

**Tuesday
7 November 2017**

**Volume 630
No. 48**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 7 November 2017

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

STANDING ORDERS (PRIVATE BUSINESS)

Ordered,

That the Amendments to Standing Orders relating to Private Business set out in the Schedule be made.—(*The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy

The Secretary of State was asked—

Electric and Autonomous Vehicles

1. **Matt Warman** (Boston and Skegness) (Con): What steps he has taken to support the development of electric and autonomous vehicles. [901633]

6. **Andrew Lewer** (Northampton South) (Con): What steps he is taking to support businesses that are developing connected and autonomous vehicles through the Midlands Engine. [901639]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Our industrial strategy capitalises on our strengths as we build the next generation of motor vehicles. In July, we committed £246 million to the Faraday Battery Challenge to make Britain a centre for the development of battery storage. I have also announced £51 million to fund automated vehicle testbeds across the country. I am delighted to say that in October Ford opened its new European Mobility headquarters in Britain.

Matt Warman: Whether lorries or tractors, it is in rural areas where autonomous vehicles have the potential to make a particularly profound impact. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that the research that he is funding will look in particular at rural areas rather than simply focusing on our very well connected cities?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. He is right in saying that, if this is to apply right across the country, the opportunities in rural areas are very important not just for the vehicles he describes, but for public transport. He will know that at the University of Lincoln, not far from him, excellent work is being done through the Centre for Autonomous Systems on the future of mobility. I hope that it will be a participant in this great wave across the country of research and development in the technologies of the future.

Andrew Lewer: Silverstone Technology Cluster supports many thousands of jobs in and around Northamptonshire, including in companies such as Cosworth in my constituency of Northampton South. What steps are the Government taking to support the Silverstone cluster?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the choice that some of the world's best motor manufacturers make to locate in the cluster reinforces our reputation. Last year, we launched the Aylesbury Vale enterprise zone, which supports the Silverstone high-performance technology cluster. It provides an environment that is helping to deliver new jobs in this sector. The local growth fund for his area includes an innovation centre, which is geared to automotive technology in the enterprise zone.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I urge the Secretary of State to say something to leading engineering businesses and the University of Huddersfield where we are doing a lot of research on autonomous vehicles, because they might have listened to "Today" on Radio 4 this morning and heard another Secretary of State using a mysterious kind of language. He was talking about "a new post-Brexit trade policy" and "a new trade remedies body"—what is a new trade remedies body?

Mr Speaker: I do not care what a new trade remedies body is. All I am concerned about is autonomous vehicles—electric or otherwise. Let us hear about the matter.

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman asks an important question. It is absolutely right that the researchers at the university will have huge opportunities in this area. The reputation for excellence that has been established in that university is well known not just across the country, but around the world. The Prime Minister and I had the privilege of attending a roundtable of the leading managers across the motor industry, including the supply chain. They are united in their excitement about what is the biggest change in mobility since the invention of the petrol and diesel engine. We are replete with these possibilities, and it is increasingly recognised that we are establishing a reputation for being the place in the world to come for them.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Whether it is exporters of autonomous vehicles or other exporters within the automobile industry in my constituency, what they need going forward is a consistent regulatory framework. What kind of guarantees can the Secretary of State give to exporters such as those in my constituency as we leave the EU?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. The predictability of the regulatory environment is extremely important for future investment. It is one reason why we have introduced the Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill, which will be ahead of the world in establishing the right regulatory environment for electric and autonomous vehicles. Again, this is something that has commanded the attention of the world, and it is exactly in line with what he says.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): As we take steps to grow the economy and decrease emissions, will the Secretary of State commit to working with all businesses

involved on the noise that autonomous and electric vehicles make, as highlighted by my deaf and blind constituents, and to working with the disabilities agenda as this new technology moves forward?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that one of the advantages of the new technologies is that they give particular hope to people who find it difficult or impossible to use conventional vehicles. Part of the point of putting together the research in the automotive, renewable energy, healthcare and social care sectors is that we can join the benefits of all of them in a single programme.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): If we are going to have these electric vehicles, these autonomous vehicles, and everything else is going to be wonderful, why bother with £100 billion on HS2?

Greg Clark: Because we need both. Our ambition is to make this country one of the best connected in the world so that it is possible to go from the capital to our midlands, northern cities and beyond quickly and efficiently, and have more capacity to move freight around the country. I would have thought, given the importance of the motor industry to Derbyshire, that the hon. Gentleman, as a Derbyshire MP, would welcome the investment and progress in the sector, including £250 million invested by Toyota in its excellent plant.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Germany has said 2030; Norway and Holland are aiming for 2025. The Chinese owners of Volvo say that all their new models will have an electric motor from 2019. As the climate conference in Bonn begins, does the Secretary of State consider that the UK Government's plan to ban the sale of fossil fuel vehicles from only 2040 is somewhat lacking in ambition, failing to provide strong leadership, or downright pathetic and making the UK a laughing stock?

Greg Clark: If the hon. Gentleman reflects on our reputation in the world, he should know that, for international leadership on climate change, it is very strong. He would do well to commend rather than undermine that. In the past few weeks, we launched the clean growth strategy, which commits, across a range of areas, not just to meet our legal commitments and generate jobs in those important technologies, but to lead the world in exports. I would have thought that he would use his time at the Dispatch Box to commend the Government for a document that has been well received across the world.

Leaving the EU: Civil Nuclear Industry

2. **Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD):** What assessment he has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the civil nuclear industry. [901634]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): The Government have made clear their commitment to the continuing success of the nuclear sector, including nuclear research, in this country. We are aiming for a maximum level of continuity with the current arrangements. My Department has held discussions with the sector to ensure we understand and address its concerns.

Wera Hobhouse: Does the Minister agree that the uncertainties over leaving the EU, as well as the falling prices of solar energy and the timescale for delivering the projects, will make nuclear energy projects such as Hinkley Point deliver very little value for money?

Richard Harrington: I very much disagree with the hon. Lady's assessment. The Government's policy is to go for a mix of different types of energy, of which nuclear power is firmly and clearly one, as are renewables and all the others.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): As the Minister knows, the nuclear industry is extremely important to Cumbria. Does he agree that leaving the EU has its issues, but that it is far more important to ensure that we have a nuclear sector deal as part of the industrial strategy, which will mean real investment and growth in the sector?

Richard Harrington: I agree with my hon. Friend and I commend him for all his work to support the nuclear industry. We are very well aware of the nuclear sector deal. I met leaders of the industry last week, as I do repeatedly, to ensure that their sector deal is important and will be relevant to carrying the industry forward for a long time in the future.

19. [901656] **Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD):** The civil nuclear industry is getting increasingly twitchy about Euratom transition arrangements. Will the Minister today clarify whether Euratom membership can continue during the transition period and, if not, will he support the cross-party amendment 300 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, which would protect the civil nuclear industry from a cliff-edge Brexit?

Richard Harrington: The hon. Lady will be aware that these matters are being discussed in the Bill Committee. The Government intend to build a consensual view to ratify the problem. I know she has a keen constituency interest. The Government are aware of all the issues. It is our intention to have the closest possible relationship with members of Euratom.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): It is very important that we achieve an agreement with the EU that enables us to retain as many of the benefits of Euratom as possible. Will the Minister say something about the future of small modular reactors in the UK?

Richard Harrington: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The Department is looking closely at small nuclear reactors. We have had presentations from many different companies and entities involved in developing this technology. We hope this will be brought to a conclusion very quickly. I commend him. I visited his constituency to see the research work going on there. We are very supportive of it.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Exiting the EU is introducing an added complication into the efforts to rescue the Moorside deal, with all the jobs and security it would bring. Are the Government open to the idea of offering a stake in the Moorside project if the conditions with a particular buyer are right?

Richard Harrington: I would make two points to the hon. Gentleman, who is also a worthy champion of the nuclear industry: the Moorside arrangement is a private commercial matter for Toshiba; and in my view what is happening with Euratom and the EU is not really relevant here.

Horizon 2020 Programme

3. **Ian Murray** (Edinburgh South) (Lab): What steps he has taken to ensure that the UK participates in the Horizon 2020 programme for the duration of that programme. [901636]

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): The Government have acted quickly to underwrite Horizon 2020 funding that is competitively bid for by UK participants. As we set out in our future partnership paper, "Collaboration on Science and Innovation", we will seek an agreement on science and innovation that protects us now and in the future, and continues to ensure we deliver these great partnerships.

Ian Murray: Edinburgh is blessed with three world-class universities, Napier, Heriot-Watt and Edinburgh, which punch significantly above their weight in being able to gain EU funding for research and development. Will the Minister come to the Dispatch Box to reassure those universities that they will still be able to access research and development funding at European Union level when we leave the EU?

Joseph Johnson: As I said, we are working towards an agreement that will ensure our continued success in European science and research collaborations. Scottish institutions do indeed do exceptionally well. They punch well above their weight in winning about 11% of the share of UK participation in Horizon 2020, which is well above their GDP and population share. We want that to continue.

18. [901655] **Stephen Gethins** (North East Fife) (SNP): The Minister is right to highlight that Scottish universities are world-beating. In my constituency, the University of St Andrews receives £38 million of research funding that relies on our partnerships with the European Union and European institutions. What reassurances can he provide about plans post-2020, so that those partnerships will be able to continue?

Joseph Johnson: As I just said, we are working hard to ensure an agreement with the rest of the European Union to ensure we can continue to collaborate closely in important areas of research and innovation. I repeat, Scottish institutions do well in terms of their share of overall UK participation in Horizon 2020. We want that kind of success to continue in the years ahead. Very impactful research is done in Scotland on a collaborative basis across the continent. We have every intention of that continuing in the years ahead.

Science and Innovation: Worcestershire

4. **Rachel Maclean** (Redditch) (Con): What steps he is taking to support science and innovation in Worcestershire. [901637]

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): We have committed to the single largest increase in science and innovation funding for nearly 40 years, adding an additional £4.7 billion to our science spending. This helps to drive growth across the country, and I am pleased that a consortia led by Worcestershire local enterprise partnership will be undertaking a science and innovation audit on the theme of cyber-resilience. This will identify local research and innovation strengths to drive economic growth.

Rachel Maclean: Following the commitment in the industrial strategy Green Paper to build new institutes of technology, will the Minister, if his diary permits, meet me in Redditch to review what an excellent location it would make for one of the first institutes of technology? It has fantastic transport links and access to business, and would provide a great opportunity for young people.

Joseph Johnson: My hon. Friend is a strong champion for her constituency, and I am pleased to say that we have recently issued a statement confirming our intention to establish high quality and prestigious institutions that specialise in delivering the higher level technical skills that employers need across all regions of England. We will be launching a call for proposals before the end of the year and would welcome applications from Redditch and other places across the country.

Leaving the EU: Scottish Research Sector

5. **Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the Scottish research sector. [901638]

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): As I have said, Scottish institutions are performing well in terms of their participation levels in Horizon 2020, and we want that to continue in the years ahead. The Government are working hard to ensure the success of our institutions and to get an agreement that enables us to continue to collaborate in the years ahead.

Carol Monaghan: Of course we also want our institutions to continue to do well, but our research sector is facing a significant loss of funding owing to Brexit, which will of course impact on innovation. What direct communication have the Government had with Scottish universities about the funding threat posed by Brexit?

Joseph Johnson: The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Department for Education are in constant contact with all the devolved Administrations at various levels on a wide range of issues, including EU exit. BEIS participates in various forums, including the UK research funders group, and officials have recently participated in working groups with the Scottish Government, Universities Scotland, Heriot-Watt University and Edinburgh University.

Carbon Capture and Storage

7. **John Mc Nally** (Falkirk) (SNP): What steps he is taking to support the development of carbon capture and storage technology. [901640]

13. **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What steps he is taking to support the development of carbon capture and storage technology. [901649]

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Claire Perry): Carbon capture usage and storage has huge potential to play a vital future role in reducing emissions across a range of activities, but the technology has to be made more cost-effective to deploy at scale. That is why we have committed up to £100 million of public money in CCUS innovation in our clean growth strategy and why are working with the private sector and other Governments to drive up technological innovation and to drive down costs.

John Mc Nally: The clean growth strategy falls short of boosting the investment necessary to stimulate change in carbon capture and storage, and the industrial strategy Green Paper failed to mention it. In the light of the previous failure to deliver on Peterhead, what measures will the Minister announce to recover that investment?

Claire Perry: The world has not yet decided to invest in traditional CCUS. There are 21 at-scale plants operating globally, of which 16 rely on enhanced oil recovery as a revenue stream. It is simply not cost-effective enough in its current form for us to commit large-scale investment. We have to get the costs down. We are now in a world where the private sector wants to invest, however, and I am sure we would both welcome developments such as Project Acorn, to which both the UK Government and the Scottish Government have committed funds.

Alan Brown: The Minister does not like being reminded that the pulling of the £1 billion for the Peterhead project was a betrayal of the north-east of Scotland and the Scottish energy sector. She talks at the Dispatch Box about value for money, but the strike price of £92.50 at Hinkley is not value for money. When will the Government make real financial commitments to CCS in Scotland?

Claire Perry: In the world I live in, £100 million is quite a substantial financial investment in CCUS. It is striking that the Scottish Government invested only £100,000 in Project Acorn, as opposed to our £1.3 million. The point remains that the technology is not cost-effective. Only six plants in the world are operating without additional revenue from enhanced oil recovery. We want Britain to be the technological leader and to develop cost-effective solutions. I hope that we can work together to achieve that aim.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I welcome the return to some consideration of CCS in the clean growth plan, after the Government's dreadful mistake in cancelling the £1 billion UK CCS pilot plants in 2015. What discussions has the Minister had with her Norwegian counterparts on the prospects for UK-Norway collaboration on that country's advanced plans for carbon sequestration in the North sea?

Claire Perry: As the hon. Gentleman will know, Norway is currently a little bit unsure about the level of its own financial commitment. However, it has an excellent Energy Minister, with whom I have had multiple meetings and conversations. It seems strange to me that, having taken the hydrocarbons out of the North sea basin,

we should not co-operate to put the carbon dioxide back, so there are frequent conversations. The hon. Gentleman will have seen the clean growth strategy, on which we would like very much to work with other countries—not just Norway, but the United States and Canada as well.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): We have just heard about the broken promise to establish a world-leading carbon capture project at Peterhead. That is another betrayal of the North sea industry: £1 billion was never invested, and 600 jobs were never created. Is it not true that when it comes to the North sea, this Government are no good at anything except breaking promises?

Claire Perry: Some might say that the Scottish National party is not very good at forecasting oil prices. As I have already said, no Governments have taken a very substantial bet in the past few years—I call it a bet because it is not cost-effective—but, as the hon. Gentleman will know, organisations such as the Oil and Gas Climate Initiative are asking us, “How can we work together in a public-private arrangement to deliver the best, most cost-effective solutions?” We need to create some technology that we can export, like the oil and gas services that have delivered such economic value in the North sea.

Drew Hendry: Support for the North sea was also promised by the former Prime Minister in January 2016, when he said:

“An Oil and Gas Ambassador will be appointed to...promote” oil and gas “around the world”.

However, the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), told the *Press and Journal* recently that it was a “good idea” but he was “not aware” of it. He said:

“It's not crossed my desk”.

Whose desk did it cross? Or was it just another fantasy—a false promise from a “say anything, do nothing” Government”?

Claire Perry: I can understand why there is not much solar installation in Scotland: it appears that the sun never shines north of the border.

I will take no lessons from the hon. Gentleman about support for the North sea, which is a vital industry. I cannot answer his point about the ambassador, but I shall be happy to discuss it with my colleagues.

Leaving the EU: Automotive Sector

8. **Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union on the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the automotive sector. [901642]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): I have frequent discussions with the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union. The UK continues to demonstrate that it is an attractive place for future investment. Companies such as Nissan, BMW and Toyota continue to invest, thanks to our highly skilled workforce, the strong partnership between the Government and industry and long-term investment in new technology and innovation.

Tom Brake: I am sure the Secretary of State is aware that some car manufacturers are questioning whether to make further investments in the UK because they are uncertain about the validity of type approvals after we have left the European Union. When will the Secretary of State be in a position to confirm that they will indeed be valid and that the trucks shipping components will not be stuck in long queues at either Dover or Calais?

Greg Clark: I have been very clear in my discussions with the industry, and, as I said earlier, last week we had a roundtable at No. 10 with the Prime Minister. It is essential for our trading relationship with the European Union not only to be tariff-free, but to allow the continuation of a means of production that involves multiple components going back and forth, often at very short notice. There are questions about, for instance, type approval and rules of origin, and we are working with the industry to ensure that those matters are part of the deal that we want to achieve. That is a course that I know Members in all parts of the House would commend.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): Mitsubishi's headquarters are in Cirencester, where it employs 250 people and supports 113 dealerships throughout the UK. I wholeheartedly endorse my right hon. Friend's remarks about needing to secure a Brexit agreement that supports the automotive sector, so that we can protect those jobs.

Greg Clark: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. The industry is aware of the firmness of our intention. It makes no sense to disrupt what has been a very successful relationship between this country and some of the home countries of those manufacturers: that is very clear in all our minds.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Our successful car manufacturing sector exports nearly 1 million cars a year to the rest of the European Union. However, the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders has said:

"Brexit is the greatest challenge of our times".

What is the Secretary of State doing to ensure that there are no costly tariffs or time-consuming customs checks in the sector after we leave the EU?

Greg Clark: We met the SMMT and all members of the sector to discuss every aspect of the challenges and opportunities ahead. The hon. Lady is of course right that Brexit is very much on the minds of every motor manufacturer, which is why the discussions we have had reinforced our commitment not only to secure a good deal at high level, but to make sure all the particular aspects for that industry are addressed. The industry was also enthusiastic about our clear commitment, with mounting enthusiasm being shown on the part of our partners, big and small, to invest in the future and to make sure that what makes Britain attractive as a place to locate continues to be so in the future.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Ten years in low-paid work and then four years a Jaguar apprentice, I will never forget Warren waxing lyrical about the job that he loves, and moving into, in his words, the house of his dreams with the woman of his dreams. Does the Secretary of State begin to understand

that, as a consequence of this Government's disastrous mishandling of Brexit, investment has fallen by over 50%? Does he begin to recognise the damage the Government are doing to workers like Warren and the jewel in the crown of British manufacturing?

