party, we stand by the agreement reached with the Democratic Unionist party, and nothing I have said today changes that.

**Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I want to place on the record my thanks to the Secretary of State and his team for coming to the House to set out the current position, and for being so helpful in his answers. For the benefit of my residents in Aldridge-Brownhills and I am sure those elsewhere, will he set out the extent to which he and his team, as well as civil servants and the Prime Minister, have undertaken work and made commitments to try to find a way through what is clearly a very difficult situation?

**James Brokenshire:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for underlining the work—the hours and days that have gone into supporting the parties—that so many people have done. We as a Government have made an absolute commitment to a positive outcome and a resolution. That has involved working closely with all the parties in seeking to reach a solution, by providing ways in which they can consider how to bridge the gaps between them. We will continue to do so because this matters so much. As I have said, we have made the utmost commitment to restoring the devolved Government and seeing them get on with the job at hand, and we will certainly continue with that work.

**Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson** (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement. We are of course disappointed that we do not have a devolved Government in Northern Ireland, because that has an impact on my constituents every day. I say to the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), who represents the Scottish National party, that we are quite capable of reflecting what happens in Northern Ireland. I have been a Member of Parliament for 20 years, and I think I have acquired a little knowledge of how Northern Ireland works, which I would bring to the House if we had direct rule.

May I tell the Secretary of State that the armed forces covenant is very important to us? It is part of the negotiations, and our agreement with the Government includes its full implementation in Northern Ireland. There will be no outcome that does not see the armed forces covenant provide for the servicemen and women, the veterans and families from Northern Ireland who have served this country. We look to the Government to support us in securing such an outcome.

**James Brokenshire:** I pay tribute to the armed forces for the incredible work they do for us every day. As a Government, we have underlined our commitment to the military covenant, and we want it to cover all parts of the United Kingdom. I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that that has involved, for example, my attendance last week at a cross-departmental group—Ministers from across Whitehall coming together—to assess progress. We want the important benefits of the military covenant to be felt in all parts of the United Kingdom. Yes,

we must recognise the differences across the UK in how the covenant is delivered, but we none the less accept its significance.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of the statement. Notice of a full minute might have been helpful, but the 50 seconds we got was useful. I quite understand if the usual channels were slightly preoccupied with other matters within the Government this morning.

I remember the last time we had direct rule from this place, and it was a thoroughly unsatisfactory way of doing business both for the people of Northern Ireland and for the procedures of this House. The Secretary of State is right to do anything he can to avoid that. Has he considered the proposal from my noble Friend Lord Alderdice that, notwithstanding the absence of an Executive, the Assembly might be reconvened as a body to which matters could be referred and which Ministers here could consult as they go about the business of the administering they will have to do?

**James Brokenshire:** I welcome the right hon. Gentleman's comments about what the outcome needs to be. I know that he earnestly wishes to see, as I do, the restoration of an inclusive, functioning devolved Government. He points to other scenarios and solutions, but I would say to him that our focus must be on how to get an agreement. That must be the priority. I know other points have been made about different structural or constitutional ways in which Northern Ireland could operate, but it is important to focus on supporting the parties at this time. I will obviously continue to reflect on a range of points that have been made to me, but it is important to keep the focus on that at this time. However, I note the points that he and others have made in recent weeks.

**Kate Hoey** (Vauxhall) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State understand the frustration—indeed, the cynicism—felt by people in Northern Ireland about the word “deadline”? As a result of the changing deadlines, the word really does not mean anything. Is it not time that when Governments set deadlines, they should actually mean something? We have had nine months of parties having discussions and there has been no change, so what magic wand does he think will make any difference in the next few weeks, given that one party is quite happy to go back into the Assembly right away, and another is making ridiculous demands that it was not making when the Assembly fell?

**James Brokenshire:** Do you know what, Mr Deputy Speaker? I certainly do hear the frustration and cynicism among the public in Northern Ireland that the hon. Lady will have heard. They want to see a Government just getting on with the job of serving them. I do hear that, and I know there is huge frustration—I sense there is frustration on both sides of the House—at being in this position.

We could take steps towards saying, in essence, “Okay, we will move straight to direct rule,” or something similar, but I profoundly think that that is not the right way to approach this issue. Ultimately, this is about seeking space within which the parties can reach an accommodation and an agreement. Yes, this is difficult. For all the time that all those involved have spent on this, it has been hugely challenging to bridge the gaps. Doing so still remains possible, but it is certainly difficult.

We will continue to keep available to us a range of options for supporting the process and galvanising the parties to achieve the positive outcome that we all earnestly want. Equally, the hon. Lady rightly makes the point that this cannot just continue—I hear that message from the House very clearly—and there is a need for Northern Ireland to be able to make decisions. It is worth all of us putting in all our efforts to see whether we can get a positive solution so that the parties are able to find a space in which to work together and get on with the job. I encourage everyone with any influence to get behind that work.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State very much for his statement, and for the industrious energy and commitment he has brought to the talks process, which we much appreciate.

Northern Ireland community groups—Home-Start and other charities—need, as a matter of urgency, to know whether they will receive funding. Who will make such funding decisions, as Westminster cannot be expected to micromanage, and someone needs to send out a message about the state of play across the Province? Similarly, what will happen with the funding for the NHS and infrastructure projects that Northern Ireland should be provided with as a matter of urgency? The projects that will receive most of that funding have been waiting patiently, but the situation is becoming increasingly difficult. I urge the Secretary of State do something about finance most quickly.

**James Brokenshire:** Financial decisions will remain with the Northern Ireland civil service. I take the hon. Gentleman's point about voluntary and community sector organisations, and I have raised that with the Northern Ireland civil service. I am seeking to provide as much certainty and assurance as possible, because I know just how important those organisations are in delivering services across Northern Ireland, and I pay tribute to all groups that do such an incredible job.

The hon. Gentleman points to decisions on infrastructure, and we would obviously like other public sector reforms. It is for the Northern Ireland civil service to do that work at this point. If possible, we obviously then want a devolved Government to move in and take those decisions, but if that is not possible, we will need further careful reflection on the next steps.

**Karin Smyth** (Bristol South) (Lab): I am vice chair of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, which recently met in Liverpool. The Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), addressed that meeting, and many right hon. and hon. Members were there. It was a grouping from across these islands, and across parties, and people with very different views were able to discuss and debate. It is important that such forums continue, including those established as a result of the Good Friday agreement. Such forums are critical, and decisions and conversations take place during them. My experience of this place is that people are not aware of the history, politics and passions that arise in this House, and that statements in this House have a profound impact on the people of these islands. We must keep those other forums going.

Today I have heard what we do not want, but I have not heard a plan for how we get from that to what we do want. As has been said, it is inexplicable that the Prime

Minister has not been able to make the short journey—less than an hour—to Northern Ireland to give confidence to people there that this is one of her highest priorities. I urge the Secretary of State to encourage the Prime Minister to do so.

**James Brokenshire:** The hon. Lady makes an important point about the role of bodies outside this House and the work of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. As she said, my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary recently attended a session in Liverpool. It is helpful to have such forums so that people may debate and exchange their views, and I pay tribute to all Members of the House who support that important engagement and work.

The hon. Lady highlights the role of the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister has been actively engaged with the process and has been kept closely informed about the steps that have been taken. No one should be in any doubt about her close interest in the process and her desire to see a positive outcome from it. The hon. Lady speaks about flying people in and so on, and although we keep all options firmly on the table, our judgment at this point is that that would not have made a difference. This is about how we can constructively support the two main parties to find a resolution on those core issues, which we have done with the support of the Irish Government. We will continue to support that process and we are considering other interventions and ways that we can help constructively. I will keep the House informed about that process, because we need a resolution quickly in the best interests of Northern Ireland. I hear the hon. Lady's point, but this is about getting that optimum outcome and using people, interventions and the work of the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach in the most effective way.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The House will know that I have long-standing concerns about the implementation of the two-child policy and the rape clause in Northern Ireland, especially when there is no Assembly in Stormont to mitigate specific concerns about section 5 of the Criminal Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1967, which will see third-party verifiers such as social workers, doctors, nurses, midwives and women's aid workers facing prosecution for trying to support women. What specific discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Northern Ireland Association of Social Workers? I urge him to speak to his colleagues in the DWP, and to use his influence to get rid of the rape clause and the two-child policy once and for all, before women are harmed.

**James Brokenshire:** The characterisation that the hon. Lady has given to the House is not quite right. Specific guidance has been provided on this matter, but perhaps I can write to her, because there are a number of issues and a lot of sensitivity attached to this, including on factors such as disclosure. I will write to her with details on this matter, because I realise its importance. I know the careful way in which colleagues at the DWP have considered this issue and worked on it locally to ensure that these important issues are addressed effectively as universal credit is rolled out.

**Emma Little Pengelly** (Belfast South) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. Issues of culture, identity and language remain deeply divisive in what is

[Emma Little Pengelly]

still a deeply divided society in Northern Ireland. It is therefore all the more disappointing that Sinn Féin has decided to make its cultural agenda a barrier to government in Northern Ireland, and it is the hundreds of thousands of people from across all communities in Northern Ireland who are suffering most because of that decision. Will the Secretary of State commit to doing everything he can in his budget considerations to minimise the detriment to the people of Northern Ireland, particularly on health, education and public services?

**James Brokenshire:** The budget Bill will effectively reflect the priorities set by the Northern Ireland civil service—these are not numbers that I set myself in bringing forward the legislation. As the hon. Lady will know, the Northern Ireland civil service has recently reallocated an additional £40 million to address pressures such as those within the health service. I am sure that she will have an opportunity when we debate the Bill to underline important points about the delivery of services in the areas where some of the pressures lie at the moment, and on the need for reform and getting on with the job.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is disappointing that we have reached the point where the Secretary of State has to set a budget. Will he set out clearly how the process will be properly scrutinised and say what time will be allocated for that? I am deeply concerned that, by default, more and more powers are drifting away from Northern Ireland to this House. Does not that show that more emphasis needs to be put on the mediation process?

**James Brokenshire:** May I amplify what I said in my previous answer? The budget lines—the numbers that will go into the Bill—will not be set by the House; we will be approving them. Effectively, they will provide the legal authority for the budget that the Northern Ireland civil service has been operating to thus far, based on civil servants' assessment of the priorities of

the outgoing Executive. That obviously reflects changes that have taken place this year. This should not be seen in any way as me or the Government somehow stepping in and saying, "You're going to put this budget line here." I will simply take the recommendations provided to me, and it is important that I make that clear on the Floor of the House. As I said, this should not be seen as a step towards direct rule. It is about implementing and giving statutory authority to the budget. I acknowledge that this is a serious step and I do not want to be in this position, but I have to be as a consequence of the need to have legal authority in place by the end of the month. I am sure that the House will have an opportunity to debate the Bill when we return from the November recess.

**Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): May I press the Secretary of State further about his response to my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) and the involvement of the Prime Minister? He said that the Prime Minister has been taking calls, and as has been said, she has been to Belfast once. There is a serious point here because over the past 35 years, every Prime Minister from all parties has led from the front on solutions in Northern Ireland, including in reinstating devolution. Can the Secretary of State set out the Prime Minister's actual involvement in terms of hours? Nobody in the House doubts his sincerity in trying to resolve the issue and restore devolution, but there is a point about the Prime Minister leading on this, as she does on Brexit. I urge him to ask her to lead from the front.

**James Brokenshire:** I say again that the Prime Minister is committed to Northern Ireland issues, but the hon. Gentleman should know that previous interventions by the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach have not automatically led to change. We keep under review what will be effective and what will make the difference on particular processes, steps and interventions, but this is about the parties themselves taking the leap and finding an agreement, and how we act to support them. We will continue to do so and to keep all options under review.

## Sentencing

12.50 pm

**The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lidington):** With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I should like to make a statement on sentencing and the Government's response to the Hirst judgment.

For many years, it has been a feature of United Kingdom law that when someone commits a crime that is sufficiently serious to receive a prison sentence they are deemed to have broken their contract with society to such an extent that they should not have the right to vote until they are ready to be back in the community. This prohibition is currently set out in the Representation of the People Act 1983, as amended, and the principle behind it has been reaffirmed by this House, most recently in 2011.

It is in this context that successive Governments have considered the implications of the Hirst judgment in 2005. Labour, coalition and Conservative Governments have all taken the view that UK laws are a matter for elected lawmakers in the United Kingdom and have not enacted any change to legislation. The Conservative Government continue to believe that convicted offenders who are detained in prison should not vote. We do not share the position taken by the Leader of the Opposition that all prisoners should be enfranchised regardless of the length of sentence or the gravity of the crime. The United Kingdom has a proud constitutional tradition and it is clearly right that we uphold our obligations, but the British public expect us to do so in our own way, consistent with British values of rights and responsibilities.

In December 2016, the Government gave a formal and public commitment to the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, the body representing the national Governments of its members, that we would, in time for its meeting next month, provide proposals to address the Hirst judgment. Since then, the Government have considered the issue carefully. We have decided to propose administrative changes to address the points raised in the 2005 judgment, while maintaining the bar on convicted prisoners in custody from voting. First, we will work with the judiciary to make it clear to criminals when they are sentenced that while they are in prison they will lose the right to vote. That directly addresses a specific concern of the Hirst judgment that there was not sufficient clarity in confirming to offenders that they cannot vote in prison.

Secondly, we will amend guidance to address an anomaly in the current system, where offenders who are released back in the community on licence using an electronic tag under the home detention curfew scheme can vote, but those in the community on temporary licence cannot vote. Release on temporary licence is a tool typically used to allow offenders to commute to employment in the community and so prepare themselves for their return to society. Reinstating the civic right of voting at this point is consistent with that approach. Release on temporary licence is absolutely not an automatic entitlement and every case is subject to rigorous risk assessment. The measures I am announcing today do not involve any changes to the criteria for temporary release, and no offenders will be granted release in order to vote.

We expect the change to temporary licence to affect up to 100 offenders at any one time and none of them will be able to vote from prison or to register a prison as a home address. The prisoner would have to have satisfied the conditions for registration at a genuine home address. This measure will require no changes to the Representation of the People Act 1983, but instead will entail a change to Prison Service guidance.

Our relationship with the Council of Europe is a reserved matter under the devolution settlements, but we will certainly work with the three devolved Administrations on this issue. In particular, we shall work hard with the relevant Administrations to reflect the differences in law and practice in Scotland and Northern Ireland respectively. We have informed the devolved Administrations of our plans to resolve this across the UK.

We believe the changes address the points raised in the 2005 judgment in a way that respects the clear direction of successive Parliaments and the strong views of the British public. I commend this statement to the House.

12.55 pm

**Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab):** I welcome the opportunity to discuss this matter today and I thank the Justice Secretary for sharing his statement with me in the past hour.

This matter has been given greater prominence over the past decade due to rulings that found the UK to be in breach of its international human rights obligations. As the House is aware, prisoners serving a custodial sentence do not have any right to vote in any elections. As the Secretary of State said, this blanket ban is set out in the Representation of the People Act 1983. Since 2005, however, the blanket ban has been ruled unlawful by the European Court of Human Rights in the Hirst case.

Subsequent rulings since the 2005 decision have offered further clarity on what is required by law. I note especially the October 2015 ruling of the European Court of Justice that depriving certain prisoners convicted for very serious crimes, such as murder, of the right to vote was not an unlawful breach of the right of EU citizens. Likewise, in 2013, the UK Supreme Court dismissed appeals that prisoners serving life sentences for murder should be able to vote. I think most of the House would feel that that is sensible.

The question remains, however, of how we meet our obligations in relation to the ruling against a blanket ban. This House has been grappling with this issue since 2005. Following the Hirst judgment in 2005, the Labour Government began a consultation on the question of prisoner voting. The Ministry of Justice published a consultation paper in 2009 indicating that some limited enfranchisement of prisoners ought to occur, but made it clear that a final decision on the scope of the franchise must be made by Parliament.

Shortly after the 2010 general election, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition Government announced that offenders sentenced to less than four years in custody would have the right to vote in UK Westminster Parliament and European Parliament elections, except when the judge considered it inappropriate when making the sentence. Soon after, in 2011, the Political and

[Richard Burgon]

Constitutional Reform Committee published a report stating that while the current ban on prisoner voting may be “morally justifiable”, it was a breach of international law.

As a nation, we pride ourselves on our adherence to the rule of law. I believe we also take pride in being a nation that abides by its commitments. Our respect for the rule of law is something that has led to our legal system being so well regarded around the world that our legal services are exported internationally and contribute vastly to the UK economy. Today is an opportunity to discuss exactly how we will meet our commitments following the 2005 ruling.

I hope the slowness the Government have shown in responding to this issue does not set a precedent for taking over a decade to address our international obligations to uphold human rights. I think we should be clear that if we are signed up to the European convention on human rights, we are bound by its judgment and by those human rights laws. What this debate should be about is not whether we should meet our duties under international human rights law—that is non-negotiable and it is disappointing that some Members have suggested that we should ignore such law—but how we meet our duties and requirements.

Specifically, today’s discussion is about whether the Government’s proposals meet that threshold and satisfy our international obligations to uphold human rights. I hear Government Members saying, “Of course they do,” but we need reassurance, because the Secretary of State said that prisoners sentenced to less than one year in jail who are let out on day release will be allowed to return home to vote. We need to know what discussions with lawyers and assurances he has had to make sure that his proposal brings us into line with human rights law. The last thing this House wants is the right hon. Gentleman having to return to the House at some point to explain that, unfortunately, these measures have not satisfied the test and do not fulfil our international obligations and commitments. I am sure the Government do not want that, and nor do we.

As hon. Members have pointed out, including at this week’s Justice questions, this measure is about rehabilitation. I am therefore disappointed that the statutory duty on prisons to rehabilitate offenders and thereby reduce the number of victims and make society safer was dropped when the Prisons and Courts Bill fell. I hope that will be considered again in due course.

**Mr Lidington:** I think I gathered amid that response that the Opposition spokesman offers no specific criticisms of the proposals I have outlined today. I can give him a clear assurance that we have taken the best advice possible. We believe that this set of proposals complies with our international legal obligations following the Hirst judgment. Obviously, it will have to be considered by the Committee of Ministers at the forthcoming meeting.

I have to say to the hon. Gentleman that it is a bit rich for him to chide me about the pace at which this matter has been addressed. He acknowledged in his response that it took the Labour Government, under whose watch the Hirst case was heard and decided, four years even to get round to publishing the answers to their own

consultation paper. In my years of service in this place, I have not seen Labour Home Secretaries or Justice Secretaries rushing to the Dispatch Box to announce that they had the answer and the Government would now publish proposals.

I hope that there will be broad agreement among the parties to support the general approach that I have outlined. Where I agree with the hon. Gentleman is that the European Court of Human Rights has on more than one occasion made it clear that, regardless of the specific circumstances of the Hirst judgment, there is no requirement to enfranchise all prisoners; I hope that that message has by now been conveyed to the Leader of the Opposition. Indeed, many members of the Council of Europe—established, mature democracies like ours—maintain a strict bar against serious offenders voting.

**Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State on having grasped the nettle that none of his predecessors grasped. He deserves a warm round of applause for having done so.

Will my right hon. Friend confirm that in achieving this measure, we put ourselves in almost exactly the same position as every other mature democracy in western Europe and, indeed, pretty much the same position as 40 out of the 50 states of the United States of America, which do not feel the need for a blanket ban as characterised in the Hirst judgment?

**Mr Lidington:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments and can confirm the point he makes.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for writing to my colleague, the Scottish Government’s Cabinet Secretary for Justice, to inform him of his plans regarding the UK parliamentary franchise.

This is a difficult matter, and I welcome the fact that the UK Government are taking steps to respect the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights. Many people across the UK at first disagreed with that decision, but at Justice questions earlier this week we heard some eloquent explanations of why it is appropriate for the Government to grasp the nettle.

The Scottish Parliament’s Equalities and Human Rights Committee is currently looking at this very issue, taking evidence and examining practical points about whether devolved powers could be used in relation to the franchise for Scottish Parliament elections. The Scottish Government will respond in due course. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the UK will work with the Scottish Government to reach the cross-party agreement required for this sort of reform?

**Mr Lidington:** I am very concerned indeed to ensure that my officials, my Ministers and I work closely with Michael Matheson, the Scottish Justice Minister, and his colleagues and officials in Edinburgh. In my current position, I am well aware of the importance of recognising that the Scottish legal system and legal tradition are distinct from those of England and Wales. We need a policy that works as effectively in Scotland as in the rest of the UK.

**Mrs Cheryl Gillan** (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): May I add my congratulations to my right hon. Friend, who, after many years, has arrived at an elegant and sensible solution? He will be aware that great consternation

was caused in the Council of Europe by the UK's being unable to comply with the judgments. It even led to talk of the UK leaving the Council of Europe, of which we were a founding member by the treaty of London. Will he confirm that we now leave the company of Armenia, Bulgaria, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary and Russia, which will be the only countries in the Council of Europe that still have a blanket ban?

**Mr Lidington:** It would not be wise of me to comment in detail on the systems in operation in those countries, but in thanking my right hon. Friend for her comments, I can confirm that we will stand in the company of the great majority of established democracies in Europe.

**Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab):** As one of 22 Members who voted against the blanket ban in 2011, this small step forward is mildly welcome to me, but will the right hon. Gentleman accept that it is a missed opportunity better to align sentencing objectives with the right of a prisoner to vote? In particular, as he said in his statement, reinstating the civic right of voting is consistent with a rehabilitative approach. Where rehabilitation is identified by a sentencer as a specific sentencing objective, should not that sentencer also have discretion to consider the individual's right to vote?

**Mr Lidington:** I understand the principled position from which the hon. Lady approaches the matter. I think it right that there should be consistency in our approach, set by the Government and by Parliament through the appropriate Representation of the People Acts. What the Government propose today provides both clarity and consistency, and enables us to go forward in a way that respects the strong views expressed in this House and among the wider British public, while also respecting our international legal obligations.

**Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con):** May I, too, welcome the statement and the approach my right hon. Friend has taken in resolving the matter? As he will be aware, the problem has bedevilled many Law Officers of the Crown, and if the matter can be resolved along the lines that he suggests, I have no doubt that our right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General will breathe a sigh of relief.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is of immense importance for this country to be seen to be a leader in human rights—something for which we have a great deal of international respect? We have proven track record of improving human rights, not only on the European continent but further afield. Sending out a signal of our willingness to try to adhere to an international legal obligation is of the utmost importance.

May I also say that, should it be necessary for my right hon. Friend to come back to this House because what he has done proved in some way not to meet matters—I hope that will not be necessary—it ought to be part of a wider debate about how we rehabilitate prisoners? When one removes the matter of our international legal obligations, that is a matter that merits debate, and were he to ask the House for its opinion on it, the House might well not express the same opinion as it has expressed in the past.

**Mr Lidington:** I am grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend for his support, and I will say two things in response. First, I certainly share his commitment to doing all we can to make certain that our prisons are effective agents of rehabilitation, because effective rehabilitation that reduces the cycle of reoffending is in the interests of the safety and security of everybody in this country. Secondly, my right hon. and learned Friend is right about the importance of respecting international obligations. We rightly talk about British values and seek in our various expressions of policy to embody and represent those values, and among those values are respect for the rule of law and a rules-based international order. It is certainly harder to urge respect for those principles on others if we are not clear about doing so ourselves. For those reasons, the package I have announced today represents a clear, and also, I hope, an effective way forward.

**Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab):** This Government have introduced a system of universal credit on the basis that it mirrors the world of work, so why will they not use the same logic and consider that prisoners should be prepared for life outside prison by maintaining their civic right to a vote?

**Mr Lidington:** I am not sure whether the hon. Lady was urging that all prisoners should be enfranchised, regardless of the seriousness of the crime or the length of sentence, but I think that was the implication of what she said. What I have announced today relates enfranchisement to effective rehabilitation, but I do not agree that we should depart from the principle that it is reasonable to clearly tell someone who has been sentenced to prison—which means the court must have considered every alternative penalty and decided that the crime had been so serious that no other punishment would suffice—that they have forfeited the right to vote as a consequence.

**Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con):** I conducted the Hirst litigation on behalf of the Government in the domestic courts, and remember only too well that Governments of both colours have found this a very difficult area to deal with for many years now, so I add my congratulations to those of the Chairman of my Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), and others in this House for the fact that the Government have found a solution that is not only elegant but sensible. However, I ask the Lord Chancellor to reassure people outside this House that serving prisoners such as Mr Hirst will not be covered by these new rules and would not be able to vote.

**Mr Lidington:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her support. I think, first, that it would be unlikely in the extreme for somebody serving a long prison sentence and with a record of violence and posing a risk to public safety to qualify for release on temporary licence in the first place, and, secondly, for anybody serving a long sentence to be able to demonstrate in practical terms that they had a continuing home residence other than a prison, and they would not be allowed to register at the prison.

**Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP):** I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. It will have impacts on Northern Ireland. What intention does he

[*Emma Little Pengelly*]

have to consult in Northern Ireland? Given the unfortunate ongoing situation of no Government in Northern Ireland, how will he find a solution to ensure that full consultation can happen?

**Mr Lidington:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady and realise both the sensitivity of this issue, given the history of Northern Ireland and its current problematic political circumstances. We have notified officials in the Department of Justice of our intentions, and we will continue very close consultation and collaboration with them on the way forward so that we are confident we are addressing the particular administrative and legal circumstances of Northern Ireland. I am also happy to undertake to consult the hon. Lady's party and the other leading parties in Northern Ireland, so that we take their views into account.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): As a quid pro quo, will my right hon. Friend restore penal servitude with hard labour? There would be plenty of votes for that.

**Mr Lidington:** That takes me on to rather wider territory than the subject of the statement. I thought my right hon. Friend might be about to suggest transportation with penal servitude, but I think the territories are no longer available.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): I, too, was one of the 22 who back in 2011 voted against a blanket ban, and I have not changed my view since.

This is a tiny concession from the Government; it is the bare minimum they could get away with. I believe that when we imprison somebody we deprive them of their liberty, but we do not deprive them of their rights. Why does the right hon. Gentleman feel so threatened by that idea?

**Mr Lidington:** I would have thought that the act of depriving someone of his or her liberty when they are sentenced to custody by definition deprives them of some absolutely vital civic rights. What we have announced today is a sensible and constructive way forward that we believe complies with the requirements on us under international law, and the Hirst judgment in particular, but does so in a way that respects the view repeatedly come to by this House.

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): The Secretary of State knows that I think giving the vote to any prisoners is idiotic, unjustifiable and about as popular with the general public as finding a rattlesnake in a lucky dip. As he has made great play of the rule of law, he must know that the European Court of Human Rights went way beyond what is in the convention when it made this ruling, so he might want to remind it of the obligations under the rule of the law, which are to stick to what is in the convention. It seems from his statement that he is putting the rulings of unelected, unaccountable pseudo-judges, many of whom are not even proper judges in their own country, above the views of the British public and the British Parliament. Will he at least have the

courtesy to put this to a vote of this House, to make sure that what he proposes has the consent of the British Parliament?

**Mr Lidington:** We are not proposing any change in the law, as I have already said. The commitment to stay within the European convention on human rights, which includes the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights, was in the party manifesto on which both my hon. Friend and I stood earlier this year. I do, however, agree with him that it is important to look for ways in which to respect and enlarge the margin of appreciation allowed to individual member states in interpreting the duties under the convention in the light of their national constitutional and legal traditions. We made a significant step forward when the UK held the chair of the Council of Europe and with the Brighton declaration negotiated by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). In taking the Brighton declaration forward and seeking to implement protocol 15, I would hope that we can count on the support of my hon. Friend.

**John Howell** (Henley) (Con): I unreservedly welcome the statement and the decision made, which comply with our obligations to the European Court of Human Rights. While we are on that subject, will my right hon. Friend confirm that we win most of the cases that we take to it? Will he also consider producing a more detailed briefing for members of the Council of Europe who are also Members of this Chamber, because it would be useful to have that when we go back to Strasbourg for the next Council of Europe meeting?

**Mr Lidington:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his support, and I am happy to offer the briefing that he requests for members of the delegation from this Parliament to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. He is right about cases brought against the United Kingdom: well over 90%—from memory, 96% or 97%—of cases brought against the United Kingdom do not even get to a judgment. They are rejected by the Court as inadmissible, and by no means all of that tiny minority of cases that go through to a judgment are found against us. We have a good track record.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): David Cameron, the previous Prime Minister, said that it made him physically sick to think about giving prisoners the right to vote. Many of us on these Benches feel the same nausea, as do many of our constituents. I congratulate the Lord Chancellor on overcoming his nausea. He makes great play in his statement of the point that

“while they are in prison they will lose the right to vote.”

However, for those on temporary licence, if polling day does not fall on a day when they are out of prison, they would presumably have the right to request a postal vote registered at their home address outside the prison, which could presumably be delivered to them in prison. Will the Lord Chancellor ensure that that cannot happen?

**Mr Lidington:** We will obviously ensure, as we work through the details, that we have safeguards against any kind of electoral fraud. It is certainly our intention that for people on temporary licence—like people on home detention curfew under the current arrangements—the

franchise would exist on polling day on the assumption that those people would be out of prison on that day. We will certainly be working through the details, following what I hope will be the successful outcome from the Committee of Ministers meeting.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** And the prize for patience goes to James Cleverly.

**James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con):** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. As a result of this decision, the fact that prisoners are not eligible to vote will now be better communicated to them at the onset of their sentence. What plans has the Secretary of State put in place to ensure that that is effectively communicated to the prisoners themselves and to the electoral registration officers in the places where they are registered to vote?

**Mr Lidington:** On my hon. Friend's first point, we are going to be talking to the judiciary, whom we have notified about this statement, in order to understand their views on the best means of communicating this to people at the point of sentence. The most probable outcome at this stage would seem to be to look at the wording of the warrant of committal that is issued when a sentenced prisoner is put into custody. On my hon. Friend's point about electoral registration officers, he will know that guidance for EROs is the responsibility of the Electoral Commission, and we will be talking to the commission in order to understand how it wishes to take this forward.

## Backbench Business

### Unaccompanied Child Refugees: Europe

1.23 pm

**Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con):** I beg to move,

That this House notes that it is one year since the Calais Jungle camp was demolished; further notes that the UK demonstrated moral and political leadership in transferring 750 child refugees from intolerable conditions in that camp to be reunited with family members in Britain and provided those children with protection under section 67 of the Immigration Act 2016; and believes that as the UK prepares to leave the EU, provision must be made to ensure that unaccompanied children in Europe can continue to access the safe and legal means to reunite with family and relatives in the EU as is currently provided for under the EU Dublin III Regulation.

I should like to thank the Backbench Business Committee and all those who have supported me for allowing this debate to be heard on the Floor of the House. I want to make special mention of my co-sponsors, the hon. Members for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) and for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil).

One of the hardest things about this job is maintaining a focus on important issues, particularly when new headlines and stories so readily grab the media's attention. It is our responsibility to continue to give a voice to those who might otherwise not be heard, and there are none needier of that representation than the most vulnerable—the children who have fled the most unimaginable terrors of war and found themselves alone and without family in Europe.

Almost a year ago, the squalid Calais refugee camp was demolished, but despite the tremendous efforts of the British Government at the time, there are still refugee children in the Calais region as well as in Greece and Italy. Prior to the Calais demolition, we safely transferred 750 children to the UK: 200 under the Dubs amendment and 550 under the Dublin III family reunification rules. However, at least 250 remain in Calais and Dunkirk, and the youngest is nine. Most have fled from Afghanistan, and 2,950 are registered in Greece today. Moreover, 90% of the 13,687 children who have arrived in Italy so far this year are unaccompanied.

From the very first time this subject was debated in the House, I and many others have maintained that if we do not offer help further downstream in mainland Europe, more people will continue their journeys and arrive on our shores. Those are unnecessary and indescribably dangerous journeys; they do not provide the organised, compassionately prepared and safe welcome that we want to offer to those terrified young people.

We currently have two schemes through which we can offer sanctuary to children in Europe: Dubs and Dublin III. Many in this Chamber were bitterly disappointed that the Dubs amendment did not result in a more generous number of places being offered to unaccompanied children. The Government, in consultation with local authorities, determined that 480 was as many as we could take. In fact, we have learned this morning that the High Court challenge to the thoroughness of that consultation has favoured the Government. For context, I can tell the House that that 480 represents 0.5% of the total number

[Heidi Allen]

of refugee children who have so far arrived in Europe. That is not even one per constituency. So, setting the legal case aside, I remain disappointed by our contribution. It does not stand proudly next to the outstanding figure of the 23,000 refugees we will resettle from the Syrian region by 2020 through the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme. Aside from the devastatingly obvious moral imperative, we have a duty as part of Europe to help to deal with the migration crisis affecting Europe. To me, that is what a deep and special relationship would feel and look like.

**Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): The hon. Lady, my near neighbour, is making an excellent speech and I commend her for the excellent work she has done on this issue. Is she aware that, back in 2015, 100 families in the city of Cambridge volunteered to host refugee children? Does she agree that the Government need to be much more creative and to respond more positively to the kind of generosity that we see, not just in my city but in cities and communities across the country?

**Heidi Allen:** I absolutely agree with that. This goes to the heart of why—the legal case aside—the general public and many Members did not feel that the consultation had exhausted all the offers that were made. I am convinced that there are still families and businesses in my constituency that want to help. A safeguarding strategy was published yesterday, and I will come to that in a moment. It should open a window of opportunity for people to benefit from those offers, and it would be unforgivable for us not to use them.

In Calais, children are still sleeping outdoors at the mercy of the elements and, dare I say it, the police, because the official shelter that the French Government have provided can house only 60. In Greece, more than 1,800 children are waiting for a space in such a shelter, and when they make it, they will find that it is actually a disused prison. In Italy, the situation is even more chaotic. I understand that our ability to influence local arrangements in those countries is limited, but we have a responsibility to set clear parameters with our foreign counterparts to allow them to rapidly identify every child who might be eligible for Dubs or Dublin. It therefore concerns me when the numerous charities still working on the ground tell me that only 20 children have been transferred from France under Dubs in the past 12 months, that only a handful have come from Italy under Dublin, with none under Dubs, and that none at all have come from Greece. It is over 18 months since I last visited Lesbos. Can we honestly say that we have done everything we can?

If we have taken just 200 from Calais so far, there are still 280 Dubs places to be filled. Does the Minister suspect that our criteria have been misunderstood? Are they too tight? Do we need to look again at the cut-off date of 20 March 2016? Can we work quickly to identify the remaining 280? I hope to hear from the Minister what he will do to fill those spaces as soon as possible. Can we aim for the end of the year? Call me sentimental, but can we aim for Christmas?

But this debate is not just about Dubs. I am also seeking reassurance on what will happen to Dublin III once we leave the EU and its legislation. Despite textbook

policy suggesting that our existing domestic asylum legislation should already allow unaccompanied child refugees to be reunited with their wider families—grandparents, siblings, uncles and aunts—this is not happening in practice. What plans does the Minister have to improve or amend our domestic legislation so that it does exactly what it says on the tin? Can we have complete confidence that the spirit of Dublin III will exist post-Brexit? Might our negotiations even allow us to stay in Dublin III? Clarity on this point really matters. Knowing that we will continue to offer sanctuary to the most vulnerable children in the world is as important to them as is the depth of charity and benevolence that makes Britain great.

**Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on the manner in which she is opening this debate. She alludes to whether there might be scope for us to remain in Dublin III even after we leave the European Union, but does she share my curiosity, which the Minister may address in due course, about whether we could continue with Dublin III arrangements even if we are not party to any potential Dublin IV arrangements?

**Heidi Allen:** That is a question that I have, too. There has to be something between the great repeal Bill and the immigration Bill that will come later to ensure that we still offer the same rights to those children as we do now.

I will conclude by thanking the Minister for Immigration and the Minister for Children and Families for publishing the eagerly awaited safeguarding strategy just yesterday. Although it comes five months later than was originally indicated, it has been significantly improved by being done hand in hand with charities that understand intimately the vulnerabilities that refugee children have and the risks they face. I am pleased that it commits to updating Parliament and the Children's Commissioner regularly on the number of children transferred, that the funding made available to local authorities will be reviewed and that the number of foster training places will be increased by 1,000. Most important of all for me, however, is the commitment to improving how Dublin III is actually administered on the ground, with an emphasis on improving family tracing and speeding up asylum application processing. I wish that the determination to act with pace had come more quickly. I wish that those children had not had to sleep in fear for as long as they have. We should be proud of the safeguarding strategy, and I thank both Ministers for creating it but, for goodness' sake, let us bring it to life now and bring those remaining Dubs and Dublin children home.

1.31 pm

**Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I start by putting on the record my admiration for the work of the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen); I know how personally and passionately she feels about these young people. My right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) and I have faced online and sometimes offline abuse that I do not believe reflects the best of our British character when it comes to protecting some of the most vulnerable people in our world. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire and my hon. Friend

the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) mentioned their constituents, and I want to thank the people of Walthamstow who have reflected that sentiment.

I thank Debbie Bliss for organising the “Warmth from Walthamstow” project, which will take sleeping blankets and emergency blankets to the children who are still in Calais. I thank Rod Holmes, who runs our migrant action group and helps some of the people who are here to make the best of their lives. I thank Maud Milton for running the refugee kitchen that has been taking flapjacks to the children in Calais. I thank Katrina Kieffer-Wells, who runs Side By Side Refugees. I also thank national organisations such as Safe Passage and Help Refugees, which so valiantly fought but sadly lost in the High Court today—I hope the debate will continue. All those people and groups reflect the reality of the British public’s reaction when they see these children and what is happening to them. They recognise that our nation is a better place when we offer sanctuary, and today’s debate is about the best way of doing that.

Nobody is saying that we have not helped children; we are saying that the need to get things right is even more pressing today than it was perhaps a year ago. People may think that we have the resolved the issue, but conflict sadly continues around the world and the push factors that lead to people making dangerous journeys have not abated. While all of us may wish that the world were otherwise, the reality is that it is not. The reality on the ground in Calais is that hundreds of unaccompanied children are still sleeping rough. They need warmth not just from Walthamstow, but from our country.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) on bringing this debate to the Chamber today. Last week, we were discussing modern slavery and the risk of human trafficking, so does my hon. Friend share my concern that if unaccompanied children are not rescued from the Calais camps, they could fall into the hands of traffickers?

**Stella Creasy:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Indeed, we have seen many reports that suggest that that is precisely the case. When there is no safe passage, that does not stop people coming here; it means that the only passage available is through the traffickers, which we know is unsafe.

Today’s debate is about asking the Minister to ensure that we are being the best of British and that we keep these children safe, because we have a moral obligation to do so. Indeed, it is in the best of our traditions. We hear that the French police will not allow NGO tents, meaning that many children are sleeping without any form of shelter at all, including unaccompanied children as young as nine. We want to hold the French authorities to account, but we must also hold ourselves to account for what we are doing to help.

**Charlie Elphicke** (Dover) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a typically powerful speech, as befits an award-winning “Backbencher of the Year”—I congratulate her on that. It is important that we put more pressure on the French authorities to behave properly and treat people well, children in particular.

**Stella Creasy:** The hon. Gentleman will know that I bow to nobody in holding all Governments to account, and that means that I will not turn a blind eye to our Government and what they could do. Our power today is to send a clear message to the Minister about the ambition set out in the safeguarding statement, which was made over a year ago and is now, frankly, a little up in the air due to Brexit and issues around Dublin III and how we deal with unaccompanied children. The statement explicitly talked about children in Europe now to whom we may well have a responsibility. It is not good enough to ask somebody else to pick up the pieces if we are falling short ourselves. The concern today is that Britain is still falling short of what it can do for these children. This is about the nine-year-olds sleeping in bushes in Calais and the children sleeping without shelter in Greece and Italy. They are paying the price. I am pretty sure that the hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) would not want that on his conscience when there are practical things that we can do here in this House to make a difference. While the French authorities have put together a temporary administration centre that opened this week, it is dealing only with a small number of children. We know that there are issues with children being processed and with applications being heard.

A year ago, many of us were acting with good intent when we encouraged children and young people to go with officials to processing centres only to find that the goalposts had been moved. Changes to which children would be accepted, basing the decision on nationality not need, were made through pieces of legislation and statements that were issued without this House undertaking proper scrutiny. Since then, many of us have been concerned about how the Government approached local authorities. The High Court may not have agreed with us, but it is worth recording that the High Court was discussing the fact that the Government simply had not asked even the Northern Ireland Government what they could do. The Scottish authorities were told not to respond, and a third of English authorities did not respond to the consultation. We know that the British public support protecting children. If local authorities are asked, as we have found since the High Court began looking at the issue, we know that there are more places to be had. Are we really saying that this country can look after only 480 vulnerable young people, for whom there is nobody else in the world to protect them?

**Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the recent recognition of her excellent work in this House. Does she agree that there are fantastic local authorities doing the everyday bits, such as registering children with GPs, getting them into college or school, providing friendship groupings and doing the mentoring? In tough times, does she agree that the Home Office needs to support local authorities in that joint endeavour?

**Stella Creasy:** I completely agree with my hon. Friend, who anticipates one of my points. We know that the Government have spent £81 million on security measures in Calais, yet just one member of staff has been seconded to France to try to progress family reunion claims even though we know that one in six people in the Jungle is trying to reconnect with their family. Local authorities undoubtedly need resource, but we also need a process

[Stella Creasy]

that is quick and fair. We do not have that at the moment and those children often wait on their own for months before they access accommodation.

The Minister will know that I have raised cases with him of children who are waiting, often with severe mental health needs as a result of the delay—frightened, vulnerable young people who are looking to this country to be what it has been in the past.

We may be talking today about Calais and the processing centre, but we know that it is not just about Calais; it is about Greece. Not a single child has come from Greece as a result of the Dubs amendment, even though we know there are thousands of unaccompanied child refugees there. The same is true of Italy. Two thirds of the 3,000 unaccompanied children in Greece do not have proper shelter and care. Those are our children to take responsibility for, working with the Greek authorities and the Italian authorities. [Interruption.] The Minister is shaking his head. Is he really saying that he can be proud of a country that looks at children sleeping under bushes, without proper shelter and care, and says it is somebody else's problem—nothing to do with us? Of course the Greek authorities have to take responsibility, but so too do we, Minister.

The question today is what responsibility we are taking for children in Europe, because the statement a year ago did not just specify Calais; it talked about all these children. When he responds, I want to hear from the Minister what he is going to do about the children in Italy and Greece as well, because we have a responsibility to all of them. He can shake his head all he wants, but I suspect the British public will not be satisfied with the idea that because some of them are in France, we might do something about them, but we do not have a responsibility for those who are in Italy and Greece.

**Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con):** The hon. Lady is making a powerful case. Can we also make the case for the children who are still in the region or still in Syria? The Hands Up Foundation, which my small Singing for Syrians initiative tries to help, makes the point that not only are they suffering and alone, but often they are under gunfire. It is important not to forget that they matter too, and this Government have done so much to get funds out there where they are desperately needed.

**Stella Creasy:** I do not disagree with the hon. Lady, but it is not an either/or situation. As I said at the start, we all wish the world was different. All of us wish that there was not conflict, fear and persecution. All of us wish that the Oromo people were not fleeing in fear of their lives and that young Afghan boys were not frightened of the Taliban, but they are and they are acting accordingly. The question for us is whether we will act as well. That is the challenge. Whether they are in the region, whether they have fled to Europe or whether they are among the 10,000 at risk of trafficking, do we as British society want to say that it is just somebody else's problem, or do we want to have a process in place so that we can hold our head high?

I say to the hon. Lady that for all of us this is not just about immediacy; it is about our history as well. It is not just about all of us who were inspired by Lord Dubs. Government Members may find this surprising,

but I often say that I share something in common with Nigel Farage: Creasy, like Farage, is a Huguenot surname. Many of us have refugee traditions within our families. Many of us might, in a different generation or a parallel universe, be that child looking for help.

Over a year ago, I was trying to chase down with the Government what had happened to 178 children whom the Prime Minister herself was directly notified about and whom I have asked about repeatedly—children who would have been eligible to come here under the Dubs amendment. I have to tell the Minister that, more than a year and a half on, I am still waiting for a response that gives me confidence that our Government know what happened to those children whom they were notified about and who were in Calais at that time. Nobody is able to make contact with them. Those children may be in this country, but they may be elsewhere and they may be with the traffickers. I make a plea to the Minister: will he at least go and see whether we can find out whether any of those children are safe on our shores? I think that we have to accept responsibility because they came to us asking for help.

I want to put on record why I have tabled amendment 332 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. There will be debates about the Dublin regulation and I agree with the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire that we need to make sure that we are living up to our Dublin commitments. There will also be debates about what happens to the commitments we made in the safeguarding statement a year ago. Clearly there have been issues. For example, the safeguarding statement spoke about working with the devolved authorities, but that has not happened to date, as the court case shows. Those debates need to happen on the Floor of the House, because how we treat refugee children cannot be dealt with in a statutory instrument Committee hidden away elsewhere in the House.

I therefore make a plea to the Minister. He may disagree with me about our obligations regarding the numbers of children. I still think that we made a commitment to 3,000 children with the Dubs amendment, and I would like to hold the Government to account on that. However, I certainly think that, given that parliamentarians debated that amendment and are having this debate today, any further changes that would affect our ability to help some of the most vulnerable children should not be hidden away. I hope he agrees that no changes will be made by statutory instrument, whether under the immigration Bill or the withdrawal Bill, to the treatment of refugee children. If he will at least say that, I think we can be on the same page in respect of this country's commitment to do the best by these people. Certainly it should not be up to those wonderful men and women in all our constituencies to lead the charge and for this House to be found wanting.

I congratulate the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire on securing the debate. I look forward to working across the House on these issues, and I hope that the Minister will hear the plea to be the best of Britain.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Order. I have to put a time limit of six minutes on Back-Bench speeches, at least to begin with.

1.45 pm

**Charlie Elphicke** (Dover) (Con): Given that I represent Dover, Calais is literally a few short miles across the water. Indeed, I can see Calais from my bedroom window. It is striking, is it not, to think about the conditions there until a year ago? I am delighted by and proud of the campaign that so many of us fought to get the Jungle dismantled. Over time, the numbers there swelled to some 10,000 people. It was a place of appalling squalor, with no sanitation facilities, no running water, no protection from the cold, and nasty, rickety shacks. The Jungle was frankly a lawless place where people traffickers roamed free, exploiting people.

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): I visited the Jungle at its height. I agree that it was a far from ideal place, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that the conditions in which almost 1,000 refugees are now living around Calais are far worse?

**Charlie Elphicke**: Conditions for anyone who is living outside without food, shelter and water are appalling, but let us remember what the Jungle was like at that time. Ten thousand destitute people lived in a concentrated area. Many of them had been trafficked there by people who were exploiting and preying on them in furtherance of the evil trade of modern slavery, selling the promise of a better life in Britain. In reality, if the traffickers did get them across the border, it almost invariably resulted in them disappearing from view into a life of exploitation, whether working in a nail bar, growing cannabis or being used as a child criminal. We all know that those and other forms of exploitation went on and go on. It is entirely unacceptable.

That was why it was so important to get rid of the Jungle. It was why it was so important that the French authorities were pressed successfully into helping people to get away from Calais into refugee reception centres with food, shelter, water and sanitation, safe from the traffickers who would exploit them and treat them so shockingly.

**Alan Mak** (Havant) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a characteristically powerful case. Does he agree that we should commend the efforts of the British police and security services in tracking down and deterring the people traffickers who prey on vulnerable people from Syria and other regions in crisis?

**Charlie Elphicke**: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is the central point that I am just coming to.

It was right that we managed to get the Jungle dismantled. It was right that we got so many vulnerable people removed to safer places. It is also right that we have worked tirelessly, on an international basis—Britain, France and countries across Europe—to target the international criminal gangs: the trafficking gangs behind the evil trade of modern slavery and this wicked exploitation.

**Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): I dealt with child refugees a long time ago and I have total sympathy for their plight. We have taken about 8,500 people into this country, about half of whom are children. Am I right to assume that all the people who come through that system are tracked, looked after and watched so that they do not just disappear into an underclass?

**Charlie Elphicke**: I hope that the Minister will address my hon. Friend's powerful point when he responds to the debate.

We should welcome the fall in the numbers from 10,000 to 1,000, but that is still 1,000 too many. That is why it is right that we keep up pressure on the French Government to do the right thing by acting to ensure that people are not on the streets of Calais. I understand that there are hon. Members who, like me, are deeply concerned about the plight of all refugees across the world. Some 50 million people have been displaced by conflict. We have taken 3,000, but what is the right number of children to take if it is not 3,000? Is it 30,000? Is it 300,000? Should we take all the children from across the whole of Europe or just those who have a connection to Britain?

I think the right policy is that we should do our bit, particularly on reunification. We should hold our heads high for the amount we have been doing across the board, because it is important to remember that we have taken in 20,000 people from Syria directly. That avoids the risk of people making perilous journeys, because many lives have been tragically lost at sea, or as a result of exploitation or mishap, in the journey to Calais. It is also right that we have spent more than £1 billion in aid to provide places of safety close to regions of conflict. It is better to keep people close to their homes and hearts, meaning that they can go home when a conflict ends, rather than in any way to risk incentivising a dangerous journey across the whole of Europe, because we have seen on our television screens how that often ends up in tragedy. We must also remember what we do not see on our television screens: the evil exploitation by traffickers and what they do to these vulnerable and desperate people. That is why I feel so strongly and passionately that we cannot risk a return of the Calais migrant magnet, and that the right thing to do is to help people close to the places of conflict—in theatre. That is why I feel so powerfully that while it is right that we help to do our bit as a country, it is also right that we are strong on Europe and the European Union improving their own border security and the safety of people within their borders. We must make sure that the EU and European countries as a whole do their bit to look after vulnerable people within their borders, as that is their duty and responsibility.

We are doing a lot and we are making a real difference. We have continued to make a real difference across the world. The fact we are helping so much with international aid and development, and in areas close to conflict to keep so many people safe, is something we should be very proud of in this House of Commons. We should also be proud of the work we have done to take vulnerable people into Britain and to reunite families in Britain. If other families can be reunited—if children who have a connection to this country can be brought in, should there be a family in this country with which they should be united—we should do that. There should be a focus on that, so I agree with the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) that we should be looking at reunification of families. However, I do not agree that we can be responsible for all refugees or all children throughout the whole of Europe. We cannot take in every child.

I will tell hon. Members why that is. I get complaints from my constituents in Kent that we have getting on for a quarter of the unaccompanied asylum-seeking

[*Charlie Elphicke*]

children in the whole of this country. My constituents are concerned about the pressure on public services that that creates in Kent. It also constrains provision for other Kent residents, which is why it is important that we maintain a sense of balance and fairness. If we are going to be there to care for and to look after these poor children, it is right that we make sure that they are not just left in the county of Kent; the whole country must do its bit. Councils must be encouraged to do their bit to ensure that children are spread across the whole country and that the burden does not fall disproportionately in places such as Kent, which I represent.

1.54 pm

**Yvette Cooper** (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Let me start by welcoming the work done by the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) and my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) in securing this debate. Let me also respond directly to the hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke), who has rightly long had concern about the pressures in Kent and the conditions in Calais. I agree that all councils across the country should do their bit and the whole country should come together to support vulnerable child refugees.

Twelve months ago, when the Calais camp was cleared, I praised the work of the Government and the Home Office at that time to help 750 child refugees, and the speed with which they had acted. I welcomed, too, the Government's decision 18 months ago to support the Dubs amendment, after it had received cross-party support. We have seen lives transformed as a result. I am thinking of the Syrian teenager I met in London who now has a place at university, after being out of education for many years. I am thinking of the Eritrean girls who are in safe homes, having previously been trafficked, abused and exploited along the way. That is what this Parliament and the Home Office's action made happen. That is what the work of councils, campaigners, local volunteers and people across the country has made possible, by giving those children a future.

I wish I could keep on praising the Government for the action they have taken since, but sadly I cannot; some of the failures from the Home Office since then put this country and Parliament to shame. The Dublin arrangements, which Ministers made work so effectively, so briefly, last autumn, have now become far too slow again. The failure of co-ordinated action across Europe, despite the partnership working we had 12 months ago, is now allowing the numbers to build up in Calais again, particularly those of unaccompanied child refugees. Why are the Government still refusing to publish the number of unaccompanied children and teenagers coming to Britain under the Dublin scheme? They have the figures and there is absolutely no excuse for not publishing them and making them available to everyone.

It is not good enough for the Government to try to fudge the facts by pointing to the number of children who come either with asylum-seeking families or through irregular and illegal routes instead. The whole point is that we want to reduce the number of people coming through the illegal, irregular and very dangerous routes and instead make sure that there are legal and safe

routes to sanctuary. The longer we fail to have a functioning Dubs and Dublin scheme, the more we will simply see teenagers and children take these crazy, dangerous risks—on lorries, through tunnels, putting their lives at risk and causing huge problems to the system.

That is what makes the Government's failure since last autumn on Dubs even more shocking. First, they announced they would close the scheme that Parliament voted for just six months after it was set up and started operating. They refused to even ask councils to look again at how many more places they could provide each year, even though we know that there were councils ready to do more. The Government miscounted the number and could not even get the figures right in the first place.

Worst of all, once the 480 places had been offered the Government just stopped filling them. After the first group had come through Calais, we had month after month of no child coming through the Dubs scheme at all. I hear that the Government may have managed to scabble together a few additional numbers from France last month and I hope that is the case, but it is simply not good enough. Well over 250 places are still empty; at the same time, there are 63,000 unaccompanied children and teenagers across Europe who came to Europe this year.

**Jo Swinson** (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I thank the right hon. Lady for her important work on this issue. She mentions the horrendous scale of this problem. Does she not think the Government's inaction is so deeply troubling, given Britain's history? This is not a new problem, and in the past we have opened our doors and been welcoming to refugees. That is a distinctly British thing to be able to do and we should be proud of continuing to do it. That is why the Government should definitely act.

**Yvette Cooper:** The hon. Lady is right about that. We are also talking about something that has had cross-party support. I do not see this as a party political issue, which is why I would like to be able to welcome the work the Government have done. The trouble is that we have seen huge problems and the gaps in action on the Alf Dubs amendment—a measure that is widely supported.

Lord Dubs came through the Kindertransport and has done so much for this country, like so many other child refugees we have welcomed here. We are talking about children whose lives and futures are at risk, and we could be helping them. I am thinking of those such as the Iranian teenager I met in Athens on the very day the Government announced that they would open the Dubs scheme. I told him what we would be doing. He is a gay teenager who had fled because he was being persecuted in his home country. We had a long conversation, because he spoke brilliant English—he spoke no Greek. Yet he was one of very many children and teenagers in Greece without proper support and proper shelter, who needed a future and for whom we and our country should be doing our bit.

**Alan Mak:** Will the right hon. Lady give way?

**Yvette Cooper:** I want to make some progress because other Members wish to speak.

There are nearly 3,000 unaccompanied children in Greece, of whom 1,800 are on a waiting list for shelter. Some of them are being held in police custody because there is nowhere else safe for them to go, and Harvard University has established that they are at risk of being trafficked by gangs and of being taken into modern slavery, which the Government have rightly condemned and are determined to stamp out.

The Minister will say that he has been to Greece and Italy to try to sort the issue out, but the problem is with our system, not theirs. It is not good enough simply to blame the Greek and Italian Governments for the failure to bring children in under the Dubs scheme. Our job was not just to rock up in Greece or Italy and say, “We have a whole load more hurdles and a whole load more headaches for you, and more complex bureaucratic procedures in our scheme for you to meet”; instead, our job should have been to design the Dubs scheme in a way that made it easy for the overstretched social services systems in Italy and Greece to send some of those children here to the sanctuary that this country had already promised to offer.

We must think of teenagers such as the 12-year-old Eritrean girl who is on her own in Italy, and whose case I have raised with the Home Office. Her brother is already in foster care here in Britain. The foster carer has offered to take the sister as well. The girl is only 12, but she has been in mixed accommodation with adult men in Italy. She has tried several times to run away. We could bring her over, through either the Dublin scheme or the Dubs scheme—frankly, it does not matter which. She is the kind of child we should be trying to help.

I urge the Government to reopen the Dubs scheme, to speed up the Dublin scheme, and to take fast action now, as the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire said. Let us fill those 280 places by Christmas. We must stop insisting on the unworkable cut-off date, which has no impact at all on whether children and teenagers arrive in Europe. It is drawn from some kind of fantasy world in which the detailed conditions of a small British refugee scheme somehow have an impact on whether children or teenagers make an incredibly dangerous journey to get to Europe in the first place.

Ditch the cut-off date, rip up some of the bureaucratic hurdles that the Home Office has put in place, and make the Dubs scheme work as Parliament intended it to and as we all voted for. We promised in good faith to do our bit to help those child and teenage refugees. We promised to do our bit, just as we did with the Kindertransport. The Home Secretary said herself that “it is the children who matter most.”—[*Official Report*, 9 February 2017; Vol. 621, c. 639.]

It is. Members of this House could come together with the Home Office, on the same cross-party basis on which we came together 12 months ago and 18 months ago, to support child refugees again.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Order. I must reduce the time limit to four minutes.

2.2 pm

**Amanda Milling** (Cannock Chase) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) on securing this debate. It is a pleasure to

follow the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper).

The migration crisis affects countries around the world and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) said, there are refugee crises around the world. This is a truly global challenge and there is no simple solution. We should be proud of what the United Kingdom has done in seeking a comprehensive solution and response to the migration crisis that provides the greatest effect for those who are really in need, and that deals with the causes as well as responds to the consequences.

We operate several routes for resettling children in the UK. Crucially, at the heart of our approach must be the need to prevent migrants, particularly vulnerable children, from making these dangerous journeys in the first place. That is why the Government’s approach—to settle the most vulnerable children from the region—is absolutely right. We must try to prevent their having to make these journeys in the first place.

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Amanda Milling:** I will not be giving way because I do not have much time.

We have committed to resettling 20,000 individuals of all nationalities who have fled the Syrian conflict by 2020. We have also committed to resettling 3,000 of the most vulnerable children and family members. I am pleased to see the progress that has been made, with more than 8,500—around half of whom are children—having already settled. It is worth noting that in 2016 the UK resettled more refugees from outside Europe than any other EU member state. We should be proud of that.

Alongside the resettling of the most vulnerable children directly from the region, we must continue to invest in and deliver aid to the region itself to tackle the root cause of the migration crisis. We have been at the forefront of the response to the Syrian crisis, having pledged some £2.46 billion, and we have rightly prioritised upstream interventions in the countries of origin to reduce the factors that encourage migrants to leave their homes in the first place, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dover said. We have also contributed to the Mediterranean migration crisis response in Europe, allocating more than £175 million in humanitarian assistance, including the £75 million announced by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister at the European Council in June.

Taken together, our two approaches offer the best response to the crisis. We are investing directly in the region while also resettling those refugees at the heart of the crisis. In doing so, we are playing our part in tackling the global challenge that I referred to at the start of my speech, and as such upholding our moral duty by helping those who are most vulnerable and most in need.

2.6 pm

**Lyn Brown** (West Ham) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) and my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella

[Lyn Brown]

Creasy) for securing this debate. I wish to use my time to draw attention to the plight of two specific children and bring human faces to what can be a difficult discussion. I want the Government to hear about these two children—especially the Minister, who is currently chatting on the Front Bench, because I would like him to do something about it. He knows that I will hold him to account if I do not believe that he is paying attention.

**The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis):** I would like to point out that what the hon. Lady just said is completely false.

**Lyn Brown:** Rubbish! I am not even going there.

The first case is that of Tekle, a 13-year-old Eritrean boy who is currently living in a camp near the French-Italian border. He has survived in Italy, unaccompanied, for more than 11 months now. His father is in the UK and is desperate for his son to join him. It must be absolutely heart-breaking for a parent to know that a child is so vulnerable but to be unable to bring them the relatively few miles to safety and to that parent. The asylum system in Italy—[*Interruption.*] The asylum system in Italy is overwhelmed. [*Interruption.*] Does the Minister want me to call him out again? I am happy to. I really would like him to listen. Perhaps the Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty's Treasury, the hon. Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths), could stop chatting.

**Brandon Lewis:** I am not sure whether or not the hon. Lady wants us to listen, but she is stopping for reasons that I simply do not understand. I am making notes on what she is saying so that I can answer her questions later. I am not quite sure what she is trying to imply. She seems to be playing a very silly game.

**Lyn Brown:** The Minister knows better than to accuse me of playing silly games. If I was not watching people chatting on the Front Bench and if I was not worried that I was not being heard, I would not be stopping. I want to be heard because I genuinely believe that although these two cases are specific, they are also indicative of all the cases we have been hearing about today. I think the Minister is a good man generally, and I know that he normally listens to debates, which is why I had so much faith that he would listen to me today and take some action on these cases. That is why I am being so clear that I would like him to pay real attention to what is going on.

The refugee support organisation Safe Passage secured an appointment with the Italian authorities so that Tekle could request asylum and seek transfer to the UK, which appears to be his right. He was finally granted an interview last month but was not given an interpreter, so the information recorded was inaccurate and his journey was curtailed once more. Psychologists working with Médecins Sans Frontières have met Tekle more than once, and their professional assessment is that his mental health is in a perilous condition. He is also vulnerable to the criminal gangs that, as the Minister knows, prey at these camps around the world. His future remains unclear. I can only imagine what it must be like to be that young, that frightened and that alone and have to wait so long with nothing in the future secure. He does not know whether he will ever find a home or be safe with his family again.

The story that my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) raised was about Awet, a 12-year-old Eritrean girl who arrived in Italy in June. Her brother, also a child, has been living with a stable foster family for the past three years. His carer is willing to foster Awet too so that the two can live together in security. Awet is obviously vulnerable. She was initially placed in a mixed reception centre with adults of both sexes before Safe Passage intervened. She is terribly afraid and despairing in the reception centre, and, like Tekle, has recently attempted to run away. She would rather risk absolutely everything in her attempt to be with her brother than remain in what she perceives to be a terrifying prison.

Last month—five months after her arrival—Awet was able, finally, to submit her asylum application in Italy, but it is unclear whether a take charge request has been made because of the consistent bureaucratic delays in the area. This is the situation that so many unaccompanied children live in across Europe. Their only hope is for a legal route to be offered to them so that they can rejoin their families.

**Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab):** Will my hon. Friend join me in asking the Government to ensure that the 280 places that have not been filled are filled as quickly as possible and that family reunions can take place as quickly as possible?

**Lyn Brown:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I ask the Minister, whom I normally like very much, to work with Safe Passage, which has been helping Tekle and Awet, to look into those two cases. I ask him personally to update me on their progress. As he knows full well, those are just two cases among many.

There is a clear moral principle: no child should spend a second longer than necessary in a state of vulnerability and uncertainty when they have family in Britain who can provide them with safety and support. This motion is not just about moral principle, but about the law. Whatever happens after Brexit, it is vital that UK law ensures that access for vulnerable children with a legal claim to rejoin families in Britain is retained and not reduced.

The Dublin III regulation leaves a lot to be desired, but the family reunion access guaranteed by our domestic law is often even more restrictive. Some lone child refugees who have grandparents, uncles, aunts, sisters or brothers living in the UK only have a legal route to safety and family reunion because of the Dublin regulation. I want the Government—and the Minister today—to commit to working across this House to ensure that we, at the very least, replicate the provisions of Dublin III—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Order. I will allow the hon. Lady to say her last couple of words.

**Lyn Brown:** You are very kind, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Basically, I ask the Government to replicate the provisions of Dublin III after Brexit so that we can bring these children home.

2.13 pm

**Adam Holloway (Gravesend) (Con):** Many of the people in Calais come from war-torn areas such as Syria and Iraq. Indeed, shortly before the general election, I went with my former interpreter to the city of Mosul

for about three hours and had a look around. As we approached the city—we were about 20 km away—we saw a great caravan filled with women in black and children. There were very few men. I remember seeing one lady carrying two babies, with a toddler walking behind.

The next day I went to one of the camps, which had taken in an extra 23,000 people in the previous week. The latrines by the entrance, which had been designed to last 17 months, were already overflowing after three weeks. There were many young people there who were in great need. It gives none of us pleasure to see pictures of young people in Calais, or at the edge of the Europe, living in such intense hardship. Of course we must help the young and the vulnerable, but we must not be naive and we must not create pull factors—or what my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) described as migrant magnets.

**Heidi Allen:** While we can all have a debate ad nauseam about pull or push and will never agree on it, at least let us look at some of the places we should be providing under Dubs—I am talking about the 280 places that we have not yet filled.

**Adam Holloway:** Well, yes, I accept that, but we must be careful to do what is right for as many people as possible, rather than for the people who are most visible to us. We should not just do what makes us feel good. We must stop creating a “pull” for people to make these very long journeys.

**Bob Stewart:** My very good friend has lived under cover in Sangatte. Has he any comments on how the children were living there? In particular, can he tell us about the conditions that he saw when he was under cover?

**Adam Holloway:** I thank my hon. and gallant Friend for his intervention. The reality is that this was some time ago, and that there were very, very few children. What I found in my week-long stay at the Sangatte camp was that the refugees were mostly fit young men. I would do exactly as they did—they had sold bits of land in Kurdistan or wherever else and were coming to England. The reasons why that camp was full, why the Jungle camp was full and why there are thousands of people around Calais is that they know they will get into Britain. We have people drowning in the Mediterranean because we have created the pull factor: the expectation that if they make it to Europe, they will stay in Europe. Until we break that, we will continue to have this problem, and we will continue to have so many young people coming over here.

The reality with what we describe as these “refugee children”—I do acknowledge that we cannot have nine-year olds living in bushes—is that 90% of the unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who applied for asylum in 2016 were male, 59% of whom claimed to be either 16 or 17 years old.

**Stella Creasy:** The hon. Gentleman is talking about people who may have come here illegally. Does he agree that if we have a safe and legal process, all of the *Daily Mail* myths about who the refugee children are can be

dealt with because Home Office officials will be processing them on the ground? That is what we are talking about today.

**Adam Holloway:** I have great sympathy with what the hon. Lady says, but I have also seen these kids in the camps. We should be doing everything we can for the many, not for the relative few. *[Interruption.]* It is true. We should not just do what makes us feel good. There are millions of refugees in the middle east who need as much help as we can give. We cannot settle them all in the UK; we must do what we can for the many.

By taking such young people, we are spending vast amounts of money that could much more effectively help children in their own regions. We are also creating pull factors, which encourage young people to embark on these long and sometimes lethal journeys. Here, council foster places are already oversubscribed. The amount of money spent on each child is enormous. I am saying not that we should not take in some cases, but that we should think about where we spend this money. We should use the money to look after people nearer their own homes. We must do what is right, and not what makes us feel good. If we are really to help all those who most need our help, we would do better to help them outside our borders, and to stop these immoral pull factors. We should be helping the many, not pulling in the few.

2.18 pm

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Images of families and children in makeshift refugee camps around Calais have disappeared from the front pages and from our Facebook timelines, but the refugee crisis has not abated across Europe, and we continue to face the biggest humanitarian crisis since the 1940s.

Last week marked one year since the demolition of the Jungle camp. I went to visit it for myself in 2015, as others have done. The experience was both eye-opening and heart-breaking. Conditions were awful, but it was amazing to see the strength and grit of the people living there, despite the unimaginable situation in which they found themselves. They had built themselves a mosque and a church, and set up libraries, language schools and a barber’s shop. It was utterly striking that these people, who had been treated in the most uncivilised way, were now responding with dignity and civilisation.

From spending time with the families and the charity workers who were working tirelessly to provide support and advice to them, it was clear that they felt that the camp was their only option. I met lots of children who were there without adult guardians. For some, their parents had paid traffickers to get them to safety in Europe. Others had lost their parents to conflict or had become separated from them while fleeing.

I was particularly frustrated on behalf of those who were stuck there with family who were already in the United Kingdom. Under EU and UK law, they have a legal right to be here, but complicated bureaucracy and systemic failures mean that it can take up to six months even to register for reunification. The argument goes that they have reached European shores and they are safe, so why do they seem so intent on coming to Britain? Well, those who wish to come to the United Kingdom are a small minority of refugees who are

[Tim Farron]

currently in France, but nearly every one of them I spoke to on my visits had this grand view of Britain as a place of decency, safety, freedom and civilisation. If someone has made that kind of journey, crossed seas and taken those risks—let us be blunt—they are not one of life's spongers. People who have met those refugees know that it is not the pull factor that has brought them here, but the push factor of war and persecution back at home.

**Adam Holloway:** This is absolutely preposterous. The fact is that these very long journeys, which sometimes last many months, cost a great deal of money and most are organised by people smugglers. These are the relatively privileged few; we should be concentrating on the many.

**Tim Farron:** We should concentrate on those who are most in need. I ask the hon. Gentleman to think again about the image of Britain in the mind of the people who seek to come here.

**Heidi Allen:** It occurs to me that a modern, compassionate and wealthy country like ours should be able to do both.

**Tim Farron:** The hon. Lady, to whom I would have paid tribute if I had had the time, now allows me to pay tribute to her; she has hit the nail bang on the head. It should be a source of immense pride that this is how Britain is seen by many. A real patriot wants other people to think well of their country, in spite of the ugly face that we so often seem to wish to present to the rest of the world.

On 24 October 2016, the French authorities began their full-scale demolition of the camp. The demolition was backed, by the way, by around £36 million of UK money. One reason that the French authorities chose that date was that French law makes it an offence to make anyone homeless after 1 November. It was a clear attempt to clear the decks and to do something that many of us would consider as morally reprehensible in the narrow window of time in which it was legally permissible. That is a reminder that our Government do not have a monopoly on heartlessness.

As compensation, or to deflect criticism, the Home Office transferred 750 children to Britain to begin to rebuild their lives. About 550 were reunited with family under Dublin III and 200 were brought in through the Dubs scheme. To put this into context, 1,900 children were registered as living in the camps, and many more would have been there but not registered. Rough estimates today suggest that about 1,000 people remain scattered in and around Calais, including an estimated 200 unaccompanied children. These people are vulnerable not only to the coming winter weather, but to heavy-handed law enforcement, as we have heard. Most appallingly, they are vulnerable to traffickers and others who would do them harm. For children, no place could be more dangerous. I want this debate to be a call to arms to redouble our efforts to ensure that this crisis is not simply brushed under the carpet.

I want the Government to agree to do three things. First, I want them to reopen the Dubs scheme today. We who fought to secure this commitment expected the

Government to offer sanctuary to thousands, not just a couple of hundred. There is no shame in reversing a bad decision, so let us fill those remaining 240 places, scrap the deadline and open up more places for children who arrived in Europe after March 2016. Secondly, I want a guarantee that family reunification provisions for unaccompanied children are not restricted in the event that the UK ceases to be bound by Dublin III. Thirdly, I call on the Government to support Baroness Hamwee's Refugees (Family Reunion) Bill in the other place. The Bill would amend our existing immigration rules to allow adult siblings, grandparents, aunt and uncles who have refugee status to sponsor unaccompanied children from outside Europe to join them in the UK.

I cannot overstate the horrific truth that the longer this goes on, the more likely it is that more children will go missing and fall into the evil hands of traffickers. While Brexit dominates the agenda in this place, there are children in desperate need. It is an accident of history that it is those families—those children—facing the cold in Calais. Let us imagine that they were our children and our families. Would not we want a foreign country to help? When we answer that question honestly, we know exactly what we need to do now.

2.25 pm

**Victoria Atkins** (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) and the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) for calling this debate. It has been an interesting and, at times, difficult debate to listen to because we know the terrible cases we see in the middle east, Europe and here at home due to the terrible crises that have happened across the world. I was very moved by the experiences of my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway), with his military expertise. I am sure that has helped to bring an extra dimension—*[Interruption.]* Sorry, I should have said my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Gravesham; my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) is telling me off.

It has been a pleasure to listen to this debate because it has been a consensual debate on a consensual motion. The hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) was not perhaps so consensual in some of her remarks, but the debate has been consensual on the whole. I am pleased that the motion recognises that the United Kingdom has

“demonstrated moral and political leadership”,

and that it focuses on access to

“safe and legal means to reunite...family and relatives in EU”

with the hope that we will meet the standards of the Dublin III regulation. I am sure that the Minister has been listening carefully, and that this Government are entirely committed to ensuring that we continue to preserve that access and do our part in looking after the children of the world.

**Bob Stewart:** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Victoria Atkins:** If my hon. Friend can make it very quick, as I am conscious that others want to speak.

**Bob Stewart:** I will be quick. Our country has done very well. We have taken in more people than any other European country, and we have most definitely brought

far more people than any other country direct from the countries where they originated into this country, avoiding all these awful journeys.

**Victoria Atkins:** My hon. Friend has clearly read my notes because I was just about to move on to the other things on which we can agree. We can all agree that no one wants child—or, indeed, adult—refugees to fall victim to the serious organised crime gangs that run the people-trafficking rings, and we can all agree that we must target those criminal gangs, which are in it for profit and nothing more.

Surely we can all agree that children should receive the highest levels of care when they come to live in this country and we offer them a home. It was reported recently in the papers that children from Vietnam who have been taken into care as part of our refugee programme are going missing within hours or days of finding foster care. They are being tempted back out—or are sometimes physically taken back out—by criminal gangs in this country. We cannot and must not allow that to happen. We have to remember that we need to look after people properly when they come to our country. I am sure that we can also agree that expanding the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme from only Syria to all nationalities was good and entirely just.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham said, the UK's record is significant. More than 8,500 people have been resettled so far, and about half of them are children. The United Kingdom resettled more refugees from outside Europe in 2016 than any other EU country. More than a third of all resettlement to the EU was to the UK that year. We should acknowledge that in the consensual terms of this debate.

I listened carefully to the intervention by the hon. Member for Walthamstow on my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham about the expertise of Home Office officials. I completely understand where she was coming from in what she asked for, but Italy, France, Greece and other countries are sovereign countries, and my concern is that we cannot just roll into town, as it were, and take over their immigration systems. We have—I imagine the Minister will tell us this—to work very much in co-operation and partnership with them.

**Stella Creasy:** The point was that the hon. Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway) is concerned about illegal people being here. If we have safe and legal routes, we can be confident that it is child refugees who are coming. We can deal with that in partnership with other nations. The point is that, right now, we do not do that and, as a consequence, children are coming illegally.

**Victoria Atkins:** We can agree on the fact that we do not want any illegal immigration, and I say this coming from a criminal law background, not least because sometimes it means that the people who come here—not refugees, but others—have very bad intent. I was trying to make the point that we have to find a way of working better with our neighbours to make sure their systems work as well as we would like them to and as well—I hope we can agree on this—as they work in this country.

I will end on a wider, philosophical question, which was touched on by my wonderful hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling). Immigration is an international problem, and we are

only beginning to comprehend the extent of the task ahead of us. Across the world, we are seeing people on the move. They may be on the move because they live in conflict or war zones, as we have seen, sadly, in Burma. They may be on the move because they have the entirely human aspiration to create a better life for themselves and their families. The developed countries in this world are going to have to find a way to deal with that, whether by trying to sort out conflict zones or by trying to find ways, as we do, to use international development to raise the tide of economic wellbeing so that everybody has the chance of a good life and opportunities in life. We will have to face that challenge, and we will have to do it across the world. Sadly, the issue will be with us for years and years to come.

2.32 pm

**Thelma Walker** (Colne Valley) (Lab): I thank those hon. Members who secured this debate.

Imagine, for a moment, that it is your child who is alone in a foreign country, unable to speak the language and at risk of being trafficked. As a parent, would you want that for your child? No parent would, and we have a duty of care and a civic responsibility to make sure that these vulnerable children are protected. This country has a proud history of protecting and supporting vulnerable children, going right back to the Kindertransport of world war two, when children fleeing persecution from Nazi-invaded countries were offered refuge, support and love in the UK.

Children and families who escape persecution and are offered a new chance can go on to achieve a happy and fulfilled life. These same children could become future leaders in business and the arts, or future politicians who will drive change in our communities. We need the UK to be a world leader on this issue. We need to look back at our history, and we need to learn from it.

We need swift action to reunite families. Currently, it can take up to six months for a child to be registered and for the process to even begin. That is simply not good enough. Never mind six months; the Government should be doing these things in under six days. We also need established safe places away from Calais where children and families can be taken. This would reduce the risk of children coming to harm while their cases are processed.

As I have said previously in the House, legal aid was removed from refugee family reunion cases following the passing of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012. I have worked for a number of years with organisations in my constituency and across Kirklees that support families and children who have been resettled into our communities. They include volunteer groups such as Sanctuary Kirklees, whose goal is to create a network of groups and organisations throughout Kirklees that are proud to be places of safety for people seeking sanctuary, helping them to integrate into their local communities.

Recently, I attended the launch of the Buzz Project in Marsden. It was set up by a Syrian refugee who uses his expertise in beekeeping to help other refugees to make a living. In spring next year, they hope to harvest their first crop of honey. This project and others, such as Destitute Asylum Seekers Huddersfield, show that once

[*Thelma Walker*]

we open our hearts to refugees fleeing the horrors of war and genocide, they can give so much back to our country.

So the next time you tuck your child into bed at night, think about these children lying scared in a cold camp, frightened for their life. Next time you give your child a hug, think about these children just across the channel with no one there to hold them. Next time you laugh and play with your child, think about these children with no one to engage with and care for them. It is difficult and upsetting to think about the challenges these children face every single day, but they need our help more than ever. As the UK turns away from the European Union, we need to make sure that we do not turn our backs on these vulnerable children.

2.35 pm

**Will Quince** (Colchester) (Con): This is an incredibly important issue, and it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Colne Valley (*Thelma Walker*), who made a very emotive contribution.

I vividly remember the debates we had in this Chamber on child refugees and the need to help vulnerable children stuck in squalid conditions through the Dubs scheme. I may even have had a disagreement with the Government on the issue, but we have changed the Chief Whip and the Deputy Chief Whip now, so perhaps all is well again.

I am really proud of our record as a Government. I am proud that we have provided sanctuary for unaccompanied children. In 2016, we transferred over 900 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children to the UK from Europe. More than 750 of them came from France as part of the UK's support for the Calais camp clearance. In the same year, the UK settled more refugees from outside Europe than any other EU country. According to Eurostat figures, more than a third of people resettled in Europe came to the UK. That is something to be proud of, and I hope our European colleagues will listen and follow our lead. More widely, the UK has granted asylum or another form of leave to over 9,000 children in the past year alone. Since 2010, it has been over 42,000.

I want to say that this motion is right. We need to ensure that there are safe and legal means for unaccompanied child refugees to come to the UK. Everyone in this Chamber will no doubt agree that we need to stamp out people traffickers. They profit from the desperation of the vulnerable and do not care about their welfare. Where we do not have safe and legal routes, people smugglers not only operate but thrive.

We should be clear that primary responsibility for unaccompanied children in France lies with the French Government. I encourage my right hon. Friend the Minister to urge his counterpart to ensure that the French are doing everything they can to process asylum applications.

While we continue to be a member of the European Union, we will participate in Dublin III, and it is in all our interests that we continue to co-operate on asylum and migration, both legal and illegal, once we have left the EU. We should bear in mind that unaccompanied children cannot make applications for family reunification

under the Dublin regulation. That regulation is a mechanism to determine which member state is responsible for the consideration of any asylum claim, but it is not, and never has been, a family reunification route in and of itself.

We must look to the future, however. I accept that the nature of any future agreement is still to be discussed with the European Union—it will form part of the negotiation process. It would be wrong to set out our position in advance, but we can set out our principles: we are proud of the UK's long history of offering sanctuary to those who need it.

**Amanda Milling:** Does my hon. Friend agree that we should be proud of the totality of support that the UK is providing to refugees, particularly these most vulnerable children?

**Will Quince:** I do agree. There is sometimes a danger in the House that we make the perfect the enemy of the good. I am proud of what our Government are doing.

We are proud of the UK's long history of offering sanctuary to those who need it. Britain will always offer asylum to those fleeing war, genocide and persecution, and we will continue to make sure that vulnerable unaccompanied children can join their families here. The Government have played an important role in responding to the migration crisis, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (*Amanda Milling*) just said. We have settled the most vulnerable children directly from the region. We have pursued the criminal gangs and trafficking networks that profit from the misery and desperation of those in these terrible conditions, and we are one of the largest contributors of aid and development in the Syria conflict. As the motion says, the UK has demonstrated moral and political leadership on this issue. Long may that continue.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Order. I have to reduce the time limit to three minutes.

2.40 pm

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (*Heidi Allen*) and my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (*Stella Creasy*) for securing the debate.

Two fundamental questions arise every time we debate the issue of child refugees: what kind of society and what kind of a nation do we want to be? We want to be part of a society that is fair-minded, generous and compassionate, and which understands its role in the world and does not shirk its responsibilities. In my home in Leeds, refugee charities and local authorities are doing incredible work settling and welcoming people to the city.

**Hugh Gaffney** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I just want to put on record what the people of Scotland are doing. Angela and Maria Feeney organised an initiative called Wishaw to Calais, which became Scotland to the world—just to help my friend over there, the hon. Member for Gravesham (*Adam Holloway*). The people of Scotland got together and North Lanarkshire Council gave us two warehouses. We filled them up and

supplied the world. One of the volunteers, a young girl called Leanne Hawkins, wanted to help because she was also a child. She died recently, and I pay tribute to her and thank her for her work.

**Alex Sobel:** I, too, pay tribute to my hon. Friend's constituent for the work that she did. I also pay tribute to his other constituents, and those of other hon. Members, for the work they have done for so many children in Calais.

Local authorities often have to act at short notice—sometimes as little as 48 hours—and under competing and enormous pressures on resources to house vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers, and to find homes for children who come through the scheme. Our northern cities have deep and powerful humanitarian instincts and traditions, going back to the Huguenots and the Kindertransport, but as local authorities' budgets have been slashed, the strains have become all too apparent. Child protection in the UK is decentralised, meaning that it is managed by local government. At the same time, the care of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is funded directly by the Home Office. That creates a major source of conflict and confusion, and it is invariably bad news for the children whose wellbeing and futures rest in the hands of these institutions.

Local authorities, and the charities that work with them, would like nothing more than to be able to act confidently and swiftly to assist child refugees when they are transferred to their care, but as things stand it is not uncommon for local authorities to find themselves subject to unreasonable and close-to-unworkable demands to house refugee children. As such, a 2016 report by UNICEF on unaccompanied child refugees made a single recommendation to the UK Government, calling for measures

“to ensure that local authorities have the financial resources and operational capacity to enable these evaluations to be carried out quickly, whilst safeguarding the child's best interests.”

Without clear guidance and financial guarantees to local government, we risk falling far short of the standards of decency and compassion that we aspire to as a society. I am sorry to say that as a nation we have fallen short of our best traditions of global leadership and humanitarianism on this issue.

According to UNHCR, 138,300 refugees have made their way to Europe so far this year, with Italy, Greece and Spain managing the bulk of arrivals. More than 2,500 refugees are thought to have died or gone missing in the process. In the same period, only 3.5% of asylum applications made in Europe by children were made in the UK. The UK is the second wealthiest nation in Europe, but ranks a lamentable ninth on European child asylum applications. We are clearly—and hazardously—not pulling our weight. As this clearly shows, pull factors are not a consideration when it comes to child refugees.

In the long term, there are few established benefits to isolationism. The domestic problems and anxieties we face as nation are invariably shaped and impacted by events beyond our immediate control. Whether we like it or not, we cannot retreat from these challenges. We should never be comfortable retreating from the challenge of sharing responsibility for child refugees. This goes to the heart of the question of who we are as people and a nation. The nation may have voted for Brexit, but it did not vote to turn its back on child refugees.

2.44 pm

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): Since my election to this place in June, the issue of unaccompanied child refugees has been a major topic in my postbag and inbox, so I am glad we are having this debate. I commend the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen), who has already set the bleak scene in Calais, for securing it.

Before saying a little about the Dublin regulations, I want to touch briefly on the Dubs amendment.

**Ben Lake** (Ceredigion) (PC): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Dubs amendment, far from being a pull factor, disrupts the traffickers who seek to profit from smuggling and the exploitation of vulnerable children by establishing a safe and legal route for those seeking asylum?

**David Linden:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the great misfortunes of this debate is that the Government talk a lot about a pull factor but have published absolutely no evidence; it is a case of putting up or shutting up.

I want to touch on the British Government's woefully inadequate response to what is the worst humanitarian crisis since world war two. To be clear, we on the nationalist Benches would like to see the Dubs scheme continued to enable the UK to receive at least 3,000 unaccompanied child refugees from Europe. Moreover, we want the British Government to increase the total number of refugees they intend to settle under the Syrian vulnerable person resettlement programme.

Yesterday, I had the pleasure of meeting Sarah Kirby, from the International Rescue Committee, who shared with me some very harrowing statistics and data about the number of unaccompanied and separated children in Europe. Europol reports that there are almost 90,000 lone refugee children in Europe. Indeed, the UNHCR estimates that in 2016 about 33,800 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children arrived in Greece, Italy, Bulgaria and Spain. The majority of those—some 26,000 children—arrived in Italy.

Earlier this year, it was announced that the UK Government had axed the Dubs amendment on refugee children and capped it at 480. The refugee crisis has not gone away and people are still fleeing the continuing violence in Syria and other countries, which creates a very serious risk that the numbers of unaccompanied children becoming prey to human traffickers will increase. Her Majesty's Government need to do their part by continuing to provide places under the Dubs scheme when local authority capacity is available, as we know it is.

I commend many of the local authorities in Scotland that have embraced, with typically warm hospitality, many refugees from Syria. My own city of Glasgow has been outstanding when it comes to welcoming what are now affectionately known as “refugees”. In fact, Scotland has welcomed over a quarter of the total number of Syrian refugees in the UK.

I have some questions for the Minister. Will Her Majesty's Government consider moving the date of entry to Europe to after 20 March 2016, if indeed there are still spaces available under the Dubs amendment? Given that there are currently 2,590 unaccompanied

[David Linden]

children in Greece and more than 13,000 in Italy, what assessment has been made of the UK's ability to accept more than the already agreed 480 children? Sadly, it took a dead toddler to wash up on a beach and photos appearing on the front pages of our newspapers to make most of us sit up and take note of the stark horror of this humanitarian disaster.

**Adam Holloway:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**David Linden:** No, I think we have heard enough of the "little Britain" approach from the Government Benches today.

The photos have now disappeared from our newspapers and the story has largely faded, but the humanitarian crisis rages on. The Government can and must do more.

2.48 pm

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): I have had the opportunity to visit the refugees in Calais on two very different occasions. In December 2015, I went there with a group of local paramedics who were giving up their time voluntarily to provide medical assistance when the Jungle camp was at its height. Just two months ago, with Safe Passage UK and Hammersmith and Fulham Refugees Welcome, my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) and I went over and had a look at what has happened since the camp was demolished about a year ago.

I do not pretend that the situation in Calais is the most dramatic or the worst situation for refugees fearing persecution, but it is on our doorstep. Almost overwhelmingly, the people in and around Calais are there either because they believe that they have a right to come to the UK or they have a particular reason for wanting to come to the UK. The situation is emblematic of many of the other problems that we have.

We have heard two different interpretations of what the Jungle camp was like. One is that it was a place of utter despair, lawlessness, violence and brutality; and the other is that it was a rather thriving environment with shops, restaurants, churches, mosques and theatres. The answer is that both are true. We saw the extraordinary resourcefulness of the people there, as well as the risks that they were up against. Now it is just scrubland, but around the port of Calais about 1,000 people, including about 200 children, are sleeping rough. A number of those children have rights under Dublin III, and some would qualify as Dubs children.

Having Lord Dubs as a constituent in Hammersmith and Fulham is a source of great pride for us. It also keeps me on my toes on this matter, as one can imagine. The situation is more brutal than it was two years ago. There are no facilities for the people there now. There is a concerted campaign, as is well documented by the authorities, to drive people away using very brutal tactics. I would like the Minister to comment on whether any UK money is going in to support the riot police and the oppression that is going on there.

We now have an opportunity to say what we are going to do—not only while we are in the EU, but if we leave the EU—to honour the conditions of Dublin III

and honour the obligations given to Lord Dubs. At a lobby last week, I was able to meet some of the children who came over last year, many of whom are in my constituency. I am a governor at a school that has many asylum-seeking refugee children who are doing extremely well. Some of them fear being deported back when they are 18. I ask the Minister to comment on that as well. I say in the meantime that this country had clear obligations, and we should be proud to fulfil them.

2.51 pm

**Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) and to speak in this debate on a subject that has been discussed with such passion.

The trip that I took to Calais with Safe Passage UK, which my hon. Friend mentioned, was harrowing; I still have nightmares about the stories that I was told. I want to spend the brief time I have talking about how painful and difficult it is for the young people in that area. I spoke to children from Eritrea, Syria, northern Iraq, Ethiopia and Libya, and heard stories about how difficult it is for them now. Many did not want to speak about their journey or about what had happened in their home country. They hoped that the dangers of the sea and the journey to reach Calais, and then onward to Britain, would be worth it.

I went to Calais with Faraday Fearnside, a Plymouth campaigner who works for Safe Passage UK and also founded an organisation called Open Hearts Open Borders. She collects resources from right across the far south-west to send to unaccompanied child refugees, not only in Calais but across the country. She joins many people from right across the UK who give up their time and resources to support these often forgotten-about young people. She wrote to me to say:

"Like you I was appalled by what I saw; child refugees are having their bedding stolen, trench foot is rife and police violence against them happens nearly every night."

Will the Minister tell us what oversight the House can have over the money spent by the Home Office in supporting the French police? Hearing stories about how children sleeping rough at night are tear-gassed as they sleep by the French police raises serious concerns about what money we are giving to those police that they are then using to assault and brutalise these young children, who have no protection. Those children are sleeping rough at night, fearful about what might happen to them and what the police may do to them. They must face those experiences every day, as well as the experiences of their journey to get there. UNICEF's report "Neither Safe Nor Sound" stated that sexual abuse is commonplace—a constant threat for young women and boys—and that the biggest fear of the children it interviewed was the fear of being raped.

Calais is closer to this place than Plymouth. The constituencies of the majority of hon. Members who have spoken today are further away from this place than those children in Calais are at this very moment. Christmas is coming.

**Heidi Allen:** I just wanted to mention, in the context of nightmares and things that stay with us, the most harrowing story that I heard when I was in Calais:

when a Médecins Sans Frontières doctor said how tired he was of constantly stitching up little boys. That has stayed with me ever since.

**Luke Pollard:** I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. Christmas is coming, and children all across our country are wondering what Father Christmas will bring them. The children who are sleeping rough in Calais want to go back to school, to have a roof over their heads and to be reunited with their families. In many cases, we have a moral and legal obligation to reunite them with their families.

We are expecting a cold winter. I expect children to die sleeping rough in Calais this winter, so we need to act urgently. It occurs to me each and every day that if these were Plymouth children, we would be acting—the debate would be so noisy and vociferous that we would act swiftly—but because they are unaccompanied refugee children, they are forgotten. I hope that this debate will remind not only Members of the House and Ministers but the public of our obligations. We have a choice about what kind of country we want to be after Brexit. I want us to be a beacon country, which proudly displays its values and supports people, especially unaccompanied child refugees who are desperate for our help.

2.55 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I am pleased to be called to speak in the debate. I can say, hand on heart, that I cannot begin to imagine the plight of these children. My heart goes out to them. We have all seen the images on TV and have been disturbed by what we have seen. The children are in this predicament through no fault of their own, so we must help them. We have taken steps to do so, and we must take further steps. As hon. Members have said, we must think about these children as though they were our own and respond accordingly. We acknowledge that we have a role to play, and we must exercise wisdom in playing it.

In the short time that I have, I want to refer to some of the things that we have done in Northern Ireland, with Government help. The first Syrian refugees to arrive in Northern Ireland through the Syrian VPR scheme came to Belfast in December 2015. We had some 51 people—10 families—and they settled and were housed in north, south and west Belfast. As of June 2017, nine groups of refugees had been brought to Northern Ireland, bringing the total number to 558. Another 192 have come since then, and we now have some 750. Northern Ireland hopes to take 2,000 refugees over a five-year period. That may not seem like a terrible lot, but we are a small region and we are doing our bit. I want to put our commitment on the record in the Chamber.

**Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): May I say what tremendous work is being done in Northern Ireland? Sadly, we have this refugee crisis, and there will be refugee crises in the future. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is vital that the networks of support for refugees are maintained in all our regions, because they will be crucial in any future refugee crises that we come across?

**Jim Shannon:** I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Gentleman.

As well as bringing refugees in, we have to think about what we need to do afterwards. In order to support the Syrian refugee families with full integration into Northern Ireland, we need to support them with housing, health, benefits and school places for children. The costs of those things are met by Home Office allocations for the first year. I subscribe to what other Members have said: we have 250 places, so let us fill those places and do our bit. Let us make it clear what we in the United Kingdom are about. We must work out which situations merit opening our doors and which merit stepping in and doing what we can.

Let us put on the record what our Government and the Home Office do. When I looked up the funding allocation for Northern Ireland, I found that the Home Office provides some £11,120 per refugee to cover the first year's costs. That covers resettlement costs and includes housing, education and healthcare, as well as key worker support, which is very important. Those things are all part of the integrated system—the full package—that is required. The Home Office agreed to make additional money available to cover additional educational costs and medical costs for any complex needs cases, of which there are many.

The Home Office also provides reducing levels of financial support for the resettlement of the refugees for up to five years after their arrival, so our Government provides ongoing support. When we bring in refugees, we give them the full package to keep them educated and get them settled. The funding from the Home Office will be sufficient to cover the costs of managing the arrival and resettlement of the refugees expected to arrive in Northern Ireland.

The Government have many methods of helping to settle refugees. As Members will know, I come from Northern Ireland; I fly over every time and then fly back. On the plane, the staff give a safety demonstration every time, and it never changes; we could probably recite it off by heart, but it is still important. They make it clear that in the case of oxygen being needed, we must first put the mask on ourselves before helping others to ensure that we can actually help others. I believe the same applies here, except for one difference: we have the oxygen, and we should try to help where we can.

In conclusion, may I ask the Minister whether if we can do more, he can show how? If we can do more, why are we not doing it? If we cannot, then what can we do for these children—and, indeed, for children in similar circumstances across the world? That is what this debate is about, and right hon. and hon. Members have made it very clear that we want action.

3 pm

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Members for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) and for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) on securing this debate, which is about what we should do for unaccompanied child refugees on the European continent. In summing up for the third party, I had hoped to be able to say that there was a measure of cross-party agreement that more should be done. I probably can say that, although there have been one or two dissenting voices.

[Joanna Cherry]

I will come on to deal with the argument about pull and push factors in a moment, but I want to say that the motion rightly notes that the United Kingdom has in the past

“demonstrated moral and political leadership”,

and it must do so again. Several speakers have mentioned the Kindertransport this afternoon. I was privileged and humbled recently to meet an old lady who came to the United Kingdom on the Kindertransport. The thing she was most keen to impress on me was not her experience, but the fact that we in the United Kingdom must now take similar steps to help modern child refugees in Europe. That was her message. It is right that there should be a degree of cross-party agreement, because this is a moral responsibility, not something that should break down on party political lines.

As I have said, I want to deal with the comments made by the hon. and gallant Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway) about pull factors. I will do so by referring to the findings of a substantial report launched in the other place this summer, “An independent inquiry into the situation of separated and unaccompanied minors in parts of Europe”. It was originally the idea of the all-party group on human trafficking and modern slavery. When the general election was called, the all-party group was dissolved, but its members felt that the dangers of human trafficking facing children in Europe were so great that the report should nevertheless be done. It was done, and was published in July.

One of the reasons why the report was commissioned was to deal with something said by the Home Secretary in responding to an urgent question in the previous Parliament, back on 9 February, when she said that

“to continue to accept children under the Dubs amendment indefinitely...acts as a pull”

which “encourages the people traffickers.” She also said that

“if we continue to take numbers of children from European countries, particularly France, that will act as a magnet for the traffickers.”—[*Official Report*, 9 February 2017; Vol. 621, c. 639, 645.]

It was because of those statements that the right hon. Fiona Mactaggart and Baroness Butler-Sloss felt compelled to get this inquiry under way.

The evidence gathered during the inquiry and its findings demonstrated numerous push and pull factors, but it did not receive any evidence to support the Government’s position that the safe transfer of children to the UK is a pull factor encouraging traffickers. On the contrary, the inquiry found that the chaotic manner in which these arrangements were handled on the ground and then abruptly stopped, as well as the Government’s administration of the Dubs scheme, had created a lack of trust that was playing directly into the hands of the traffickers. Children were losing faith that the British Government would act in their best interests, and they were not prepared to wait for months for a decision that might never happen, so they turned instead to ever-riskier methods of getting to the UK.

What I am trying to say is that these children are in Europe. We might not like the fact that they are in Europe, but they are there. Many of them are unaccompanied, and it is our moral duty to help them.

By failing to help them, we are actually pushing them into the hands of human traffickers. This debate seeks to get the Government to see their moral responsibility to continue with the efforts that they started last year, and to put them on a firmer footing to protect those children.

**Adam Holloway:** Is this not a no-brainer? The pull factor is the fact that people get to stay in Britain and Europe. If people did not get to stay in Britain or Europe, we would not have this complete mess and we would be able to look after people properly in their own regions.

**Joanna Cherry:** With respect, it is not a no-brainer, and I prefer to proceed on the basis of evidence, rather than on the hon. Gentleman’s say-so. I commend to him a report by the Human Trafficking Foundation. It took evidence, and found that the British Government’s failures were pushing children into the hands of traffickers. The contrary is therefore the case: if we provide safe routes to the United Kingdom, we take the children out of the hands of traffickers, and that is what we are debating this afternoon.