Greg Clark: If the hon. Gentleman talks to people in the motor industry, as in other industries, he will know that no one is more vigorous and active than I am in meeting prospective investors to explain our strategy and the attractiveness of the UK. As a result of the industry's work, supported by the Government, we have had a commitment from BMW to build the electric Mini in the UK, Toyota is investing a quarter of a billion pounds in Derbyshire, Nissan has confirmed that it will build two new models in Sunderland, and other discussions are continuing. That work, in the context of the need for continued good access to the European market, is giving confidence to the industry. I would have hoped that it was a matter of consensus across the House that we should maintain that confidence, rather than seek to undermine it.

Smart Meters

9. **Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con):** What assessment he has made of the effect on consumers' awareness of energy consumption of installing a smart meter. [901643]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): Recent research has been conducted by Smart Energy GB, the independent not-for-profit organisation responsible for national consumer engagement on smart meters. It found that 86% of people with a smart meter said that they had made energy-saving changes to their behaviour and that this positive action was maintained over time after installation.

Nigel Huddleston: The Minister is obviously aware that, by encouraging better energy consumption, the average consumer saves about £75 a year through a smart meter. Does he agree that smart meters will enable more switching of suppliers, saving the average customer £200 a year, and that this is therefore good for the environment and for consumers?

Richard Harrington: I totally agree with my hon. Friend's analysis. Smart meters enable consumers to make more confident and informed decisions about which supplier and tariff is right for them. Interestingly, Ofgem's survey for 2017 showed that consumers who say they have a smart meter are more likely to have switched supplier in the past 12 months.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): Energy consumption and awareness is a two-way street, and the companies are aware of what energy is being consumed in the home, so what steps is the Minister taking to ensure that energy companies do not increase the customer's daily rate as customers reduce their energy consumption?

Richard Harrington: The hon. Lady should rest assured that this is on our agenda. Increases must have Ofgem approval, and it is something we are monitoring very carefully.¹

1. [Official Report, 14 November 2017, Vol. 631, c. 1MC.]

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What assessment have the Government made of the security of smart meters?

Richard Harrington: The Government consider the security of smart meters to be very important, and the whole smart meter programme was designed with the approval of the cyber-security body and all the other relevant authorities.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): How does the Minister intend to make the process for switching between gas or electric companies easier for those with smart meters, as the process is extremely convoluted, to use a Ulster-Scots-ism, at present, with customer smart reading going dumb and manual readings having to be sent out?

Richard Harrington: The hon. Gentleman should be aware that the SMETS 2 programme involves complete compatibility between all the different meters, enabling people to switch. The current system that is being installed, SMETS 1, will be applicable for that in, we think, about a year, when the software allows that to happen.

Paris Climate Change Agreement

10. **Michael Tomlinson** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): What steps he has taken to meet the UK's commitments under the Paris climate change agreement. [901645]

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Claire Perry): The UK was a leading negotiator of the extraordinary Paris agreement in which 195 countries agreed to act to keep the global temperature rise well below 2°. In 2016, only two countries in the world cut their carbon emissions intensity in line with that Paris goal: China and the UK. Last month, our clean growth strategy set out how we intend to go further and faster in cutting our UK emissions to reach the Paris goal, while delivering economic growth.

Michael Tomlinson: Many of my constituents have contacted me with their concerns about climate change. Following Paris, what steps is the Minister taking to ensure that there is a global political movement to combat climate change?

Claire Perry: I will be going to Bonn next week for the 23rd United Nations climate change conference with the council of partners, where we will join other leading nations in reaffirming our commitment to the Paris goals and working on a variety of practical initiatives such as the phase-out of power generation from unabated coal. Britain, which started the industrial revolution using coal, now leads the world in phasing it out. We will also be working on the use of innovative financial solutions to mobilise private investment in low carbon technologies.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): How does the Minister intend to support carbon capture and storage in the Tees valley, given that that, too, would improve our environmental ambitions and enhance economic growth?

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady will know that the Tees valley has been incredibly assiduous in campaigning in many ways to be a location for the deployment of the new technology. We are working actively with it and we would like to see some investment proposals coming forward.

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): In reaffirming the UK's commitment to the Paris climate change deal, will my hon. Friend assure me that she had her colleagues will continue to pressure and persuade other countries that have not signed up to it or that might be reticent about its merits and about why they should be involved?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend makes a good point: we are only as good as the partners that we are working with. Other countries, including India and China, have set progressive goals for their own countries involving very rapid decarbonisation. Paris remains fit for purpose and will not be renegotiated. We would like all countries, particularly the major OECD countries, to change their minds and get behind this groundbreaking agreement for the world.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Committee on Climate Change clearly states that fracking cannot be compatible with the UK's climate change targets unless three key tests—on methane gas, on gas consumption and on carbon budgets—are met. Given that the Government have not shown that those tests can be met, will the Minister's Department refuse consent for fracking in Ryedale, North Yorkshire, which is currently under consideration, or is she planning simply to ignore the advice from the Committee on Climate Change?

Claire Perry: We cannot comment on particular cases. Testing wells are being drilled at the moment, and we need to understand the scientific basis, so that we can prove or disprove these tests. I find it slightly odd that those who argue the loudest that people should accept the scientific basis for climate change refuse to have a conversation about the scientific basis that would prove or disprove the case for fracking.

Royal Bank of Scotland: Small Business Customers

11. **David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the conclusions of the recent Financial Conduct Authority report on the Royal Bank of Scotland and small business customers. [901647]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has frequent discussions with the Chancellor on a range of matters, including financial regulation. The Financial Conduct Authority has published a summary of Promontory's skilled persons report, to which I think the right hon. Gentleman refers. The FCA is now considering the report's conclusions, including whether there is any basis for further action.

David Hanson: Constituents of mine have, in good faith, used Government-based schemes such as the enterprise finance guarantee scheme to grow their businesses, only to find the Royal Bank of Scotland using the very

same scheme to close down their businesses. Given that there is a litany of such cases throughout that report, is it not now time that the Minister and the Treasury conducted a proper investigation and perhaps even a judge-led inquiry?

Margot James: The enterprise finance guarantee scheme was exactly designed to enable businesses to borrow when they lacked collateral, with taxpayer support. If a bank is closing down overdraft facilities to claim on the guarantee—as in the case to which I believe the right hon. Gentleman refers—that would clearly be a gross abuse of the scheme. Any evidence of that will certainly be looked at very carefully by my Department.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Does the Minister not agree that the response to the finding that 92% of the bank's restructuring group's small business customers were mistreated has been pathetic and is unworthy of a publicly owned institution?

Margot James: I suggest that the right hon. Gentleman hold fire until the Financial Conduct Authority has decided on what action it may still take. It is empowered to take action, and I totally agree with the sentiments behind his question.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): What happened at RBS's Global Restructuring Group is a scandal of the highest order. Businesses were ruined; families were torn apart; and people took their own lives. The Minister must know that the FCA cannot deliver justice for the GRG's victims on its own, because most business banking is unregulated. I have asked Ministers this question six times already, and I will ask it a seventh time: will the Government set up a judge-led inquiry into RBS GRG, or do they have something to hide?

Margot James: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we have nothing to hide. I share the concerns about the practices of the Global Restructuring Group at RBS and the devastating impact on people's businesses, which represent a lifetime's work for many people. I am sure that we have not yet heard the last of this inquiry.

Leaving the EU: Car Industry

14. **Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the UK car industry after the UK leaves the EU. [901650]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The UK's automotive industry is a great British success story, and as I said earlier, the Prime Minister and I met senior executives last week and reiterated our determination to secure a Brexit deal that guarantees the sector's competitiveness. I will continue to work closely with all companies in the sector.

Alex Burghart: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for mentioning Ford in an earlier answer, because Ford is a major employer in my constituency. What is his Department doing to ensure that this country is the epicentre for innovation in the car industry as we move out of the European Union?

Greg Clark: Through our industrial strategy, we have a clear focus on being the go-to place in the world for the future of mobility in all its different forms. Dunton in my hon. Friend's constituency is home to Ford's technical centre, which is obviously one of the major global forces in that future. It is particularly gratifying that Ford has chosen the UK to be the centre of its European operations for the future of mobility.

Social Care: Minimum Wage Back-Payment

15. **Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on providing funding to ensure minimum wage back-payment in the social care sector. [901652]

17. **Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on providing funding to ensure minimum wage back-payment in the social care sector. [901654]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): I have worked closely with ministerial colleagues to implement a national minimum wage enforcement approach that protects the interests of social care workers and vulnerable service users. The Government recognise the financial pressures that some providers face, and we are exploring further options to minimise any impact on the sector. Any intervention would need to be proportionate, and the Government have opened discussions with the European Commission about issues relating to state aid.

Nick Smith: I thank the Minister for that answer, but how are the Government supporting individuals with personal budgets who could face bills of thousands of pounds in back-payments?

Margot James: We recognise that such individuals can be among the most vulnerable in society, and we are working to ensure that that group receives the necessary help and support. We expect local authorities to work with Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to ensure the right outcome for such individuals, but it is only fair that the budgets provided to personal budget holders reflect their legal obligations to pay the national minimum wage to workers on sleep-in duty both now and when it comes to any arrears owing.

Paula Sherriff: If enforcement action results in the closure of or disruption to service providers, how will the Government guarantee that vulnerable people will not be left without services?

Margot James: I would like to reassure the hon. Lady that the new social care compliance scheme will give providers up to a year to identify what they owe to workers and will be supported by advice from HMRC. Employers who identify arrears at the end of the self-review period will have three months to pay workers, so the scheme is designed both to support workers and to ensure the continuation of the crucial services that providers perform.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): The Government's new interim compliance scheme, announced last week, unfortunately adds to the uncertainty facing the social

care sector. May I urge the Minister to do all she can to ensure that, as quickly as possible, the Government get back round the table with the sector to find an acceptable long-term solution?

Margot James: I assure my hon. Friend that we are working very hard across Government with the Department of Health and the Department for Communities and Local Government to continue our discussions with the Treasury about possible solutions to the long-term viability of certain providers.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I welcome the Government's efforts to try to find a permanent solution to sleep-in shifts. The situation arose from a change in guidance following an employment tribunal in 2014. Would it not be sensible to consider revisiting the legislation in this place simply to return to the pre-tribunal position?

Margot James: We have made it clear that we expect all employers to pay workers according to the law, including the national minimum wage, for sleep-in duties. It is not uncommon for employment law to be clarified in the courts and tribunals, and this issue has been the subject of a number of cases. Even if we were to do as my hon. Friend suggests—we will certainly not be revisiting the legislation—it would not have any impact on workers' eligibility for historical back-pay liabilities.

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): This week is Living Wage Week. Some sectors in the UK are better predisposed than others to paying higher wages, but the rising cost of living applies to all. What will the Minister do to incentivise businesses in all sectors to sign up as living wage employers?

Margot James: I applaud the work of the national Living Wage Foundation, but we have a crucial role to play in ensuring that Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs has the resources to enforce the minimum wage, where it needs enforcing. That is our priority, although obviously I respect the work of the Living Wage Foundation.

Tidal Lagoons

16. **Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential merits of the recommendations set out in the Hendry review on tidal lagoons. [901653]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): As my hon. Friend knows, the issues raised by the review are complex. A lagoon programme could cost in the region of £50 billion. The costs of renewable energy are plummeting, and we need to consider the questions associated with deploying this technology in the marine environment. All programmes have to be considered with the following in mind: the cost, the export potential and the contribution to the green economy.

Richard Graham: The Hendry review was delivered on time by a distinguished former Conservative Energy Minister who started a sceptic and finished a convert, strongly recommending that the Government push ahead with a pilot project. Although none of us would want to see the Government rush into decisions of this kind—

a global first—what are the chances of a formal response before the review's first anniversary in January? Does my hon. Friend agree that the Budget is an excellent opportunity for a positive announcement?

Richard Harrington: My hon. Friend may be frustrated, and I know the Government have yet to respond to the review, but as I have said this is an extremely complex issue and we need to ensure that we make the right decision. All I can say to him is that we will be publishing our response in due course.

Topical Questions

T1. [901622] **Dr Paul Williams** (Stockton South) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Since we last met, my ministerial colleagues and I have brought three major pieces of legislation to the House: a draft Bill to cap consumer energy prices; new laws to ensure that every home and small business will be offered a smart meter; and the new Nuclear Safeguards Bill to maintain our nuclear safeguards as we leave the EU. We continue to develop new policy that will benefit businesses and wider society, and today we are publishing a call for evidence on Professor Dieter Helm's independent review of energy. We have reaffirmed our position as a world leader in tackling climate change through the launch of the clean growth strategy, and I take this opportunity to invite all Members on both sides of the House to join us in celebrating Small Business Saturday, which is coming up on 2 December.

Dr Williams: Is the Secretary of State concerned that, although October's figures show continued welcome manufacturing growth, almost half of the net jobs created in the UK since 2010 are in London and the south-east, where only a quarter of the population live?

Greg Clark: I would have thought that the hon. Gentleman would welcome the fact that jobs are being created in all parts of the United Kingdom and that we have the highest level of employment since records began. That is a signal of the success of the UK economy, but he is absolutely right that we want to make sure that every part of the United Kingdom reaches the height of prosperity it is capable of reaching, and through the industrial strategy we will have more to say about how we can propel that forward.

T2. [901623] **Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Businesses in my constituency and across the west midlands need the investment and the skills to continue to thrive and flourish. Will the Minister update me on the work the Government are doing in that regard?

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): We are investing in a world-class technical education system, growing apprenticeships and introducing T-levels from 2020 for 16 to 19-year-olds, backed by a further £500 million per year. We are also investing £170 million to create institutes of technology across all regions and £80 million for specialist national colleges to deliver higher-level technical education.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): Last week, the Secretary of State repeatedly refused to confirm, when pressed by the Select Committee, that the energy price cap would be in place by next winter. Media reports have also suggested that the Government have already told energy investors that the draft legislation will be ditched if they feel the big six power firms are doing enough to tackle high bills. I therefore ask the Secretary of State, in the hope he will today provide a clear answer, whether the energy price cap will be in place by the winter of 2018 and, if not, whether the media reports are true that there is actually no intention of introducing price cap legislation?

Greg Clark: I can assure the hon. Lady that there is every intention of introducing a price cap, and there is consensus in the House around that. We have published a Bill and it is being scrutinised by the Select Committee. As soon as it has finished that scrutiny, we will look for an opportunity to introduce it to the House.

Rebecca Long Bailey: I am afraid that answer simply created even more ambiguity, so let us try a different topic. The Government scheme to deal with the social care back-payment announced on 1 November has been cited as “inadequate” by many care businesses and organisations, as it does not address the fact that many providers simply cannot afford to pay due to funding cuts, and some workers will not be paid what they are duly owed until 31 March 2019. Mencap has stated that many providers will be reluctant to take part in the scheme as they feel they will be “writing their own suicide note”.

Therefore, I ask the Secretary of State: will the Government commit the necessary funding in the Budget to avert a crisis in the care sector, which could see many businesses struggle to survive, impacting on already fragile care services, and leave thousands of care staff without the wages they are owed?

Greg Clark: As the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Margot James), has made clear, and as I believe the hon. Lady knows, this is a difficult and complex issue. We completely accept the need for confidence among the providers of care to some of the most vulnerable people in society, while recognising the legitimate claim, which has been upheld by the courts, of those who have worked in that sector. Bringing those two things together requires precision and care, so that this is robust and does not create further uncertainty if it were found not to be legally possible to advance it. That is why the interim proposal has been made, but I am happy to keep the hon. Lady informed.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Yesterday afternoon, we had an excellent debate in this Chamber about the benefits of European economic area and European Free Trade Association membership, with people on both sides of the Chamber supporting our continuing membership. I do not expect my right hon. Friend to pass comment on his own views on this matter, but I do know he will always champion the best interests of British business. To that end, will he undertake, in all the negotiations he is involved with at the highest level, to make sure that all options are kept open as to how we get a Brexit deal—that includes the EEA and EFTA?

Greg Clark: I represent strongly the views of the business community because they are absolutely vital for our continuing prosperity as a country. The whole of the business community wants to get the best possible deal for the UK, and the vast majority of Members were elected on a platform and a manifesto of obtaining that. I will be tireless in pressing the case for it.

T3. [901624] **John Mc Nally** (Falkirk) (SNP): After years of the Scottish National party lobbying, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy launched a review into limited partnerships, and we in the SNP welcome that. In the light of the Paradise papers, thousands of firms registered in Scotland will be forced to reveal their owners’ identities. When will the Government publish the full findings of the review?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): At last year’s international anti-corruption summit, we committed to introduce a register of beneficial ownership of overseas companies. We published a call for evidence in April, the responses to which are being analysed. We will publish a response that provides for legislation in due course.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): Dieter Helm’s recently published “Cost of Energy Review” says that “the prices of oil, gas and coal have fallen...contrary to the modelling and forecasting of both the Department of Energy & Climate Change...and the Committee on Climate Change”. He means that however hard they try and however worthy their intentions, mandarins and regulators are rubbish at discovering or predicting energy prices. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the provisions for the draft Bill’s absolute energy price cap, which would require mandarins and regulators to meet twice a year to pick a number, would repeat the same mistakes so should be replaced by something more closely linked to the few competitive energy prices that already exist?

Greg Clark: I know what a great campaigner my hon. Friend has been on this issue. We have published the draft Bill, which includes our intentions, and I hope that he will give evidence while the Bill is being scrutinised. We are eager to hear his views, and we are eager to hear whether the Select Committee agrees with his analysis.

T5. [901627] **Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State accept that the true test of his industrial strategy will be how actively he and the Government intervene to protect manufacturing skills and jobs when companies such as BAE Systems, Bombardier or Vauxhall face crisis?

Greg Clark: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the Government, my ministerial team and I should be active in securing investment opportunities and continued employment by UK companies and international companies that invest in the UK, and we are. I do that tirelessly. In the case of Ellesmere Port, we have had discussions with Peugeot and it is interested, as we are, in investment in the new generation of vehicles, with which I know the hon. Gentleman is familiar.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I am working closely on investment in utilities with the Greater Lincolnshire local enterprise partnership,

which will shortly publish a report detailing areas of Lincolnshire in which infrastructure requires investment. One problem is that Western Power is prevented from making speculative investment by Ofgem. Can my hon. Friend the Minister tell me why there is apparently this regulatory barrier to investment and what she can do to help?

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Claire Perry): I commend my hon. Friend and her local enterprise partnership for their work. We look forward to seeing that report and to having productive conversations. We do not want any barriers that impede economic growth in her constituency and region.

T6. [901628] **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Net present value is the economic measurement generally held to provide the most robust assessment of all the costs and benefits of any proposed major infrastructure project. Would the Government ever support a major infrastructure project that, at its inception, was calculated to have a negative net economic benefit?

Greg Clark: One of the things that the House has correctly required of the Government is that we should take account of the impact on local economies—for example, on small businesses. That is something that has changed in the impact guidance, and it is right that it has.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): On the 100th anniversary of the communist revolution's introduction of a system that impoverished and imprisoned tens of millions, what is the Department doing to promote the benefits of free markets for workers, consumers and society as a whole?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question, because the history and reputation of this country during the past 100 years, and especially during the past decade, has been based on having in this country a system of vigorous competition in which businesses compete not because they are guaranteed a position by the state but because they face pressure from competitors. That has introduced extraordinary prosperity that would be thrown away were we to adopt a different system, such as that proposed 100 years ago.

T7. [901629] **Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State assure the House of his Department's commitment to enforce the national minimum wage in the maritime sector? Why have officials from his Department been unable to attend meetings of the cross-departmental legal working group on seafarers?

Margot James: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point about the national minimum wage and seafarers. We are looking into it and I will write to him with the latest position.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): This week is Offshore Wind Week. The wind and renewables sector is vital to my constituency. Many young people are training to secure jobs in the industry, as is being highlighted by the apprenticeships event that will begin here shortly. What ongoing support will the Government give to young people entering the industry?

Claire Perry: I am sure that my hon. Friend, like me, celebrates the fact that there has been an unprecedented fall in the price of offshore wind in the most recent auction, proving that the policy making—at least in this case—actually worked. We look forward to further investment in the industry, and are working with the sector on a sector deal that will have to address the issue of skills and apprenticeships. It is a vital industry; there is much more to do and much more growth to come.

T8. [901630] **Rachel Reeves** (Leeds West) (Lab): Last year, a Whirlpool tumble dryer caused a devastating fire at Shepherd's Bush Green after Whirlpool told customers that it was safe to continue using them, contrary to advice from the fire brigade. There are still 1 million of these potentially deadly tumble dryers in people's homes. What does the Minister think about that and what is she doing to ensure that all electrical goods are safe, and recalled if they are not?

Margot James: The Government take product safety extremely seriously. We established a working group on product recalls and safety that reported in July, and we will respond shortly. We are already taking action in the areas that have given the hon. Lady cause for concern. Whirlpool has now managed to withdraw or modify more than 2 million of those machines to an unprecedented degree.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): The Secretary of State will be aware that Newquay's bid to be the location of the spaceport is backed by organisations right across Cornwall, including the LEP, the chamber of commerce, the wider business community and the local authority. Will he update the House on what progress has been made in this important development for the UK space sector?

Greg Clark: I will indeed. My hon. Friend is a great champion of Newquay's bid. The shortlisting has taken place and announcements will be made very soon.

T9. [901631] **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Minister knows that the Red Arrows fly Hawks built at Brough, and they are great ambassadors for British aeronautical engineering and attracting export orders. But with the production line at Brough under threat, including those skilled jobs, is it not time for the Government to renew the contract for Hawks for the Red Arrows and, most importantly, to keep sovereign capability in this country?

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady is a great advocate for this and we discussed this matter during the recent urgent question. We want to do all we can to support the manufacturing future of that entire company, which is why we are focusing so much on trying to help it to get the overseas orders it needs.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): When does the Minister plan to respond to the Matthew Taylor review of employment practices in the modern economy?

Margot James: We are working on our response to the Taylor review's recommendations now, and we will publish that response before the year's end.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Imminent changes to the operation of the EU emissions trading system register are likely to invalidate UK-issued carbon allowances from the start of next year. These measures, which have been brought about by Brexit, will have a significant impact on the steel industry. Will the Minister let us know what contingency measures are being taken to mitigate this impact in the event that an agreement cannot be reached with the European Commission on this issue in time?

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise this important issue. He will be reassured to know that there are active conversations going on between my Department and the European Commission. He presents the absolute worst-case scenario, which we are confident that we will not reach.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: The other Conservative Members standing have been heard, but we have not heard from Ms Pow.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. The House may be aware that 2017 is likely to be declared one of the top three warmest years on record. With that in mind, it is more important than ever to stick to our carbon commitments. Will the Minister kindly outline what objectives she has for the forthcoming UN climate change conference? Will consolidating our position as global leaders in this area be one of those objectives?

Claire Perry: I commend my hon. Friend for her tireless advocacy and leadership in the Conservative Environment Network and for the work she does on behalf of her constituents—Taunton Deane is very lucky. She and I share the aspiration to continue our global leadership role; indeed, the headline objective for the conference is about making everyone aware that there is no rowing back on the Paris agreement—in fact, we want momentum to accelerate. I will be using the conference to announce further investments and further approaches the UK is taking to push our world leadership position forward. If my hon. Friend can just be patient for a few more days, I am sure she will join me in celebrating those when we announce them.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): The Committee on Climate Change and a range of respected experts all point out that the existing clean growth strategy will fail on the fifth carbon budget and on the Paris commitments. The Minister must have some additional measures in mind. What are they?

Claire Perry: The Committee on Climate Change said this set of policies was one of the most wide-ranging that had ever been put forward. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the budgets end in 10 and 15 years' time, and we are currently on track to achieve 94% and 93% of the things we need to do, a decade out. I think it is pretty good odds that we will achieve them.

Exiting the EU: Sectoral Analysis

Mr Speaker: Before we begin the urgent question in the name of Matthew Pennycook, I wish to emphasise to the House that it is narrowly focused. Colleagues will, I am sure, attend to the wording—indeed, I have already attended to the wording—of the hon. Gentleman's urgent question, which is on the matter of when the Government intend to provide the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union with impact assessments arising from sectoral analyses carried out by Her Majesty's Ministers. Questioning must focus on that matter; this is not an occasion for a general re-run of Brexit-related matters, of which I am sure there will be many examples in the days, weeks and months to come. I am sure that colleagues can expend their energies more than adequately on the terms which the hon. Gentleman has drawn.

12.36 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union if he will make a statement on when the Government intend to provide the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union with impact assessments arising from sectoral analyses carried out by Her Majesty's Ministers.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): We have this morning laid a written ministerial statement on this issue, which sets out the timeline and nature of our response to last week's motion. As the Government have made clear, it is not the case that there are 58 sectoral impact assessments. During the Opposition day debate, the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), told the House:

"there has been some misunderstanding about what this sectoral analysis actually is. It is not a series of 58 economic impact assessments."—[*Official Report*, 1 November 2017; Vol. 630, c. 887.] The Secretary of State for Exiting the EU made the same point during his appearance before the Lords EU Committee on 31 October, and to the House at oral questions to the Department for Exiting the European Union on 2 November.

Let me clarify exactly what the sectoral analysis is. It is a wide mix of qualitative and quantitative analysis, contained in a range of documents developed at different times since the referendum. It means looking at 58 sectors to help to inform our negotiating positions. The analysis examines the nature of activity in the sectors and how trade is conducted with the EU currently, and in many cases considers the alternatives after we leave the EU, as well as looking at existing precedents.

Our analysis is constantly evolving and being updated, but it is not, and nor has it ever been, a series of impact assessments examining the quantitative impact of Brexit on these sectors. Given this, it will take the Government some time to collate and bring together this information in a way that is accessible and informative to the Committee. We will provide this information to the Committee as soon as possible. We have made plain to the House authorities that we currently expect this to be in no more than three weeks.

Matthew Pennycook: Here we are again, Mr Speaker. As you will know, Members from both sides of the House have repeatedly requested that the 58 sectoral analyses

undertaken by the Government be released. On each occasion prior to last Wednesday's debate on our motion, Ministers argued that publication of these analyses would compromise the UK's negotiating position. On no occasion did Ministers argue or imply that the information did not exist as discrete documents, yet yesterday, in his letter to the Chair of the Brexit Committee, that was precisely what the Secretary of State argued. Can the Minister tell the House why, if the information that Members have repeatedly called for does not exist as a series of discrete impact assessments, a clear impression has been allowed to develop over many months that it does?

In a response dated 29 September 2017 to a freedom of information request submitted by my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) requesting details about the analyses and their publication, the Department's FOI Team stated:

"the Department for Exiting the European Union...holds the information you have requested".

Yet in the Secretary of State's letter to the Chair of the Select Committee, he implies that it will take time to collate and bring together the information because some of it is held by other Government Departments. Can the Minister confirm that the information given by his Department's FOI Team on 29 September is correct and that the Department holds the information? If not, why was the Department's FOI team permitted to state that the information is held? If the Department holds some of the information but not all of it, what is preventing the information that is available from being released to the Brexit Committee immediately?

This farce has dragged on for far too long. Ministers cannot use semantics and doublespeak to avoid the clear instruction that this House has given. There can be no further delay; Ministers just need to get on with it.

Mr Baker: The hon. Gentleman says that an impression has been allowed to develop. It was never our purpose to allow such an impression to develop. As I have explained, the Government carry out a wide range of analysis across these sectors in order to inform our negotiating position. Our purpose is to develop our negotiating capital. Our purpose is not to create the kinds of stories that the hon. Gentleman seems to be pursuing. The Government hold a wide range of information across a wide range of documents. The information is provided by Departments and collated by my Department, but what it does not comprise, and has never comprised, is quantitative forecasts of impact on those sectors. I think that the public will look at Labour Members today, look at what they are asking for, look at the kind of narrative they are trying to create, and ask, "Whose side are they on?"

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): As vice-Chairman of the Committee on Exiting the European Union, I thank my hon. Friend for his answer. The Select Committee has not actually discussed this matter formally, but from my own point of view, may I tell him that what he has said to the House this afternoon seems to be entirely reasonable?

Mr Baker: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend. I believe that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has spoken to the Chairman of the Committee, from whom I am sure we will hear, and I believe that a further meeting has been scheduled.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): It is absolutely astonishing that more than 500 days on from the referendum these documents are not yet prepared. If the Government are scrabbling them together in three weeks' time, woe betide us all. Have they been shared with the devolved Administrations, as the Secretary of State intimated to the Committee? Can the Minister confirm what other assessments have been made about the regional impacts of leaving the European Union?

Mr Baker: First and foremost, this criticism comes from a party that decided to leave the United Kingdom without determining what currency it would use. The sectoral analysis has been discussed with the devolved Administrations and the Joint Ministerial Committee, and we will give careful consideration, as and when information is released to the Select Committee, to how we share that information with the devolved Administrations. Once again, I reiterate that the information that we have does not comprise now, and never has done, quantitative forecasts of impact—not on sectors and not on any region.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): This is a storm in a teacup. Given the extent of the analysis, the timeframe seems reasonable, because if an incomplete picture was presented, the Opposition would be the first to criticise and to suggest that we were hiding something. I also suggest to the Minister that we should not want to weaken our negotiating hand.

Mr Baker: I am grateful to my hon. Friend—he is exactly right. Our purpose as a nation is to go forward and maximise our negotiating capital to deliver the best possible deal for all people in the United Kingdom.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): We now know what this material consists of, but I am concerned to read in a letter that the Secretary of State sent me that Ministers now intend

“to collate and bring together this information in a way that is accessible and informative for the Committee.”

I would expect the Committee to receive these documents in the form they were in when the motion was carried—in other words, unamended. As I made clear in my letter to the Secretary of State, I think it is for the Committee to decide in what form they are published. We are conscious of our responsibilities, in the same way as the whole House is. Can the Minister therefore confirm that that is what will now happen, and that there will be no further undue delay?

Mr Baker: The material that we hold includes commercially sensitive material and material that is relevant to our negotiating position. The House has previously voted not to release information that would be prejudicial to our negotiating position. If we were to give the right hon. Gentleman and the Committee the original reports commissioned at the beginning of the Department's life, he would find that that material was incomplete and out of date. It is our intention to satisfy the motion by providing to him information that is relevant, timely and correct.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): The Minister does himself no favours by turning into a partisan matter a perfectly legitimate request by this sovereign

Parliament for information about the most important negotiations to affect this country for decades. In the Secretary of State's letter to the Chair of the Brexit Committee, he talks about

“a wide mix of qualitative and quantitative analysis”.

Presumably, one part of that is the model that the Chancellor referred to when he gave evidence to the Treasury Committee recently. He said that there is a cross-departmental model that

“looks at impacts on different parts of our economy”.

My understanding is that that model is available immediately. Will it be disclosed immediately?

Mr Baker: The Treasury model to which my right hon. Friend the Chancellor referred is not contained within the documents, which I have carefully studied.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): The Minister says that there is nothing of significance in these documents and that they do not measure any impact. One might ask: what is the point of them, on the biggest single issue facing our country in our lifetimes? On the timing, Mr Speaker, you were very clear last week after the vote. You talked about days, not weeks, and there was also a discussion of Ministers being in contempt of Parliament. Perhaps you might like to remind the Minister what the potential sanctions are for a Minister who is found to be in contempt of Parliament.

Mr Baker: I think that the right hon. Gentleman has put the words “nothing of significance” in my mouth. I do not think that I have ever said that. We are saying to the House that this sectoral analysis does not contain quantitative projections of impact. As for the right hon. Gentleman's final question, I think that is a matter for you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): The motion that the House passed last week without objection referred to

“the impact assessments arising from those analyses”,

in reference to the previous list. I can well imagine that these assessments are scattered around different Departments, and that different officials are looking at various bits of work and saying, “Does this count as part of one of these assessments or not?” I think it would have been unconscionable for the Government to come to the House and suggest that they were not going to comply with the motion or release this information, but may I suggest that there should be some private dialogue with the highly respected Chair of the Brexit Committee, on Privy Council terms, about how to resolve the matter without it becoming a matter of embarrassment that disrupts the negotiations?

Mr Baker: It is our intention to comply with the will of the House, but we cannot release what we do not have. We will bring forward the material that is appropriate, timely and up to date, and that will inform the Committee. Steps have already been taken to carry forward the appropriate meetings.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): In response to detailed questioning at the Environmental Audit Committee last week, Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Ministers revealed the existence of sectoral analyses for the waste

[Mary Creagh]

and chemicals sectors. Given that those two analyses exist and have been read by Ministers, what is preventing their immediate publication?

Mr Baker: The reports that I have read on waste and on chemicals date back to the origins of the Department and so, as I suggested earlier, are now out of date and do not reflect our current thinking. We wish to inform the Committee with the latest information.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Unlike the Minister, I attended the entire debate. I have gone back on my phone to look at the words of the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), and I make it absolutely clear—the *Hansard* record of the debate is absolutely clear—that the nuts and bolts of the debate were about redaction. The argument that the Government advanced was that some material in the papers would be commercially sensitive and might have an impact on the negotiations. Will the Minister please take this matter seriously? This is a gross contempt of this place. The Government were specifically asked what, if they were not going to vote against the motion, was their problem. Disclose this material, and disclose it properly and quickly.

Mr Baker: My right hon. Friend is being perhaps unnecessarily unkind to me. I am sure that I did attend the entire debate, although I might have slipped out briefly. Perhaps I should watch the entire video over the weekend, but we will see. I would say to her that there has been no suggestion of redaction from the Treasury Bench, and certainly not during the course of that debate. That came from the Opposition Front Bench, when—

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): Not true.

Mr Baker: The hon. Lady says that is not true, but the record will show that when the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) was standing at the Dispatch Box, in dilating on his experience as Director of Public Prosecutions, he offered redaction, gisting and summaries—[*Interruption.*] He did that in his opening speech, whatever the hon. Lady may say.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): There are times when a Government have the stench of death about them. They are leaderless and directionless, and we learn today that their defence is that they are also contentless. Most concerning of all is the Minister's attempt to come to the House today and say that those who ask for this information should have their patriotism questioned. This will not stand, and it cannot be allowed to stand. The House gave the Minister an instruction, so my request to him today is to show a modicum of competence—in this week, of all weeks, for the Government—and pass these studies to the Committee, without redaction, as soon as possible.

Mr Baker: We have been given an instruction and we are seeking to comply with it earnestly. I would say to the right hon. Gentleman that there is absolutely no

question of being content-free. We have a large amount of content, but we need to draw it together and present it to the Committee in a form that is useful. On his other point, it bears repeating that it is time for the House to come together and strive in the national interest to implement the referendum result, not to seek anything that would undermine our negotiating capital.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): When the papers are published, will they inform the negotiations in any way? In that respect, does the Minister sometimes wonder whose side Opposition Members are on?

Mr Baker: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. It is very important that we in this House do not do the work of our negotiating partners for them. We wish to have a deep and special partnership, and to go forward in a spirit of friendship, but it is not our place to do an analysis of our own negotiating capital for our partners.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I actually want to commend the Minister, as I thought it was impossible for this Government to get more incompetent but they are doing a very good job of it. When they release the data, will they explain why, if they have undertaken all this analysis, none of it is quantitative? That does not bear any credence whatsoever, because there is no point undertaking an analysis without checking what the impact will be.