This is about reinstating the Dubs amendment, and the understanding that we all had—it is always the same Members who attend these debates—that the scheme would involve 3,000 people, not a measly few hundred. Let us be honest about that. I have also put my name to an amendment to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. I do not want the United Kingdom to leave the European Union, but if we are to do so, there is an opportunity for us to try to place our own rules on family reunion on a firmer basis, and to stretch that beyond just parents to reflect international standards. I would like us to remain part of international arrangements and to lead on them, and I hope we will do that.

It is important to remember that there are some good news stories in this, and perhaps the good news about children who managed to come here legally will inspire the Government to do more. I am grateful to Safe Passage for providing me with a briefing that tells a little bit about what happened to some of the children who were brought from the Calais camp last year. One year on, many of those children are living with family or foster carers, and older teenagers have been placed in supported accommodation. Most are now involved in college or attending school, and some are even preparing to go to university. These people will be useful members of our society, and will contribute to our society and economy.

One problem is that some children who came to join a family have since been taken into local authority care because their families were unable to support them. There is evidence that a small amount of financial support at crucial times can help those reunited families stay together in such situations. I applaud Glasgow City Council, which provides £57.90 per week to reunited families during the time that it takes to access welfare benefits. There are very low instances of family breakdown in Glasgow because of that, and it is an example of a small step that local authorities can take to assist in such situations.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) said, SNP policy is clear: we want the Dubs scheme to continue to enable the UK to receive at

least the 3,000 unaccompanied children that this House had in mind when the amendment was accepted. We also want the UK Government to increase the total number of refugees that they intend to take under the Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, by taking people from camps closer to their homes. We also want the UK Government to do their bit by providing better arrangements on the ground, so that there can be outreach to child refugees who arrive in Calais and Grande-Synthe, and proper outreach on the ground for children in Greece and Italy who have a right to come to the United Kingdom.

I am aware of the decision by the High Court this morning, and that it will be appealed, but I would like more good faith on the part of the Government in communicating with local authorities about whether they have the wherewithal to take those children. In Scotland, local authorities have made great efforts, together with partner organisations such as the Welcoming Association, which is based in my constituency. Local authorities across the United Kingdom have made efforts. Some have taken more than their fair share and have more of a burden than others, and we need to share the burden more fairly.

All of this takes a will and it takes central co-ordination. I encourage the Minister to give us something positive to go away with today. I encourage him to give us an indication of what he will do to break the stalemate we seem to have reached and to fulfil the spirit of what the House voted for over a year ago on the back of Lord Alfred Dubs' hard work.

3.10 pm

**Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Let me too start by thanking the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) and my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy).

Today's debate marks one year since the demolition of the Calais Jungle camp. The situation in Calais is a significant crisis that has lasted for many years. Razing the camp has not solved it. The Government stand accused this week of standing back while the position of unaccompanied minors has deteriorated markedly. In the past year, excessive police violence in Calais has intensified. Beatings and tear gas have been used against children. The Refugee Rights Data Project found that 94% of young people "didn't feel safe" or "didn't feel safe at all", with one 19-year-old saying:

"There are no human rights here."

I welcome the opening of the new temporary accommodation centre in northern France, but what exactly has the UK Government's involvement been? Will the application process for the new centre, and more generally, be reduced to weeks rather than months or over a year for eligible children? Will the Government provide legal and outreach support to children eligible under Dubs and Dublin III in Calais?

The Labour party fully understands how difficult the Calais crisis has been over many years, but refuses to accept that the Government have so far approached the whole issue with humanity and consistency. The clear evidence for this is the Government's ending of the Dubs scheme. The Dubs amendment was tabled by Lord Dubs, who was himself saved from the hands of the German Nazi regime. It was passed with the intention

of bringing about 3,000 unaccompanied refugee children to Britain. The Government have since announced that they will halt the scheme after accepting just 480. We on the Labour Benches, and many on the Minister's own side, cannot accept this decision.

The Government have wriggled out of their obligation to accept child refugees, shutting the door on the most vulnerable. The Government said that

"following consultation with local authorities"

they set the number of children to be transferred under the Dubs scheme at 480. However, evidence to the Home Affairs Committee casts serious doubt on that claim. Local authorities suggested that up to 4,000 more places could be made available. We must have more transparency on the issue of local authority capacity. Authorities across the country who might have places must be encouraged to come forward. We understand from refugee charities that a small number of admissions may have occurred in the past two weeks, in which case the point remains that this is too little, given the size of the refugee crisis and the plight and experience of refugee children across Europe. The UN has called for Britain to take 10,000 refugees per year.

The Home Secretary has said a number of times that she wants to avoid the Dubs scheme acting as a pull factor for child migrants or encouraging people traffickers. In fact, the opposite is true. Legal schemes such as Dubs disrupt the activities of people traffickers rather than encourage them. Where legal routes are limited, where children lose faith in systems and trust in officials, they turn to people traffickers or smugglers who exploit them. Unless the push factors, including violence, persecution and conflict which drive children to flee their homes, are resolved children will continue to flee. Will the Minister give an assurance that where it is in the best interests of unaccompanied children, they will be reunited with their families in the UK?

Iraqi refugee Mohammed Hassan died earlier this year hiding in a lorry's wheel arch on a journey from Calais to Oxford, trying to reach his uncle. The coroner highlighted the fact that UK border agency officials who had detained him only days before could have given him information regarding his right to family reunion under Dublin III. When the Calais camp was demolished, one in six of its inhabitants were children seeking to reach family members; several of those children have since died trying to reach their family. How will the Government ensure that all children in northern France who are eligible for family reunion are able to access safe passage? We must prevent the regrowth of the Jungle and more tragic cases like that of Mohammed Hassan.

There is a great deal to be done in the face of the humanitarian and refugee crisis across the world. We are leaving the EU, but that does not mean we should cease to work together to solve this crisis. The Labour party is clear that Brexit must not be used as an excuse to abandon our legal and moral obligations to refugees. The Government must commit to ensuring that Brexit does not lead to any loss of rights for refugees. Like the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire and my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), I ask the Minister for an assurance that the Dublin III definition of "family" will apply in the UK's immigration rules post-Brexit.

[Afzal Khan]

When refugee children come to the UK, we must ensure that they are treated fairly and that councils have adequate resources to provide them with the support they need. As the Government's safeguarding strategy mentions, there is a real danger of family placements breaking down and children ending up in social care. Poverty among refugee families is a major cause of breakdown. That can be resolved with small amounts of cash, as the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) described happening in Scotland. That is infinitely cheaper than the alternative of putting a child into care. Will the Minister guarantee that core integration needs are covered for reunited families? Will he meet me and representatives from the Scottish Government and Safe Passage to review best practice?

Britain has a proud tradition of honouring the spirit of international law and moral obligations by taking our fair share of refugees. As the feeling demonstrated in this House today shows, we must not now turn our back on unaccompanied children fleeing war and terror, who are not too far from here—in northern France, in Calais.

3.17 pm

**The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis):** I join others in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) and the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) on securing a debate on such an important subject, as well as all those who have made such thoughtful contributions. I agree that the tone has been hugely consensual on some core points, particularly the desire we all share to do the right thing by children who need our help the most. We will occasionally disagree on how to achieve that, but I think that core purpose is clear from the emotive, passionate and well informed speeches we have heard this afternoon. It is also important that we get things absolutely correct, and I will spend the next few minutes outlining some of the things that we are doing and that we can do, because some of the comments made this afternoon are simply not accurate.

We are a global leader in responding to the needs of those affected by conflict and persecution. Our country has a long and proud history of offering sanctuary to those most in need of protection. In response to the conflict in Syria, we have pledged over £2.46 billion in aid, and we will resettle 20,000 people in the UK by 2020 under the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme. More than 8,500 individuals are already here, about half of whom are children. We will also resettle 3,000 of the most vulnerable children and their family members from the middle east and north Africa by 2020 under the vulnerable children's resettlement scheme. Eurostat figures show that in 2016 the UK settled more refugees from outside Europe than any other EU member state, and over a third of all resettlement to the EU was here in the UK. We as a country, across this House and across our local authorities and community and faith groups, should be proud of that.

Our efforts do not end there, however. To reduce suffering along the key migration routes, we have allocated more than £175 million in humanitarian assistance to address the Mediterranean migration crisis, among other direct on-the-ground work and support we are giving in the region and in those communities.

Given some of the comments made in the debate, I want to make it clear that there is no need for migrants to return to Calais and the surrounding areas in the hope of travelling illegally and dangerously to the UK to claim asylum here. France is a safe country and those in need of protection should claim asylum at the earliest opportunity. Claiming asylum in France is the fastest route to safety for those who need protection.

**Adam Holloway:** Once someone from, for instance, Syria finds safety in Turkey, Jordan or Lebanon, however—[*Interruption.*] Wait. However crowded or unpleasant that might be, when they then decide to move further into Europe, they are making a choice. I would make the same choice, but at that point they are a migrant exercising their free will, and they are therefore qualitatively different from the people who have just found safety.

**Brandon Lewis:** The heart of my hon. and gallant Friend's point is that people should claim asylum in the first safe place they arrive at. That is the agreement and that is how the system works.

We also welcome the efforts of our French colleagues, who in recent weeks have, as Opposition Front Benchers have also recognised, established additional welcome centres to those already in place across the country. Four new centres have recently opened, away from the port area, where those wishing to claim asylum will be supported through the asylum process, and regular transportation is provided to these centres.

Bearing in mind questions raised earlier this afternoon, I want to make it clear that we work closely with France and other member states to deliver and transfer 480 unaccompanied children from Europe to the UK under section 67 of the Immigration Act 2016. That is the opposite of what some Members have said this afternoon about that process having stopped—it has not, it never has, it is still open.

A High Court ruling handed down today confirmed that the Government's approach to implementing section 67 has been lawful. The Government's focus is on working with local authorities and other partners to ensure we are transferring eligible children to the UK as quickly as possible, with their safety and best interests at the centre of all our decisions.

**Yvette Cooper:** The Minister said the Dubs scheme is not closed. Will he therefore now agree to contact again local councils across the country and ask them what further places they could provide under the scheme for next year?

**Brandon Lewis:** I will come to the wider point around that shortly, but, as I have just said, the High Court has outlined that the process the Government have used is lawful.

Children have already arrived in recent weeks from France and transfers are ongoing. We have been working closely with Greece to put in place the processes for the safe transfer of eligible children to the UK, and expect to receive further referrals in the coming weeks. I say to the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), the Chair of the Select Committee, that she is effectively proposing that we should just take children from another country. I am sure Members must appreciate, when they think this

through, that we simply cannot do that. We as a Government and a country must respect the sovereignty of other countries and their national child protection laws. That is the right thing to do.

For the year ending June 2017, we in the UK granted asylum or another form of leave to remain to more than 9,000 children, and have done that for more than 42,000 children since 2010. We are fully committed to ensuring that unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and refugee children are safe and that their welfare is promoted once they arrive in the UK. That is why yesterday, as has been outlined, the Government published a safeguarding strategy for unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children, in recognition of their increased numbers and specific needs, backing up the point I made earlier that we want to make sure we are doing the right thing by the children who need our support.

**Lyn Brown:** The Minister will remember that in my contribution and in those of other Members, we talked about children who have families here in the UK and who are desperate to get to them. Will he commit today to working with me on the two cases that I have brought to him, and on the other cases that Members on both sides of the House have raised, relating to children with families here who are risking their lives trying to be reunited with possibly the only family they have left?

**Brandon Lewis:** I have worked with the hon. Lady a great deal over the years, and I genuinely like her. I will respond to the particular cases she has brought up, and I will touch on the wider issue of family reunion in a moment if she will bear with me.

The motion understandably considers the impact of our exit from the EU on this country's participation in the Dublin regulation. I want to reassure the House that until we exit the EU, the UK will remain bound by EU asylum legislation, where we have opted in, including the Dublin III regulation. We are committed to ensuring that it operates efficiently and effectively, and the guidance we have published today is a further indication of our commitment in this area.

However, I want to clarify a misunderstanding that is out there. Dublin is not and has never been a family reunion route in itself. The recent reporting of this issue has been misinformed, and I hope that I can provide some clarity today by confirming a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) in his excellent contribution. The Dublin regulation is the mechanism used to determine the member state responsible for the consideration of an asylum claim, and it is primarily used in respect of adults, not children, to make transfers both into and out of the UK. It confers no right to remain in the UK once an asylum claim has been considered.

The right approach to this issue must be to negotiate with the EU on co-operation on asylum and migration, considering the issues in the round. The Government have set out a clear position that co-operation on asylum and migration, which we value, is for discussion with the EU. We support the underlying principle of the Dublin regulation that asylum seekers should claim asylum in the first safe country they reach and should not be allowed to "asylum shop". That point has been made by several of my hon. Friends today. Moreover, Dublin is a two-way process that requires the co-operation

of 31 other countries to work effectively. We do not think it appropriate to commit unilaterally to the entry into the UK of one cohort of those who currently fall within the scope of the Dublin regulation when it requires the co-operation of other sovereign nations to operate.

I want to pick up on the point that the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) has just raised. The wider issue of family reunion is hugely important, and Members across the House have rightly raised it this afternoon. The Government strongly support the principle of family unity, and we have a comprehensive framework in place for reuniting refugees safely with their families. We have reunited more than 24,000 partners and children with their family members already granted protection here in the last five years. Our family reunion policy allows children to join their parents here, and there are also specific provisions in the immigration rules that allow extended family members lawfully resident in the UK to sponsor children, where there are the right circumstances. That is aside from the work we do for our mandate resettlement scheme. As we leave the EU, we will continue to meet our moral duty to support refugees affected by conflict and persecution, including children, and continue this country's proud history of supporting and protecting those in need.

3.28 pm

**Heidi Allen:** I should like to thank everyone who has spoken so passionately in today's debate. There has been a broad recognition of the UK's contribution to tackling the migration crisis around the world, and I have taken away two conclusions. First, we must fulfil our obligations under Dubs. We need to fill those remaining places as soon as we possibly can. We have been reminded today that these are not numbers. They are people; they are children. I particularly want to thank the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) for reminding us of that fact, because it can be too easy to focus on the documents and spreadsheets when we should be focusing on the children and families.

My second conclusion is that we must not let Brexit reduce our ability to offer the broadest family reunification we can, whether under Dublin III or our own domestic legislation, perhaps through something new in the great repeal Bill or an immigration Bill. We need to ensure that we make this as broad as possible, and I was pleased to hear the Minister set out his intention to work towards achieving that. Further clarity around our domestic legislation might also be required.

At the end of the day, the migration crisis will not end any time soon. Whether it is due to war or climate change, I fear that this is only the beginning. We will have to face the situation as a global member of the world and, as a wealthy and compassionate society, we have a duty to lead. The crisis is not going to go away tomorrow, so our compassion must not go away either. I thank everyone for continuing to bring the plight of these children to the ears of the media and to the general public.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House notes that it is one year since the Calais Jungle camp was demolished; further notes that the UK demonstrated moral and political leadership in transferring 750 child refugees

[Heidi Allen]

from intolerable conditions in that camp to be reunited with family members in Britain and provided those children with protection under section 67 of the Immigration Act 2016; and believes that as the UK prepares to leave the EU, provision must be made to ensure that unaccompanied children in Europe can continue to access the safe and legal means to reunite with family and relatives in the EU as is currently provided for under the EU Dublin III Regulation.

## Sexual Harassment and Violence in Schools

[*Relevant documents: First Special Report of the Women and Equalities Committee, Sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools: Government response to the Committee's Third Report of Session 2016-17, HC 826, and Oral evidence to the Women and Equalities Committee, on Work of the Government Equalities Office, reported to the House on 11 October 2017, HC 356.*]

3.30 pm

**Mrs Maria Miller** (Basingstoke) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Third Report of the Women and Equalities Committee, Session 2016-17, on Sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools, HC 91; recognises that peer-on-peer sexual abuse is a significant issue affecting a large number of children and young people in schools, particularly girls; notes that the Committee found that data collection on instances of such abuse is inadequate and that too often schools fail to recognise, record and report sexual harassment and sexual violence; and calls on the Government to ensure that revised, specific guidance for schools on preventing and responding to sexual harassment and sexual violence is put in place before the end of the current academic year.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for its support in holding this debate and pay tribute to members of the Women and Equalities Committee, and our incredible team of Clerks and special advisers who work so diligently in support of everything that we do to make such inquiries possible. I am speaking today along with the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), who is also a member of the Committee. We are delighted to have this opportunity to look in more detail at the report that we produced well over a year ago.

There could never be a more timely debate. Parliament might not be a typical workplace, but we have a clear duty to tackle sexual harassment and sexual abuse, to have the right support so that victims can come forward without fear, and to act swiftly on the evidence that is presented. If Parliament cannot get it right, what example are we setting the rest of the country? There has been a wide range of allegations—some with evidence and some without—but the country will be watching how we handle them. We need to get it right, and blaming the victims or those who speak out is never right. Sexual harassment was never acceptable, but with record numbers of women in work and record numbers of women in this place—although still not enough—it is becoming more possible for voices to be heard. It is right that changes are made quickly to put in place the support systems that are currently lacking, and it is right that changes could well have been made within days. So why on earth do we find it so difficult to get the same swift action to protect children in our schools when the evidence is so clear, strong and compelling?

Sexual harassment and abuse are not only workplace problems. The scale of the problem among children in schools was set out by the Committee well over a year ago. Two in three girls under the age of 21 have experienced sexual harassment according to the Girlguiding “Girls’ Attitudes Survey”. In our evidence sessions, colleagues heard about children grabbing breasts, pinching bras, lifting skirts and bottom pinching—all those things are a routine part of daily life for schoolgirls in this country today. In 2015, a BBC freedom of information request that was sent to all UK police forces found that more

than 5,500 alleged sex crimes, 4,000 sexual assaults and 600 rapes had been reported in UK schools in the previous three years, with at least one in five offences being conducted by children on children.

The new evidence that really triggered the Committee's desire to call for another debate today was collected by "Panorama" from 38 police forces. Its work in October showed a 71% increase in peer-on-peer abuse in schools over the last three years. More than 7,800 cases were reported in 2016 alone, and the police tell us that that is just the tip of the iceberg. A 2013 joint inspectorate study of young sex offenders found evidence in half of cases of previous worrying sexualised behaviour that was not identified at the time, or that was disbelieved or minimised by professionals and families. In going unnoticed, the problem is doing yet more harm, and the harm does not stop at the school gates. The evidence suggests that the levels of sexual harassment that we see in schools continues through to universities and then into the workplace. More than two thirds of female students report being victims of sexual harassment at university. The most recent data on sexual harassment in the workplace comes from BBC Radio 5 Live through a ComRes poll, in which more than half of women said they had experienced sexual harassment at work or in school.

Why am I having to stand here using data from the BBC, "Panorama" and FOI requests? Why are we not collecting such data routinely so that Members of Parliament can hold the Government to account? Governments of every hue have decided not to collect the data, and that needs to change.

When we look at the data, which is very difficult to get hold of, we find that three quarters of reports that are made to the police about children abusing other children at school lead to no further action at all. Children tell us that sexual assaults and harassment are written off by some teaching staff as just banter, despite the safeguarding responsibilities that are already in place. Just as sexual harassment and assault are not acceptable in this place, they should not be acceptable in schools, universities and colleges around the country.

We are holding this debate to check what progress the Government are making in responding to the Select Committee report, which is well over a year old. In the light of new evidence from Girlguiding and "Panorama", we can see that the situation is certainly no better.

I want to take this opportunity to examine something that we did not touch on a great deal in the report, although it was referred to by parents. Sexual harassment is not new in the workplace and it is certainly not new in schools, as many hon. Members will recognise from their own school days, but what has changed is the fact that most children in this country now have tablets and smartphones at a very early age. Extreme pornography websites, social media and digital communications are all readily accessible to anybody with a tablet or smartphone. We have given our children access to the world through that technology, but without the rules and regulations that they see in almost every other aspect of their daily life. We have allowed the exponential growth of the ownership of these devices without asking any questions at all.

Perhaps we should not be surprised that Ofcom research shows that many people who look for a fact on Google think that only facts on Google can be true. They cannot believe that any data on there would not be

completely accurate. That is what we are dealing with. Half of three-year-olds and 75% of 11-year-olds use a tablet. That is Ofcom's data, not mine.

We could pick on any number of areas of criminal activity that come out of that high level of connectivity. We could talk about online peer-on-peer abuse among children, cyber-stalking, the posting of child abuse images or sexting, but let us stick with one area: extreme pornography. Again, we know the facts. Two in three 15-year-olds have seen online pornography. One in four 10-year-olds has seen online pornography. For those children, that is often the way they find out what a loving relationship looks like.

As well as updating the House on the work that is being done in response to the Select Committee report, will the Minister, who I know takes an extremely deep interest in these matters and is committed, like the Committee, to finding solutions, update us on what measures the Government are taking to tackle the role of online media in fuelling the sort of sexual harassment and sexually abusive behaviour that is becoming so prevalent in our schools?

Parents have told us that they understand their responsibility in this area, but they expect their children to be kept safe when they are at school. Parents have contacted the Committee about this, and I have spoken to two parents this week who have endured particularly harrowing difficulties. For obvious reasons, I will not use their names and I will anonymise their contributions, but I felt that the House should be aware of the very real damage this sexually abusive behaviour is having on our children today. Mrs X told me about the rape of her six-year-old daughter at school by a male classmate, which was simply dismissed by teachers as "playful activity". There was no central recording of these incidents because of the age of the other child—under the age of criminal responsibility—and certainly no support for the victim as a result. Mrs X would like school guidance that specifically states that children, no matter how young they are, should be protected in the same way as we might protect an adult who had been through a rape or sexual assault, as her daughter had, and that victims should never face the prospect of having to go to school again with those who have abused or even raped them. That would require the Government to act to ensure that primary and secondary schools adhere to that in their school placements.

The daughter of the second parent I spoke to was also raped at school. That parent described how girls as young as 12 encouraged each other to sext their peer group—that means they would be sending sexual images of themselves by mobile phone, which is a criminal offence. He also described how they were encouraged to have anal sex by their classmates. What was his observation as a father? He said:

"they have no idea they are experiencing sexual abuse...if their first frame of reference is viewing extreme pornography then spanking and being given a dog collar to wear around their neck isn't to them out of the norm".

So why do schools find this so difficult to deal with? Some are reporting the crimes, but some, particularly primary schools, are dealing with an area they never have before. Is the law clear? Do teachers understand their responsibilities? Sexual harassment is defined in law in the Equality Act 2010, but how many teachers have been asked to look at that, given that it talks about adults and adult workplaces?

[Mrs Maria Miller]

Our Select Committee report advocated a whole-school approach to creating a culture of respect and responsibility; that all incidents should be recorded and reported, and that they should be looked at in detail by Ofsted; that sex and relationships education should be compulsory for all school-age children; and that the guidance given to schools should be urgently updated.

Parents need to be aware of the consequences of putting their children online, and we should be considering age restrictions on tablets and smartphones. After all, it is not that long ago that we thought smoking did not cause us harm, but now we know a lot better. I applaud the Government's work on restricting underage people's access to pornography sites and encouraging parental blocks, but we know that as fast as the Government implement their plans, a way around them will be found. "Unblock in school" advertises to children a product called X-VPN, which allows access to blocked sites when at school, so it has got around that problem already. Multinational corporations generating significant profits in the UK are causing harm to our children, so why are we not already putting in place levies so that they pay for the harm they are creating?

**Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Good point!

**Mrs Miller:** Thank you.

I applaud the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport for putting forward a Green Paper on ways in which this situation might be improved, but I fear that these suggestions are long overdue. We need solutions, and they need to be designed into the products that we give to our children, not retrofitted as an afterthought.

What has happened so far? The Government's response to our report was very positive. We are pleased that it is now in law that children have to be given compulsory SRE, but what has actually changed in our schools? Nothing. To revise the guidance, the Government have set up an advisory group, but it has met only twice—why is there not more urgency?

Since our most recent evidence session with him, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Equalities has confirmed to me in writing that 124 schools have been judged to have ineffective safeguarding measures and are therefore inadequate. However, we still do not know how many schools are rated so poorly because of how they deal with sexual harassment.

Although sex and relationships education is now compulsory in law, we are told that even when the statutory guidance is issued—we are still awaiting a consultation on that—it will take a full academic year to come into force. How come we can act here in Parliament in a matter of days, yet it takes a full year to put in place safeguards for our children? The House needs to know how many legal cases the Department for Education is dealing with that relate to children who have been sexually harassed or abused, or worse, while still at school.

One year on, very little has changed for children in our schools, other than that they now perhaps feel more confident about speaking out and not being ridiculed. Schools already have clear responsibilities to keep our

children safe, but those 7,866 reported cases of abuse in 2016 suggest that the way in which schools are handling this problem does not work. If we can change things here in a matter of days, why can we not do the same thing for children? If we tackle sexual harassment and abuse early on, teach children about healthy relationships and respect, and properly regulate social media and digital communications, we may be able to start to tackle the root causes of the sort of sexual harassment that we see is so prevalent in wider society today. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Order. I am sure that colleagues can see that many Members wish to speak, so I shall start by imposing a time limit of six minutes.

3.46 pm

**Jess Phillips** (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): It is a real honour to both follow and work with the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller). She has outlined exactly where the problems exist, what the Select Committee found and the areas in which we still have so much progress to make.

I have worked in this area, including by delivering sex and relationships education in schools, for many years. I have written programmes for the Home Office in the past. In my career I have dealt with hundreds, if not thousands, of cases of rape and sexual violence against adults and children. As the right hon. Member for Basingstoke outlined, the cases are horrendous, and the cases in which children are involved hurt even more.

I am a resilient human being in this subject area; I have been trained and I know what I am talking about. This week, in this place, I find my resilience at its lowest ebb, because I feel like nothing is changing. I feel as if all the things the Select Committee heard about the need for boys and men to be included completely in SRE programmes, about gendered attitudes, about who we can and cannot trust, about the processes that should exist in schools but simply do not seem to—all those things are every single reason why what we have heard about happening here in the past few weeks happens.

We have an opportunity to change things. I have to keep believing that we have an opportunity to change the culture of our schools, Parliament and industries, because after this week it feels a little bit like I should give up having this same conversation. I will rally—do not worry—but the fact is that every single argument that has been made about this place could be applied to our schools at the moment. There is not a clear process in place for the harrowing peer-on-peer abuse that we have heard about, which should be called child abuse—that is what it is.

On the Committee, we heard from parents whose children had been left in the same classroom as their perpetrator. The complaint was not just how harrowing that is, but the fact that there is no guidance: there is no process to tell us what to do. What is so galling about that—and what has been so galling about some of the situations in this place this week—is that, if it were a teacher who had committed, or been accused of

committing, some of these crimes against a child, there would be a clear process to follow. Again, I find the parallel to here painful in that there is no process and no threshold for this place and the people who work in it.

**Helen Goodman:** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Jess Phillips:** I have been told that, because so many Members wish to speak, I should not take interventions. I am very sorry about that.

I say to the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills, who I know cares deeply both about the culture here and the culture in our schools, that getting SRE right does not need to take the length of time proposed. This is not something new; it exists in schools, but is patchy. I also say that, just like here, the advisory group on sexual violence and sexual harassment, which the Government have got on board to help with this, does not have any sexual violence academics, frontline specialists, or sexual violence organisations working on it. I fear that that means we are missing some of the very vital information that is needed to get this right in the future to make sure that we are not prejudiced and do not treat any of this like banter—like something that is just part of a culture that we must accept.

The length of time spent on the issue was, unfortunately, interrupted by the election. We will have to chalk that up to experience. I cannot bear to think that, in a year's time, we will be having the same debate because the process will not have changed in schools, SRE will not be being delivered compulsorily, and specialist agencies will not have been lined up to swoop in when schools rightly need help—schools are not specialists just as not all of us are specialists in this building. I leave that with the Minister and say that we must act.

3.52 pm

**John Mann** (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I praise the work of the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips). As I have been listening to them over a period of quite some time, I have learned a lot of important things.

The issue raised here today is, without question, the highest on the agenda for the country. There is so much ignorance about the scale of the problem. The problem has been made worse by social media—by the extent of our exposure to it and the fact that people are now exposed to things that they were not exposed to before. People use it now for communicating with each other.

We are talking about an epidemic of abusive sexual photographs of girls being circulated on a daily basis around schools. Schools and teachers have no idea what to do about the problem as they have not been trained, and Ofsted has no criteria for dealing with it. Even if all of that was in place, the law in relation to the social media companies in this country must be fundamentally changed. The exemption from publishers' liability must be removed, because if the system has been breached, it allows people or organisations to take legal action, exactly as they can in the print media. That exemption, which came from the United States at the beginning of the internet industry, is quite fundamental to our ability

to do something about social media. In essence, we are powerless across the world and in this country when it comes to that issue.

I will not repeat what the previous two speakers said about systems of reporting, but my experience is exactly the same. There is confusion, a lack of clarity, a lack of confidence in the system and a critical lack of training for key professionals. Those are fundamental issues. Some schools have got it and are good exemplars, but the vast majority are pretty clueless. That means that significant sexual offences—the routine, daily offences and the life-transforming ones that wreck the lives of the girls who are attacked—are possibly not even recorded. The details cannot be passed from one headteacher to another or to a governing body, so no one knows anything because there is no system in place.

There is meant to be good practice in higher education with consent training in universities. That training on understanding consent is quite profoundly needed for men and boys, and for girls and women. But it is not compulsory; no register is kept. People choose not to go—guess which people. Making that training compulsory in universities, schools and in education for 16 to 18-year-olds would mean more debate and dialogue about how it is done, and would make it far easier to spread examples of best practice. That would have a huge impact. We men in here should also have that compulsory training. It should be a requirement for sitting as Member of Parliament.

Finally—and the Minister has been helpful and active on this issue—people are saying that, even for 16 to 18-year-olds, some aspects are taught and the rest is not, even some of the basic stuff. From my experience, there is literally nothing in place in sports academies for 16 to 18-year-olds, not even the legal safeguarding requirements.

I get very depressed by the numbers of people—usually of women—who come to see me, and I find out what happened to them at school. Their parents do not know; they have no idea whatever. These women will not have reported to the police the fact that they have been raped. The volume is so incredibly profound that we have an epidemic in this country. If we do not act, we are responsible. We have that power. Therefore, the entire Parliament should be in here. I very much encourage those who have taken a lead to keep doing so and to kick the rest of us into action.

3.57 pm

**Mims Davies** (Eastleigh) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) on their work to secure this important debate. I also thank all members of the Women and Equalities Committee for their wide-ranging work and the cross-party spirit in which it is being undertaken. I sincerely miss being on that Committee because it brings so much good work to the House. Whenever I talk to people in my constituency about the work that really matters to me as an MP, I always say that my time on that Committee was the most positive experience.

In this House, we all understand the importance of ensuring that our schools—indeed, our educational establishments as a whole—are safe environments in which students can learn and thrive. I am still absolutely

[Mims Davies]

shocked when I listen to the evidence to the Select Committee of the young children who talked about the pressures and issues they live with.

I learned so much as a parent. I thought I knew so much—until I heard from those youngsters. So I thank the members of the Committee for the work they are doing. I also thank the Minister, because she is very committed to her work in this sphere, and I can think of no one better placed to start moving things forward. That is really what this debate is about.

I am so sorry about the spirit this debate finds the House in and about what has been raging around us. We absolutely need training courses; we need to learn and to work together. This morning, I sponsored the Women's Business Council's Four Years On reception in Parliament, which celebrated some really positive moves forward. It was really tough to espouse the good work we are doing here, given the environment we have to deal with. So we can do better in every sphere, and as we head into next year and the celebration of 100 years of women's suffrage, we have a real opportunity to make some positive steps.

For me, this debate is the start of a very long journey, and I agree with my right hon. Friend about the importance of relationship, sex and online education. During my work on the Digital Economy Bill, I was absolutely staggered by the amount of pornography our youngsters are able to get hold of at the touch of a button. From nudes, to sexting, to Snapchat, I do not think most parents, or indeed school establishments, understand what is out there. Why does this matter? We need to see these things against a background where, as the Committee heard, 5,500 sexual offences were recorded in UK schools over a three-year period—data published in 2015. Given that background, we have what we have heard described today as an epidemic.

However, there is some good work. Girlguiding is doing important work to make sure our young girls understand what sexual harassment is and how to deal with it. So there is hope. Universities UK is also doing great work on helping university students to understand that these learned behaviours need to be dealt with. As part of an investigation it carried out, 68% of female students said they had been the victim of one or more type of sexual harassment on campus. These are behaviours that people are learning from school and online, and parents do not necessarily know about them or understand them. The figures are deeply concerning, and I am pleased that the Department for Education is committed to working with the Women and Equalities Committee and the Government Equalities Office, which I was with earlier.