Mr Baker: I am very happy that I now have so many hon. Friends from Scotland, which is a statement about what the Scottish people think of the competence of the hon. Gentleman's party. In so far as there is quantitative analysis in the documents, which I have carefully studied, that is a statement of the facts as they were known at the time, not a projection into the future.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Most fair-minded people would accept that it is reasonable that some of this material may not be available until three weeks have expired, but there must be some of the material that could be made available now or sooner than in three weeks. Will my hon. Friend assure the House that he will do his best to make available soon that material which could be supplied before the three-week deadline?

Mr Baker: It is our intention to make available a coherent and up-to-date set of information within three weeks.

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): I hesitate to ask this question, because I have an image in my mind of the Minister rocking up to the office of my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) with carrier bags full of paper and asking him to sift through them. Nevertheless, will the Minister assure me that when the documentation is made available, it will include comparative information about the sectoral impact of the different forms of Brexit that the Government have considered but discounted?

Mr Baker: The hon. Lady asks an interesting question. It is precisely because we wish to avoid dumping unnecessary information on the Committee that we want to take the time necessary to bring together the information in an

appropriate form—[*Interruption.*] Well, that was what the hon. Lady said. She asked for comparative economic forecasts, but I have already said repeatedly that this material does not include quantitative economic forecasts.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): What the Minister has said is perfectly reasonable, but I urge him to release the documents in full as quickly as possible, as redactions only enflame interest. I have lived through many of these rows, and once such documents are published, they are often found to be very long and boring. When Parliament gets itself into a fine passion about this sort of thing, the travelling is often more fun than arriving.

Mr Baker: On my hon. Friend's final point, having carefully read the initial analysis, I think I can say with some certainty—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh, we have some analysis!"] I say to SNP Members that, as I have already told the House, I have read the initial round of analysis from the beginning of the life of the Department.

I can say to my hon. Friend that, in this case, the arrival will indeed be far less interesting than the journey.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The House will be absolutely staggered to hear Ministers say today that it is not the case that 58 sectoral analyses exist. In his evidence to the Select Committee, the Secretary of State said that the Prime Minister had seen the summaries, and that they comprised excruciating detail. In its response to my freedom of information request, the Department said that the initial exercise had concluded and, as such, all of the studies referred to had been completed. Will the Minister explain exactly what the Prime Minister saw, given that the Department does not have the studies, and could the studies—as referred to, perhaps, in the initial exercise, and as shown, I suspect, to the Prime Minister—be released to the Select Committee today?

Mr Baker: The hon. Lady is conflating various terms. There is certainly a sectoral analysis; what there is not is a quantitative impact analysis forecasting the future. It might help the House if I repeat what I said earlier. The analysis thus far has been a wide mix of qualitative and quantitative analysis, contained in a range of documents developed at different times since the referendum. The analysis examines the nature of activity in the sectors and how trade is conducted with the EU currently in those sectors, and in many cases it considers the alternatives after we leave, as well as looking at existing precedents.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The House has clearly voted for these papers to be released. My Whips advised me not to vote against that, so they have to be released. The Minister is trying to be helpful in providing additional information. I would say to him that that is not what the House requires. It requires lots of cardboard boxes with the information to be dumped on the Select Committee for it to look at. The Select Committee will then decide what, if anything, should be published.

Mr Baker: I am very grateful indeed to my hon. Friend, but I would say to him that the information we have includes commercially sensitive information, information that is material to our negotiating capital

and advice to Ministers. The House must be very careful not to establish precedents that it could regret in due course.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Minister's explanation for the delay is laughable and was not used in rejecting my freedom of information request two weeks ago. His explanation smacks of cover up and smokescreen. He questioned which side the Opposition were on. We are on the side of the public. When he deigns to publish these reports, will he also publish a report that the public can have, setting out precisely the cost of the Brexit that he so enthusiastically endorses?

Mr Baker: As I have not ceased saying, we are not in possession of quantitative studies forecasting the impact of leaving the EU. What the public deserves is to have this House pull together to deliver a successful result, which requires us to maximise our negotiating capital by not releasing information that would be prejudicial to the future of the country.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Although these analyses do not contain sectoral impact assessments, they may contain sensitive and confidential information, so will the Minister engage with the Chairman of the Select Committee to ensure that the information in these reports is handled appropriately with the public and the Committee?

Mr Baker: As I understand it, a meeting has already been arranged between the Secretary of State and the Chairman of the Committee to do just that.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I am sure that the public will, on the whole, use common sense and agree that this timing is reasonable. May I ask the Minister to make it very clear that, whatever is in these documents that we will be sitting up all night to read when they are published, it will make no change whatever to the policy of this country—that we are leaving the European Union, the single market and the customs union?

Mr Baker: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady, and I agree with her. The Government's policy follows naturally from the UK's democratic decision to leave the European Union. We will take back control of our laws, our borders, our money and our trade policy, and I am confident that we will make a success of it.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Mr Speaker, you have said that this particular question should focus on the issue of when, and the Minister has said within three weeks. During that period, the Select Committee will be able to have a proper debate about what exactly we want to see and in what format. Those of us who are going to Brussels this afternoon will have the chance to ask Mr Verhofstadt what plans the European Union Parliament has to make the same demands to the European Union Commission, and to ask Monsieur Barnier what plans the Commission has to provide the same answers to the same demands. Surely there is no one in this House who would want to see us publish information that would damage this nation in negotiations with another party.

Mr Baker: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I agree with what he said.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): It really is a bit rich for those on the Government Benches to ask which side we are on when this whole exercise from start to finish has been one of party political management over the national interest. The question is: party interest or national interest—which side are they on?

On the specific issue of timing, I am on the side of British businesses, which have warned the Treasury Committee that, before Christmas, some sectors will have to take potentially irreversible decisions. That position worsens in quarter one of next year in major sectors of our economy. Is three weeks really a reasonable delay? What can possibly be a reasonable explanation for such important and critical information not to be held in a way that is readily available and readily understood?

Mr Baker: The hon. Gentleman refers to an exercise in party management, but I have to tell him that, over the past two years, I have very much enjoyed working with members of Labour leave—and, indeed, Liberal leave. Right across this country, people of every party allegiance have wanted to resolve this question. He refers to businesses: of course, we continually engage with businesses—indeed, I met representatives of the chemical sector yesterday. He asks whether three weeks is reasonable. The answer is yes, for the reasons that I have given.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Given all the outrage that we are hearing in the Chamber today and further to the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), is my hon. Friend aware of any requests from the Opposition for those EU sectoral documents?

Mr Baker: No, I am not aware of any such request.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): The Minister confirmed in a response to me on 13 September that the Department had the analyses. He has confirmed today that he has seen the analyses. He then said that there is no quantitative work that casts its eye into the future. The question in response to that is: why has that work on such a critical issue not been done by his Department? He has not explained that. Surely he is in contempt of the House and we should repurpose the Tower to accommodate him and his Department heads.

Mr Baker: I refer the right hon. Gentleman to a range of answers that I have already given.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): The Minister has confirmed that the sectoral analyses will need to be released in relevant time and will need to have the correct information. Does he agree that resolving this matter to the satisfaction of the whole House and this country is most important and that long-term damage to the UK is certainly what nobody should be seeking?

Mr Baker: As I have said during the course of this debate, members of the Government are parliamentarians first and we do wish to satisfy the House. I say to my hon. Friend that our first priority as a Department is securing the long-term future of this country, and it is to that end that we will bend all our work.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Does the Minister recognise that, with his statement today, he really has turned farce into a new art form? When he asks what side we are on, I say that we on the Opposition Benches are on the side of the 29 million workers whose livelihoods absolutely depend on the impact of Brexit on the UK economy. Will he recognise that he is treating not only this House but the British public with contempt?

Mr Baker: I will tell the House what is turning farce into an art form: it is blogging about the Greek debt crisis under the hashtag #thisisacoup and then supporting our continued membership of the European Union, as the hon. Lady has done. That is what takes the public for fools. I say to her that we are all on the side of the British public. The UK took a democratic decision to leave the European Union, and we will now carry through that decision.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): When these documents are released as a result of the Opposition day motion, a cheap asset will have been handed to our negotiating partners within the EU. When the Minister implements the motion of this House, will he take as much time as is necessary to ensure that at least he and the Secretary of State continue to act in the national interest?

Mr Baker: We will continue to act in the national interest as we seek to satisfy the House and this motion. It is to that end that the Secretary of State will be meeting the Chairman of the Select Committee.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): People are increasingly concerned about jobs and the national health service. The Minister has given some very confusing information in his answers today. Who will be the censor of what MPs and the public are allowed to know about these issues of national importance?

Mr Baker: This Government have a proud record on jobs and on the NHS and we will continue to give both issues the first importance.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): My constituents, more than most, want the Government to get on with delivering Brexit. They told me that they were saddened that this House had voted as it did because it does not help our negotiating position. What they would like this House and the Minister's Department officials to get on with doing is negotiating the best possible deal rather than spending time facilitating the whims of this House. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is a very unseemly atmosphere in the Chamber. I understand the rising passions on the subject, but, as colleagues will know, I regularly visit schools across the country and conduct Skype sessions with school students. One of the most frequent questions put to me is: why do people feel the need to bawl at each other? We should set a better example to the next generation of leaders.

Mr Baker: I listened carefully to my hon. Friend and I say to him that officials and Ministers will have to spend some time on this work over the next three weeks, which will of course distract them from the negotiation.

That is regrettable, but we take seriously the motion that the House has passed and, in the way that I have set out, we are seeking to comply with it.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): This is outrageous! Whose side are we on? We are on the side of the truth being told; we are on the side of the British people; we are on the side of British business; we are on the side of British workers. Is it not the case that the Minister is simply making it up as he goes along, and treating Parliament and the people of Britain with utter contempt?

Mr Baker: No, that is not the case.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Is the Minister forgetting that, this time in one week, we will have 300 or 400 amendments before the House? Does he believe that this is a good way to start the Committee stage of European Union (Withdrawal) Bill?

Mr Baker: I am very conscious of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill coming forward, and I would like to begin Committee stage in a positive spirit of collaboration in order to deliver in the national interest. I have sought today to give straightforward answers to the questions that we have been asked, and I stand by what I have said.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): This is turning into the Government equivalent of the dead parrot sketch. The Minister says that releasing the information could compromise the Government's negotiating position, yet he could not be bothered to turn up to the House to vote the motion down. The Secretary of State for Scotland said at Scotland Office questions just last Wednesday that a sectoral analysis of Brexit's impact on Scotland's economy existed and had been shared with the Scottish Government. Does it or does it not exist? When will the Minister release that information?

Mr Baker: As I have said throughout the urgent question, we are not in possession of quantitative forecasts of the impact of Brexit. We are in possession of sectoral analysis, and we will work on that to satisfy the motion.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It is very simple. Parliament has told the Government to hand over the documents to the Select Committee. The Government accept that the resolution of the House is binding and that they will have to do that. They accept that the things exist because the Minister says that he has read them all and that the Prime Minister has read their outlines. It is very simple: the Minister has to hand them over to the Committee in a timely fashion. However, he seems to think that, in the meantime, he can rewrite them all because they are not good enough. That is not good enough. It is all very well for him to smirk and sneer at our patriotism, but if he holds the House in contempt, he holds the British public in contempt.

Mr Baker: There is no question of our holding the House in contempt. We are seeking earnestly to deliver to the House what has been requested. I say again that I have read the initial analysis, which Departments conducted at the beginning of our Department's work. It is necessary to hand to the Select Committee not out-of-date, multiple

documents produced at different times that are not representative of our latest thinking. We will therefore bring together the right information to provide to the Select Committee.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Listening to the Minister and his slippery evasions makes me question why the Department and he as a Minister exist at all. What is the point of the Department if it is not doing its job?

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is an extremely versatile and dextrous parliamentarian. He should not accuse the Minister of "slippery evasions" because there is a connotation there of alleged dishonesty, which the hon. Gentleman, who is normally an equable and good-natured fellow, should withdraw. He has articulated the thrust of his point. Withdraw.

Mike Gapes: I am happy to withdraw, Mr Speaker.

Mr Baker: Mr Speaker, I am most grateful. I reiterate that I am confident that I have answered those questions directly. The purpose of our Department is to deliver a successful exit from the European Union. I know that the hon. Gentleman nobly opposes that cause, as he has long done, but I have to say to him that we will continue to work with all our might to deliver a successful exit from the EU that works for everyone.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The quantitative assessment that counts is that of the British people. They determined at the general election that the Conservatives should not have an overall majority in this House. That is why a majority of this House demanded that the Minister make the documents available to the Select Committee. It is not beyond the Minister's wit to negotiate with the Select Committee Clerks how confidential information may be handled and kept confidential. He should proceed on that basis and negotiate the handling of the documents. Exactly what does he fear that Select Committee members will do with the confidential information?

Mr Baker: As I explained earlier, I understand that the Secretary of State has made arrangements to meet the Chairman of the Select Committee to discuss those matters.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): We are currently fighting for the survival of the Vauxhall car plant in my constituency. I am working with the local enterprise partnership and others to come up with a plan for the future. Of course, Brexit is a huge part of that. Will the Minister share as much as he can as soon as he can with my LEP of any impact analysis he has seen for the automotive sector?

Mr Baker: We would like to get on with delivering the best possible deal for the hon. Gentleman's constituents and the whole country. That is why we have constantly sought to get on to talking about the future relationship. I undertake to visit that plant with him as the business of the House allows.

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): We are seeing astonishing, dizzying theatre from the Government. We have had all sorts of Brexit before us: we are now seeing

[James Frith]

“improv Brexit”—improvising, making it up as they go along, with no tangible appreciation that, away from here, Brexit is playing out in everyday lives and there is a thirst for practical guidance. Three weeks feels like enough time to make it up, from “We shall not publish” to “It is not the case that these documents exist”. What does the Government’s quantitative analysis actually quantify?

Mr Baker: As I said in answer to a previous question, the quantitative analysis in the documents that we have and that I have studied reflects conditions at the time they were written.

Israel: Meetings

1.16 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the circumstances surrounding her meetings in Israel in August 2017.

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): I start by explaining that the Secretary of State is on a pre-arranged Government visit to Africa—[*Interruption.*] She is currently in the air. She is on a pre-arranged visit to Africa, to focus on how we are breaking down barriers to trade, helping African countries achieve their development ambitions, reducing dependence on aid and helping build Britain’s trading partners of the future.

I welcome this opportunity to update the House on the Secretary of State’s trip to Israel earlier this year, and I appreciate the hon. Lady’s question. The Secretary of State made a public statement yesterday. In that, she explained that she had the opportunity to meet a number of people and organisations in Israel. A list of who she met and what was covered was published in yesterday’s statement.

The Secretary of State realises in hindsight that those meetings were not arranged following the usual procedures, and she has apologised for that. The Foreign Office has said that UK interests were not damaged or affected by the meetings on that visit. I therefore hope that hon. Members will agree that now she has made that apology and published details of the meetings, we should accept that and refocus on our vital work of tackling extreme poverty and humanitarian crises across the world.

Kate Osamor: I thank the Minister for being here, but it is simply unacceptable that the Secretary of State is not here before the House to answer this question and explain herself.

The British public are outraged that the Secretary of State held 12 secret meetings in Israel, including with Prime Minister Netanyahu, without telling either the Foreign Office or the Prime Minister, and was accompanied by a pro-Israeli lobbyist. She then misled the British public with comments on Friday that she finally corrected yesterday. It has now emerged that the Prime Minister met her Israeli counterpart last week without even knowing about the secret meeting in August.

Today we learned that the Secretary of State has applied pressure to her Department to divert humanitarian funding to the Israeli army in the Golan Heights. Will the Minister tell the House exactly what was discussed in those secret meetings, and exactly what pressure the Secretary of State applied on her Department when she returned to the UK?

It is hard to think of a more black and white case of breaking the ministerial code of conduct, but rather than change the Minister, the Prime Minister somehow decided last night that the ministerial code itself needed changing.

We have a Prime Minister who has lost her authority and her control of the classroom. Does the Minister accept that it is time the Secretary of State either faces a Cabinet Office investigation, or does the decent thing and resigns?

Alistair Burt: First, I repeat that the Secretary of State is already on her way to Africa on a pre-arranged visit. She is already flying and it is not possible for her to deal with the question, but that is why I am here. The Secretary of State published a statement yesterday, with an apology.

Let me take the hon. Lady's questions as she put them. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office was informed of the Secretary of State's visit during the course of the visit, but not before. The Secretary of State has been very clear and absolutely contrite. Her statement yesterday recognises that of course she should have informed the Foreign Office before the visit, but she did not. That is why the statement was made and that is why she has apologised. In the statement, she also gave full details of the meetings she had. They are not verbatim accounts, but she has given details of who she saw and the subjects that were discussed, which I think is quite appropriate. I do not think that that means they were particularly secret meetings, particularly as the Foreign Office was aware, during the course of the visit, that she had been seeing people in Israel.

On the ministerial code of conduct, my right hon. Friend the International Development Secretary has apologised to the Prime Minister for her handling of this matter. The Prime Minister has accepted her apology. The Foreign Office was aware of her visit to Israel while it was under way. The Foreign Office is also clear that UK interests were not damaged or affected by the meetings on this visit. The Prime Minister regards the matter as closed.

I would like to make a couple more points, if I may. Let us look at who my right hon. Friend met: leading politicians; an emergency humanitarian aid non-governmental organisation; Pears Programme for Global Innovation; and a group that works on water, farming, solar and hospital projects in Africa; she visited Save a Child's Heart to talk about a co-existence project; the Galilee International Management Institute and held a meeting with a group of start-ups with a focus on Africa. Does the hon. Lady think that she should not have met those people? If I had been in Israel on a two-day visit, I would have wanted a programme just like this.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): You would have told the ambassador.

Alistair Burt: I would have told the ambassador—of course I would. But if we look at the quality of the meetings, who my right hon. Friend saw and what her job is, they are all absolutely pertinent.

One last point if I may, Mr Speaker. The hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) raised the question of pressure on the Department afterwards. As the Minister responsible for development in that area, I can say that two issues were raised by the Secretary of State on her return. One related to aid currently being provided by the Israeli army for those in Syria who could not get medical assistance or cross the border to get it from the Israeli Defence Forces. The second issue she raised was whether there was room for more co-operation between the UK and the Israeli aid agency, as we look at issues right across the region.

We looked at both issues. The Department's view is that aid to the IDF in the Golan Heights is not appropriate—we do not do that—and that was the advice given to

the Secretary of State. We are looking hard to see if there is room to co-operate with the Israeli aid organisation, as we do with others around the region. There was no pressure put on the Department. They were perfectly pertinent questions to raise on her return. She raised them in an entirely the proper way with the Department and with me, and we are dealing with it. She is doing her job as Development Secretary. That is what she is doing today and that is what the meetings disclose.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): The spotlight is on the proceedings and behaviour of all of us in this place as never before. What people want is transparency and accountability. Does my right hon. Friend not agree that it is time, finally, to address the issue of privileged access, lobbying and funding if we are not to have this repeated time and time again? Does he not agree that all organisations involved in active lobbying of Members of Parliament and Ministers should open their books and be entirely transparent, so that we can see who is lobbying whom and who is providing the funding?

Alistair Burt: Questions about lobbying and transparency are really important for the House and for Ministers, which is why it was important for the Secretary of State to disclose who she was with and the organisations she went to see. Wider questions about lobbying and funding are for others, but I think the Secretary of State has, having made the statement yesterday to disclose what she had done, been entirely transparent in relation to her visit.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I share the astonishment of the hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) that the Secretary of State is not here to defend herself. It would appear that the Government have such little credibility left that Ministers are now freelancing on foreign policy. I wonder if the Minister will answer these questions. Will he confirm whether the Chancellor was briefed about the outrageous development that UK aid funding was to be given to the Israeli army? What action is the Prime Minister taking to ensure the matter is investigated in terms of the ministerial code? Does he have faith that the Secretary of State still has the ability and credibility to carry on?

Alistair Burt: No, I do not think the Chancellor was informed, because it never became a policy, or had the chance to become a policy, to fund the Israeli Defence Forces in the Golan Heights. Secondly, as I said a moment ago, as far as the ministerial code is concerned, the Prime Minister has seen the Secretary of State, who has explained and apologised again for not informing people beforehand. The Prime Minister regards the matter as closed, but she is looking to tighten up the ministerial code to make it very clear what the process should be. Do I have full confidence in my right hon. Friend? Of course I do.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): When I met the Israeli Deputy Prime Minister, he stormed out of the meeting. The Secretary of State got a much more cordial reception. Is it just because she is a lady?

Alistair Burt: I am not sure if it is appropriate for me to answer on either how my right hon. Friend was treated or the reception for the Secretary of State for International Development, but I am quite sure that both meetings were perfectly proper and appropriate.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): The Minister read out an incredibly long list of meetings that the Secretary of State held in Israel on what I thought was supposed to be a family holiday. Did she have any meetings with the Palestinian side? The Minister will, as Middle East Minister, appreciate the importance of a wholly balanced approach to the middle east peace process and not a one-sided one. If she is in the air now, she could have delayed her departure, couldn't she, and shown some courtesy to this House. It is very difficult for us to know, Mr Speaker, whether the Secretary of State for International Development or the Foreign Secretary has the worse relationship with accuracy. If we had a Prime Minister who was not so weak, both would have been sacked.

Alistair Burt: The Secretary of State says, in her very full statement yesterday, that she was on a family holiday between 13 and 25 August, which is 12 days. She took two days out of that holiday to have a series of meetings with Israeli politicians and political people, and a number of different charities, including, as I said earlier, Save a Child's Heart, which works with Palestinian children as well as Israeli children. The list of meetings has been published. I do not see that she specifically had a set of meetings with those representing Palestinian interests, but of course she has met those on other occasions. It is a full disclosure of work. She had two days off in the middle of a holiday. I suspect that is not particularly unusual for Ministers, who sometimes do other things. But you would, of course, let the Foreign Office know in advance, which my right hon. Friend did not, and that was the error for which she has apologised. The meetings were really pertinent to her work, to our work and to British interests.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Given that Foreign Office Ministers and International Development Ministers now share responsibilities across the two Departments, and that we have two Secretaries of State, is there not a need to clarify the position for Ministers visiting particular countries—whether the Foreign Office or DFID is informed—so that we clear this matter up once and for all?

Alistair Burt: Having been around a bit, I would hope that the ministerial code makes it clear what the sequence of events ought to be. Most Ministers should let the local embassy know they are going to be there, in case something happens while they are—that is reasonable practice, including sometimes for holidays. Certainly, if a Minister is going to have meetings in a country, they need to make it very clear that they want to have them and get them set up. That is the appropriate process. Again, my right hon. Friend has said very clearly that she did not do that, and she has apologised, and I suspect that someone will not be doing something like this for a very long time.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It is a real shame that the Minister is acting as an air raid shelter here—I think if he reflects later, he will not be proud of what he has done today. The honest truth is that if the Secretary of State had said in this House what she said in public last week, when she misled the public, by now she would have been referred to the Committee on Standards. I honestly say to the Minister: either there is a Government with collective responsibility in which people talk to one another before they potentially meet significant people in other Governments, or there is not a Government,

and if there is not a Government, it is not a question of whether the Secretary of State should resign, but a question of whether they should all resign.

Alistair Burt: To return to the core of the issue, my right hon. Friend accepts that she should have discussed the visit before she went and made it very clear what she was going to do. In relation to what she said to *The Guardian* last week, again she has made it clear that her words left room for misinterpretation and misunderstanding, which is why she issued the statement yesterday and is clarifying matters. She regrets not being clearer in her language, which is appropriate, and I think it perfectly reasonable that I have been asked to do this today, given that she is continuing her work as International Development Secretary abroad and so could not be here.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's apology. My right hon. Friend the Minister will understand that we often come to this issue with history and positions previously taken: he is a former treasurer of the Conservative Friends of Israel, and the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State are regarded as very strong supporters of Israel. My right hon. Friend will know how important it is, when people get into these positions and hold responsibilities for whole-of-Government policy, that they understand all the perspectives around this awful conflict, which is at the heart of so many of the problems in the middle east. He is probably the best equipped of her Ministers to take her gently in hand, and I hope that he does.

Alistair Burt: I appreciate my hon. Friend's welcome for my right hon. Friend's apology. He is right; many Members have history in relation to this terrible and long-standing conflict. Those in ministerial positions have to be particularly careful that whatever their background they apply themselves honestly and objectively to the issues. We all try to do so. We cannot pretend we did not have affiliations, but we make sure, when we are acting in the UK's interests and on UK foreign policy, that that—and absolutely nothing else—is our guiding light. I have seen nothing to suggest that the Secretary of State takes a different view.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister said that the Foreign Office was made aware of the Secretary of State's visit to Israel during her visit. Can he give us more information about when the Foreign Office was made aware? Was it before or after the meetings with Israeli Ministers and politicians? At what level was the Foreign and Commonwealth Office made aware? Did someone in the embassy find out, or did the Secretary of State tell London she was in Israel?

Alistair Burt: My understanding is that FCO officials became aware of my right hon. Friend's private visit on 24 August—during her visit. I do not have the dates of all the meetings, but I suspect it was after the meetings took place, and I believe that it was she who told the official abroad that she was there and having these visits. That is my understanding of the case.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Has guidance now been reissued to Ministers and Secretaries of State that they should not freelance on foreign

policy—or on policy in relation to any other Department—when on their holidays, with or without Tory donors present?

Alistair Burt: The Prime Minister said yesterday that the ministerial code would be tightened in relation to this matter, and I am quite sure that it will be. I do not think it has been reissued this morning, but—again—the common sense of this is very clear. That is why my right hon. Friend has recognised that she should have done this differently, as I am sure we all would were we in a similar position.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The Minister has been clear that neither his Department nor the Home Office knew about these meetings. He said that they were not set up in the usual way. Can he explain how they were set up? My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) asked about when the FCO was made aware of the meetings. Is it not important that that question be clarified? If it knew beforehand, did the embassy make any attempt to attend the meetings and make sure the Secretary of State knew her responsibilities?

Alistair Burt: As far as I am aware, no officials sought to attend the meetings. As I said, I think the Foreign Office was made aware of the visits after they had taken place.

Mr Kevan Jones: That's not what you said.

Alistair Burt: That would seem to be the appropriate thing. The root of this is that my right hon. Friend knows that she should have told the embassy and the Foreign Office in advance.

Mr Jones: That's not what you said.

Alistair Burt: I am sorry. I thought I said clearly what I understood the sequence of events to have been. The meetings were set up by Lord Polak through his contacts and interests with Israel, which are widely known.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): This appears to have been a gross breach of the code of ministerial conduct—certainly every code I have ever seen—and, as a Minister of nine years' standing in previous Governments, I would have thought that this was a resigning matter. The Minister, for whom I have a lot of respect, has said that no officials attended the meetings. Has the Secretary of State provided a full minute to the Department, the Foreign Office and the Prime Minister of the content of the meetings, which she appears to have attended alone, without any officials, so as to fill this appalling gap that she has created?

Alistair Burt: My right hon. Friend supplied in her statement yesterday a list of the meetings and the subjects covered—nobody would expect a verbatim account of those meetings—and has spoken to the FCO and the Prime Minister about them. I again draw the House's attention to these meetings, however, with parties ranging from the Foreign Ministry, the Prime Minister of the State of Israel and the Minister for Public Security, Information and Strategic Affairs to several charities. There is nothing in this programme that anyone interested in Israel and the middle east would quibble with. The difficulty was that they were not spoken about in advance, as my right hon. Friend recognises, but none of these

meetings themselves would be considered untoward. That is why the Prime Minister and the Foreign Office are satisfied they were in the UK's interests and that nothing has happened that is detrimental to the UK's interests.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I feel for the Minister—he has been sent here to answer these questions—but it is not unreasonable to have expected him to arrive able to furnish the House with full details about what was disclosed, to whom, when and under what circumstances. [*Interruption.*] He says he has. In response to the questions from my hon. Friends the Members for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) and for North Durham (Mr Jones), he was unable to provide accurate and factual responses about who was met—[*Interruption.*] Will he stop waving bits of paper, just for one moment, and getting hot under the collar? At what point was the Foreign Office informed? What exactly was it informed about—was it the full scope and content of the meetings? At what stage was it informed? Under what circumstances was it informed? Those are the key questions. Finally, there has been some controversy about this issue with the IDF. Did the Secretary of State discuss funding for the IDF in her meetings in Israel? If so, it was not disclosed in the ministerial statement.

Alistair Burt: I was holding the piece of paper because on it is the statement that my right hon. Friend issued yesterday. It lists the meetings that she attended and the subjects for discussion. It is not a verbatim account, but it is pretty detailed in respect of the matters that she discussed.

Mr Kevan Jones: When did the embassy know about it?

Alistair Burt: I gave the hon. Gentleman the answer to that question. The embassy was aware on 24 August, which I think will have been after some of the meetings. As for who was met and what was said, details have been provided.

I am sure colleagues do not believe that the Secretary of State should not have discussed the Pears Programme for Global Innovation with Dr Aliza Inbal, discussed with IsraAID emergency humanitarian aid and the work that the organisation does, or visited Save a Child's Heart. If I were on a development-related visit to Israel, I would want to have exactly the same meetings. The root of the matter and the heart of the concern is the fact that my right hon. Friend did not disclose her visit at the outset. She has addressed that, and the details of the meetings have been made clear in her statement.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Earlier, the Deputy Leader of the House accused Labour Front Benchers of pursuing this matter because they were vehemently anti-Israel. I freely admit that I have profound disagreements with the perspectives of some of my Labour colleagues on this conflict, but let me say to the Minister and to all Members that, as a former proud chair of Labour Friends of Israel, I am appalled by what has happened. The Minister is right to say that the meetings were not heinous in and of themselves, but the lack of accountability is highly suspect.

Mr Speaker: Order. This is a most interesting and engaging disquisition, but I am looking for the question mark, and I think that the hon. Gentleman is teetering on the brink of it.

John Woodcock: Does the Minister not agree that it is beyond credibility that the International Development Secretary thought that it could be an appropriate use of UK public funds to divert them to the Israeli Defence Forces in the Golan Heights? This is surely an example of her seeking a position within the Conservative party and bringing the country into disrepute.

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman would not expect me to defend any suggestion that the matter is being pursued because of an Israel angle, but it is a perfectly legitimate matter for the hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) to have raised because, as we know, the substance of it is already contained in a ministerial apology. My right hon. Friend accepts that she got the sequence wrong, and that she should have done something differently. Therefore, I accept the question in a perfectly straightforward way. However, I think it is a stretch to say that, having learnt on that trip—if she did not already know—of the Israeli army's work in looking after people from Syria who cannot get medical aid for their acute injuries there and who cross the border into Israel where aid is properly and freely given by the Israeli Defence Forces, she should not have come back and said that that was an extraordinary humanitarian gesture, and asked whether there was anything that we should do. The answer to that question is no, for the reasons that I gave earlier, but not to believe that it is a perfectly genuine question to ask, on a humanitarian basis, strikes me as a bit of a stretch.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): It is dismal to see the Minister having to defend the indefensible in this way. He is doing his very best to put a positive gloss on the issue, but does he really believe that, when the Secretary of State offered to make financial assistance available to the Israeli Defence Forces to aid that settlement development in the Golan Heights, she did not know, or did not care, that the UK does not recognise the legality of Israel's occupation of the Golan Heights? Will he clarify that point, please?

Alistair Burt: Let me make it clear that there is no question of supporting any settlements in the Golan Heights. What the Israeli Defence Forces do is open information, which the hon. Lady can find on the internet. Civilians from Syria come to the Israeli Defence Forces with their injured, for whom they cannot get help on their side of the border, and ask for medical help, which the Israeli Defence Forces give. That is an extraordinary humanitarian act, and it has been going on for some time. I do not think that my right hon. Friend was unreasonable to look at the work that was going on and ask whether there was something that the United Kingdom could do to assist it. Because we regard the Golan Heights as occupied territory, and because we cannot support the Israeli occupation, the answer to her query was no, but I think it entirely reasonable for her to have come back and thought about it—and, of course, the Department provided the appropriate answer.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): Does the Minister understand the concern that the public will feel when it seems that British foreign policy on Israel and Palestine is being run by a Conservative-linked lobby group rather than by an independent civil service and

an elected Government? Is this not just another example of a Government who are in disarray as lobby groups, not Downing Street, run our country?

May I also ask whether the Secretary of State has been referred to Sir Alex Allan or to Sue Gray, the director general of propriety and ethics, in connection with the ministerial code of conduct?

Alistair Burt: The short answer to the hon. Lady's second question is no, because the Prime Minister considers the matter to be closed. As for her first question, it is palpably obvious that policy on Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories is not made by any lobby group anywhere, but is made, perfectly properly, by the Government. Since my right hon. Friend returned from Israel, support for the west bank, and for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency and the emergency appeal from Gaza, has come from the Department for International Development. Ministers quite properly make the policy. The Government are informed by lots of people, but they make the policy, not lobbyists.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): This feels like another case of shooting the messenger, but are we supposed to believe that—according to the Minister—the Secretary of State had all those meetings that were so beneficial, so worth while, yet did not fully brief people when she came back? This has never come up in parliamentary questions.

We are supposed to believe that the Secretary of State is so capable and has the ability to carry out her role, yet we are also supposed to believe that it was a good idea to give the Israeli Defence Forces money in the Golan Heights—oh wait, we cannot, because we do not recognise the territories; we regard them as occupied territories. That does not sound like someone in whose ability to do her job we can have confidence.

May I also ask a question about demolitions? Did the Secretary of State express any concern about international aid for the villages of Khan al-Ahmar and Susiya?

Alistair Burt: I cannot answer the last part of the hon. Gentleman's question, because I do not have a verbatim account of all the meetings, but I can say that the Secretary of State is fully behind the Government's policy, which has been to oppose the demolitions in both Khan al-Ahmar and Susiya. I went to visit those villages in August, and the policy has not changed.

As for the issue of the Israeli Defence Forces, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State saw, as we all have, the extraordinary work that is being done to provide humanitarian assistance and save people from the death that they would have suffered had they not been treated. That she should feel humanitarian concern and ask whether, wherever that support had come from, the United Kingdom could contribute to it did not strike me as unreasonable, but we cannot do so, for the reasons that I have already given.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): It is becoming a regular occurrence in the Chamber for issues to become less rather than more clear when a Minister is at the Dispatch Box. It seems that the Secretary of State informed the Foreign Office about her visit the day before she left; perhaps that was because she got caught.

On the issue of transparency, will the Minister ask the Secretary of State for a full timeline showing when she met the organisations that she met? It should start with the first correspondence between the Secretary of State and Lord Polak, or between whoever arranged the visits in her office and Lord Polak. It should also show whether she used official or unofficial e-mail addresses.

Alistair Burt: Let me say first that my right hon. Friend did not suddenly contrive a long-planned visit to Africa in the last 24 hours.

Ian Murray: I did not say that.

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman implied that my right hon. Friend had suddenly found a reason to go to Africa and disappear, and that is not fair.

If more information is needed, there is no reason why further questions may not be asked by means of written parliamentary questions or the like. Let me point out again, however, that a full statement and an apology were made by my right hon. Friend, who recognised that what she did was not in the right sequence, and gave the details of whom she saw. I am sure that, if colleagues seek more information, they will be responded to in the appropriate way.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I also have great respect for the right hon. Gentleman, but even he must concede that the more we hear about this affair, the murkier it sounds. May we have an assurance that DFID will publish a summary of all discussions that took place in the months prior to this holiday within the Department that had any connection to Israel or any organisations in Israel, and may we have a summary of all discussions that have taken place in the Department since the holiday?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman can ask these questions, but I have to say that DFID and the Foreign Office discuss issues relating to Israel and the occupied territories virtually all the time. It is a constant source of discussion as we look at both the long-standing issues between them and the aid we give to the west bank and Gaza in emergency appeals and for long-standing development programmes. That is all public and open and clear. If the hon. Gentleman would like to ask any further questions, he can do, but the information on these matters and the support that is given to the area is well known, and that policy has not changed in any way since my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State came back.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I feel for the Minister, who is a very decent man. He has been brought here to answer questions about significant failings by the Secretary of State, but frankly she should be here today, and if that meant cancelling or postponing a flight, so be it. May I press him on when the Secretary of State first informed her own Department of these meetings, and whether she received any advance briefings or advice?