It is so important that we build on healthy relationships and keep our kids safe in school, and the primary school issue is really important. In preparation for the debate, I spoke with leaders at one of my local senior schools, and I was pleased to hear they did not feel that sexual abuse was a real concern in their school. However, they did say that, although they have strong safeguarding procedures in place, the culture is coming into school from elsewhere. That is where parents can very much work to change behaviour and change what is acceptable, but they need to know and understand what is out there.

I welcome the Committee's suggestions on working with Ofsted and independent schools, but social media companies and parents need to come to the table, and the Government need to get on with this. A year down the line, this epidemic is growing.

I would like to finish by once again thanking the Committee for all the work it is doing. It is providing the Minister and the Government with plenty to think about, but more importantly, plenty to act on.

4.3 pm

**Laura Pidcock** (North West Durham) (Lab): The scale and frequency of the sexual harassment of girls in schools is a disgrace, but, to be honest, I am not that surprised. That so many girls who are trying to learn, think and thrive do so in an environment of fear and intimidation is a symbol of the endemic sexism that exists in our society. Amidst accounts of sexual harassment emanating from our own workplace this week, the Select Committee report on schools is not surprising, because the culture that allows abuse and violence to thrive exists everywhere.

Why is it that cases of sexual harassment can exist in an institution such as this or in schools? The answer is that sexual harassment and violence against women and girls do not happen in a vacuum. When women and their male allies call out sexist language or jokes, when they challenge age-old stereotypical notions of what it is to be a man or a woman, when they challenge tired and rigid gender norms and expectations—because we know they are social constructs rather than a fabric of our DNA—it is not because they want deliberately to destabilise society but because everything counts. Sexual violence is not where it starts but a product of everything that has gone before. Every single thing counts: our thoughts, our words, our behaviours.

If we are to challenge sexual harassment in schools—or in this place—we must start by acknowledging that continuum and make it clear that this behaviour happens and matters. Liz Kelly and Jill Radford, in their excellent paper “Nothing really happened”, paint in stark detail how women's experiences of sexual violence are invalidated and how as women and girls we are systematically encouraged to minimise the violence we experience at the hands of men. The Select Committee report lays down a marker for schools. It says to girls in schools who have been called a slag or a slut, had their bra straps undone, been punched, tripped up, groped, had their bodies shared via text messages and worse that something did happen to them and that their experiences are not invalidated but count.

The pressure on young people today is immense—the pressure to consume, look good, be perfect. The Instagram and YouTube generations have a lens on an alternative reality that presents as unaltered women who often have been airbrushed to present a synthetic version of beauty. The pressure—to have big lips, big boobs, be thin, be perfect—is pressing but has not always been there. I know that young people can see through much of this YouTube culture, but nevertheless it seeps into a young person's consciousness and alters expectations among both boys and girls of what it is to be beautiful in this world.

I want to focus on one aspect of the recommendations: recording and reporting. I agree with many, if not all, of the findings. Those on compulsory relationships and sex education, which talk about understanding pornography

and consent, and those on separating targets from perpetrators have been mentioned, but the issue of recognising and reporting sexual harassment, as well as sexist incidents, is also key. In my previous job, I worked extensively with schools to encourage them to record and report racist incidents. Acknowledging and writing something down helps schools to establish the patterns, the prevalence and the actions that need to be taken and inform a whole-school analysis of the problem.

It is equally vital that schools report sexual harassment and sexist incidents. There was, however, strong reluctance to report racism because incidents at the start of the continuum were seen as not valid enough. Racist terminology and name calling were minimised, not least because teachers did not understand why they should be counteracting such language, why it was inappropriate or how to explain it to young people. They were also heavily burdened with other tasks—lesson plans, data proving pupil progress, exam preparation, behaviour management and, of course, teaching. It was seen as another daunting task—it should not have been, but it was. There was often a fear, too, that high reporting levels would make it appear that the school had a problem.

If we are to have an education system able to act on all the forms of oppression that young people face, we must give teachers the time and space to be trained to recognise and challenge sexist behaviours. Equally, however, we and Ofsted must make it clear that we value what they are doing. We cannot just keep piling work on teachers and expect them to do it, because they cannot.

One thing gives me hope: there is a generation of young people questioning and resisting the sexist template that society currently subscribes to. Young women are fighting back; they are not accepting being silenced or being called derogatory names. Teachers, too, really care and want to challenge these behaviours, but they feel unequipped and unsupported. There are very many young people defying society's expectations of them and questioning the current order. I imagine that all they want is for us to catch up.

4.9 pm

**Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) for securing this debate. I want to add my voice to the voices of those who have stressed to the Minister the urgency of making this happen. As my hon. Friend pointed out, we are possibly going to be in the invidious position whereby in a year's time MPs could have more protection, more guidance and more systems and processes than the young people in our schools.

I am what I would call an inbetweener feminist, in that I am in between the generation who first got involved in political campaigning on equality and those who now have to deal with the consequences of the internet. I hear the points that the right hon. Member for Basingstoke has made, and I too see the impact on our society. As an inbetweener feminist, I also know what is coming next. Let us be blunt about what has happened in the past couple of weeks in our society, not just here in the UK but around the world. There has been a wake-up call; we have all said, "Me too." But we

know that the backlash will come. We will hear, "It was just a knee—it was a misunderstanding." What happened will be minimised, with women being told they did not really experience the thing they know they experienced. I say to the Minister that if one positive thing comes out of this time in our society, let it be that we make sure the next generation will not be the same as our generation, finding ways to tell women to cope with these kinds of behaviour rather than changing them. The backlash will come, because this is about power. It is about the power to control what young women's worth is, and young men's too. We have to change the culture. Yes, we need legislation, and yes, we need training.

I see this in my own constituency. In recent weeks, I dealt with a mum who came to see me because her daughter was assaulted on a school trip by one of her peers. Her peer did not deny it, and the school did not inform the parent. The perpetrator was excluded from the school for a day and then let back in. Our schools and governing bodies are crying out for help to get this right. Why do we expect them, like our Members of Parliament, to be any different from the rest of our unequal society in not understanding how to deal with the power used to abuse and to harass? I want to put on record my gratitude to the right hon. Member for Basingstoke for saying that this is not just about our schools, because it is also about our universities and making sure that every young person can learn free from fear. Nor is it just about the impact of the internet: these kinds of behaviours have been going on for generations.

As the Minister will know, we had an opportunity to deal with this in the Bill that became the Children and Social Work Act 2017 when we highlighted the need to make sure that we updated the guidance on what schools should do if reports of sexual harassment and abuse were brought forward. Her predecessor promised us that that that would happen imminently. I recognise, as my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley pointed out, that the general election got in the way, but it is out of the way now. We need both that guidance and the sex and relationships education consultation now, because this is happening in our schools, colleges and universities, as it is happening in our wider society, now.

We can do something about this. If the Minister wants to fast-track the necessary legislation through a Statutory Instrument Committee, I will personally volunteer to be on that Committee to back her. If she needs help to take on the people who say, "It's complicated", I will be there with her. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley, I do not want to be here in a year's time hearing about the need for more paperwork and listening to more people telling us that it is a complicated issue—because in our hearts we know it is not. We know that our young men are picking up ideas that are not about the future that we want for them, and that our young women are living in fear, finding ways to avoid the hands and the catcalls while soaking up the YouTube culture. We know that we are seeing that in our society as well.

Right now, this place is not full of role models. Right now, we are not role models if we do not act on this, because we can see that it is happening and we know what we can do about it. We know that there are experts out there. We know that our teachers are crying out for

[*Stella Creasy*]

support to be able to deal with it. There is no reason to delay, not even by a few weeks or a day. We could all do something about it. I congratulate the Women and Equalities Committee—long may it keep raising this. Frankly, though, I wish that we did not have to keep raising it. I do not know what else it is going to take before we recognise that failing to act is damaging everyone in our society.

4.14 pm

**Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): As others have done, I thank the House for debating this extraordinarily important issue. I have been a secondary school teacher all my adult life, and the change that we have seen in young people's day-to-day interactions over time has caused me deep concern, on a professional level, for several years. That is particularly true of the rise in online bullying, which is linked to the harrowing subject that we are discussing.

The statistics in the Select Committee's excellent report make awful reading, but it is terrifying to think that this is just the tip of the iceberg. I completely agree with the sensible recommendations on improving child safeguarding, which include rewriting the Government guidance and allowing Ofsted to inspect how well schools are dealing with sexual harassment. Those measures are necessary to protect children from abuse, but they do not address how to prevent people from being abusive in the first place. I especially endorse the report's recommendation that all children must be given personal, social and health education that includes sex and relationships.

I used to pride myself on being an accessible teacher. "Don't smile before Christmas" did not last even an hour for me on the first day of school. I welcomed groups of teenagers hanging out in my classroom and chatting while doing homework and very often asking for help with their very personal problems. But I always called out inappropriate banter. I taught sex education in my role as a science teacher and PSHE as a head of year. In the school I worked at, we used to ask the 13 and 14-year-olds—my favourite age group, I should add—to put anonymous questions into a hat, and we would then draw them out over the course of weeks to talk about them. The questions were extraordinary at exposing how wide-ranging young people's views of the world are at that age. I used to find myself shocked at both what they knew—as has been alluded to, the sort of porn and destructive relationships that they thought were normal—and what they did not know. Most harrowing was the fact that so many of them did not know when it was okay to say no.

The conversations I had, with younger girls especially, unsurprisingly centred on their relationships and especially on sex. Some were confident, and some very insecure. We talked about consent and mutual respect. We would teach them to try to see things from other perspectives and never to assume that someone else was thinking the same thing as they were. Many reported that it was really hard to talk to their parents about such things, and they all appreciated the fact that we had helped to create a safe space where they could talk about what they wanted.

I am sorry to say that, sadly, not all schools are able to do that, and I recognise how lucky I have been to work in schools that do. The fact is that, as has been

mentioned, sex education in England is unfit for purpose. It is part of the national curriculum, but the academies and free schools programme means that 70% of schools do not have to teach it. Government guidelines have not been updated since 2000 and are unfit for the digital age, failing completely to address issues such as online pornography, LGBT+ relationships and the importance of consent.

That is not to say that schools do not see the value of PSHE or do not want to teach it, but school funding pressures mean that teachers have more and more subject contact time, leaving less and less time to have informal pastoral conversations. I should add that not all teachers are comfortable leading PSHE and difficult conversations, and that the right training is critical. The fact is that the picture is far too much of a patchwork and not at all well enough resourced.

The academies programme means that parents have no minimum guarantees about what their child will be taught, and that is why I have been campaigning for a minimum curriculum entitlement—a slimmed-down curriculum—that all state schools, no matter what type, would have to teach. That would include not just sex and relationships education, but all aspects of PSHE as well as citizenship and financial education.

I was heartened to see MPs from all parties join forces to ensure that the Government changed the law, so that sex education will—eventually—become compulsory for all secondary schools. However, I echo the calls from across the House for the Government to move faster. They have not brought the new law into force. We were told that the first students would study the new sex education curriculum in September 2019, but as we have already heard, we need the consultation process to start and move quickly. While they are at it, the Government should also make the other aspects of PSHE compulsory.

We have a duty of care to our next generation so that they do not make the same mistakes as our own. I also echo what others have said in the Chamber about how disheartened we have felt this week. Children deserve to flourish, and to know what it means to respect their peers and be able to enjoy healthy relationships, not ones characterised by misogyny and exploitation. We owe it to them to do much better.

4.20 pm

**Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) for securing this debate. It is in sad circumstances, however, in the sense that we are a year on from when the right hon. Lady's Committee made recommendations to the Government. Clearly, horrible and horrific issues have arisen this week, which makes it even more poignant that we are having this debate today. The issues in schools are the starting point for the systemic problem that we arguably have in this House and across various parts of society. It is not just in this House, but in business, local government and, I would argue, at every level of society.

I know, as I have already said to the Minister, that education is devolved to the National Assembly and is the responsibility of the Welsh Government, but this issue has no borders. It is a matter for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, for the

European Union and for every country in the world. This violence or this stain, as it were, on our society is unacceptable across the world, and in my opinion, it has no boundaries.

For women in particular, the reality of sexual harassment and violence is first apparent in school. As a former cabinet member for children's social care and education for four years in Wales, I fought for organisations such as Stonewall Cymru to come in and assess the impact of violence in schools on LGBT bullying and bullying generally, against the will of some teachers in senior leadership roles. To my mind, the academic year issue was quite poignant: I was up against those in certain schools who told me, "Oh, we couldn't possibly do that until next September", or "We cannot put in place your policy, Councillor Elmore"—as I was then. I was told time and again, "We cannot fit that into the curriculum because the curriculum plans have been written." I fought against that for several successive years. Whatever programme I put in place to try to improve outcomes for bullying, assessments or whatever it might be, there was the constant issue of timetabling, with people saying it would not work because they had already written the timetable. That was a true failing of some schools, school leaders and school governors, who lacked the understanding of what was happening at the coalface in some schools across the United Kingdom.

The effects of sexual harassment on mental health and wellbeing are of course huge, and it leaves lasting scars on girls, as well as on some boys, when they later move into the workplace. Those who have committed what in my view are offences think it is acceptable in society to carry on doing so. I speak as someone who was never sexually assaulted in school, but I was horrifically assaulted in school to the point where I was hospitalised several times and received mental health support for what would be considered breakdowns at the ages of 14, 16 and 17. I know all too well the horrors of being attacked for supposedly, as it happens, being a homosexual, which I am not—and if I was, so what? That was the rationale for my being attacked the final time at the age of 17, when I was assaulted and hospitalised, which involved minor reconstruction to part of my face. I was assaulted in a friend's home by seven school friends, based on the premise that I was—I shall keep this within parliamentary language—a gayer, and therefore deserved to be attacked as a 17-year-old boy.

Research published in "Psychological Science" in 2013 demonstrated that former victims of bullying in schools were more likely to have left school without qualifications and less likely to have friends. Again, this is a systemic issue: girls do not perform less well than boys as long as girls are actually treated fairly within education. It is a huge failure of all society that we have this ongoing problem. The NSPCC mentions abuse survivors. The idea that someone was abused as a child disgusts us. Nevertheless people survive that abuse, but it means that they may then have relationship difficulties and will not understand what it is to be in a loving, caring relationship. If a child understands that abuse is something that simply happens, they may expect it when they marry—perhaps they never marry, but when they form a relationship or whatever.

In the time remaining, I wish to touch briefly on work by the Welsh Government in encouraging schools formally to record cases of abuse. They started that last

year, and for the first time in a number of years, schools in Wales are now recording cases to ensure that that is fed into Welsh Government information. The Welsh Government are also instructing schools to mark Safer Internet day, and to explain, for example, "These things can happen to you on social media, or with access to pornography". Perhaps the Minister could consider those points and learn from the devolved Administrations.

The Welsh Government have also approached Women's Aid when formulating the guidance that goes to schools. I do not suggest for one minute that it is all perfect and rosy and that the sun is shining—the sun often does shine in the valleys of Wales—but we can learn lessons from the education service in Wales, and we should look at that. Finally, I echo the calls made by the right hon. Member for Basingstoke about social media. As my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) said, we must do more to hold social media companies to account—I have spoken about that many times in this Chamber. We must bring them to book, and the law must be changed to improve young people's lives.

4.26 pm

**Karin Smyth** (Bristol South) (Lab): This is my first opportunity to talk in a Backbench Business Committee debate because I usually rush home on a Thursday to look after my children. It has been a pleasure to be here, and I say to the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) that, although some of us cannot be part of the work done by the Women and Equalities Committee, we very much support it and it is a pleasure to take part in this debate.

This debate is important for two reasons. I am the mother of three almost-teenage boys at secondary school. My house is full of banter, non-stop football and male sport. It is often full of teenage boys who come round to watch said sport and banter with said boys, along with my partner. One good thing about being a Member of Parliament is that I have total autonomy over my own remote control because I get my own television in my own house.

I have felt the responsibility of being a mother to those boys particularly strongly in the last couple of weeks, and I have been horrified and deeply incapable of explaining to them the behaviour of some of my colleagues across the House. It is not a position that I ever expected to be in; I am singularly unequipped to deal with it, but we do our best.

People have spoken about role models, and in the past two weeks I have been pleased that among our colleagues there are some magnificent role models. In the past few weeks, I have talked with many male colleagues who are also parents of teenage boys about how they continue to be good role models for their sons. I am not sure whether I am an inbetweener feminist—I am slightly older than my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy). I started my life as a feminist, but we must equip ourselves to talk with young boys about these matters, and that is why the report is so important.

My second reason for feeling passionately about this issue is that, like that of many hon. Members, my surgery continues to be full of young women who are

[Karin Smyth]

dealing with the consequences of sexual harassment and domestic violence—that is a huge issue in my constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) is an expert in that area and has 26 years' experience of such work. She has always been very supportive to me, as I am not an expert in this area. She kindly lent me some of her notes for today, and she has written about the work in which she has been involved. The numbers are horrific—I had absolutely no idea that that level of sexual harassment was prevalent in our schools, despite being actively involved in my children's school and education at all ages.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West has said that while young people need to know the basics of sex education, they also need to know how they can leave an abusive relationship, how they can seek help, or what the consequences are when their classmates are suffering abuse or harassment. We have heard some horrific examples today.

People are not equipped to support young people in schools. The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) talked about her experience as an educator. It is critical to help the people in our schools so they can talk about these issues and guide our young people. I was educated at a Catholic primary school. If my parents had had the opportunity when we were talking about such things, would they have opted me out of such education? That is a difficult one. I think my mother probably would have done so and that would have been wrong. I feel very passionately about secular education because of my own experiences. It is not acceptable—as a parent, I feel very strongly about this—to opt children out of this education. The rise in academies and their choosing not to teach these matters is also not acceptable. The events of the past two weeks in this place heighten the need for us to set an example to the country about educating and equipping all our young people in the future.

4.31 pm

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I am delighted to be able to join you for this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am usually away up the road as well, so I am very glad to be here for this very important debate on this very important report. I pay tribute to the wonderful members of the Committee, not least the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), for putting the report together, and pursuing the issues and the evidence we need to ensure that action is taken.

The Scottish Parliament Equalities and Human Rights Committee, under the chairmanship of Christina McKelvie, produced a similar report, published in July, on prejudice-based bullying and the harassment of children and young people in schools. It is, I suppose, not remarkable that the report addressed a lot of similar issues. What I took from both reports was the issue of the prevention of misogynistic behaviour, which is not just a matter for girls or for boys. The whole school community should be involved in considering the issues that drive sexism in society. As many Members have said, this is about not just schools, but how universities and society as a whole deal with these issues.

It is important that sex education is available to everybody and is consistent across all schools, so that everybody can receive the same message and has a proper space in which to learn. I pay tribute to the Time for Inclusive Education—TIE—campaign in Scotland, which is pushing very hard to get LGBTI+ education into schools. As the hon. Member for Ogmire (Chris Elmore) mentioned, this area can be a huge source of bullying. We need to ensure that everyone feels safe and protected, and is able to conduct their education without fear of bullying and harassment.

Rape Crisis Scotland, in its evidence to the Scottish Committee, talked about the focus schools often have on girls' behaviour—how girls are supposed to dress or act in a particular way, and how they should not feel pressurised to engage in sexting and so on—when it should be the other way around. They should not be pressured or made to feel that what they wear has anything to do with other people's behaviour towards them.

It might be useful for this Parliament if I highlight the Abusive Behaviour and Sexual Harm (Scotland) Act 2016, which came into force in July. It makes it a criminal offence, with a sentence of up to five years' imprisonment, to disclose, or threaten to disclose, an intimate photograph or film. That is quite a deterrent. There has been a huge public information campaign in Scotland around it, under the banner of “Not yours to share”, highlighting the fact that such images are not yours to share. They are intimate images and should not be shared, and people should not be pressured to have them taken in the first place if they do not want to.

As there is for many of the other issues raised in this debate, there is a gap in the data on this problem. Engender, the wonderful women's organisation in Scotland, has highlighted the data gaps in reporting and where the problem is. There is almost certainly under-reporting of sexual harassment in schools as in life, because it is normalised—it becomes a joke, part of the banter. If this week has taught us anything, and I hope it has, it is that we must believe women and we must not trivialise this sort of behaviour, because that is the start of a dangerous slope.

In Scotland, teachers have been at the forefront of campaigning. I commend the report by the Educational Institute of Scotland “Get it Right for Girls”, which challenges misogynistic behaviour in schools—everything from physical attacks down to the language used in schools. Saying things are “girly” or telling people to “man up” perpetuates stereotypes. The EIS also challenges objectification of women and the roles of women in society. We have an awful lot of work to do on that.

I think about that sort of thing quite a lot, because I have a seven-year-old and a wee girl who turns four next week. I am very conscious of what they learn in school and nursery. When my son was in nursery, all the kids were asked to think about what job they wanted to do when they grew up, and they made a video. The boys wanted to be ambulance drivers and soldiers—very active roles. All the wee girls in that class—all of them—wanted to be a dancer or a singer. There is nothing wrong with being a dancer or a singer, but why were they choosing those at the age of three, rather than to be an ambulance driver or anything else? Why were they so stereotyped into those roles at the age of three? We need to think about that.

Consent also starts at a very young age—we can think about that with children too using something as simple as tickling. If you are tickling a child and they say, “Stop,” you stop. That is teaching consent to very young children. They understand that. We can build in resilience from a young age and teach children that if they want something to stop, they tell the person doing it to stop, and that happens.

I could say many, many more things, but I am happy to conclude at that. I encourage the Government to look at other places and to act, because as all hon. Members have said this afternoon, we cannot wait any longer for action. Every day that every child goes to school in this country, they face this problem. That is not acceptable anymore. We need to act.

4.37 pm

**Dawn Butler** (Brent Central) (Lab): I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for securing this debate, which she opened with a thoughtful speech. As Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, she has led important work to expose the extent of sexual harassment and violence in schools.

I thank all those who contributed to the debate. We heard moving speeches, including from my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore), who gave an example of how we can use our own experiences to make valuable points in this place. I also thank Mr Speaker, who is not in the Chair at the moment, both for the assurances he gave on Monday that sexual harassment and bullying are not acceptable here or anywhere else, and for the subsequent meeting with him, the Leader of the Opposition and others in his office.

The motion we are debating is part of a cultural and political watershed. As we heard today, the exposure of Harvey Weinstein by the survivors and victims of his brutal misogyny has ended his impunity and serves as a stark warning that no one—no matter how powerful they are, what their position is, or who their friends are—is free to harass, or inflict violence against, anyone of any gender or a child. Here in this House, as the right hon. Lady said, people are coming together across party lines to say that enough is enough. Bullying, harassment and misogyny must end. We have reached a tipping-point in all industries and sectors. That is unprecedented, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) said, now is the time to act.

Sadly, the abuse in Hollywood and Parliament is also widespread in our schools. That shows that there is no refuge from misogyny. Sexual harassment and violence operate at the same level inside and outside the school gates. I remember during the election being verbally abused by a constituent who shouted that he would not vote for me because I refused to support his son at school. It took me a while to register that he was the father of a young boy who, with a group of friends, had surrounded a young girl and pulled down her knickers. I spent a long time trying to get him to imagine if it had been his daughter, not his son—and I did not care whether he was going to vote for me.

Bullying and sexual harassment is an attempt to stop young people—predominantly, but not exclusively, women—from achieving their potential. It is intended to humiliate, undermine, threaten, silence and intimidate.

Coupled with a climate in which such behaviours have been normalised, if not trivialised, through comments such as, “It’s only a touch,” “It was just banter,” and “It didn’t mean anything,” we are teaching impunity for perpetrators, while saying to young women that this should be accepted rather than challenged.

We are enabling an environment in which women and girls in particular feel unsafe in schools, and that is a very uncomfortable place to be. The result is that they are often unable to learn, as in that kind of environment they feel powerless to expect any challenge to such behaviour. This is harming many young people’s learning outcomes and long-term financial independence, and it is also damaging their mental health.

The situation is bleak. As we have heard, Girlguiding has found that almost two thirds of girls—64%—were sexually harassed at school in the last year. That figure is up from 59% in 2014. But young women are refusing to accept this horrific culture. Some 59% of those aged between 11 and 21 have said they would feel confident to challenge sexual harassment at school when they see it. I am sure that this is in no small part due to bullying and harassment being publicly challenged.

I would also like to briefly highlight the situation at school for LGBT+ pupils. Stonewall has found that nearly half of LGBT+ pupils, including two in three trans pupils, are bullied for being LGBT+ at school. That does not even include the homophobic and transphobic abuse that LGBT+ pupils receive outside school. I know that the Minister is passionate about these matters, so will she tell us if the Department for Education will ensure that all teacher training programmes will teach positively about LGBT+ issues and tackling anti-LGBT+ bullying? Training is vital to take people on a journey so that pupils and teachers understand, and so that adults in general and we in this place understand. I again thank Mr Speaker for agreeing at the meeting with Her Majesty’s official Opposition that training on matters such as sexual harassment and unconscious bias will be provided centrally by the Houses of Parliament, subject to all the checks and balances.

Last year’s Women and Equalities Committee report on sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools not only uncovered the extent of such behaviour in schools across England, but found that the Government had no plan to tackle the causes and consequences of violence aimed at young women. There can be no doubt that it was the work of the Committee, as well as of those who campaign outside this place, that led to the Department for Education announcing compulsory relationship and sex education in schools, and this is to be welcomed. A report prepared for the Government highlighted the numbers of young people who had seen pornographic material in 2015: 2% of nine to 10-year-olds; 9% of 11 to 12-year-olds; and 25% of 13 to 14-year-olds, and 15 to 16-year-olds. The right hon. Member for Basingstoke cited other disturbing figures in her speech.

There is no time to be lost in teaching relationship and sex education in our schools, and the Government must ensure that RSE is properly funded and resourced. Will the Minister tell the House whether there has been any discussion with the Treasury to secure adequate funding? If not, when will that happen? With the Budget just around the corner, now is the perfect opportunity for money to be allocated. Will she confirm when the public consultation will begin? It would be helpful to

[*Dawn Butler*]

know more about the consultation arrangements, including its timescale, and whether the Department will ensure that girls' and young women's voices will be represented. Will she also make a commitment that relationship and sex education for all children and young people will include LGBT+ inclusive training.

Finally, will the Minister confirm that the Department for Education is preparing new guidance for schools on how to deal with sexual harassment and assaults, as recommended by the Committee? Will schools get that guidance before Christmas? If so, are there any plans to train teachers on its use? As I said earlier, training is as important as implementation and ensuring that the guidance is rolled out through all schools.

4.46 pm

**The Minister for Women (Anne Milton):** I have a long speech, so I will not be able to cover all the points that have been raised, but I will ensure that everyone who has contributed to the debate gets a timeline of what is happening. If I do not address all the points raised by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Brent Central (*Dawn Butler*), I will ensure that she gets an update.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (*Mrs Miller*) on securing this debate. She has done a brilliant job as the first and only Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, on which she really is to be commended. The hon. Member for Ogmore (*Chris Elmore*) said that it was a coincidence that we should be having a debate this week on individuals abusing their powerful positions in order to sexually exploit those who are seeking patronage or merely trying to get on with their jobs—and that is just in Westminster. As we have heard, however, the reality is that this is happening everywhere, including in our schools. The #metoo campaign has without doubt gained momentum and done much to reduce the stigma and damaging shame associated with people coming forward to tell of their experiences. The hon. Member for Ogmore got a hug from the hon. Member for Walthamstow (*Stella Creasy*). He bravely mentioned his own horrific experiences, for which he deserves not only a hug but our respect.

I want to pick up on a number of points that have been raised. My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke gave the House some shocking figures, but the really worrying thing is that they are just the tip of the iceberg. She rightly said that if we get this wrong in schools, the problem can go on right the way through a child's life and result in them becoming abusive adults. She talked about the collection of data, and I have great sympathy with her on that. If we measure it, it matters. I think she deserves a fuller letter on that point in particular. She specifically mentioned online pornography. We have been talking about that for as long as I have been a Member of this House. I am not a schools Minister, but I am Minister for Women, and perhaps it is sad that I am not entirely shocked by all this.

I have been asked whether the law is clear and if teachers understand it, and the shadow Minister talked about training. Even when people understand the law and what they are required to do, they still need training in how to do it. My right hon. Friend the Member for

Basingstoke was also right to say that as soon as the Government introduce restrictions, someone will find a way round them. I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is very aware of a number of these issues.

When my friend—I use that term on purpose, because our friendship has been in the papers—the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (*Jess Phillips*) and the hon. Member for Walthamstow spoke, the emotion behind their contributions was clear. Like the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley, I have to keep on believing that things will change. We will not give up. Things can be dispiriting at times, but I am firmly of the belief that if we—women in particular, but I am not excluding men, who have made some contributions today—keep on going resolutely and in a cross-party way, we will make some progress.

There will be more directive guidance—the shadow Minister requested that—but in some ways, sadly, action needs to be taken on a case-by-case basis. Teachers cannot be the arbiter, but schools have to recognise that a referral of a serious sexual assault to the police is not the end of the matter. The hon. Lady is right that we have to act. The hon. Member for Walthamstow spoke a lot about power, which we do not talk about enough, because a lot of sexual abuse and harassment is all about power.

The hon. Member for Bassetlaw (*John Mann*) was as dogged as ever. He rightly pointed out that we must not forget that some schools are excellent, but that we do need consent training in schools and universities. He was also absolutely right that we need training about consent in this place, too. He talked about an epidemic in this country and, sadly, he is probably right. We can start by talking about and changing things here, but there has to be change across the country. My hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (*Mims Davies*), who is doing a great deal as chair of the all-party group for women in Parliament, talked about social media companies, which have been mentioned a lot. They have to come to the table, and we need to do more to make them stand up and note their responsibilities.

Relationship education in primary schools and relationship and sex education in secondary schools were made compulsory by the Children and Social Work Act 2017. The Act also provides powers to make PSHE mandatory in schools subject to consultation, which is ongoing, and we will be looking to hear from schools, teachers, parents, safeguarding experts and, to respond to the shadow Minister, from young girls and indeed young boys. The consultation should not be restricted, because sexual violence is not just restricted to girls. We will develop new statutory guidance on RSE, and we hope that draft regulations and guidance will be published in 2018. Regulations will then be laid alongside the draft guidance, and I have no doubt that there will be further opportunities for debate in the House.

Making RSE compulsory is absolutely not the end. I was public health Minister when the FPA was campaigning to make it compulsory, and I used to say that just ticking a box and getting the geography or RE teacher—somebody with nothing to do on a Thursday afternoon—to do it is not sufficient. This education has to cover the sort of issues that have been spoken about in this debate, and the situation is complex. We all come to the

topic of RSE with our own experiences, and we need to be able to park those experiences in order to provide high-quality training, which must include an understanding of power in relationships and among peers, and how it can be used in a sexual nature to force young people to submit.

All schools have a legislative duty to safeguard and protect children, and Ofsted always reports on whether arrangements for safeguarding children are effective. The Education and Skills Funding Agency carries that responsibility for academies and free schools. Similarly, parents and carers must always have the opportunity to discuss concerns with children's social care and the police. "Working together to safeguard children" is the definitive piece of statutory guidance on safeguarding. It clarifies the legislative requirements on local authorities, children's social care, health services, the police, schools, and other organisations that work with children and families.

It is important to note that inadequate safeguarding is one of the few reasons why Ofsted can rate a school as inadequate, irrespective of other good performance. A school can be brilliant at maths and everything else, but if it fails on safeguarding, it will be rated as inadequate. In a serious situation—a number of serious and harrowing situations have been raised today—if parents or carers do not think that a child is safe, they should go to children's social care. Alternatively, if a parent or carer feels that a school is not fulfilling its duty because either it is not following its policies or it has inadequate policies, there is a whistleblowing line with Ofsted and the NSPCC.

Part of what we can do as Members of Parliament is to get parents and carers who come to us to look at their schools' policies and then call out the schools that are not doing what they should. Ofsted can do what it does, but in the meantime we all have a duty. Perhaps we as Members of Parliament should be looking at the schools in our constituencies, asking them about their safeguarding policies and taking a view as to whether they are adequate.

I have not covered all the points I would have liked to address, but I just want to say that I do not consider myself to be an inbetweener—I think I am a born-again feminist. I do not think that the House of Commons is sexist; I think it just smells of boys a bit, to be honest. When I was public health Minister and I had responsibility for sexual health, what struck me more than anything when reflecting back over 40 years was how very much more complicated life is for today's young people. Young people have to make decisions on a far more complex set of choices than I ever had to make. For me, it was just about smoking and drinking, and how much to do of both. Now it is about taking club drugs, being on the pill, using a condom to protect oneself from STIs, who to have sex with—and where and when—and the risks of going home with somebody. If we overlay that with everything that is on social media, all the pornography that is freely available, all the coercive sexual behaviour that we know goes on in schools, and sexual assault and rape in or outside the classroom, it is absolutely clear that we have much more to do to make young people more resilient and able to resist the challenges they face. There is no doubt that there is an urgency to do exactly that.

4.58 pm

**Mrs Miller:** I thank everybody who has taken part in the debate, particularly my right hon. Friend the Minister, who I know takes this issue to heart.

If we do not tackle sexual harassment in schools, not only do we let down girls, who are most often the victims, but we let down boys, because they do not learn how to develop healthy relationships. As the mother of two teenage boys, I feel that strongly.

I welcome the clear commitment that the Minister has given, but I will welcome even more her action to bring about the changes that we proposed in our report. The House will look to her to put her weight, commitment and enthusiasm behind that.

**Mr Speaker:** I am grateful to the right hon. Lady and to all colleagues who took part in the debate.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the Third Report of the Women and Equalities Committee, Session 2016-17, on Sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools, HC 91; recognises that peer-on-peer sexual abuse is a significant issue affecting a large number of children and young people in schools, particularly girls; notes that the Committee found that data collection on instances of such abuse is inadequate and that too often schools fail to recognise, record and report sexual harassment and sexual violence; and calls on the Government to ensure that revised, specific guidance for schools on preventing and responding to sexual harassment and sexual violence is put in place before the end of the current academic year.

## PETITION

### Early years provision

4.59 pm

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing me the opportunity to present this important petition concerning early years provision in Warwickshire. The residents of Warwick and Leamington, the constituency I represent, have asked that I put forward this petition, which is the latest of six that have together collected more than 7,000 signatures from people across Warwickshire who oppose the closure of 25 children's centres. The petition asks Warwickshire County Council to reconsider its decision to reduce the number of centres following a budget cut of £1.2 million. It urges the council to postpone its decision at the very least and asks that there is full consultation on these proposals with the residents of Warwickshire.

Following is the full text of the petition:

*[The petition of residents of Warwick and Leamington declares that Warwickshire County Council have put forward proposals for children's centres which could see Warwickshire's 39 centres reduced to 12 community hubs, due to budget cuts of £1.18million; further that the Council's final decision is expected on 9th November 2017; further that the Council's consultation did not allow for meaningful views of the local community to be collected; and further that, if these proposals go ahead, then early years provision in Warwickshire will be badly affected.]*

[Matt Western]

*The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage Warwickshire County Council to reconsider its proposals for reducing Warwickshire's children's centres from 39 centres to 12 community hubs, and at the very least should pause these proposals and consult further with residents in Warwickshire.*

*And the petitioners remain, etc.]*

[P002073]

## University of Essex

*Motion made, and Question proposed,* That this House do now adjourn.—(Craig Whittaker.)

5 pm

**Mr Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I am grateful to you for granting me this debate, Mr Speaker, and it is a pleasure that you should be in the Chair, given that you are also the chancellor of the University of Essex. We are fortunate that you have taken on that role. I am also grateful to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills for being here, and I look forward to her reply to this debate. I hope she will convey the points of concern I am raising to her colleague, the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation.

As the UK prepares to leave the EU, universities, including the University of Essex, are facing much uncertainty: what access will there be for EU students and academics after the UK leaves the EU? What fees will EU students be liable to pay? Will EU students still have access to the UK student loans system? Will the UK continue to participate in EU research programmes such as Horizon 2020? Despite all that, I have never doubted that the UK's universities will continue to thrive outside the EU, just as they did before we joined.

The 2018 QS World University Rankings put four UK universities in the top 10 in the world, and nine in the top 50. What is more, there are opportunities for universities when we leave the EU. By levelling the playing field between EU and non-EU students and academics, universities will be better able to compete with all our international rivals—the big US universities and the emerging universities of Asia, as well as the European universities. But the Government need to make decisions as soon as possible so that universities can plan for the future.

Since I was first elected for Colchester, North in 1992, I have had the privilege of representing the University of Essex in Parliament. We have a close relationship, and I am a member of the court of the university. Over the years, I have witnessed how much the University of Essex has contributed to academia, the local economy and the wider community. It continues from strength to strength. I make no apology for using this opportunity to set out the university's progress and achievements. In June, Essex was awarded "gold" in the teaching excellence framework. Essex was also ranked in the top 15 in England for student satisfaction for the fifth year running in the national student survey, and 22nd in "*The Times* and *The Sunday Times* Good University Guide 2018". Furthermore, Essex was ranked in the UK's top 20 universities for research excellence in the last research excellence framework.

Very few universities excel in both education and research, while also performing strongly in measures of overall student experience, graduate prospects and quality of facilities. Essex is one of a very small group of universities that genuinely achieves that. As a result, Essex students benefit from a research-led education that not only equips them to succeed on their courses, but provides them with the skills to succeed in their chosen careers after graduation. I look forward to continuing to work with the university in the years ahead, as it builds on these achievements.

The Higher Education and Research Act 2017 will introduce a new regulatory framework. One of its effects is to establish two new bodies, one called the Office for Students and the other called UK Research and Innovation. I will not elaborate on the complex details of the reforms, but there is concern that those two bodies must work closely together, reflecting the importance of integrating research and teaching. I know that a consultation is in progress, but I hope the Minister can reassure universities about that in her response.

I commend to the Government the 2014 Public Administration Committee report on the effectiveness of public bodies, "Who's Accountable?". I was Chair of that Select Committee at the time. Ministerial directions will not be enough to ensure co-ordinated working. Our report found that to make things work effectively in such a situation, the Department must develop confident, open and trusting relationships, both within the Department on the two policy areas and between the officials in the Department and the leadership of those two public bodies. There is no other way to ensure a high level of co-operation between the two bodies so that the mutual benefits that result from excellent research and outstanding educational experiences are promoted.

This is proving to be a record year for recruitment at the University of Essex, with close to 6,000 students starting undergraduate or postgraduate courses this autumn. The university has seen unprecedented levels of interest in student places, with more than 20,000 applications for 4,400 undergraduate student places this year. This has allowed the university to continue to grow in size. In 2016, it had 14,000 students, compared with only 9,500 in 2012. The university plans to grow further, increasing student numbers to 20,000 by 2025.

The University of Essex has recruited more than 152 new academic staff over the past three years and invested heavily in its professional services. That recruitment continues as the university continues to grow. It is also making a significant investment, until 2021, of around £90 million in its teaching facilities, student accommodation, knowledge gateway building programme and sports facilities. I look forward to seeing the outcome of that work.

**Will Quince** (Colchester) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. As he knows, around half the University of Essex's students live in the Colchester constituency. Does he agree that the university plays a huge social, cultural and economic role in Colchester's prosperity? We are incredibly proud to have the university linked so strongly to our town.

**Mr Jenkin:** I certainly agree with my hon. Friend. He will be as acutely aware as I am of what a big role the university plays in the civic life of Colchester and the surrounding area.

The University of Essex's research is pioneering and world class. Its department of government, at which you studied, Mr Speaker, is ranked the best in the country in every assessment of research quality that has been undertaken. The university is also in the top four for social science research, fifth for economics and 10th for art history. Last year, the university secured £42 million of externally funded research income, including half a

million pounds secured by a biological sciences research team to investigate marine bacteria, which will improve our understanding of the impact of global warming on this vital part of Earth's life-support system.

The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, of which I am Chair, scrutinises the UK Statistics Authority, which has done work on what is known as big data. As Chair of that Committee, I am delighted that the University of Essex won £27 million from the Economic and Social Research Council to support its work on understanding society up to 2021. It is the largest longitudinal statistical study of its kind, and it provides crucial information for researchers and policy makers about changes in attitudes and behaviours over time and on the causes and consequences of deep-rooted social problems and change in people's lives. The university's status as a leading centre of expertise in analysing and handling big data, such as that generated through the Understanding Society programme, received further validation in 2016, with UNESCO's establishment of its only chair in analytics and data science at the university.

I would be grateful if the Minister set out how the Government will remain fully committed to recognising and rewarding research excellence wherever it is found, whether at Essex or elsewhere. I would also like to pay tribute to the late Anthony King, who, in 1968, became reader in government at the University of Essex, which gave him the opportunity to shape the department, which now enjoys such a renowned reputation.

University of Essex research has impact through partnerships with businesses of all sizes. That work was recognised when the university was ranked in the top 10 in the UK for engagement with business through what the Government recognised as knowledge transfer partnerships, and supported through the programme run by Innovate UK, to help businesses improve their competitiveness through better use of UK knowledge, technology and skills.

The knowledge transfer partnerships are one of the main ways in which the university ensures its research feeds into business activity, and the range and scope of those partnerships is extensive. For example, Essex works with the digital agency, Orbital Media, to use artificial intelligence to create automated online GP services. Essex also works with the organisation Above Surveying, which will use the latest technology to improve the way its drones monitor and inspect solar farms.

Essex is continuing to expand its business engagement and the University of Essex Innovation Centre is now being built on the Colchester campus. This is a joint initiative with Essex County Council and the south-east local enterprise partnership, which, when completed, will provide space and support for up to 50 start-ups and smaller high-tech businesses in the Knowledge Gateway research and technology park.

The university's research impact also supports public institutions in tackling challenging social and economic issues. In conjunction with Essex County Council, the university has appointed the UK's first local authority chief scientific adviser, Slava Mikhaylov, professor of public policy and data science, who supports Essex County Council to develop policy rooted in scientific analysis and evidence.

[Mr Jenkin]

Essex was one of the very first universities to start offering degree apprenticeships in higher education, which provide students with the skills that industry needs and allow them to combine studying for a full degree with gaining practical skills in work. Such apprentices get the financial security of a regular pay packet, while providing businesses with a cost-effective way to bring in new talent and skills or develop their workforce. Tech giant ARM, alongside local small and medium-sized enterprises, is already offering degree apprenticeships in partnership with Essex. The university's work in this area is hugely beneficial, with both students and businesses standing to benefit a great deal from these opportunities.

This determination to use research to drive growth has led to Essex being asked to lead a £4.7 million Government project in the eastern region and to grow the economy through improved productivity by encouraging collaboration between universities and businesses. The "Enabling Innovation: Research to Application" network will build collaborations to support business innovation across Essex, Kent, Norfolk and Suffolk.

I am enormously proud of the University of Essex's work. However, I am also proud of its global outlook and international spirit.

**Mr Mark Francois** (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I declare an interest: I went to Bristol—I am sorry about that. As an MP from the south of the county, may I confirm to my hon. Friend that the reach of the university goes across the entire county and indeed beyond? In the south of Essex, we greatly value the economic contribution that the university makes to the life of our county.

**Mr Jenkin:** I very much welcome my hon. Friend's intervention. At the point where I am celebrating the University of Essex's global reach, it is entirely appropriate that Southend and Rayleigh should be included in the equation.

Staff and students come from all around the world and the university collaborates internationally on a high proportion of its work. The *Times Higher Education* rankings for 2018 placed the University of Essex second in the UK for "international outlook" and I am delighted that applications to the university from international students continue to increase. I am also delighted that, on their arrival in Essex, international staff and students are met with such an open and inclusive welcome.

As the UK regains control of its borders following Brexit, I urge the Government to ensure that barriers are not put in the way of universities such as Essex, one of the UK's great export success stories, continuing to attract talented students and staff from around the globe.

**Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that as well as having an excellent chancellor, the University of Essex is a great centre for the local community it serves, not just the global community? This summer I was fortunate enough to give out graduation certificates to hundreds of students who attended during the summer break. Does my hon. Friend agree that the university serves a useful purpose in that regard?

**Mr Jenkin:** I am very grateful for that intervention because I did not have that element in my speech.

The Government will be aware that EU membership has obliged us to provide support for students from EU countries. Leaving the EU will provide us with an opportunity to support more students from poorer countries, and I encourage the Government to look at how the UK can do this. The higher default rate among EU students taking out UK taxpayer-funded student loans is a burden. According to figures released by the Student Loans Company earlier this year, this figure stands at approximately 4% for EU domiciled student loan borrowers compared with around 0.5% of English domiciled student loan borrowers. The percentage of students who are yet to have their repayment status confirmed, or who have not supplied their incomes and have therefore been placed in arrears, is also higher among EU domiciled student loan borrowers.

It is hard for the Student Loans Company to pursue loans being repaid from abroad. These losses should not fall on the British taxpayer, nor should British students have to pay higher interest rates as a consequence. I hope that the Minister will make it clear that the UK will no longer be obliged to offer student loans and subsidised fees to EU students after the UK leaves the EU, not least because these students come from far wealthier countries than other countries that we should want to help more.

Essex is also leading the way on women's equality, so it is appropriate that this Minister, who is also the Minister for Women, is replying to this debate. Essex gave its female professors a one-off salary increase in 2016 after an audit revealed a pay gap between its male and female professors. It was the first university in the UK to do so and the decision was covered in national media. This was a brave and bold move, and, one year on, the gender pay gap between male and female professors has not reopened. The university and its vice-chancellor, Professor Anthony Forster, deserve credit for this.

I do not need to say how important universities are to individuals, to our society and to our economy. They transform people's lives through education and the value of their research, provide businesses with people who have the vital skills they need, and make a crucial contribution to the UK economy. They enrich our society and culture as places where conventional wisdom can be challenged and where contentious issues can be debated with passion on all sides. The University of Essex was one of the few universities that remained officially neutral during the EU referendum. I personally helped to find speakers from both sides of the argument for a major debate hosted by the university just prior to the vote. Essex has set the highest example of impartiality and protection for freedom of speech.

In conclusion, I am sure that the Minister will want to join me in congratulating the University of Essex for all that it is achieving. However, I hope that she will address the concerns I have raised, particularly those arising from the UK's decision to leave the EU. These uncertainties about access for foreign students and academics to UK universities, or about the replacement of EU funding, are not dependent on the outcome of any negotiations with the EU. The Government can decide things such as our future immigration policy

right now. The Government can decide now that they will guarantee, at least in principle, to replace EU funding with UK funding, particularly as when we leave the EU we will no longer be required to support non-UK EU spending, which amounts to some £9 billion a year. There is no excuse for extending uncertainty unnecessarily. I hope that the Minister will at least agree with that.

5.19 pm

**The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton):** I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) on securing this debate on the University of Essex. Perhaps, Mr Speaker, as you are unable to speak on this subject from the Chair, we can all speak on your behalf, as I am sure that you concur with many of the comments.

We have a world-class higher education system, and the Government are obviously committed to ensuring that that success continues. Delivering the reform outlined in the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 will enable us to do that, and my hon. Friend made a number of mentions of that.

The teaching excellence and student outcomes framework will allow students to see clearly where teaching is of the highest quality and where they are likely to achieve the best outcomes. The results will also show us that every single participating provider has met very demanding national requirements.

It was interesting to see my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) and my hon. Friends the Members for Clacton (Giles Watling) and for Colchester (Will Quince) stay for the debate. Such is the affection and acclaim Essex enjoys that it has kept three Members here for the debate.

Universities such as Essex, which has been shortlisted for university of the year in the *Times* and *Sunday Times* “Good University Guide”, are critical to the success of our higher education system. The university was awarded a gold rating in the teaching excellence and student outcomes framework and was in the top 15 for student satisfaction.

We should particularly celebrate the approaches the university has introduced to achieve those outstanding student satisfaction results. It is important to mention, in particular, its fostering of a culture that uses student feedback to develop rigorous and stretching teaching that is tailored to suit student needs, and its effective retention strategies, including a peer mentoring scheme for all new students, with targeted support for disabled students, supported by the student engagement team.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex rightly highlighted the university’s outstanding research output, and particularly its work with business. As Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills, I particularly welcome that work, which is critical as we look ahead. I am also very impressed by the work with the county council.

Essex is, without doubt, an example to other universities. Universities must take student satisfaction and value for money seriously, and it is paramount to the Government that students are put at the heart of the system. The Office for Students will be the new regulator, putting the interests of students at its heart. It will be innovative—that

is a bit of a Government-type word, but it truly will be innovative in its approach to student participation, success and employability.

The reforms will help promote the significant value that universities can offer their local communities and the economy, including by promoting outreach initiatives, and hon. Members have heard from me and my hon. Friend that Essex is doing that significantly.

My hon. Friend raised some specific issues about Brexit, and there are a couple of things I should cover. We have asked the independent Migration Advisory Service to report on two things: the impact of Brexit on the labour market and on EU and international students. It will report by 2018, but it has the power to provide interim reports, and I am sure my hon. Friend will ensure that that happens if he feels it is necessary.

We are looking at finance, but I should say that it cannot be considered without also looking at the further education sector. It is important that both are looked at, particularly when we consider our skills and apprenticeships reforms and the joint working we are encouraging between FE and HE.

In the meantime, guarantees on student finance for EU students starting in 2018-19 will remain as before. The citizen’s rights offer is important, but we know it is clunky, and we are trying to make it as streamlined as possible.

My hon. Friend talked about research, and there is no doubt that the University of Essex is really leading the way—I am incredibly impressed. I should also mention the university in my constituency, the University of Surrey, which has also developed innovative and really world-leading efforts on research and on working with business. The EU Horizon programme lasts till 2020—there is a successor programme—and as long as a bid is submitted before we leave the EU, the Government will underwrite the costs if Horizon does not continue the funding. We are bringing together all the research councils and want to ensure that the OFS and UK Research and Innovation work together, but my hon. Friend is right that these things do not simply happen; we need to make sure they become a reality.

As Minister for Women, I was hugely impressed with the work on the gender pay gap, and I will never miss an opportunity to say in this House that all companies with more than 250 employees have until next April to report on their gender pay gap. And there we have it: the University of Essex is a beacon on this subject. This work is really important, because if we do not get it right, we will miss out on the talent and skills of women who can contribute and make sure this excellence continues.

Universities such as Essex are part of our world-leading higher education sector and the qualities that make it great: the fact that it is open to all, innovative, offers students choice and value for money, which is critical, and puts students at the heart of ensuring that that continues. I congratulate my hon. Friend, therefore, on securing this debate. I probably have not answered all his questions, but I have no doubt that he, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford and my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, will continue to sing the university’s praises and make sure, as we progress

*[Anne Milton]*

towards Brexit, that all the concerns of such universities are fully reflected in the Government's response to our leaving the EU.

**Mr Speaker:** The expressions of commendation and support that have flowed over the last 25 minutes for the University of Essex will be deeply appreciated by everyone

at the university and, for that matter, by the occupant of the Chair. I can also safely say without fear of contradiction that the university has earned every word of that commendation and support. Colleagues, thank you.

*Question put and agreed to.*

5.27 pm

*House adjourned.*





# Westminster Hall

Thursday 2 November 2017

[PHILIP DAVIES *in the Chair*]

## BACKBENCH BUSINESS

### HMRC Closures

[*Relevant document: Fifty-third Report of the Public Accounts Committee of Session 2016-17, The HMRC Estate, HC 891.*]

1.30 pm

**Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered HM Revenue and Customs closures.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing me to open this hugely important debate. I also thank more than 20 colleagues from different parties for their support in making the debate happen—including you, of course, Mr Davies. Thank you very much indeed for your enthusiastic support.

We need this debate first and foremost for the sake of hard-working staff at Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, who face massive change and uncertainty. I know that many Members present represent HMRC employees in their own constituencies. I put on record my thanks for everything that those workers do, and I also highlight the hard work done by the local shop stewards in the Public and Commercial Services Union. The Government are fond of saying that there is no magic money tree, but there is the hard work of tens of thousands of public sector workers who are putting up with what has become years of uncertainty, thanks to endless change programmes.

This debate is hugely important for towns such as Cumbernauld in my constituency, which seem set to lose major employers.

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): The HMRC office in Coventry is going to close very soon, costing about 300 jobs. People will be expected either to travel into Birmingham or to use modern technology. We all know that at least a third of the population is not familiar with modern technology, so they will have great difficulties in terms of travel, expense and inconvenience.

**Stuart C. McDonald:** The hon. Gentleman makes a series of valid points, and they are valid for the whole range of sites affected by the “Building our Future” agenda. In Cumbernauld, for example, HMRC is the largest employer, providing about 1,500 good-quality jobs. I am not making the argument that once a Government Department opens in a particular location, it must stay there forever. What I am saying is that, first, the implications for that town should form part of the Government's thinking and, secondly, there should be very good reasons for closing any such office. “Building our Future” fails on both counts.

**Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for securing this important debate on a subject that matters to many people in many of our constituencies. Does he agree that surely it makes sense for HMRC to put high-quality, high-wage jobs into areas where there is a deficiency of those jobs? In my district of Bradford, two thirds of the civil service jobs—more than 2,000 of them—are with HMRC. Putting those jobs at risk surely makes no sense whatsoever.

**Stuart C. McDonald:** Indeed. That is the argument that I will come on to make. Centralising those jobs in city centres, which are already in many cases doing very well in terms of employment, makes absolutely no sense at all.

This debate is also important to the public and taxpayers generally. When it was formed in 2005, HMRC had 96,000 full-time equivalent members of staff and 593 offices. Less than a decade later, staff numbers had fallen to below 50,000, in fewer than 190 offices. “Building our Future” sets out to close 137 offices and centralise even fewer staff in 13 large regional hubs, with between 1,200 and 6,000 staff. Some 38,000 staff are either going to have to move or leave HMRC. From any perspective, that is a massive and radical change to how our taxes are collected to pay for the services that we all use and rely on, so it deserves the closest of scrutiny.

**Dr David Drew** (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it would help if, at the very least, some research was done into those areas that have already lost offices through the previous NOS programme, of which new Labour was monumentally supportive? We should look at the impact on those areas that have no tax office and rely entirely on phone lines or email, where lots of people cannot get any satisfaction from HMRC at all now. Would he support such an investigation?

**Stuart C. McDonald:** I agree entirely. In a nutshell, that is the point of my speech. We have an opportunity now to pause and look at what has happened and the impact it has had. When the proposals come under scrutiny, the business case for change looks decidedly dodgy, and it is also proving something of a moveable feast.

**Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is extremely disappointing that the UK Government decided to relocate HMRC services from west Lothian to a regional centre in Edinburgh, affecting potentially 1,200 local jobs, without proper parliamentary scrutiny and despite concerns raised by the National Audit Office about the financial integrity of such a move? Although I hope that the Government will seriously reconsider their position, if it is their intention to press ahead regardless does he agree that they should at least consider west Lothian as a centre for a mini-hub, so that we can retain the skilled, experienced staff who would not otherwise transfer to the regional centre, and support a key part of the local economy? I hope my hon. Friend will join me in calling for the Minister to address that point.

**Stuart C. McDonald:** I happily join my hon. Friend in making that call of the Minister. In essence, there are strong reasons for a moratorium on further implementation of the “Building our Future” programme, while HMRC,

[Stuart C. McDonald]

Parliament and the public can take stock, scrutinise what has happened in areas that have already experienced change, and consider whether all the further moves make sense. Since the last time we had the opportunity to debate the changes, we have had reports from the National Audit Office, as my hon. Friend has mentioned, and the Public Accounts Committee.

The National Audit Office noted that HMRC now accepts that its original plan was unrealistic. Little more than one year on from submitting its original business case, when the NAO report was published in January, HMRC's estimate of the costs over the next 10 years had risen by £600 million—more than half of which was due to higher than anticipated running costs for new buildings. Similarly, estimated cumulative efficiency savings to 2025-26 had fallen from £499 million to £212 million.

I cannot honestly say that I am surprised. I was astonished to learn that the Government Property Unit is in negotiations for some of the most expensive commercial properties in Scotland in Glasgow's international business district. It may pay the market rate for those properties, but it will certainly be a far higher rate than it would have to pay for the same capacity in Cumbernauld. As the Public Accounts Committee said, HMRC

“has yet to demonstrate that it has a realistic and affordable plan to deliver such a radical change to its estate, and we do not believe that it needs to be based in expensive cities across the UK.”

To cut to the point, with the original business case inaccurate to the tune of hundreds of millions of pounds, is it not time to halt the signing of new leases and deals, take stock of what has happened so far with those hubs that have been established and revise the plans accordingly?

In the case of Cumbernauld, and I have no doubt many other offices, HMRC's rush to closure is simply incomprehensible. One of the biggest frustrations felt by staff in Cumbernauld is the fact that, to all intents and purposes, the site already meets the criteria that HMRC are looking for in a regional hub. It is a large, easily accessible site that will be nowhere near as expensive as the equivalent space in Glasgow city centre. It is situated between world-leading universities in Glasgow, Stirling and Edinburgh, in the heart of Scotland's central belt, with all the accompanying digital and transport infrastructure of that region. Why close it and move, as it is rumoured, to somewhere that is currently no more than a car park in Glasgow's financial district? Just how sure is HMRC about that being the right model for the future?

There are also very real concerns about capacity. The Government are opting to buy into inflexible situations, with 25-year leases apparently signed without break clauses. In the case of Glasgow, if the capacity is wrongly assessed, the office block next door cannot just be demolished, nor is it possible to just build into the Clyde—and requirements do change. Brexit will apparently require HMRC to recruit thousands of additional workers. Brexit post-dates “Building our Future”, so, again, “Building our Future” requires revisiting.

Finally, let us not forget that in 2015, HMRC suffered from the lowest staff morale in the civil service survey. In 2016, it climbed five places to 94th out of 99. That impacts on the Government's goals for maximising revenue and efficiency. It also impacts on the workforce

turnover rate. The chief executive officer of HMRC stated in September 2017 that even he found the level of turnover at HMRC surprisingly high.

There can be costings, revised costings and even more revised costings for brand new governmental hubs, but HMRC will never operate efficiently if it does not invest in its staff and its workforce. There is no point in centralising and saying that the opportunities for staff to progress are being maximised, if staff and their expertise do not stay in the organisation long enough, due to low morale and high turnover.

I know from my discussions with staff that those who have worked diligently for many years distrust the management and its agenda. Members will be aware that support for relocated staff has been reduced from five to three years. The mismatch between the capacity at the new sites and the existing workforces, the lack of clarity, the redundancies and many other factors have contributed to the lack of trust between the staff and HMRC, and the low morale, which is clearly documented in civil service surveys.

In September 2016, the then Chair of the Treasury Committee wrote to HMRC's chief executive and pointed out:

“There appear to have been over a dozen major reorganisations in HMRC since the merger in 2005. There is a trade-off between stability and what may work better on a management consultant's whiteboard”.

That, in a nutshell, is why I fear “Building our Future” will be proved wrong: the management consultants' nice ideas will prove to be drastically different in reality, and when we look back, stability will appear to have been the better option. We have a chance to stop and reflect on whether what was envisaged for the first couple of regional hubs really happened in reality, so let us not waste this opportunity. Let us do what is right for staff, our communities and taxpayers. Let us halt the “Building our Future” programme.

1.40 pm

**Luke Graham** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) on securing this important debate.

This reform of the HMRC estate takes place against the backdrop of large organisational changes in HMRC and the drift towards a more digital economy. The changes, some of which are being made in the Finance Bill, are about making tax digital. People's interaction with tax and HMRC services online is becoming increasingly important. That change, combined with the change in footfall on the high street and accessibility reviews carried out across the HMRC estate, led the Minister and the Government to make these changes.

Making tax digital is a key part of these changes. Although slightly delayed, it is still in line with the timeline for some of the individual office closures. Combining our staff and skills resources in regional hubs will enable us to improve customer support, which, as hon. Members have said, is allegedly poor, by clustering skills together, and technology will enable us to deliver a better service for our constituents.

It is important that we strike the right balance between cost savings and the accessibility of services. I am sure the Minister appreciates that HMRC is a vital public

service, so it is important that we ensure that there is access in smaller towns and cities throughout Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom. Although the closures in Scotland are proportionate with those in other parts of the United Kingdom, it is important that HMRC proactively looks at outreach schemes to ensure smaller towns and villages still have access to HMRC facilities and services. That is very important to many of my constituents in South Perthshire, Kinross-shire and Clackmannanshire.

I will close on this point. I want to be very brief, because lots of other Members want to speak. The closures are taking place in the context of massive change in our economy and our society as a whole. They are not just about cost saving, but about looking at how our constituents engage with the Government. If this were just a stand-alone measure without the other Government initiatives to make tax digital and increase online accessibility and interaction with constituents, I would stand firmly against it. However, because it is part of a suite of options, HMRC services and investment in digital infrastructure, I believe that some of these measures can and should work for our constituents.

I reinforce the point I made earlier. Many smaller towns and villages in rural parts of our country will need accessibility, especially if their broadband connectivity is not as good as it is in other parts of the UK. We need to ensure that HMRC is proactive in reaching out to those communities and ensuring that they can still access the services they require. The Government want them to engage with the cost-saving initiatives over the next five to 10 years, as outlined in the paper under discussion and others.

1.44 pm

**John Grogan** (Keighley) (Lab): I want to make one central point, which is to do with the eight location principles that the Revenue used to decide where the regional hubs should go. All of the proposed regional hubs will be in big, successful cities, such as Leeds, Glasgow, Birmingham and Cardiff. One could argue that, in those cities, a big HMRC office will crowd out private investment. Alternative choices would have been a lot cheaper and would have pump-primed the local economies. In west Yorkshire, if the regional centre had gone to Bradford, rather than Leeds, where there is a severe danger of crowding out, it would have acted as a pump-primer, boosting the local economy.

I do not know whether management consultants or HMRC bosses thought up the eight principles, but they include sustainable large sites, a talent pipeline, single location career paths, a catchment for a mix of business activity, digital infrastructure, facilities for HMRC's people and robust long-term infrastructure. Only one of the eight—market rates—has anything to do with cost and savings to the HMRC. Obviously, in some of the smaller towns, rents are a lot cheaper. Given that the driving force of the review is meant to be to reduce costs, that seems odd.

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there should have been an assessment of the social and economic impact that the office closures will have on the local economy? In many towns and cities in the UK, the HMRC office is the largest employer.

**John Grogan:** That was going to be my next central point. It seems very negligent that such social and economic impact assessments have not been carried out. It is no secret that one of the long-standing offices is in your constituency of Shipley, Mr Davies, which neighbours my constituency of Keighley. When we met the bosses of the Revenue, we were shocked that no such assessment had been made.

**Dr Drew:** I thank my hon. Friend for being so generous in giving way. The Government and the previous Government always said that rural proofing would be part of policy making. Was there any attempt to rural-proof this decision?

**John Grogan:** I have studied the eight points carefully, and there does not seem to be any rural proofing, which one would expect of this exercise.

There is a relatively new boss at HMRC. It will be interesting to see how much the Government will own this process and how much they will say that it is all to do with HMRC. I think the call for a moratorium is very reasonable, as it would allow us to go back and carry out some economic impact assessments. If the Government press ahead with the broad policy of regionalisation—there are many question marks against that—at the very least they should locate these offices, which are big economic drivers, in areas that would benefit from the boost that they would bring.

I join many other Members in saying that there is still time to halt this process and in asking HMRC to look again. That needs to be done, and only the Government can give those instructions to HMRC.

1.49 pm

**Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) for securing this important debate through the Backbench Business Committee. He made a thorough and detailed analysis of what is an appalling situation for our constituencies—particularly in Scotland. Many thousands of people face losing their jobs at HMRC, in a significant blow to local employment and our local economies.

Before the debate, I looked at some of the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East in his speech, and I discussed them with HMRC staff. We wrote a letter to the Minister's Department about the closure of Centre 1 in my constituency and the associated tax offices. The talent pipeline cuts very deep, despite the suggestion that we do not have one, and I assure the Minister that there is an extraordinarily skilled and talented workforce in my constituency and throughout the other centres that are being cut.

My constituency is home to one of Scotland's best known tax offices, Centre 1, which we want to keep there. It is named Centre 1 because it was to be Scotland's centre for tax collection. In my constituency, it is synonymous with tax affairs, our skilled workforce and our families' livelihoods. Like most local people, I have friends and family members who work for HMRC in the tax office. It is vital to my constituency, and the very idea that it could leave is absolutely devastating to all.

[Dr Lisa Cameron]

Staff members to whom I have spoken have voiced real concerns about the closures. They worry about the impact of staffing reductions on their ability to do their job well. They worry about having to travel to a new and unknown site, and about the difficulty of finding childcare or disability parking, given increased time away from home for part-time workers and others. They are also significantly concerned about the lack of consultation.

When the proposals were first mooted in the previous Parliament, I met the Treasury and was reassured that I would at least be kept up to date with what was happening about lease proposals. I have heard nothing since and have had to submit parliamentary questions to tease out the information, which I continue to chase. It feels as though my constituency and our workers are being ignored. They do not deserve that, because they have served the United Kingdom in terms of tax revenues so well for so many years.