Alistair Burt: I thank the hon. Lady for her generous remarks; I appreciate them very much.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State informed the FCO on 24 August. If I recall rightly, the FCO at that time made the matter known both to her own

Department and the rest of the FCO. So it was known at that stage. It would seem clear that discussions were not held in advance—my right hon. Friend has apologised for that and recognises she got it wrong. That is what I have been trying to make clear in this statement as best I can, and that was also the purpose of her statement yesterday.

Mike Gapes: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Minister has given a number of answers to me and other colleagues whereby there is some lack of clarity and some uncertainty. How can we best ensure that the House gets the full facts about the timing and the role of the two Departments in the periods up to, during and at the end of this ministerial private visit to Israel?

Mr Speaker: The short answer is that Members can table questions, either written or oral or both. If the hon. Gentleman is dissatisfied he can, when the House returns next week, seek, by one or other means of the various types of question available, to procure the information, in all likelihood from the Secretary of State for International Development herself.

Mr Kevan Jones: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Will the Minister have an opportunity to offer some clarification? He has said today that Foreign Office staff in Israel found out about these meetings as they were going on, but, from answers to my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) and others, it seems clear that they found out after the meetings had taken place. May we get some clarity about when they did find this out?

Mr Speaker: The Minister of State may come in in a moment if he wishes, but when that was first put to him, he effectively acknowledged the likelihood that that was so, and I think it recurred as an issue in the course of the questioning—and the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) has now reiterated the same point. So, although there might not be specificity today about precise dates, on the concept involved, the right hon. Gentleman the Minister of State was clear. It is open to Members to return to these matters in the normal way through written and oral interrogation, and the hon. Gentleman will have to be only modestly patient.

Alistair Burt *rose*—

Mr Speaker: But I think we should preserve the last words on this matter to the Minister of State, whose emollient tone we will now hear.

Alistair Burt: I am happy to do as best I can by being as clear as I can. The information I have is that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State told Foreign Office officials on 24 August that she was on the visit. It seems likely that the meetings took place beforehand. The reason for the statement and for her explanation yesterday is that she recognises that she should have told people beforehand. So there is no doubt about that: that is what the explanation is for; that is what the statement is for; and she has apologised for that—she got that wrong. I do not think there is any lack of clarity about the date, the sequence or anything else now.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman.

Chris Bryant: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Bearing in mind what the Minister has just said and what has been said about giving advance notice, would it not be nice, and rather charming, if the Secretary of State just told you—today, perhaps—that she was going to make a statement next Monday, so all of this could be cleared up in the round?

Mr Speaker: I always welcome communication from the right hon. Lady, whom I have known for many years. If she becomes aware of these matters and wishes to indicate to me an intention to come to the House, she is welcome to do so and I would welcome it, but that has to be for her to judge. We will leave it there for now.

Yemen

1.57 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the impact of the escalation of Saudi Arabia's blockade on the humanitarian situation in Yemen.

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt): First, it has been made clear where the Secretary of State is, and we have apologised for her being on a visit to Africa. Let me answer the question.

Yemen is the world's largest humanitarian crisis: 21 million people in Yemen are in need of humanitarian assistance, and nearly 10 million are in need of immediate help to support or sustain life. As the third-largest humanitarian donor to Yemen and the second-largest donor to the UN appeal, the UK is already leading the world's response to the crisis in Yemen. Our funding of £155 million this year will provide enough food for 1.8 million people for at least a month, nutrition support for 1.7 million people and clean water and sanitation for an expected 1.2 million people.

As penholder on Yemen at the United Nations Security Council, the UK was responsible for a presidential statement earlier this year that called on all parties to provide safe, rapid and unhindered access for humanitarian supplies and personnel to all affected governorates in Yemen. We continue to call on all parties to the conflict to respect the statement and take action accordingly.

As my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary set out in his statement on Sunday 5 November, the UK condemns the attempted missile strike on Riyadh this Saturday in the strongest terms. The ongoing ballistic missile attacks by Houthi-Saleh forces against Saudi Arabia threaten regional security and prolong the conflict. This latest attack deliberately targeted a civilian area. We therefore recognise the coalition's concern about illicit flows of weapons to the Houthis, in direct contravention of UN Security Council resolution 2216.

We also recognise that, following Saturday's attack, Saudi Arabia needs to take urgent measures to stem the flow of weapons into Yemen. At the same time, it is vital that the country remains open to humanitarian and commercial access. The Saudi-led coalition has confirmed that it will take into account the provision of humanitarian supplies. We are encouraging it to ensure that humanitarian supplies and access can continue. Our ambassador is actively making this case directly to the Saudi authorities.

Finally, there remains a desperate need for a political solution to the Yemen conflict, to help to end the suffering of the Yemeni people, to counter destabilising interference and to end attacks on neighbouring countries. It is vital that this situation does not escalate further. The United Kingdom will continue to work towards a political settlement that supports regional stability, and calls on all countries in the region to support that goal. We will also continue to support our partners in the region in protecting themselves against security threats.

Stephen Twigg: I join the Minister in condemning the missile strike on Riyadh by the Houthis, which has been described by Human Rights Watch as "most likely a war crime".

We have seen alleged violations of international humanitarian law on all sides of this conflict. Will the Minister update the House on progress towards the independent investigation that was agreed at the recent United Nations Human Rights Council? I welcome what he says about seeking to bring all parties back to the table in Geneva. Can he tell us what progress has been made towards securing a ceasefire, so that a political solution can be achieved?

The scale of the humanitarian crisis in Yemen is truly appalling. The cholera outbreak is considered the worst on record, and as the Minister said, the UN estimates that more than 20 million Yemenis are in need of humanitarian assistance, with 7 million on the brink of famine. The Saudi-led coalition has now intensified its blockade. With 90% of Yemen's food imported, that risks making the dire humanitarian situation even worse. Does the Minister agree that that blockade could constitute unlawful collective punishment of the people of Yemen?

The Minister mentioned the representations that our ambassador was making. What representations has he and the Foreign Secretary made to Saudi Arabia to have the blockade lifted as soon as possible? I urge the Minister and the Government to do everything in their power to get that inhumane blockade lifted.

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who is the Chair of the International Development Committee, for raising this issue. Let me try to take matters in order. On the reaction to the incident, we should in no way mistake the intent of the direction of that missile or where it came from. An Iranian-supplied missile to the Houthis was deliberately fired towards Riyadh airport, with all the implications that that involves. That the Saudis would take immediate steps to safeguard their country and ensure that the flow of missiles into Yemen was further checked is not unreasonable.

At the same time, as the hon. Gentleman makes clear, it is vital that humanitarian and commercial access should continue. We have consistently urged the coalition to take all reasonable steps to allow and facilitate rapid and safe access for humanitarian assistance and essential commercial imports of food and fuel. We are actively engaged with the coalition and those responsible for humanitarian support in Yemen to try to find a way that will enable the blockade not to affect the humanitarian access, while still safeguarding the important rights of those in Saudi Arabia who might be under attack. I spoke to the Saudi Minister on Saturday, shortly before the attack took place. I intend to speak to him again shortly, either today or tomorrow. Since Saturday night, the ambassador has been actively engaged in Riyadh in trying to deal with these issues.

In relation to cholera and malnutrition, we try to be at the forefront of international efforts on both those topics to provide support to UN agencies that are actively involved, and we will continue to do that.

Importantly, on the political negotiations, I am well aware of what is happening there. We had a meeting in New York recently, and there is likely to be another ministerial meeting shortly at which we will be trying to find a pathway through to the deescalation of the conflict. This is not just about the coalition forces. It is about the Houthis and those who support them, and about whether they have any willingness to take regard of the appalling

condition of the people of Yemen, which has been caused by their actions in starting the conflict and usurping a legitimate elected Government.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the UK is playing a leading role in the response to the appalling humanitarian crisis in Yemen, as the third largest humanitarian donor to Yemen in the world and the second largest donor to the UN appeal?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for helping to make that case. The United Kingdom has played as big a part as it possibly can, whether through its bilateral support or through UN agencies. In September, we announced a £16 million uplift in funding to Yemen, which took our total funding for this year to £155 million, as I detailed earlier. This will support millions of people with food, clean water and sanitation, and other life-saving interventions. We recently reallocated £8 million specifically towards the cholera response, but further work is necessary and the United Kingdom is contributing what it can.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) for asking this urgent question. The escalation of the conflict in Yemen in recent weeks, resulting in the Saudi-led coalition closing all land, air and sea entry points, represents a particularly alarming development, even in a protracted conflict that is now more than two years old.

The country is already facing the worst cholera outbreak in recorded history, with more than 800,000 cases, and more than 20 million people are in need of urgent humanitarian assistance. The blockading of ports will only add to the already catastrophic humanitarian situation, and the UK must do whatever it can to ensure that we mitigate the impact of this new development.

With the UK's own actions in mind, will the Minister tell us how the Department for International Development is responding to this new development, and what assessments have been made of the blockade's impact on DFID's humanitarian operation across Yemen? Given that other countries, such as the US, refused to sell arms to countries that impose humanitarian blockades, will Her Majesty's Government now finally re-evaluate their decision to continue to sell arms to the Saudi-led coalition and suspend further arms sales immediately?

Alistair Burt: I thank the hon. Lady for her remarks. The first and most important thing is to try to ease any impact of the blockade in relation to humanitarian access. I returned to the fact that missiles flow into Yemen through ports and through other areas. The firing of those missiles puts innocent civilians at risk, both in and outside Yemen, and it is not unreasonable to seek to ensure that that does not happen. We stand by those who want to take such measures to prevent that action from happening, while at the same time ensuring that there is appropriate access for humanitarian and commercial supplies. The commercial supplies feed people, as well as the humanitarian aid, and they are therefore essential.

Since the events at the weekend, and as part of the Government's approach, DFID has made representations because we want to ensure that the UN agencies that we

[*Alistair Burt*]

fund have that access. But of course, the situation is particularly difficult in the immediate aftermath of an event that could have had catastrophic consequences, including for UK citizens, has that missile landed on Riyadh airport. The hon. Lady is right, however, to concentrate on the blockade. We will do all we can to press the point that we have to find a way through for increased humanitarian and commercial access.

On the arms control issue, the House knows that this matter is extensively trawled over by the Department and that we have a rigorous arms control regime in place. Every request for support is dealt with on a case-by-case basis. The Government were recently successful in the legal action in relation to that, but that does not stop us being very careful about any supplies. The important thing is to end the conflict, and that is what the United Kingdom is devoted to. However, too little attention is given to the fact that there are two sides to this conflict and that it could come to an end tomorrow if the Houthis and those who support them would agree to the negotiations that are necessary to end it, so that Yemen can at last emerge from a period of some years in which the people have not been well regarded by those who purport to govern them, to give them the chance they deserve.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Have the Government made an assessment of the current political convulsions in Saudi Arabia? If so, might there be implications for the situation in Yemen?

Alistair Burt: Well, if the House has 20 minutes—[*Laughter.*] In an ever-fascinating region, to add to what we know about what is happening in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia at the moment would take a little while. Recent events in Saudi Arabia include Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman consolidating his already strong position by taking action at the weekend on corruption as part of his efforts to drive Saudi Arabia forward. He believes that the “Vision 2030” plan—the economic and social advancement of Saudi Arabia—cannot be achieved without dealing with corruption, which is so widespread across the region. The decision that certain individuals had to be arrested and questioned about their activities has had a clear impact.

The relevance to Yemen is limited, but there is no doubt about the impact of the missile strike on Saudi Arabia, in addition to the missile strikes that already take place. The House does not always concentrate on the number of civilians in Saudi Arabia who have lost their lives as a result of missiles from Yemen. My right hon. Friend is right that the combination of the two factors means that we have to work even harder to try to find a negotiated solution, which is what all parties now seriously want.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): The scale of the devastation and cruelty outlined by the Chair of the International Development Committee and by the Minister should haunt us all, but the Minister sees his Government’s record through somewhat rose-tinted glasses. The Saudi Government have benefited from the sale of £3.8 billion-worth of weapons from this country, yet the Government have given only £200 million in aid to Yemen. Will the Minister explain that large disparity?

As other Members have said, should we not join countries such as Germany and the Netherlands by suspending arms sales to Saudi Arabia? Does the Minister not see that there is an inconsistency in the Government ending a prisons contract with Saudi Arabia over human rights concerns, but not suspending arms sales over the humanitarian crisis in Yemen? Finally, will he outline what he hopes to achieve at the joint Foreign Ministers meeting with Saudi Arabia, the United States, Oman and the UAE on 14 November? What will Her Majesty’s Government be calling for, and what is he hopeful of achieving?

Alistair Burt: Let me start with the last part of the hon. Gentleman’s questions. We have convened that meeting, which we hope will be in London, and it follows a meeting that I hosted in New York at the end of the General Assembly of the United Nations that involved what is known as the “quad”—the United Kingdom, the United States, the UAE and Saudi Arabia—meeting the UN special envoy for Yemen to discuss progress on the negotiations and talks. The engagement of Oman is about trying to provide the link that will get the Houthis and those who support them to engage in the talks and use the good offices of Oman to try to achieve that in Muscat. It is part of an effort made over many months to support the work of the UN special envoy, to try to make political progress, which the United Kingdom is doing all it can to facilitate. What do I hope comes out of it? I hope that we get a detailed plan for the de-escalation of the conflict, but that will work only if all parties agree to it. It is a matter of utmost concern to the United Kingdom that we do that and that is what we are engaged in.

As for the hon. Gentleman’s other questions, I spoke earlier about the arms control situation. It is not the United Kingdom’s policy to change matters in relation to Saudi Arabia, but to continue to use rigorous arms controls mechanisms and our legal obligations, not least to ensure that international humanitarian law is applied in relation to the use of any United Kingdom weapons by the Saudis. Any allegations that that is not happening are open to legal challenge.

As I have indicated, we are the third largest donor of humanitarian aid to Yemen. We have supplied £150 million this year to provide nutrition for 1.7 million people and clean water and sanitation for 1.2 million people. However, I fully appreciate that unless the conflict comes to an end the handing over of aid is a plaster over the situation. The whole House should be united in wanting to see the negotiations succeed, and that is what the United Kingdom is spending all its efforts on.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that no-one should envy the Saudi-led coalition and the complexity of the task it has set itself, under a unanimous mandate from the UN Security Council, to deliver some security and stability in Yemen? Is he able to give us some sense of the number of Saudi civilians who have been killed by missiles coming from Houthi-held areas, as illustrated today by the missile that was fired at Riyadh?

Alistair Burt: The number of deaths among the Saudis is measured in hundreds and relates to a variety of missile attacks over a significant period. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his remarks about the complexity

and difficulty of the situation that the coalition is trying to deal with: an insurrection against an elected Government that is complicated by all the history of Yemen. That is why it is taking such effort to try to pull it all together. There is also the unwelcome involvement of those who are supplying weapons to the Houthis, instead of contributing to the peace process. There is always a chance for any of the parties involved to play a part now, recognising the seriousness of the humanitarian situation.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): The profile of Daesh terrorism in the region is increasing. What are the United Kingdom and the international community doing to prevent the collapse of Daesh in Syria from further prolonging the horrific humanitarian situation outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg)?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman is mostly right in his questions, and he is back on form with that one. As Daesh collapses elsewhere, he is absolutely right that it will look for other areas of instability to exploit. Al-Qaeda is already exploiting the peninsula, which is why the prolonging of this dispute, particularly the engagement of those outside who are supplying weapons to the Houthis, makes life much more difficult. The United Kingdom is trying to end the conflict by negotiation, but in the meantime we support the coalition's efforts to prevent any further conflict and damage to civilians.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the actions of the Iranian Government both in Yemen and in the wider region are having a direct impact on the lives of millions of people in the Arabian peninsula? Does he agree that the position of Her Majesty's Government must be to face the enemies not only of our own country, but of our allies? In this region, the situation points to Iran.

Alistair Burt: How my hon. Friend perceives the situation is correct. In many ways, we are trying to understand a future Iran that is looking for engagement with the wider world on the one hand, but is engaged in disruptive activity on the other, whether in Syria, Yemen, Iraq or Bahrain. There is always the opportunity for those who have been responsible for such disruption to change, and our engagement with Iran is partly about providing the opportunity for it to be part of an answer, rather than part of a problem.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Is it not a bit misleading for Ministers to suggest that there is rigorous control of arms exports in this House when the Committees on Arms Export Controls have not met for several months for several reasons? They will be meeting soon, but almost a year has gone by without a meeting, and the outcome on exports to Saudi Arabia may have been different.

Alistair Burt: I understand the right hon. Lady's question. Having been at the receiving end of Sir John Stanley on many occasions, I know how rigorous the House can be. However, re-establishing the Committees is more of a matter for Parliament than the Government. The Government would be entirely open to that, but the rigorous control of the law is certainly clear and very much in the Government's mind.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): The Minister highlights easing the blockade and supporting innocent civilians as a priority. Will he update the House on the viability of peace talks and on the role the UK is playing in cajoling everyone to come to the table? How likely are such talks, and what could be the outcome if we get around the table?

Alistair Burt: I commend the actions of our ambassador to Yemen, Simon Shercliff, and our permanent representative to the UN, Matthew Rycroft, both locally and internationally in support of the work I mentioned earlier to get the various parties together and to find a negotiated outcome. They, in particular, are doing all they can, and they have the full support of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): How does the Minister reconcile the fact that the urgent humanitarian disaster in Yemen, which we are rightly sending aid to try to address, has been made worse by the weapons the UK has sold to Saudi Arabia?

Alistair Burt: If no further weapons were supplied by the United Kingdom, the conflict would still go on. [*Interruption.*] That simply happens to be true. There has been conflict in the area for some considerable time, and there are many issues to be decided. I wish it were as simple as the United Kingdom making a single decision and all the conflict in the area comes to an end, but I cannot see it.

Jo Swinson: That's not what I said.

Alistair Burt: It is exactly what the hon. Lady said. I make it very clear that I do not believe it would assist the situation; I think it would make it more difficult for the United Kingdom to play the part it is playing in the negotiations—that is the most important thing.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the UN appeal for Yemen raised only just over half its target? Does he agree it is now time for other countries to follow the UK's lead by making pledges or by honouring the pledges already made?

Alistair Burt: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Sadly, there is appeal fatigue at present. Whether it is new issues such as the Rohingya or the pressures in northern Iraq with the fall of Mosul and Raqqa, as well as Yemen, it is true that efforts to raise money through UN appeals have been very difficult, which is why it is important that the United Kingdom keeps up its extraordinary record. I am proud that the United Kingdom has been such a donor, both bilaterally and through these appeals.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): There seems to be a softening of attitudes towards human rights in Saudi Arabia and, I hope, towards a more secular society. Will the Minister indicate whether he has had discussions with Saudi Arabia's new leaders about resuming peace talks, using the scheduled meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, the United States, Oman and the United Arab Emirates on 14 November?

Alistair Burt: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has already engaged in direct conversations with His Royal Highness Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman. I engaged with the Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia, the Foreign Minister of the UAE and others at the weekend. There is a constant conversation. We all desperately want to see an end to this conflict and crisis. More than just the coalition is involved, which is why efforts have to be made with the Houthis and those who support them. The involvement of Iran is so important, as Iran could also make a contribution to peace. All efforts are being made, and my right hon. Friend is working extremely hard on the situation.

Counter-Daesh Update

2.23 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement updating the House on the campaign against Daesh in Iraq and Syria, but I should like to begin by informing the House that I called the Iranian Foreign Minister, Mr Zarif, this morning to discuss the case of Mrs Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. I expressed my anxiety about her suffering and the ordeal of her family, and I repeated my hope for a swift solution. I also voiced my concern at the suggestion emanating from one branch of the Iranian judiciary that my remarks to the Foreign Affairs Committee last week had some bearing on Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe's case.

The UK Government have no doubt that Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe was on holiday in Iran when she was arrested last year, and that was the sole purpose of her visit. My point was that I disagreed with the Iranian view that training journalists is a crime, not that I wanted to lend any credence to Iranian allegations that Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe had been engaged in such activity. I accept that my remarks could have been clearer in that respect, and I am glad to provide this clarification.

I am sure that the House will join me in paying tribute to the tireless campaigning of Mr Ratcliffe on behalf of his wife. We will not relent in our efforts to help all our consular cases in Iran. Mr Zarif told me that any recent developments in the case had no link to my testimony last week and that he would continue to seek a solution on humanitarian grounds. I will visit Iran in the coming weeks, when I will discuss all our consular cases.

I turn now to the campaign against Daesh. In the summer of 2014, Daesh swept down the Tigris and Euphrates valleys, occupying thousands of square miles of Iraqi territory, pillaging cities, massacring and enslaving minorities, and seeking to impose by pitiless violence a demented vision of an Islamist utopia. Daesh had gathered strength in eastern Syria, using the opportunity created by that country's civil war to seize oilfields and to carve out a base from which to launch its assault on Iraq.

Today, Daesh has been rolled back on every battlefield. Thanks to the courage and resolve of Iraq's security forces, our partners in Syria, and the steadfast action of the 73 members of the global coalition, including this country, Daesh has lost 90% of the territory it once held in Iraq and Syria—including Raqqa, its erstwhile capital—and 6 million people have been freed from its rule.

When my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), the former Defence Secretary, last updated the House in July, the biggest city in northern Iraq, Mosul, had just been liberated. Since then, Iraqi forces have broken Daesh's grip on the towns of Tal Afar and Hawija, and cleared the terrorists from all but a relatively small area near the Syrian border, demonstrating how the false and failed caliphate is crumbling before our eyes.

The House will join me in paying tribute to the men and women of the British armed forces who have been vital to every step of the advance. More than 600 British soldiers are in Iraq, where they have helped to train 50,000 members of the Iraqi security forces. The RAF

has delivered 1,352 air strikes against Daesh in Iraq and 263 in Syria, which is more than any other air force apart from that of the United States.

I turn now to Syria. On 20 October, the global coalition confirmed the fall of Raqqa after three years of brutal occupation. The struggle was long and hard, and I acknowledge the price that has been paid by the coalition's partner forces on the ground and, most especially, by the civilian population of Raqqa. Throughout the military operation, the Department for International Development has been working with partners in Raqqa province to supply food, water, healthcare and shelter wherever possible. On 22 October, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development announced another £10 million of aid to clear the landmines sown by Daesh, to restock hospitals and mobile surgical units with essential medicines, and to provide clean water for 15,000 people.

The permanent defeat of Daesh in Syria, by which I mean removing the conditions that allowed it to seize large areas in the first place, will require a political settlement, which must include a transition away from the Assad regime that did so much to create the conditions for the rise of Daesh. How such a settlement is reached is, of course, a matter for the Syrians themselves, and we will continue to support the work of the United Nations special envoy, Staffan de Mistura, and the Geneva process.

I am encouraged by how America and Russia have stayed in close contact on the future of Syria. We must continue to emphasise to the Kremlin that, instead of blindly supporting a murderous regime—even after UN investigators have found the regime's forces guilty of using sarin nerve gas, most recently at Khan Sheikhoun in April—Russia should join the international community and support a negotiated settlement in Syria under the auspices of the UN.

Turning to Iraq, more than 2 million people have returned to their homes in areas liberated from Daesh, including 265,000 who have gone back to Mosul. Britain is providing over £200 million of practical life-saving assistance for Iraqi civilians. We are helping to clear the explosives that were laid by Daesh, to restore water supplies that the terrorists sabotaged, and to give clean water to 200,000 people and healthcare to 115,000. Now that Daesh is close to defeat in Iraq, the country's leaders must resolve the political tensions that, in part, paved the way for its advance in 2014. The Kurdistan region held a unilateral referendum on independence on 25 September, a decision we did not support. Since then, Masoud Barzani has stepped down as President of the Kurdistan Regional Government and Iraqi forces have reasserted federal control over disputed territory, including the city of Kirkuk. We are working alongside our allies to reduce tensions in northern Iraq. Rather than reopening old conflicts, the priority must be to restore the stability, prosperity and national unity that is the right of every Iraqi.

A general election will take place in Iraq next May, creating an opportunity for parties to set out their respective visions of a country that overcomes sectarianism and serves every citizen, including Kurds. But national reconciliation will require justice, and justice demands that Daesh is held accountable for its atrocities in Iraq and elsewhere. That was why I acted over a year ago, in concert with the Government of Iraq, to launch the

global campaign to bring Daesh to justice. In September, the Security Council unanimously adopted UN resolution 2379, a British-drafted text, co-sponsored by 46 countries, that will establish a UN investigation to help to gather and preserve the evidence of Daesh crimes in Iraq.

Every square mile of territory that Daesh has lost is one square mile less for it to exploit, tax and plunder. The impending destruction of the so-called caliphate will reduce its ability to fund terrorism abroad and attract new recruits. Yet Daesh will still try to inspire attacks by spreading its hateful ideology in cyber-space even after it has lost every inch of its physical domain. That is why Britain leads the global coalition's efforts to counter Daesh propaganda, through a communications cell based here in London, and Daesh's total propaganda output has fallen by half since 2015. But social media companies can and must do more, particularly to speed up the detection and removal of dangerous material, and to prevent it from being uploaded in the first place, hence my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister co-hosted an event at the UN General Assembly in September on how to stop terrorists from using the internet.

The Government have always made it clear that any British nationals who join Daesh have chosen to make themselves legitimate targets for the coalition. We expect that most foreign fighters will die in the terrorist domain where they opted to serve, but some may surrender or try to come home, including to the UK. As the Government have previously said, anyone who returns to this country after taking part in the conflict in Syria or Iraq must expect to be investigated for reasons of national security.

While foreign fighters face the consequences of their decisions, the valour and sacrifice of the armed forces of many nations, including our own, has prevented a terrorist entity from taking root in the heart of the middle east. I commend this statement to the House.

2.34 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for advance sight of his statement. I will come to his remarks regarding Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe in a moment, but let me first address the formal purpose of this statement: the Government's quarterly update on the fight against Daesh. We are all agreed in this House that Daesh is nothing but an evil death cult and that it must be wiped off the face of the earth. We therefore warmly welcome the recent, hard-fought successes against it in both Syria and Iraq, with its vision of a caliphate stretching across both countries now lying in absolute ruins. But while that specific danger evaporates before our eyes, we know all too well that the wider threat that Daesh poses remains, as it ceases to operate as a conventional military force, seeking to occupy territory and towns, and retreats to the role of a well-armed, well-trained and fanatical network of terrorist cells that seeks to indoctrinate others, and to inflict indiscriminate, mass casualties in Iraq, Syria and far, far beyond. We therefore must not let our guard down. The fight against Daesh has not been won; it is simply switching to a new phase.

I therefore have a number of questions that I hope the Foreign Secretary will address. First, will he correct his junior colleague, the Minister for Africa, who said recently that the only way to deal with British citizens who have gone to fight for Daesh is

"in almost every case, to kill them"?

[Emily Thornberry]

That, of course, sends a very unfortunate signal to groups in Syria and beyond who are currently holding in detention British citizens captured on the battlefield. Will the Foreign Secretary make it clear today that it remains the Government's policy that those individuals should be returned to this country to face trial for their crimes, rather than simply being executed by their captors? He might also advise the Minister for Africa that in positions of responsibility in the Foreign Office, you have to engage your brain and think about the consequences of your words before opening your mouth.

Secondly, the Foreign Secretary will have noted last week the first US drone strikes targeting Daesh, rather than al-Shabaab, inside Somalia. Will he guarantee the House that if the UK is asked to participate in the opening of that new front against Daesh, authorising such action will be the subject of a proper parliamentary debate and vote?

Thirdly, as Daesh increasingly ceases to be a military player in the Syrian civil war, will the Foreign Secretary tell us the Government's current strategy in Syria? What are we now seeking to achieve, in both a military and diplomatic sense, from our engagement there? Specifically, will he tell us whether the Government intend to continue channelling funds to Syrian opposition groups? Will he give us a cast-iron guarantee that none of the £200 million that has already been channelled to those groups over the past three years has ended up in the hands of the al-Nusra Front or other jihadist groups?

Finally, as attention turns to Daesh's last remaining stronghold, in Bukamal, the Foreign Secretary will be aware of the risks as Russian and Iranian-backed forces approach the town from one side, and the Syrian democratic forces approach it from the other. Will he tell the House what steps Britain is taking to ensure the battle to liberate Bukamal from Daesh, both from the air and on the ground, does not inadvertently lead to clashes between the two liberating armies?

Turning now to Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, we appreciate the Foreign Secretary's clarification, we welcome the phone call he made this morning to his Iranian counterpart and we all hope that no lasting damage is done to Nazanin as a result of his blunder. However, I hope that he will now take the opportunity to apologise to this woman's family, to her friends, to her employers, to my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), and to all those others in this House and beyond who have been working so hard to obtain this young mother's release, for the distress and anguish that his foolish words have caused to them and to this woman in recent days. We are all bound to ask: how many more times does this need to happen? How many more times does the Foreign Secretary have to insult our international partners and damage our diplomatic relations, and now imperil the interests of British nationals abroad? What will it take before the Prime Minister says, "Enough is enough"? If the truth is that she cannot, because she does not have the strength or authority to sack him, how about the Foreign Secretary himself shows a bit of personal responsibility and admits that a job like this, where your words hold gravity and your actions have consequences, is simply not the job for him?

Boris Johnson: I shall take the right hon. Lady's points in turn. Our view about UK nationals fighting for Daesh in Iraq or Syria is, of course, that they must think of themselves as legitimate targets while they are doing that. If they seek to come back here, they will of course be subject to investigation and the full force of the law. On her second question, we have had no request for air strikes of the type she mentions or a military operation in Somalia of the kind that she describes.

On the right hon. Lady's third point, in respect of the policy on Syria, we are working to bring together the Astana and Geneva processes. We believe that the great political leverage that we in the UK and more broadly in the west have over the Russians and, indeed, over all those involved in the future of Syria, is that it is the west—the UK, the EU and the US—that has the budgets for rebuilding Syria. It is only if the Assad regime, the Russians and the Iranians accept the need for a political process that we can begin the process of rebuilding. As for Bukamal, communications are of course going on to de-conflict and to make sure that the factions concerned do not come into conflict.

In the right hon. Lady's final point, she came back to the case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. Let me repeat that what everybody in this House wants to see is Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe's release. That is exactly what the Foreign Office is working for. That is what we have been working for solidly over the past 18 months. It is simply untrue for the right hon. Lady to say, as she has said today, that there is any connection whatever between my remarks last week and the legal proceedings under way against Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe in Tehran today. I say to her that she has a choice—she always has a choice in these matters. She can choose to heap blame on to the British Foreign Office, which is trying to secure the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, but in so doing she deflects blame and accountability from those who are truly responsible for holding that mother in jail, and that is the Iranian regime. [Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The Foreign Secretary is dealing with a very important matter of some delicacy. Nobody anywhere in this House ought to be shouting while he is doing so. [Interruption.] And they certainly should not be shouting while I am speaking from the Chair. The Foreign Secretary might wish to finish his point.

Boris Johnson: I had completed my point, but I shall make it again. It is a great shame that in seeking to score political points, the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) is deflecting blame, accountability and responsibility from where it truly lies, which is with the Iranian regime. It is towards releasing Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, not blaming the UK Foreign Office, that we should direct our efforts.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May I appeal to the Foreign Secretary, even at this late stage, to adopt a more realistic policy on the outcome in Syria? It was always the case that if Daesh was going to lose, the Iraqi Government were going to win in their territory and the Syrian Government were going to win in their territory. We have not seen any sign of a third force of 70,000 moderate fighters. Will he accept the

fact that, unpleasant though it is, it is better to recognise that the regime is going to persevere in Syria? That is a price that we have to pay for the elimination of Daesh.

Boris Johnson: My right hon. Friend speaks on this matter with great wisdom. We must accept that the Assad regime does not possess itself of most of what we might call operational Syria. That is a reality, but it has not won. It does not possess all of Syria. If it wants the country to be rebuilt, it knows that that can be done only with the support of us in the UK and those in the European Union and the United States. That is the leverage that we hold, and that is how we hope to get the Assad regime and the Russians to engage in a proper political process.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I thank the Foreign Secretary for early sight of his statement. First, on Syria, Scottish National party Members obviously welcome any reversals of Daesh, and we welcome the short-term humanitarian help that is being provided to the people of Syria. The Foreign Secretary will be aware that there must be long-term consolidation, so what long-term funds have been set aside for restructuring in Syria after the conflict? He mentioned accountability; will he support the referral of Daesh fighters' cases to the International Criminal Court?

On Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe's case, the Foreign Secretary told the Foreign Affairs Committee that she was "simply teaching people journalism". He must be aware of the impact of his words. Will he be crystal clear about what he said? Has he met Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe's family, who are bearing a heavy human cost at the moment? What guidance is he taking from her and her family about her case?

Boris Johnson: I can confirm that the UK is the second biggest donor to the humanitarian relief effort in Syria at the moment, and we will of course be a major contributor to the reconstruction of the country when the Geneva talks get back under way. As the hon. Gentleman knows, we already contribute around £2.46 billion.

On bringing Daesh to justice, I will not hide it from the House: there is a question still about exactly which forum we are going to find to bring these people to justice. But be in no doubt about our determination to do that. We are assembling the evidence therefore.

On the hon. Gentleman's point about Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, I repeat that these are allegations made against her by the Iranians, to which we think there is absolutely no substance whatever, as I said in my statement. Before I go to Iran in the next few weeks, I will of course seek a meeting with Mr Ratcliffe, who has been in regular contact with our Ministers and with the Foreign Office.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): In his oral statement, I thought I heard the Foreign Secretary refer to the coalition's Kurdish partner forces, with regard to the fight in Raqqa, but the word "Kurdish" does not appear in the written version of the statement that has just been handed out. He also talked about the consequences for Kurds in Iraq of the Kurdistan Regional Government's referendum. As matters now unfold, with the effective end of Islamic State control of territory in both Syria and Iraq, will he bear in mind the fact that the Kurds have been let down by history over the course of the

past century? They think they have friends in the United Kingdom and the United States. Will he try to ensure that, when it comes to the protection of Kurdish cultural interests and freedoms in all the countries of the region, it is not just the mountains that are their friends?

Boris Johnson: I thank my hon. Friend for the eloquent way he expressed himself on that point. This country and this House are indeed great friends of Kurdistan. They will remember the role played by the Conservative Government in 1991 in that mountainous region with the setting up of safe havens for the Kurds, which were the origin of the Kurdistan Regional Government of today. I see doughty campaigners on the Opposition Benches who have also played a major role.

The Kurds can be in no doubt about our lasting friendship, but we did say to them that the referendum was not the right way forward. The best course now for our Kurdish friends is surely to take advantage of Mr Abadi, who is their best possible hope, and to enter into a solid and substantial negotiation with him.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary had a week to correct the record and to apologise over Ms Zaghari-Ratcliffe, and he has not done so. This is not the first time that the Foreign Secretary has said things that are inaccurate or damaging, and he cannot simply shrug them off as a lack of clarity or a careless choice of words.

In this case, there are fears that this could mean the extended incarceration of a British-Iranian woman. The right hon. Gentleman knows that the lives and safety of British citizens across the globe depend on having a Foreign Secretary who does not bluster and who is not too careless or too lazy to consider his words. Will he now apologise? Does he accept that he cannot be trusted to do this job and that he should resign?