I entirely agree with the comments of the hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan) about impact assessments, which are crucial. I cannot understand why such assessments have not been undertaken. In the previous Parliament, I asked the Secretary of State for Scotland about them, but he would give me no reassurances that they would ever be conducted. We are now in the process of conducting our own assessments. That is appalling—surely it is incumbent on the Government to look at the impact that closures and plans might have on communities.

Our HMRC staff are specialists in their field and take great pride in their roles. As has been mentioned, decisions such as the ones we are discussing have a detrimental impact on morale, creating stress, anxiety and sickness absence. HMRC staff should be supported because they do such vital work and the tax income is vital to our public services in general. There is a knock-on effect; we cannot think that lower morale and productivity might have a positive effect on our constituents. We have to invest in the staff, make them feel important and listen to their concerns about what the closures mean for them.

We do not want to see staff uprooted from their established bases and communities and centralised in city-centre offices, which surely cannot be more cost-effective than those in the outskirts of towns. I have yet to hear about lease agreements and arrangements—no update—so it is difficult to make any comprehensive analysis.

My constituency has a “Stay in EK”—East Kilbride—campaign, which is supported by just about everyone locally, whether the media, me, the MSP, local councillors from all parties, the public or HMRC staff. The issue is fundamental for us. I urge the Minister to pause, to have a moratorium, to look at impact assessments and to think about the constituencies that will be devastated by the proposed closures.

1.55 pm

**Jim McMahon** (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): This is a really important debate. To provide some context, the HMRC office in my constituency closed in 2014, with staff relocated to Manchester, so I can give the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) two ends of

the perspective: I can tell him about the conversations that took place before the closure and about the impact on the town, after the closure.

If the plans are about value for money, we have to ask ourselves why HMRC head office still occupies some of the most expensive real estate in Europe, at the Treasury. That building would make a fantastic five-star hotel, I am sure. The plans are not about value for money but about a fixed view of government, which is, “To hell with towns!”

If all we do is focus on our city centres, we will not be able to realise the true potential of our country. If all we do is to think that what matters is to have our cities thriving, at the expense of the surrounding towns, this country will not move on and make progress—we will not address that very real anger that I felt during the Brexit campaign. People were saying that they were sick of the settlement they have been given, they are sick of industry and well-paid, decent jobs going, and they are sick of seeing their town centres in decline. Those who are in a position to do something about that seem completely indifferent to the impact on their communities.

**Imran Hussain:** My hon. Friend makes his point, as always, very eloquently. He mentioned Brexit, and another angle of that is that many of the HMRC proposals were decided before the European Union referendum. Does he agree that once the Brexit negotiations reach a settlement—if we ever get one—that will inevitably cause issues for HMRC, not least the customs union and related areas? Is that not enough to put the HMRC proposals on pause at least until we get to that stage?

**Jim McMahon:** That is a good point. One of the biggest gaps in the whole Brexit conversation is not only the transactional relationship with Europe and what our future relationship will be but the biggest deficit in all our debates—what type of United Kingdom will we be at the end of Brexit? What type of Britain do we want? What will our communities look like? How will our economies be framed in the future? It strikes me that there is a complete absence of a direction and a vision for what type of Britain there can be after Brexit. I feel that in Oldham.

The frustrating thing about the HMRC relocation from Oldham to Manchester is that there was no value-for-money assessment. A wider review was done, which said, “If you close x number of offices, you will save money for the public purse”, but no financial assessment was made of the decision to relocate from Oldham to Manchester. That was admitted by the Minister in a February written answer to me.

Let us think about this: if the relocation was meant to be about value for money and about saving money for the taxpayer of this country, why would HMRC relocate from a town where the average office cost is £70 per square metre to a city centre where the average cost is £120 per square metre? Why would HMRC not do an assessment? If we need to rationalise the number of offices in a conurbation, surely we assess the cheapest and most efficient place to put the ultimate office when all the others have been merged into that one. However, that did not take place.

I am pretty sure that part of the reason why that did not take place is the same reason why we have seen the county court closed and relocated from Oldham to

Manchester, and why we have seen our magistrates court closed too. It is because the people doing the assessment, or the people who are making the decisions, do not live in Oldham; they do not even live in the north of Greater Manchester. The people making the decisions live in the affluent suburbs, closer to where the offices will ultimately be located when the decision is made. That is fundamental: what voice did staff have in the conversation?

**Chris Stephens:** The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. Does he agree that local knowledge is vital and that in terms of minimum wage compliance, an office in Oldham would know who the rogues were in Oldham, not elsewhere in the country?

**Jim McMahon:** The hon. Gentleman makes a very fair point. The relationships among other local service providers are equally important—the local authority and the local police in Oldham know what is going on in the community. Those localised conversations can no longer take place because the facility is not in the town as it used to be. It is ridiculous that Phoenix House, where HMRC was based in Oldham, is right outside the Oldham Central stop of the Metrolink tram line that takes just 18 minutes to get to Manchester city centre. It would have been very easy to make Phoenix House the new regional hub if there was a desire to do that, but the truth was that it was not even on the list for consideration because it was assumed that the regional hubs had to be in the city centre, at the expense of the town. That is shameful.

The Government tell us that times are hard, austerity bites and we have to live within our means, so surely there is a greater onus on them to maximise every bit of public investment where there is capital or revenue, and to provide proper scrutiny of where the investment goes, to make sure that the money is spent in the most efficient way for the taxpayer. The Government themselves have said that they did not do that. At best, that is approaching bad administration. The very basic things that I would expect a Government to do when spending public money—ensuring that it has the best effect—have not taken place.

What does that mean for a town such as Oldham? The loss of 2,000 staff by the local authority, on top of staff losses at the county court, the magistrates court, the police service and a range of other public institutions in the town, means that there are fewer people going out at lunchtime to buy a sandwich and supporting the local retail environment. There are fewer people going out shopping and using the bars and restaurants after work. There is less footfall in the town generally of people supporting the local economy. None of that was taken into account. We ask what was the local economic impact assessment; the answer is “there wasn’t one”.

If the Government are serious about having a stronger Britain after Brexit, about ensuring that public money is used to the best effect and about ensuring that our towns can be as strong as our cities, it is important to have a new approach. That new approach has to be to ensure that central Government decisions take into account the economic decisions at a local level. We also need to ensure that there is joined-up government. Government Departments that do not talk to one another are doing estate reorganisations in HMRC, the Department

for Work and Pensions, local authorities and sub-regional government. No one has asked the basic question, “If we’re being forced to reduce staff and to reconfigure office accommodation, would it make sense to come together in Oldham and share office provision in that town, to support the local economy?” The conversation is not taking place.

It is too late for Oldham. That callous, reckless decision has been made; it has not provided value for money to the taxpayer and it has kicked Oldham when it was already struggling to get up from the ground. But there is still a chance to do the right thing for the towns that have not yet seen their office closed. I urge the Government to do the right thing.

2.3 pm

**Dr Paul Williams** (Stockton South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) for securing this debate—I hope that I have pronounced his constituency correctly.

In my constituency, 800 people are employed in HMRC offices in George Stephenson House. In neighbouring Middlesbrough, there are more than 100 people employed in HMRC offices. These people have been told that they can keep their jobs on the condition that they travel to Newcastle each day to work; the “Building our Future” programme consolidates HMRC in the regional centre in Newcastle. If anyone from London looks on a map, they will see that Teesside and Tyneside are not too far from each other, but the reality for these 900 people is that their travel time to work in the mornings, during rush hour, will be at least an hour and a half longer, and it will also take them an hour and a half longer to get home in the evenings.

In Teesside, where the average commute is around just 20 minutes, there is no culture of travelling for an hour and half to get to work. Having spoken with most of the people who work in those offices, the overwhelming feeling is that the choice of a job in Newcastle is not really a choice at all. Having to add three hours to their day is incompatible with their family lives. They are not highly paid workers; the average wage is less than the national average wage. There is also a cost impact; they would pay an additional £400 a month for the privilege of having to work in another town, although they have been offered a package to ease that cost for the first couple of years.

The combination of the time and money that this will cost in the long run has led most people to say that, in effect, they will lose their jobs. That is bad for the staff—for their finances and their time—and it is bad for HMRC. These are hundreds of experienced workers who have a track record of being able to collect taxation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) said, these people know the local economy. They have relationships there, and they understand where to look for the people who do not pay the minimum wage and the places that might avoid or evade tax. Loss of experience is bad for HMRC, and this is also bad for the local economy. To add to what hon. Members have said, Stockton-on-Tees is a town, and the 800 people who work in George Stephenson House go there each lunchtime and spend about £1.7 million

[Dr Paul Williams]

a year in the local economy. To a small town such as Stockton, that is a lot, and there will be knock-on effects of losing that £1.7 million a year.

Those job losses are happening at a time when HMRC is taking on 5,000 extra staff, according to reports—presumably not in small towns such as Stockton—to cope with Brexit, rather than collect taxes. “Building our Future” is intended to deliver a better service for taxpayers; I understand that. I understand the need to digitalise and reduce phone calls and paper. We have to allow HMRC to make changes, but we also have to consider people and the unintended consequences of the changes.

As far as I can see, the only successful reduction that has occurred as part of the programme is a bit of a reduction in staff numbers. Service quality has deteriorated. Hon. Members will all have constituents talking to them about the amount of time that they have to wait on the telephone to get through to HMRC. In 2005, it was an average of 15 minutes, but in October 2015 it took people an average of 47 minutes to get through. HMRC has responded by hiring more call handlers on short-term contracts, but because those people have so little experience, I am told that the people with more experience spend a lot of their time supporting the people on temporary contracts, and overall that puts an already overstretched workforce under more pressure. Quality is absolutely central to the taxpayer, but it is also really important to the people who work at HMRC; they take real pride in their work. Sadly, 70% of HMRC workers have said that the changes have had a negative impact.

There are falling standards and falling morale, all at a time when there are billions of pounds of uncollected taxes.

Different people have different estimates; some say that £37 billion of taxes are avoided or evaded every year, and some even say that it may be up to £120 billion. We can ill afford to lose people, such as the experienced 800 workers in Stockton and 900 workers across Teesside, who have expertise and a track record in helping us to collect the taxes that we need to run all our services.

Looking up from London, the distance between Teesside and Tyneside may look, on a map, like a short distance for people to travel, but in reality travelling for three hours a day means that they are either not there to take their children to school or not home from work in time to read their children a bedtime story before they go to bed. Will the Minister pause and reconsider whether this change is really necessary, and really in the best interests of HMRC and the people who work there?

2.10 pm

**Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. May I put on the record my appreciation of your work in this area? You, like me, have made a case for Bradford, and you continue to do so.

I thank the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald)—I have failed miserably to pronounce that—for securing this important debate. Hon. Members from across the House

have made forceful and persuasive arguments, and I hope that the Minister really listens and tries to understand Members’ genuine concerns about these ill-thought-out proposals. I am also grateful to my hon. Friends the Members for Keighley (John Grogan), and for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), both of whom made very good points, some of which I will try to elaborate on. In particular, the point about value for money that they both made eloquently needs to be looked at much further, certainly in the case of the Bradford district and the negotiations that have led us to where we are.

Let me set out the impact of the proposals for the Bradford district. The closure of the HMRC offices would have huge financial consequences for Bradford. As well as potentially putting 2,300 high-wage jobs at risk, it would mean a £110 million reduction in the district’s gross value added, and the loss of around £10.5 million of district retail spending. The local authority would lose out on £1.2 million in business rate receipts, and there would be a £2.5 million increase in public spending costs. Put together, those things would be disastrous for the Bradford district.

I mentioned fairness and inclusion in an intervention. Two thirds of our civil service jobs come from HMRC. The Bradford district is already at the bottom end of comparable towns up and down the country in terms of high-wage, high-skill Government jobs. It really is unfair to impose this closure on the district. I absolutely accept that Leeds, where it is proposed the regional hub should be, is a great place for business, but my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley made the pertinent point that there is a real danger that putting more civil service jobs in Leeds will overcrowd the private sector there, so this may not be a good thing for Leeds, either.

Let me come back to value for money and the economic case that hon. Members eloquently set out, and use Bradford as an example. The case put forward by Bradford would have saved £30 million, compared with the current proposals. That is a huge figure. As my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton pointed out, there would have been lower accommodation costs per square metre, shorter commuting distances and lower redundancy and relocation costs, so why was that case not considered?

**Jim McMahon:** Does my hon. Friend agree that the consistent message that value for money reviews were not carried out when offices were relocated probably warrants a referral to the National Audit Office?

**Imran Hussain:** As always, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. These issues are arising with increasing consistency and, frankly, I believe that more needs to be done about them.

I come on to the workforce. The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) made the good point that these decisions have to be about more than just value for money; they have to be about community, too. That point should not be lost. In Bradford, we have one of the most diverse and vibrant workforces, and one of the youngest populations. We have 84,000-plus work-ready people with degrees. We have Bradford University, which is a centre of excellence for MBAs. We have many things to offer, and those frankly have just been ignored.

Much has been made of the argument that Bradford is not the right location and does not have the same connectivity as Leeds. We may not have the same connectivity, but we have suitable connectivity. We have real proximity to the M1 and the M62. Although we may not be where Leeds is, we are certainly not far away from connections, so that argument does not persuade me.

The powerful business case for Bradford was completely rejected. We have heard from hon. Members from across the House that all the cases that have been put forward have fallen on deaf ears. We have shown today that no economic case—no value for money case—has been established for these proposals. That makes me wonder whether they are the result of decisions by individuals sat in ivory towers, who chose places that were better for them to work and live in. That is the real question, and I urge the Minister to answer it.

**Chris Stephens:** The hon. Gentleman talks about people in ivory towers. Is it not ironic that people who are made redundant as a result of their town or city losing its HMRC office will find that they do not have a Department for Work and Pensions office or jobcentre to go to in their town either?

**Imran Hussain:** I absolutely agree; the hon. Gentleman makes a fine point.

**Luke Graham:** As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, connectivity is key. I represent a constituency that is not so well connected, so I certainly empathise with some of the challenges that his constituents face. Will he join me in asking the Minister whether, if the Government do not change their position on some of these closures, we can do as Opposition Members have mentioned and use Brexit as an opportunity to look at moving Departments outside London and other key cities, to ensure that our towns and secondary cities—especially those that have already faced closures by other Departments—are just as well connected?

**Imran Hussain:** Absolutely; I agree. I was coming to that very point and to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton, who I thank for giving us a perspective from a place where closure has already happened. He showed us the failures there, and made the plea that we should learn from that lesson and not do the same in other places.

My final point, which is related to the point made by the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire, is about the northern powerhouse. If we are serious about these things—certainly in the case of Bradford—the economic distribution must be fair and equitable, but again the distribution is swinging to the major city in the region. With respect to Leeds and everyone there—my point is not against Leeds—it is the northern powerhouse, not the Leeds powerhouse. We must have equitable distribution in our economic welfare. I urge the Minister to listen to all Members today, and to use this opportunity to pause the proposals. I have already made the point around Brexit, and I think the Minister has scope to pause the proposals and give further time for consideration.

2.20 pm

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Davies. Like other hon. Members, I thank you for your guidance and support and your interest in this area. First, I refer the

House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and my position as chair of the Public and Commercial Services Union parliamentary group. As you are aware, Mr Davies, we have been here debating HMRC office closures many times, and each time I and other Members have asked HMRC to think again and pause for thought.

The debate was opened superbly by my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), who rightly thanked HMRC staff for their contribution. I will give some statistics to back that up. He rightly mentioned the low staff morale in HMRC as a result of the way in which management have handled the issue.

What was most telling in the contributions so far—it is the common thread—was the social and economic impact that the closures will have in towns and cities across the UK. We heard from the hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan), and my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) talked about East Kilbride being Centre 1 for tax collection services in Scotland and the UK, and the lack of consultation by HMRC with parliamentarians. We also heard from the hon. Members for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), for Stockton South (Dr Williams) and for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), who continued the theme of the social and economic impact that the closures will have in their communities.

The starting point was 12 November 2015, when HMRC announced plans to close nearly every office—approximately 170 in the HMRC estate—and replace them with 13 regional centres and four specialist sites, mostly based, as we have heard, in major UK cities. The plans were titled “Building our Future” and if implemented in full would involve vast areas of the UK being left with no local HMRC office, including restricting the department to two offices and one specialist site covering the entirety of Scotland; two offices and one specialist site covering the entirety of the midlands; two offices and two specialist sites covering the entirety of London and the south-east of England; two offices covering the entire north-west of England; two offices covering the north-east of England and the great region of Yorkshire, Mr Davies; one office covering the entirety of Northern Ireland; one office covering the entire south-west of England; and one office covering the entirety of Wales. Like many hon. Members, I am gravely concerned that, if the plans are not halted, they will leave vast areas of the country with no nearby HMRC office. I am also concerned that, more than 15 years on from the troubled private finance deal that HMRC entered into with the contractor Mapeley, significant risks remain in the handling of the contract. The Department has learnt nothing. A National Audit Office report draws attention to the fact that HMRC has not negotiated

“any break points in the 25-year leases it has signed so far for regional centres in Bristol and Croydon.”

Of course, there have been some changes to those plans—not all of them for the better. Let us go through them in turn. The original proposals meant there would be no physical presence in East Anglia. HMRC has subsequently decided to retain a presence in Ipswich, first as a specialist site but potentially to include broader work streams. Plans to close the only Welsh-language unit have also been dropped, with staff now co-locating with the Department for Work and Pensions—that is a point I will develop later in my contribution.

[Chris Stephens]

The estate negotiations on the location and buildings for the proposed Manchester regional centre are taking longer than HMRC initially anticipated, meaning that the regional centre will now open at least a year late, and possibly even later than that. When it eventually opens, it will do so in two phases. The overall capacity of the regional centre is in a state of flux, forcing the Department to extend the existing leases of three major sites in Manchester.

There have also been problems in Northern Ireland; the opening of the Belfast regional centre has been subject to significant delay. In other areas, closures have been brought forward, including at Blackburn, Bolton, Netherton and St Helens in the north-west; Derby, Worcester and two sites in Solihull in the midlands; and York in the north. Those closures, with point-blank notice, cause significant stress, upset and practical difficulties. That is not an efficient way to run a Department.

As a direct result of staff leaving the Department because of the office closures, HMRC is losing a vast amount of irreplaceable experience. Based on data provided to the Public and Commercial Services union by HMRC, in 2017 alone the Department will lose the equivalent of more than 17,000 years of staff experience, and the vast majority of that comes from customer compliance work.

We believe that the “Building our Future” proposals are completely driven by the deadlines within the STEPS contract of 2021 and that those are flawed. The existing proposals should be put on hold until appropriate parliamentary scrutiny, public consultation and socio-economic impact assessments are carried out.

**Jim McMahon:** Does the hon. Gentleman agree with my suspicion that the end was decided before the criteria that support it?

**Chris Stephens:** I do, and I think it has been driven by cost. One other area is that while I and my hon. Friends were campaigning in our constituencies to get re-elected, HMRC, during purdah, was signing contracts, and it did not wait until after the election to inform the House of those changes. I sympathise with the point that the hon. Gentleman made. Of course, during the process, we had the Concentrix disaster. HMRC had to terminate its contract early because Members of Parliament from right across the House had major complaints about how Concentrix was dealing with its business.

In the National Audit Office’s report, the key findings stated that:

“it will be longer until HMRC starts to realise savings. In the long term, it still expects its new estate to reduce its running costs. It now estimates cumulative efficiency savings by 2025-26 of £212 million, reduced from the £499 million estimated in its strategic outline case in November 2015. By 2025-26, HMRC expects its annual running costs to be £83 million lower than they are now”.

Whether it is £83 million, £212 million or even £499 million, those are drops in the ocean compared with the Government’s own accepted figure for the tax gap of £36 billion. The figure researched by the Tax Justice Network and PCS puts the tax gap at £119 billion. A major reorganisation and rationalisation of the most vital Government Department, putting at risk the very ability to carry out the tax collecting function for savings that are not properly costed, is irresponsible management and governance.

The Scottish Government are consulting today on the Scottish approach to taxation, to accompany gradual increases in its taxation powers. HMRC’s plans could well result in the severe limiting of HMRC expertise based in Scotland, which will become even more important as the Scottish Parliament debates increases in taxation.

**Luke Graham:** Does the hon. Gentleman agree that recent figures show that unpaid tax is at a record low, so some of HMRC’s performance has improved and it is actually doing quite well? Will he join me in asking the Minister to give assurances that that performance will continue, even with the closures and movements going forward?

**Chris Stephens:** I will meet the hon. Gentleman halfway. I do not believe that unpaid taxes are at a new low. In fact, I think the report I referred to earlier, published by Tax Justice Network and PCS, showed a gap of £119 billion. That certainly suggests to me that one of the major focuses of HMRC should be collecting tax and going after the rogues who are registered in the Cayman Islands and other places, shuffling money. I will meet the hon. Gentleman halfway on that.

HMRC faces a number of challenges requiring investment in offices and infrastructure, and no one from HMRC or from the Treasury has so far explained what changes they will make in the “Building our Future” programme to meet these challenges. I will not avoid saying, “We told you so,” because we did, time after time, in this place and elsewhere. We know that UK overseas territories are used to avoid billions of pounds of tax. We know that the uncollected tax avoided by these high-rolling spivs runs into tens or even hundreds of billions of pounds. It beggars belief that, at a time when there is more focus than ever on tax dodgers and their theft from public services, HMRC are shuttering dozens of offices across the country, losing staff and skills that could otherwise be used to target the high rollers who cost our hospitals, infrastructure and schools billions each year.

It is therefore somewhat ironic that Mapeley, to which HMRC’s office estate has been outsourced, is based in Guernsey, a notorious tax avoidance hub overseen by the UK Government. Downing Street confirmed yesterday that HMRC will need up to 5,000 new staff as a direct consequence of Brexit and the UK leaving the customs union.

**Gerard Killen** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me that, with the combination of Brexit and the devolution of increased powers over tax and income bands to Scotland, it is exactly the wrong time for HMRC to consider scaling back its operations?

**Chris Stephens:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman. The next question is rather obvious: “Where are all these staff going to go?” Some will be deployed at the new hard border, which those on the Government Benches seem to believe will have virtually no impact on our economy. At least, I can only assume that they believe it will have zero impact; that can be the only reason for yesterday’s refusal to publish 58 impact assessments that they commissioned. Some will be based in HMRC offices, but what offices? Where in the country will these new recruits be based? Over the last two decades the number of HMRC offices has gone from 700 to, under the Government’s plans, just 13.

Where exactly are the HMRC staff tasked with border duties in the north of Scotland going to work? They cannot work at the Lerwick office, because it is closed. They cannot work at the Ullapool office, because it is closed. They cannot work at the Wick office, because it is to close. They cannot work at the Peterhead office, because—guess what?—it is closed. The only offices left in Scotland will be in Glasgow and Edinburgh. We will have legions of new HMRC staff, tasked with policing the customs border that it appears to be the Government's wish to create, with nowhere to carry out their office role, in an area of work that is guaranteed to involve more paperwork, more deskwork and more IT skills. I mention those offices in particular because each of those towns is a port, importing and exporting on a daily basis—the very places where, one would assume, HMRC staff are needed most. The lack of joined-up thinking on the issue would be laughable were the consequences felt across the country not so serious.

We also found out in July this year that only 399 staff are employed by HMRC in enforcing the national minimum wage, less than one full-time staff member for each constituency represented in this House. I simply do not believe, and neither do HMRC staff members, that the number of exploitative and criminal employers is so low as to allow for that low level of staffing. Indeed, the Government confirmed to me in a written answer in June that it would not, and had no plans to, fill the 83 current vacancies in the HMRC minimum wage compliance unit.

In the last financial year, HMRC closed 2,600 cases of non-compliance with the national minimum wage. That such a small staff team managed to bring so many criminals to book is incredible, and a tribute to their tenacity and hard work. However, I simply do not believe that that is even the tip of the iceberg. There are many thousands of other criminals out there, exploiting low-paid staff and pocketing profits for themselves. These individuals must be rooted out and dealt with, but what hope do 399 staff have of policing the full gamut of employer exploitation when 2.67 million businesses are registered for VAT or pay-as-you-earn? How can an office in Edinburgh properly and sustainably investigate employer criminality in Islay or Caithness? HMRC's cuts agenda is putting the poorest and most vulnerable employees at risk of exploitation by crooks and gangsters the length and breadth of these islands.

The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire talked about the closures in the round. I mentioned earlier that the proposal for the Welsh language unit in Wales means there will be a relationship with the Department for Work and Pensions, but what is that relationship? It is time for the Government to produce a map of office closures for all Government Departments, because we will find ourselves in the farcical situation of an HMRC employee having to take redundancy because they cannot travel hundreds of miles to the new regional centre, only to find that the jobcentre has been removed from their town as well and they will have to travel further to sign on, never mind go to work at HMRC. I hope that the Government will produce a map of office closures across the United Kingdom.

I will touch on the roll-out of universal credit and HMRC's role in how this is paid to claimants. Universal credit fundamentally depends on the ability of HMRC to provide real-time information to DWP about an individual's earnings from work. The entitlement to

UC for the following month is calculated from that, based on the Government's own formula. It is therefore vital that the information provided by HMRC is 100% correct and accurate. Any errors in the processing or transfer across to DWP of the employee's salary information could be catastrophic for someone relying on universal credit to top up their low salary.

We all know the carnage being wrought by the roll-out of universal credit; but I fear that the cuts to HMRC's capacity could result in further devastating implications for people receiving in-work benefits. If things go wrong with the flow of real-time information to DWP, if errors are not identified before universal credit payments are calculated or if the data is provided to DWP late, the consequences for the worker pile up, with fewer staff and fewer offices within HMRC to correct these errors and ensure that the correct payments are made.

Improvements in digital services are welcome, but not at the expense of the capacity for human intervention and expertise to fix problems and resolve issues. I fear that the Government have not properly recognised these new, massive interactions between DWP and HMRC in its "Building our Future" programme, and that the price to all of us, particularly those who need help the most through universal credit, will only become apparent when people's finances and lives are devastated through no fault of their own. The landscape has changed immensely since the "Building our Future" programme started. Customs barriers could be erected in a little over 18 months. Thousands of new HMRC employees will be recruited, after years in which we were told that job losses were the inevitable result of progress. I hope that the complexities of universal credit, with all the potential for human disaster that they entail, are now becoming apparent to those on the Government Benches.

There are growing demands for tax justice from across the political spectrum. It is surely time for HMRC and the Treasury to hold their hands up and admit that they got this one wrong. It is time to admit that the world has shifted on its axis since "Building our Future" commenced and that the burden on HMRC staff, both current and future, represented by the programme is unsustainable, unjust, and cannot be a rational way to run a taxation system. It is time for HMRC to go back to the drawing board and begin planning the next generation of accommodation for HMRC staff and services, serving communities and the people in them, rather than the bureaucratic nonsense that my constituents and others have to endure.

The plans to close HMRC offices will be extremely damaging to HMRC's operations. They fail to understand or take into account the diversity of the needs of the Scottish or, indeed the UK, economy and have the potential to seriously compromise the ability to collect tax, enforce compliance and close the tax gap. They also create massive uncertainty about jobs and locations across Scotland and the UK. With Brexit looming on the horizon, the Government must now urgently review their plans for the future of HMRC and ensure that it is fit for purpose.

2.40 pm

**Peter Dowd** (Bootle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Mr Davies. Where do we begin with this situation? It is an absolute dog's dinner. The Minister has inherited a number of dogs' dinners since coming into post and I almost feel sorry for him.

[Peter Dowd]

My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) talked about the need for human intervention, but I think we need divine intervention. St Matthew is the patron saint of tax collectors, and he will have to be prayed to an awful lot for this particular mess to be put right. We all sit up when somebody talks about modernisation, because we know what it means: job cuts and closures of this, that and the other. And this is a classic case of modernisation.

I met senior HMRC officers to discuss the criteria used for the decisions. I declare an interest: HMRC is a significant presence in my constituency and well over 2,000 of my constituents work there. Members will, therefore, forgive me if I spend a little time on Bootle, because it is an exemplar of the problems facing other places.

The officers told me that one of the criteria is that offices need to be near a city centre, but Liverpool city centre is closer to my constituency of Bootle than it is to parts of Liverpool itself. They also said that they need to be near a university, but the situation is exactly the same: Liverpool University and Liverpool John Moores University are closer to Bootle than they are to the proposed new Liverpool site. The officers talked about transport and infrastructure access, but the HMRC offices in Bootle are literally surrounded by stations, including a railway station. In fact, a bus station right next to my office is literally a minute's walk from the HMRC offices in the Triad building and the new St John's House.

We were told that we needed to maintain staff retention, but the turnover at HMRC in my constituency is negligible. They are high-skilled, high-performing, loyal staff, so that criterion does not apply. There has been no impact assessment. Nipping back to the transport situation, no assessment was made of the transport links. Mersey Travel, the Cheshire transport authority and the Welsh transport authority were not contacted, even though they will also be affected by the proposals. The way in which this has been dealt with has been an absolute dog's dinner.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas)—he apologises for not being here—has written to the Chancellor, because the issue affects his north Wales constituency, which is virtually on the border. The letter mentions the proposed closure of the Wrexham HMRC office, which will result in the loss of 350 jobs, as part of the proposal to centralise Wales staff in Cardiff. It states:

“I am incredulous that the Government is continuing to propose a policy course of moving staff away from the regions to centralised city centre locations and it seems to me that the new political environment created by Brexit allows us to pursue a new regional policy by maintaining jobs in, for example, Wrexham, the largest town in North Wales.”

That is a very good point.

I apologise for only mentioning this now, but I am pleased that the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) has brought this issue to our attention again. How many times have we discussed this matter without ever receiving any proper answers from the Government? Interventions from my hon. Friends the Members for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) and for Bradford East made a compelling case for why it needs—at the very least—to be looked at.

My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) graciously shared with us his experience of the heart-rending closure process in his constituency. I thank him for bringing that to our attention, because, if the proposals go ahead, that will be the future for communities right across the country, including mine. Thousands of people who work in my constituency will be moved to the iconic but very expensive India Buildings—car parking is at an absolute premium—in Liverpool. Why do they have to move three miles up the road when it is going to cost more money? There will be a net cost to the taxpayer in my constituency—but not, apparently, to the so-called national envelope—as a result of those offices being moved. That is dreadful.

Colleagues have made those points time after time, but let us hear what other people are saying. In a report on professional bodies, Accountancy Live noted:

“HMRC reorganisation risks pushing tax authority to breaking point. Tax advisers and professional bodies are sceptical about...HMRC's plans to close 137 offices”.

Those are not our words, but those of professionals who work on these issues every single day.

The Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales said it was staggered by the argument that HMRC will actually be adequate to provide any sort of service to 5 million or 6 million taxpayers in the London area, notwithstanding what reconfigurations may be made to the service. The word “disastrous” has been used and I agree that the situation is and will be disastrous. I ask the Government to take a step back and reconsider.

On Mapeley, something does not smell right, to be frank, about the deal for the India Buildings—to which HMRC will be moving—prior to HMRC's involvement. People are coming to me all the time about that, so I am going to have to look in much more detail at the proposal. I have no doubt that in due course I will have to either come back here or write to the Chancellor, although I hope that I will not have to do so.

Opposition Members have raised the social and economic impact, but I do not think that any Government Members have done so, with the exception of the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham), whom I thank. It is symptomatic of the debate that only one Conservative Member is in attendance. Others do not appear to be in the least bit interested in the impact that the proposal will have on whole swathes of the nation, including Scotland, as the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) has said, and Wales, which will have one office. There will be 10 or 11 offices in the rest of the country and possibly one in Northern Ireland.

This is a pretty grim situation. To add insult to injury, some of these deals were signed *de facto* during *purdah*. If a Labour Government had done that, there would have been absolute screeching from the press, the media and the Conservatives about how we were trying to tie the hands of a subsequent Government. We would have been pilloried for it and—do you know what?—rightly so.

**The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride):** The issue of making decisions during *purdah* has already been raised. It is right and proper that those decisions were made because, as the hon. Gentleman will know, under the appropriate arrangements, the Government should never act such as to incur costs through delay. Furthermore, those decisions were signed off in entirely the right manner by the Cabinet Office.

**Peter Dowd:** I take the Minister's point, but there is always an issue in government.

**Chris Stephens:** I listened to the Minister's intervention. Does the shadow Minister agree that it is somewhat ironic that during purdah, some of these contracts—for example, the contract signed in Edinburgh—were signed on some of the most expensive buildings in Scotland?

**Peter Dowd:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Some of them cost an arm and a leg. The Minister should take on board the question of perception. In a democracy, when we are in the middle of an election, it might be technically, legally and administratively okay to do this, that and the other.

**Jim McMahon:** I am afraid that I do not buy the Minister's explanation at all. The delays to the lease being confirmed for the Manchester office meant that additional costs were already being incurred. The incurred costs for one scheme were because of commercial and development reasons. The Government say that they could not wait for purdah to complete, but that would have given a new, incoming Government the freedom to change that decision. The situation is very odd.

**Peter Dowd:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent and valid point. The Government should think those sorts of things through.

As I was saying, there is, at the very least, an issue of perception about whether this is all above board. Even if it is above board, it has to be seen to be above board. The issue is that people do not feel that that is the case. We all feel that something is not quite right. In a democracy, we have to be seen to be above board. That feeds into the concern that some of us have that Parliament is being ridden over roughshod on a whole range of issues. For example, we did not have Opposition day debates for months on end. When we did get them, the Government virtually did not turn up to respond, and they continue to take that approach. It feeds into the perception that they are developing contempt for the views of Members in this Chamber and, specifically, the main Chamber.

There is a perception—and in this case, it is a reality—that the Government treat people with contempt. A briefing on the civil service compensation scheme feeds into that narrative:

“On 18 July 2017 the High Court held that the Government had failed to comply with the duty to consult prior to amending the CSCS, in that it had imposed conditions on union participation in the consultation process.”

That seems to be saying, “You either agree with us in advance what we want you to discuss, or you're going to be brushed aside and not considered.” The briefing continues:

“As such, the 2016 amendments were unlawful.”

There is getting to be a pattern of unlawfulness with the Government—for example, the issues on tribunal fees and in relation to social security. It goes on:

“The Court's decision is at the time of writing subject to appeal to the Court of Appeal.”

I have no doubt that the Government will do that. That is dated 26 October—just a few days ago.

We are not the only ones making this argument. The Public Accounts Committee said:

“We do not believe that it will save as much money as HMRC has predicted”—

that is the understatement of the decade—

“and we are concerned that it has not thought through all the negative costs to the wider economy of its approach and the impact on local employment”.

That is another understatement, if ever there was one. Many people and communities will be dreadfully affected by this.

Let us talk about service issues. The Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales said:

“Service standards are deteriorating with taxpayers having to spend longer and longer on the phone trying to get through or waiting for their letters to be answered.”

My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams) alluded to that. To boot, the National Audit Office says that this has cost £600 million more than first thought. That is the situation we are in. Why the Government are persisting with this dog's dinner is absolutely beyond me.

Members today have made fantastic contributions that were forensic, surgical, factual, objective and mixed with a bit of humanity, which seems to be completely missing from the Government's approach. I ask the Government to take these proposals back, give them further consideration and think about the communities and people affected.

2.54 pm

**The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride):** May I say what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies? I know this is an important subject to you, so if I hear any stifled gurgling or funny sounds, I will put them down to your general condition, rather than to you expressing an opinion on the matter at hand.

I thank the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) for securing this very important debate. We are talking about very important matters—people's jobs and local communities. Of course, the overarching matter we are talking about is the efficient collection of tax. We all know why that is extremely important.

Before I get into the specifics of the plans we have been discussing, perhaps I could make some general points that will be useful. HMRC's work is fundamental to that of the Government. It provides the funds for the public services on which we all rely. Every pound we raise through taxation is another pound we have to support our nurses in the NHS, keep our police force functioning effectively and support our armed forces. In other words, HMRC is not engaged in some kind of theoretical exercise. One of the most important functions Government have is to bring in the money to support public services. Taxpayers expect and demand that the money be spent responsibly, with good reason.

I think all Members here would agree that it is vital that HMRC can deliver value for money and maximise the tax it collects, relative to the tax due. It follows from that that we must have a tax authority that is fit for the modern age. I make no apologies for using that expression.

**Peter Dowd:** I do not think anybody disagrees with the Minister on the collection of tax, but that is all the more reason for the Government to get their facts right

[Peter Dowd]

about the places where tax will effectively be collected from, and to not revise the costs time after time. This has now cost an additional £600 million. Is it not incumbent on the Government to get those figures right before they come to Parliament and wave these proposals through?

**Mel Stride:** A number of Members in the debate raised the costs mentioned in the National Audit Office report, the Public Accounts Committee report and so on. Certainly, the business plan has gone through various iterations, but where we are is quite clear: the total investment over the next 10 years will be £552 million. The NAO has disputed some of our figures, and the Government's view is that the NAO has looked at those figures on a different basis—for example, over a 10-year period, whereas we were initially looking at figures over five years.

We have some cost avoidance of £75 million per annum from 2021 through getting out of the private finance initiative arrangement—which, incidentally, we entered into in 2001, which was of course under a Labour Government. On top of that, we will have £300 million-worth of savings over the next 10 years, and we will have annual cost savings of £74 million in 2025-26 compared with 2015-16, rising to around £90 million from 2026-27. The savings are ongoing and will be long standing.<sup>1</sup>

**Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): On value for money, I happen to agree with a number of points made about the opportunity here to rebalance the economy, but I do not understand how it can be any more cost-effective to relocate these major tax offices to very expensive city centre locations. The issue of future-proofing was raised by the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens). The Government have signed, through HMRC, a number of long-term leases on large offices in Croydon and Bristol without break clauses. Clearly it is essential that the capacity of HMRC to collect taxes is not impeded, but is it in our long-term interest to sign such long contracts for very expensive city offices?

**Mel Stride:** The hon. Gentleman makes two points. One is a general point about the economic sense, or otherwise, of locating the services in larger hubs. The arguments on that are, broadly, extremely strong. They are that we can have larger groups of people and more collaborative working and can ensure that the infrastructure and technology are there. HMRC operates very differently today from how it operated some decades ago. We take a risk-based approach to chasing down tax that should be paid and is not being paid. That involves a lot of data and analysis. Frankly, the idea—if anyone here is entertaining it—that for the last few years people have been able to walk into their local tax office or have appointments there is just not correct. We need centres of excellence that can work in the manner that I have described.

The hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) raises the issue of long-term leases, and he is right to say that in some cases there are no break clauses. I make three points on that. First, we get a much more competitive rate if that is the basis on which we enter into a lease. Secondly, that of course does not mean that leases

cannot be broken at some future point by way of negotiation. That is quite typical in the commercial property market. Thirdly, we have flexibility within those leases, such that other Government Departments and employees would be able to use the buildings as well. There are therefore at least three very good reasons why that approach has been taken.

Let me now make some progress. We need a tax system that offers digital services in an age in which people increasingly expect and rely on them, that makes use of technological developments to deliver as efficient a service as possible, and that is suited to the dynamic and fast economy of today.

[GRAHAM STRINGER *in the Chair*]

I hope that the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East would agree that just dispersing employees across a wide area is not an efficient way to run any organisation, let alone one with responsibility to the taxpayer.

**Jim McMahon:** I am not sure whether the Minister's tactic is to talk at length about matters on which there is agreement. There is agreement on the move to digital services, the need for those to be fit for purpose, and the need to take as much tax as possible to fund decent public services, but the majority of today's debate has been about the financial assessments of the deals done and the decisions on the locations of the head office and the regional hubs. I would appreciate it if the Minister would focus on that, because as far as I can see, the evidence base to support those decisions is at best very weak.

**Mel Stride:** The hon. Gentleman is right: much of the debate has focused on the matters to which he refers. I am not seeking to avoid those other elements of the debate at all and was coming on to them, but I shall deal with them now, as he has raised them. HMRC has had eight very sensible criteria by which to judge where to locate the new hubs. He will know that we are looking at sustainable large sites, with the capacity to hold all HMRC's requirements for the region in a single building. The talent pipeline, which has been mentioned, is extremely important.

**Stuart C. McDonald:** Everyone in the Chamber is in favour of much of the approach to digitalisation of the tax process, but does not that process itself undermine the case for saying that everyone has to be in one location? The fact that everything is being done digitally means that folk can stay in the offices that they are in currently and we can get on with it.

**Mel Stride:** I do not accept that point. We could take it to its logical conclusion and assume that everyone could work from home, and we could then have a very disparate workforce. There may be some attractions to that, but there is huge value in bringing people together in a single building, where there is a critical mass of individuals: collaborative working and the sharing of experience and ideas can take place, meetings can be held, and the technology is all in one place. I would have thought the hon. Gentleman would recognise that. Let us face it: if we went back to 2005, we might be debating whether we should shrink the number of offices from 600, which is what it was at that point. There will always

1. [Official Report, 27 November 2017, Vol. 632, c. 2MC.]

be arguments about whether we should do things and the local impacts and so on, but this overarching direction of travel, it seems to me, has to be right.

**Chris Stephens:** Could I ask the Minister two questions, then? First, on the criteria for where to locate the offices, was a social-economic impact assessment made for the towns and cities whose HMRC offices are closing? Secondly, given that he has mentioned homeworking, can he confirm whether the Department has published the information from the homeworking pilot in Wick?

**Mel Stride:** On the latter point—the specific query—I will have to get back to the hon. Gentleman, but on the general point about impacts, HMRC has looked extremely closely not just across the eight criteria, which I was working my way through, but at the impact on the individuals working at the existing offices. I know for a fact that that has gone right down to literally every single employee, plotting where those people live, and working out travel-to-work times and so on.

**Chris Stephens** *rose*—

**Mel Stride:** Could I just make one other point? The relocation does not necessarily mean that all the employees who worked at the previous office, for want of a better expression, will no longer be working for HMRC. Many of them—about 90%—will either work through to retirement at that office or migrate to working at the new hub.

**Chris Stephens:** I thank the Minister for giving way again. Can he confirm whether the Department will publish an economic impact analysis of staff moves? If people based in, for example, Inverness or Wick will be working in Glasgow or Edinburgh, I would think it would be very difficult for them to travel to their work every day.

**Mel Stride:** We are not publishing the kind of impact assessment that the hon. Gentleman suggests, but my point is that it is not the case that HMRC has not very carefully looked at those individuals who will be affected—at where they live, the travelling issues and so on—to ensure that it is as helpful as it possibly can be to all the employees in those circumstances. We heard in the debate about providing assistance with travel costs, for example. There is also relocation assistance. All that is being very carefully looked at and engaged with by HMRC.

**Jim McMahon:** Is the Minister seriously suggesting that Manchester city centre, 7 miles away from Oldham town centre, meets the criteria relating to the talent pool, throughput of staff and the economic case any better than Oldham town centre would have done? If it does, why do the Government refuse to publish the internal documents that would make the case?

**Mel Stride:** The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that I have not come here prepared with all the precise details of exactly how that decision was arrived at, but I am confident that HMRC has, with due diligence and in a very objective and dispassionate—no, objective—way, looked at which locations meet the eight criteria, and made a balanced decision at the end of that. I am very confident that it has come to the right conclusions.

**Jim McMahon:** On that basis, can the Minister confirm today that the Department will release that location assessment?

**Mel Stride:** No. I am not going to commit to bringing forward all sorts of reports and things that various hon. Members may or may not call for. I understand why the hon. Gentleman may call for those things, but I can reassure him that we have published the criteria on which the decisions were made. They are in the public domain. There are eight criteria, and they are very clearly available.

**Imran Hussain:** Does the Minister agree that one of the most important areas that needs an assessment in these processes is the economic impact on those areas where the regional hub is not based? That information, in my view, is vital when we are looking at the holistic picture. Does the Minister accept that that information is important, and was it obtained in every instance?

**Mel Stride:** That prompts the question of what the overarching purpose of HMRC is: to provide customer service efficiently to those who need access to it, and, at the end of the day, to bring in tax. We have a tremendous record, and it has a tremendous record, of doing exactly that. The main thrust of these decisions has ultimately to be about having a 21st-century organisation for a changing environment, and that means the kind of model that this process is driving towards.

**Peter Dowd:** The Minister has referred to the eight criteria on numerous occasions. I am trying to get my head around this question: when the criteria for the move are not fulfilled, what are the criteria used to override those criteria?

**Mel Stride:** The criteria are there to allow a balanced judgment across the eight criteria as to where the best place is for the regional hubs. That is exactly the approach that HMRC has taken. I fully appreciate that there are Members here who are very unhappy with the fact that there may be some closures in their constituency, but that does not necessarily mean that the criteria are being inappropriately exercised.

**Dr Cameron:** The Minister's colleagues in Departments such as the Department for International Development feel that East Kilbride in my constituency is an excellent place to have a hub and digital and new services, and has a great talent pool. How does this make sense, because there is surely a contradiction? We do not fit the eight criteria, but for other Departments reaching out and doing excellent work in East Kilbride in the modern age, we meet all the criteria. It simply does not make sense. Why is it more fitting to be in Glasgow than in East Kilbride?

**Mel Stride:** As the hon. Lady knows, a transition office will be kept in East Kilbride; it would certainly not have been there had many of the strengths to which she alluded not been present in the local community. On balance, it has been decided that it is better to go to Glasgow with a hub than to have a similar arrangement in her constituency, but that is not to suggest that there is not a great talent pool in her constituency. It simply means that on balance, under the eight criteria that we reviewed, the best solution we have come to is Glasgow.

**Dr Williams:** We do not doubt that an assessment has been made. We simply want to see for ourselves that objective assessment. Perhaps we can learn what our talents need to look like, so that we can meet future objective criteria.

**Mel Stride:** The hon. Gentleman has asked precisely the same question that the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) asked, so I have already dealt with that.

**John Grogan:** The Minister is being extraordinarily generous in giving way. Is he not at all concerned about crowding out private sector investment in some of the big cities? To follow on from the powerful speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), is the Minister not in danger of putting himself on the side of big city United Kingdom and ignoring smaller towns and cities? Is that not a bad political move to make?

**Mel Stride:** The hon. Gentleman raises the issue of crowding out private sector investment, but I am primarily concerned about the possibility of crowding out tax collection. If we do not have hubs that are fit for the 21st century, that are bristling with new technology, talent, and well-qualified, well-trained individuals working collaboratively from those units, we will be less effective at bringing the money in.

The tax gap was mentioned; it stands at 6%, a record low. Under Labour in 2005 it was around 8%. If it was 8% today, we would have £11.8 billion less coming into the Treasury, which is enough to pay for all the police forces in England and Wales, so these things matter. I understand why Members here are vexed about their constituency—I totally get it—but we cannot allow that to trump the really important job of bringing our tax collection into the 21st century, and making sure that it is effective, so that we keep our public services going.

**Chris Stephens:** Can the Minister explain how closing HMRC offices, with a lack of local knowledge, helps to bridge the tax gap? I am genuinely confused, so perhaps he can explain.

**Mel Stride:** The corollary to that argument is that we might better close the tax gap by opening another several hundred offices. I do not think anyone would argue with that. It does not necessarily follow that more offices mean more tax collected. I think quite the reverse, as I have explained. We need centres of excellence with a critical mass of people who are well trained and where there is good access to the labour market and the skills that we need; where people work collaboratively and all the technology is right; and where they operate, as we do in this country, a risk-based approach to clamping down on tax avoidance, which involves a lot of data and analysis from the centre. That is much better done from a well-resourced organisation of critical mass than by a larger number of smaller offices, many of which operate in a manner that is more manual, for example, than computer-driven, and that needs to be changed.

**Imran Hussain:** The Minister is being very kind with his time today. He talks about the need for regional hubs and centres of excellence, which we all accept. The argument is not about collecting tax and whether

we should have centres of excellence and the best facilities, but about where they should be located. That is the point we are making. In my case, an office based in Bradford would be considerably cheaper. Is the Minister saying that Bradford cannot provide a centre of excellence?

**Mel Stride:** The answer is similar to the one I gave the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) a moment ago. Nobody is suggesting that Bradford is not a superb location in many different ways for many different business activities—absolutely not. I do not have the figures to hand, but I would probably agree with the hon. Gentleman that in terms of office space, the cost per square foot is probably less in Bradford than in Leeds. However, we have a series of criteria, and the overarching objective of those criteria is to collect tax and to have access to the best available within the region—the best talent pool and the best digital and physical connectivity. On balance, the decision is that Leeds fits that bill better than Bradford, but that is not for a moment to suggest that Bradford is not a wonderful place to run businesses.

**Chris Stephens:** The Minister is being more than generous. Can he confirm that there are currently 400 employees in the high net worth unit dealing with tax evasion? Does HMRC intend to increase or reduce that figure over the coming years?

**Mel Stride:** It depends. The hon. Gentleman's question begs another question, which is what exactly he means by the high net worth individuals he refers to.

**Chris Stephens:** It is a specific department.

**Mel Stride:** If it is a specific department—I am sure it is—I am happy to get back to him on that point. I will move to another point relating to what the hon. Gentleman said earlier in his speech. When he talked about clamping down on tax avoidance, he very much started to drift into—understandably so—complex tax avoidance. He mentioned the Cayman Islands. I do not think he mentioned trusts specifically, but I suspect that would be a part of the mix of his thinking, which is exactly my point. If we are going to start targeting that kind of tax avoidance, it is far better to be in a well-resourced hub, the nature of which I have described already, rather than to have myriad other offices around the place. That is the nature of the tax challenge, so we have to have a configuration that is appropriate to meet it.

**Jim McMahon:** I thank the Minister for giving way. According to my time, we have an hour and 10 minutes of interventions if Members have questions to ask. The Minister is being generous with his time. Let us stop this dance that we are taking part in here. The truth is that no assessment was made of the suitability of sites for the relocation. Oldham was not considered as a site for the relocation, but Manchester was. That is the truth. If I am wrong, simply publish the assessment of sites that shows that Oldham was considered at the same time as Manchester. Ultimately, it is not protected under any of the exemptions in the freedom of information legislation. Let us cut out the time delay that would be initiated by our making that request under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and let us have it here today.

**Mel Stride:** That is the third time that basic question has been asked, and I am not going to give a different answer from the one I gave first. Perhaps I could make a little progress.

HMRC will move to new regional centres, which will serve each and every region and nation in the United Kingdom. The first of them opened in Croydon in July, and has been designed specifically to help staff work together and change the way HMRC operates. The building is modern and is located in the heart of the community; it is a modern, environmentally friendly workplace. The other centres will open over the coming four years and have been designed with the future needs of HMRC and the taxpayer in mind. In addition, HMRC will keep open a limited number of transitional sites, as I have suggested, for several years, to help retain key staff during the period of transition, as well as five specialist sites for work that cannot be done elsewhere, such as the site at Dover.

The locations of the regional centres were selected with a number of criteria in mind, such as cost and wider facilities for HMRC staff. They ensure that HMRC has a presence in every region of the UK. The programme will, as I have indicated, deliver savings for the taxpayer of about £300 million up to 2025, plus annual cash savings rising to more than £90 million by 2028. HMRC has structured support in place to help its staff during the move. For example, it will support staff in moving, by helping with additional travel costs for up to five years after the move. It is working with other Departments to identify opportunities for those unable to move to regional centres. The Department has already supported about 100 people into new roles in 2016-17 and 2017-18. However, we need to remember that the vast majority of HMRC employees are within reasonable daily travel distance from a regional centre, specialist site or transitional site. The locations of regional centres were chosen with the whereabouts of existing staff in mind.

**Dr Paul Williams:** The Minister said that the vast majority of people who will transfer are within reasonable distance of one of the new sites. Is there a definition of a reasonable distance, in terms of travel time?

**Mel Stride:** I shall get back to the hon. Gentleman on precisely what that means. I suspect it is a travel-to-work time, but it will probably vary depending on location.

**Chris Stephens:** Can the Minister confirm that the original criterion for reasonable travel distance that was used, and that was put to the trade union and staff, was 100 miles?

**Mel Stride:** I shall give the hon. Gentleman the same answer I gave to the hon. Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams); I am certainly happy to look into it—although I have now had some divine inspiration, and I believe that the criterion is an hour's travel time. St Matthew has come to my aid.

Let us not lose sight of the bigger picture. As I have said, the programme is underpinned by the aim of making HMRC a more efficient and effective tax authority. I want to dwell briefly on our record in that area, because what we are doing is part of a broader drive to transform HMRC that has been going on for some years. Its performance has been improving considerably.

I have already mentioned that the tax gap is the lowest in our history; it is also one of the lowest tax gaps in the world.

The hon. Member for Bootle bemoaned the Mapeley PFI deal. As I said, it was a Labour Government who put us into that deal, but he is right that there will be considerable savings from not having to continue with the deal, as a consequence of pursuing the current programme.

HMRC has improved customer service. Almost all its business customers now choose to deal with it online, and more than eight out of 10 self-assessment returns come in digitally.

**Dr Cameron:** I thank the Minister for giving way; he is being generous in that regard, at least. Are the cost savings on the Mapeley deal based on current expenditure on that deal or on renegotiation with the organisation?

**Mel Stride:** The cost savings are for an investment of £552 million over 10 years. Firstly, they arise through the avoidance of future costs that would be incurred in the event of our not going ahead with the programme. Those would be the costs of the PFI deal, were we to continue with it. That cost is £75 million per annum—obviously from 2021, when the contract for strategic transfer of the estate to the private sector comes to an end. There is a cost saving of £300 million in the 10 years to 2025. That gives an annual cash saving, as compared with 2016-17, of £74 million in 2025-26, rising to about £90 million in 2026-27.<sup>1</sup>

**Chris Stephens:** On cost savings, can the Minister provide an explanation of why, during purdah, a contract was signed in relation to an office in Edinburgh, which was the most expensive office to rent not just in Edinburgh but in Scotland? How does that lead to cost savings?

**Mel Stride:** As the hon. Gentleman knows, the criteria applied in taking the decision were not simply about cost. As to his assertion that the decision that has been taken is an exceptionally high-cost option, I cannot comment, because I do not have access to that level of detail at this precise moment; but the decisions are taken in the round, using eight different criteria, of which cost is but one. As I have repeatedly stated, the overarching objective must be the effective and efficient collection of tax, which provides all the funding for our public services. That is the basis on which the decisions are taken.

HMRC is now open to take calls from customers and engage in webchats seven days a week, so people can contact the Department at times to suit them. This year, more than 987,000 tax credit customers renewed online using the digital service. It would simply not be possible to continue to drive improvements without transforming the offices from which HMRC staff work.

The changes are an integral part of HMRC's transformation into a smaller, more highly-skilled organisation—one that has modern digital services and a data-driven compliance operation, which will deliver more for the taxpayer, at lower cost.

**Peter Dowd:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mel Stride:** This must be about my 30th intervention; I am delighted to give way to the shadow Minister.

**Peter Dowd:** The Minister is being incredibly generous with his time. The question of the criteria goes to the heart of the matter, Mr Stringer; incidentally, I welcome

1. [Official Report, 27 November 2017, Vol. 632, c. 2MC.]

[Peter Dowd]

you to the Chair, and am delighted to see you. The Minister persists with the issue of the criteria, one of which is the ability to get to a particular site via transport mechanisms and infrastructure. The problem, however, is that in many situations there has not even been an assessment of how the particular criterion applies to particular sites. I understand what the Minister says—the criteria exist. They may do, but does he agree that if they are not applied, that shoots a hole through the whole process?

**Graham Stringer (in the Chair):** Order. We have just over an hour left, but I remind hon. Members that interventions should be short and to the point.

**Mel Stride:** Thank you, Mr Stringer. I should agree with the hon. Member for Bootle if the premise of his assertion were true. In reality there has been an assessment. Of course, in each and every case, HMRC looked at the criteria and applied them to the various options in the various regions, and came to a conclusion as a result of the assessment. That is the logical and sensible way in which such matters move.

**Jim McMahon:** On a point of order, Mr Stringer. The Minister has said a number of times that an assessment has been made of the various sites and location options. If it transpired that the assessment had not been carried out, what remedy would the House have?

**Graham Stringer (in the Chair):** That is a matter of fact, not a point of order relating to the debate.

**Peter Dowd** *rose*—

**Mel Stride:** I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

**Peter Dowd:** I shall write to the Minister about this; but the bottom line is that when I asked senior officers about the criterion on transport access, I asked them if they had spoken to the transport authorities for the areas affected, and they told me they had not. It is an important point. If an assessment relating to the transport authorities was not done—if the officers did a desktop assessment—that is not proper consideration of the criterion.

**Mel Stride:** We can go round and round this for some time, but HMRC has a very clear set of criteria. It has looked extremely carefully. As I explained earlier, when it comes to travel distances to work and journey times it has mapped every single employee within its employ, to make sure that that aspect of that particular decision is taken as rigorously and robustly as possible. I am afraid I do not recognise the hon. Gentleman's suggestion that this is somehow just a case of putting a finger in the air and a pin in a map. It has been well thought through.

To conclude, raising taxes is vital to our public services.

**Chris Stephens:** It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Stringer. The Minister has not yet mentioned the minimum wage compliance, which was mentioned in the debate. Does he have some words to say about that?

**Mel Stride:** It is the duty of HMRC to ensure the minimum wage is adhered to and that it is rigorous and robust in its approach to that. It does not hesitate

to go after those who break the law and do not pay the minimum wage. It has the ability to go after those companies or individuals for back tax and penalties, and it does that with vigour. I would argue that under a more modern system with large numbers of people working collaboratively in the way I have described, it would be even more effective in doing that.

I think we have given this matter a good, broad and wide airing. I am grateful to all hon. Members for their contributions. I take all the issues raised seriously, even though we disagree on a number of matters, and I am particularly grateful for what is probably a record number of interventions in a Westminster Hall debate.

3.31 pm

**Stuart C. McDonald:** It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Stringer. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. They have been surgical in their analysis of the situation, as well as powerful and passionate.

It has been a frustrating debate, to an extent. We have, as has been said, been here before. The Minister expressed his confidence in HMRC, in its forecasts and assessments, but I gently suggest that the Minister should start challenging what HMRC officials are telling him. After all, the starting point for all of this was a business case that has been shown to have been inaccurate to the tune of hundreds of millions of pounds, so he should not just listen to what HMRC is saying. He should challenge everything that it is coming to Ministers with.

I ask the Minister to listen to the concerns that have been expressed by hon. Members across the House: about Brexit; about devolved taxation; about tax credits; about reaching out to areas remote from HMRC offices, including rural areas; about the bizarre siting of offices in expensive city-centre locations and the lack of value for money that that represents; about the impact on the town and city centres that have been left behind; about the loss of local knowledge, experienced staff and local contact; about the impact on staff and families; and about the lack of consultation and lack of care for too many HMRC workers.

We have two simple asks. The first is for a bit of openness and transparency. Publish those assessments. There is no excuse for hiding them away from scrutiny. Secondly, stop and assess what has already happened. If HMRC and Ministers are really that confident in their case, stop and prove it. Show us that the first couple of regional centres are a roaring success, that everyone is happy and that they prove to be value for money. Show us what has happened in the towns where the tax offices have closed. Prove it with facts and not just a dodgy business case. If, as most hon. Members here expect, what HMRC has forecast does not turn out to be the case, the Minister can be a hero and save the rest of us from experiencing what has happened in Oldham. He would then be able to send HMRC back to the drawing board. Again, I thank all hon. Members for their contributions.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered HM Revenue and Customs closures.

3.34 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*





# Written Statements

Thursday 2 November 2017

## TREASURY

### National Insurance Contributions Bill

**The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Jones):** The Government are announcing today that they will introduce the National Insurance Contributions (NICs) Bill in 2018. The measures it will implement will now take effect one year later, from April 2019. This includes the abolition of class 2 NICs, reforms to the NICs treatment of termination payments, and changes to the NICs treatment of sporting testimonials.

The Government have decided to implement a one-year delay to allow time to engage with interested parties and parliamentarians with concerns relating to the impact of the abolition of class 2 NICs on self-employed individuals with low profits. The Government have committed to abolishing class 2 NICs to simplify the system, so it is therefore right to take the time to ensure that there are no unintended consequences for the lowest paid.

[HCWS220]

## HOME DEPARTMENT

### European Criminal Records Information System/EU Justice and Home Affairs IT Agency

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd):** The Government have decided to opt in to a new EU proposal for a regulation to establish a centralised system for the identification of member states holding conviction information on third country nationals and stateless persons (TCN) (“the draft regulation”). This draft regulation aims to supplement and support the existing European criminal records information system (ECRIS) so that member states can more effectively obtain the EU-wide criminality history of TCNs.

ECRIS already allows for the exchange of criminal records information across the EU and establishes an EU-wide offending history for EU nationals. It supports effective criminal justice decisions which ensure that relevant public protection measures are considered. While ECRIS is well established in obtaining criminal records information in respect of EU nationals, it does not lend itself to efficient exchange with regard to TCNs. This is because member states must send requests to all member states individually in order to capture all EU criminality.

To address this, the new draft regulation will create a centralised identification system which will allow member states to make searches to identify the member state or states who hold conviction information on TCNs and envisages the existing ECRIS decentralised mechanism being relied upon to then request this information from the relevant member state(s). This draft regulation therefore will increase the efficiency of the process and help ensure that our law enforcement agencies have more information available to them when they encounter TCNs than they do at present.

Eu-LISA is an EU agency that manages certain justice and home affairs IT systems that the UK takes part in, including EURODAC (the EU’s system for storing the fingerprints of asylum seekers and certain illegal migrants) and the second generation Schengen information system (SIS II, which we take part in for police and judicial co-operation purposes and which allows the circulation of law enforcement alerts in real time across the EU).

The draft eu-LISA regulation would repeal and replace the current regulation governing the agency, making a number of changes. These include giving eu-LISA responsibility for managing the proposed ECRIS-TCN system (as well as a number of new measures that we do not take part in as they build on the border and immigration aspects of Schengen); making minor amendments to its governance; and other amendments around data quality and the interoperability of systems.

Because eu-LISA manages, or will manage, some systems that build on the Schengen aquis (for example, SIS II) and some that do not (EURODAC and the proposed ECRIS-TCN system), the draft regulation governing it engages both our justice and home affairs opt-in and our opt-out from measures building on the policing and judicial co-operation aspects of Schengen.

The Government believe it is in the national interest to continue participating in eu-LISA, as this will maximise our influence over how it operates the IT systems that we take part in and for which it is responsible. We have therefore decided to opt in to the draft eu-LISA regulation to the extent that it is not Schengen-building and not to opt out to the extent that it builds on the policing and judicial co-operation aspects of Schengen.

Until the UK leaves the EU it remains a full member, and the Government will continue to consider the application of the UK’s right to opt in to, or opt out of, forthcoming EU legislation in the area of justice and home affairs on a case-by-case basis, with a view to maximising our country’s security, protecting our civil liberties, and enhancing our ability to control immigration.

[HCWS219]

## WORK AND PENSIONS

### Social Security

**The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt):** Today I am publishing an updated version of the personal independence payment (PIP) assessment guide which provides guidance for health professionals carrying out PIP assessments on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions. The Department routinely updates the guide to further clarify the policy intent and to bring it in line with legislative requirements.

PIP contributes to the extra costs faced by people with disabilities and health conditions. It is a modern, dynamic benefit that was introduced to replace the outdated disability living allowance (DLA) system. PIP is a fairer benefit, which takes a much wider look at the way an individual’s health condition or disability impacts them on a daily basis. Under PIP, 29% of claimants are receiving the highest possible support, compared with just 15% under DLA.

The updated guidance will reflect binding case law following an upper tribunal judgment handed down on 9 March 2017 on how DWP considers a claimant to be carrying out an activity safely and whether they need supervision to do so. This will increase entitlement for a number of both new and existing claimants, largely those with conditions such as epilepsy, which affect consciousness. The Department estimates approximately 10,000 claims will benefit by £70 to £90 per week in 2022-23.

In the case of existing claimants the Department for Work and Pensions will undertake an exercise to go through all existing cases and identify anyone who may be entitled to more. We will then write to those people affected and all payments will be backdated to the date of the change in case law.

Alongside these changes, we have brought the guide in line with the Social Security (Personal Independent Payment) (Amendment) Regulations 2017 and have made amendments to descriptors within activity 3 (managing therapy or monitoring a health condition) and mobility

activity 1 (planning and following a journey) to reflect this. We are making these changes to clarify the original policy intent.

Also, following consultation with stakeholders, and to more clearly communicate existing case law, the guidance has also been changed to add clarity for health professionals around assessing claimants with sensory difficulties. These changes will ensure that the needs of those with sensory difficulties are properly taken into account within activity 9 (engaging with others face to face) and mobility activity 1 (planning and following a journey).

The Department has also made changes to mobility activity 1 to reflect the challenges that may be faced by those with sensory difficulties in the event of disruptions to a journey. Finally, activities 7 (communicating verbally) and 9 (engaging with others face to face) have now been clarified to reiterate the original policy intent that the two activities are not mutually exclusive, and these changes will benefit a number of affected individuals.

[HCWS218]





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