Boris Johnson: I really think that I have already made my position clear. Indeed, the Iranians have also made their position clear. There was absolutely no connection with anything that was said in the Foreign Affairs Committee last week. By the way, I see assorted members of the Committee here today, and they passed no comment on it. Those remarks had no impact on the judicial process in Tehran.

Rather than posturing and engaging in party political point-scoring, we need to recognise the extreme sensitivity of these negotiations and get on with securing the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. That is why I am going to Tehran in the course of the next few weeks. I agree that it will not be easy at all because it is a very difficult negotiation, but that is the effort to which the Foreign Office is devoted and dedicated, and it deserves the right hon. Lady's full support.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Does the Foreign Secretary share my concerns that while we recognise the destruction of Daesh at its base, it will regroup in other areas? In particular, it could merge with the Taliban in Afghanistan. Is there anything that can be done about that?

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend is right that Daesh and the phenomenon of Islamist terrorism is widespread and ubiquitous, but we can defeat it. Look at what we

[*Boris Johnson*]

have done just in Iraq and Syria—removing Daesh from 90% of the territory it held. As I said, 2 million people are back in their homes. Daesh can be defeated in the ungoverned spaces where its fighters have made their homes and set up their headquarters, and it will ultimately be defeated in Afghanistan as well. I am not saying that this is for tomorrow or, indeed, for the day after, but we, and moderate Muslims everywhere, will win this struggle.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): The casual disregard for the truth shown by the Foreign Secretary in his campaign bus last year was bad enough, but his carelessness in the case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe last week is unforgivable. Does he realise that his words have a serious impact in this role? This is not a game. If he will not take his job seriously enough even to read his brief, he should step down and make way for one of his colleagues who will.

Boris Johnson: With great respect, I refer the hon. Lady to the answer I gave a moment ago.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I commend the Foreign Secretary on his statement. Will he now give us an undertaking that he will concentrate in future on the very important matters within his brief as Foreign Secretary? To that end, will he give an undertaking to support the Prime Minister in her efforts—in relation to the Florence speech, for example—and ensure that his own ambitions are put secondary to the wellbeing of all my constituents and everybody else in this country? That is his job.

Boris Johnson: I assure my right hon. Friend that she and I are united—as I am sure the whole House is—in support of every jot and tittle of the Florence speech.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): My constituent, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, has been in prison in Iran for 18 months now. She is separated from her daughter, often in solitary confinement and denied access to medical treatment—all because she was a British citizen having a holiday in Iran. The Foreign Secretary, his Ministers and even the Prime Minister will be aware of this, because I have raised the case countless times in the House. It is not enough for the Foreign Secretary not to know the basic details of the case. It is unforgivable to repeat the lies of the Iranian revolutionary guard, and to say, “I should be clearer”, does not cut it when it is a matter of life and death.

I have four questions for the Foreign Secretary. Is it the official position of the British Government that they are calling for the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe? Will the Foreign Secretary apologise for and retract the damaging comments he made about my constituent, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe? Will the Foreign Secretary finally—after a year of failed attempts—meet Richard Ratcliffe, the husband of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe? Finally, will the Foreign Secretary reiterate that he will have a face-to-face meeting with my constituent, Nazanin, when he goes to Tehran?

Boris Johnson: I can certainly say that the Government are, of course, calling for the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe on humanitarian grounds, and we will continue

to do so. I can confirm that several Ministers, including the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), have met Mr Ratcliffe several times. I have just had a note from Mr Ratcliffe saying that he welcomes the clarification that we made earlier today and would like to meet, so I look forward to doing that. The hon. Lady wants to secure the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. Indeed, we all want to secure the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. If it is possible in the course of my trip to Tehran to meet the hon. Lady's constituent, of course I will seek to do that. I cannot stand before the House today and guarantee that it will be possible, but I will certainly do my best to ensure that it is so.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I welcome the Foreign Secretary to the House today, and I welcome some of the clarification that he has made of his comments at the Foreign Affairs Committee last week. His errors in his choice of words—however unfortunate they may seem—are, to be fair, entirely secondary and perhaps even tertiary compared with the crimes committed by the Iranian regime over nearly four decades of Khomeinite authoritarianism.

Will the Foreign Secretary now take this opportunity to address the threat that Iran poses to UK interests in the region and to address whether, after 40 years of instability and tyranny, we need a wider review of Iran policy? From holding British citizens hostage to failing to allow embassy staff to bring in secure communications: will the Foreign Secretary please explain to the House why he believes in maintaining normal diplomatic relations with the country that sponsors Hezbollah, arms Hamas, sends weapons to rain down on Riyadh and props up the murderous Assad dictatorship? How can that qualify as a nation with which we should have friendly, diplomatic relations?

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend is right in the sense that Iran certainly poses a threat to the region and is a cause of instability. As he says, we can see that in Yemen, in its influence with Hezbollah, in Lebanon and in Syria. There is no question but that Iran needs to be constrained. But to throw out all diplomatic relations and abandon all engagement with Iran would be a profound mistake; I must tell the House my honest view about that. It slightly surprises me that my hon. Friend should take that line because the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action—the Iran nuclear deal—was an important diplomatic accomplishment, and it is still extant. It is still alive, and it is in part an achievement of British diplomacy over the past few months that it remains, in its essence, intact. We intend to preserve it because it is the best method that we have of preventing Iran from securing a nuclear weapon.

As for severing diplomatic relations entirely, that takes us to the question that so many Opposition Members have asked today. How can we secure the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe unless we are willing to get out there and engage with the Iranians diplomatically in order to make an effort to secure her release? That is what we are doing.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Some years ago, the right hon. Gentleman and I shared an accommodation pod in Baghdad, and I think he is experienced enough to know that Daesh, while I welcome

its defeat on the ground, is still active on social media platforms—indeed, he referred to that. Will he therefore press for us to be much more nimble at stifling the activities it is involved in?

On the question of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, the right hon. Gentleman, more than most, is in a position to know that words matter, and they matter because they confer meaning. Whether he spoke clumsily or was misinformed last week about that case, will he not accept—I mean this in a good spirit—that the very least that is required is an apology?

Boris Johnson: With great respect to the right hon. Gentleman, I have answered the second point in some detail already. However, on his first point, about countering Daesh online, that is, as he knows, a subject in which the Prime Minister herself takes a keen interest. Working with the internet providers, we have taken 295,000 separate pieces of Daesh propaganda down from the web, but much more needs to be done, particularly by the social media giants.

Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): Our words do matter in here, and the members of the Iranian revolutionary guard court, who will be watching our proceedings today, are the ones to blame for the incarceration of this wife and mother of a three-year-old—of a British citizen who has been spuriously charged with falsehoods. If our words really do matter, it is only right that we do not play party politics, and I am looking at the shadow Front-Bench team, who were giggling a minute ago about the discomfort the Foreign Secretary may be feeling. I ask him to redouble his efforts to get Nazanin released as soon as possible.

Boris Johnson: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend, who speaks with huge authority about the region. I can certainly say that we are redoubling our efforts to secure the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. He is entirely right that the focus of the House should not be on any failings or the responsibilities of the UK Government for the incarceration of this mother—[*Interruption.*] If the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) is going to continue to blame the British Government for the incarceration of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, she is living in cloud cuckoo land—the world is absolutely upside down in the Labour party. It is the Iranian authorities against whom she should be directing her attention and her anger.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): While the Secretary of State is correcting inaccurate statements he made to the Foreign Affairs Committee last week, would he care to correct the answer he gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) when he said he had seen no evidence of Russian meddling in the EU referendum?

Boris Johnson: The answer to that is no.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his comments clarifying the case of Mrs Ratcliffe, and I convey the concerns of my constituents. I, too, urge him to seek an urgent solution to this terrible case, if only because there is a very small child involved, and minutes and hours away from their mother really do matter. As my right hon. Friend travels to Iran, I hope he will have that in mind.

I also ask my right hon. Friend to commend all the service personnel who are working so hard against the scourge of Daesh, as all of us in our constituencies this weekend remember all our servicemen and women and the exceptional sacrifices they make.

Boris Johnson: I warmly applaud the sentiments my hon. Friend has expressed about our serving men and women. We should all take the opportunity of this statement to recognise their towering achievement in clearing Daesh out of 90% of the territory it previously occupied in Iraq and Syria.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): May I suggest that the Foreign Secretary is unwise to talk about deflection, when he himself is diluting scrutiny of an appalling case by wrapping it up in a hugely important counter-Daesh update to the House, which he refused, despite repeated questions, to come to the House to give after Raqqa had fallen? So, as I am forced to choose, let me ask a question about Daesh's communications. The Foreign Secretary is right to talk about restricting the number of Daesh's posts, but what about the counter-narrative, which is at least equally important? What new approaches will the Government take now? UK fighters will be coming back home and potentially spreading this pernicious material.

Boris Johnson: That is an extremely important and very good question. It is all very well trying to divert people away from the path of radicalisation, and we do what we can there, but one of the most difficult things is to reverse radicalisation once it has taken place, as I think the hon. Gentleman understands very well. However, we have a communications cell, as he knows, and we are working on it. We have all sorts of means to try to do these things, but the most important thing is to prevent people from being radicalised in the first place.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): We have the Foreign Secretary in front of us today, and he has chosen his words very carefully, so I think we should reserve our ire for the evil of this regime. However, may I ask him about what this statement is really about, which is why Islamic State grew in the first place? Has the Foreign Office learned the lesson—here, I follow my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis)—of our catastrophic invasions of Iraq and Libya? Our deliberate destabilisation of Syria has unleashed untold misery. Has the Foreign Office really cottoned on to the fact that, if we undermine deeply unpleasant authoritarian leaders, we simply unleash totalitarian movements such as Daesh? And who suffers? The minorities in the middle east.

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend makes an important point. If we look back at 2003, we see that, in the words of the Chilcot report, no one could say that our strategic objectives were entirely attained—I think that is putting it mildly. But there are signs of hope, and there are people across the region who are willing to take up the baton of leadership. There are national institutions being born. We must support them, we must encourage them and we must not disengage. It would be absolutely fatal for this country to turn its back on the region and to think that we can thereby somehow insulate ourselves from the problems that are germinating there. We must

[*Boris Johnson*]

engage, we must support the political process and we must be prepared to defend freedom and democracy where we can.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): Given the mistakes of the past, the world owes it to the Government of Iraq to help them now win the peace, and that requires justice and prosecutions for genocide. Because Iraq is not a signatory to the treaty of Rome, those prosecutions will be difficult in Iraq, but we can prosecute the 400-plus foreign fighters who have returned to Britain. Yet, we have not sent a single one of them to The Hague. In fact, in answers to me in this House, the Attorney General said the Government are not even keeping figures on which foreign fighters have been prosecuted for what. That is, at best, slipshod. Can the Foreign Secretary give us an assurance this afternoon that he will give us a timetable for when we, like Germany, will send people to the International Criminal Court and throw against them the full weight of international law?

Boris Johnson: Again, that is an excellent point. It is a subject of recurrent anxiety to me that people are coming back and that, although we want to bring the full force of the law upon them, it is proving difficult to do so. As the right hon. Gentleman rightly says, we have not yet been able to do that in a sufficient number of cases. What we are trying to do, therefore, and this is why we passed resolution 2379, is to ensure that we have the evidence and that, where we can get a locus and find a court—he mentioned the international court in The Hague—we will have the facts and the testimony needed to send these people down.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): On the last occasion that the House was updated on the counter-Daesh campaign, it was confirmed from the Dispatch Box that there were zero reported civilian casualties as a result of the United Kingdom's actions in Syria and Iraq. Will the Secretary of State update the House on whether that figure is still as low? In doing so, will he join me in commending the RAF for carrying out so many campaigns against Daesh—I think second only to the United States?

Boris Johnson: I thank my hon. Friend very much. It is absolutely true that, as far as we know, and as the figures that I have seen suggest, we have no reports of civilian casualties as a result of RAF action. Obviously we cannot be sure, but we do not have any evidence to the contrary. I therefore really do pay tribute to the skill and the effort of the RAF crews—and very, very brave people they are too.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): May I congratulate the Foreign Secretary on the fact that 46 countries co-sponsored his UN resolution on bringing Daesh to justice, which was then unanimously supported in the Security Council? Does not this show that Britain is both leading diplomatic efforts against Daesh and rallying the international community around this important cause?

Boris Johnson: It is a vital cause, and we will continue the pressure. I am grateful for my hon. Friend's support.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Foreign Office says that it has three strategic objectives, the first of which is protecting our people. I fear, from the bluster that the Foreign Secretary has shown today, that he has learned absolutely nothing about what has happened in the past week. He said in his statement: "My point was that I disagreed with the Iranian view that training journalists is a crime, not that I wanted to lend any credence to Iranian allegations that Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe had been engaged in such activity." But what he said to us as a Committee last week was this:

"When we look at what Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe was doing, she was simply teaching people journalism".

There is not a single eight-year-old in the country who could not say to the Foreign Secretary, "This does not match what you said last week." Not a single eight-year-old would not be able to tell the Foreign Secretary how to do his job better. I fear that, if he cannot show some contrition today, then the honest truth is that he should not be in his job, because our people are not safe.

Boris Johnson: With great respect, I think that I have answered the hon. Gentleman's point. I was giving the Foreign Affairs Committee an account of the allegations made that I had personally heard, in the course of my intercessions, from the Iranians. I do not for one minute believe that they are true, but that is what they say. Our job now as diplomats—and I hope that we have the support of the entire House of Commons—is to get Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe released. The best way to do that is not to score party political points but to concentrate our energies and our criticism on those who are actually responsible for her incarceration.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Taking the fight to Daesh in Syria was a difficult but right thing to do, eroding its territorial base and resources, but in some ways that was the easy bit, because the warped ideology endures. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we must continue to support the security services, including those in my constituency, who are skilfully and conscientiously taking the fight to the extremists online?

Boris Johnson: I completely agree. The fight online can be every bit as valuable in saving lives as the struggle in Iraq and Syria.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Instead of misrepresenting what he said to the Foreign Affairs Committee last week, would it not be better if the Foreign Secretary were to write to the Committee withdrawing and correcting his remarks so that they are no longer on the record?

Boris Johnson: I have dealt with that point abundantly.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): May I welcome the UK Government's leadership in the fight against Daesh and thank the Foreign Secretary for updating the House? Just as we show leadership in this area, is it not right therefore that we bring forward more leadership in the areas of cyber-security and online radicalisation? Will he update the House with more detail of the measures that are being taken to tackle this scourge that affects our young people's minds?

Boris Johnson: I thank my hon. Friend for her questions. As I said earlier, we are stepping up our activity with the communications cell that we have, but also trying to work with our international friends and partners to get internet companies to take down pre-emptively much of the pollution that appears online. That is where our activities are directed at the moment. We need more co-operation from the social media companies.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I speak as a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, and the only conclusion that many in the country can come to after the right hon. Gentleman's performance at the Committee last week is not only that he is ill-equipped to be Foreign Secretary but that he is, indeed, an international embarrassment. He has been forced to come to this House today and include a statement on Mrs Ratcliffe as part of his statement on countering Daesh, and he has not corrected the record. What he said in his statement is completely contrary to what he said at the Committee last week. So, in response to my hon. Friends the Members for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and for Ilford South (Mike Gapes), I give him one last opportunity to correct the record, do himself a favour, do the Foreign Office a favour, and do the family a favour.

Boris Johnson: Perhaps for the sake of brevity I can tell the hon. Gentleman that Richard Ratcliffe himself has welcomed the clarification that I have offered today, and I think I am content with that. We will push on on that basis. I may say to the hon. Gentleman that he sat through that Committee in a state of glassy indifference and made no remark at all about anything that I had said, either then or two days afterwards.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Our armed forces can be proud of the work they have done in countering Daesh, as we are proud of them, but there is no way that this House can be proud of the conduct of our Foreign Secretary. He is quite right, as others have been right to argue, that the responsibility for the detainment of a British citizen is solely the responsibility of the Iranian regime, but with the ill-judged and inaccurate remarks he made to the Foreign Affairs Committee last week, the only person in this House who did the bidding of the Iranian regime was the Foreign Secretary. What is so egregious about this whole affair is that he did not take ownership of his mistake and did not seek to quickly rectify it; indeed, he has come here this afternoon and cannot even bring himself to show an ounce of contrition or even make an apology. This is not a criticism of the Conservative party, and certainly not a criticism of the finest diplomatic service in the world; it is a criticism firmly of the Foreign Secretary, who does not have the care and attention necessary to do one of the most important jobs in Government—so why is he still in the job?

Boris Johnson: I must respectfully repeat the point I have made several times now, which is that I have clarified the remarks I made to the Foreign Affairs

Committee. I have also pointed out the most important conclusion of today, which is that nothing I said has had any impact whatever—contrary to the assertions that have been made repeatedly by the Opposition—on the judicial proceedings taking place in Tehran. I think that we should be working together to secure the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, and that is certainly what we are doing.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): My constituents, Colin and Rosemary Gay, are family members of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. The fact is that the family have been worried sick by the Foreign Secretary's irresponsible comments. On a human level, is he at all sorry for the rollercoaster of emotions he has caused Nazanin and her family this week, and could he at least apologise to them today?

Boris Johnson: Of course I am sorry if any words of mine have been so taken out of context and so misconstrued as to cause any kind of anxiety for the family of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe—of course I am. But the most important thing is that I do not believe—and I have this from the Iranians themselves—that those words had any impact on the judicial process. We are going to work flat out to secure the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. I am very happy to have been able to make that clarification to the House today, and I am delighted that, as I say, Richard Ratcliffe welcomes the clarification that I have made. If the hon. Lady would pass on my thoughts to her constituents who are the family of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, I would be very grateful.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): It is precisely because many of us have, for many months, been working to try to secure Nazanin's release that we are so upset about the mistake that has been made. I accept that, perhaps inadvertently, we are aware of the impact of her detention on her and her family, and that that is occasioning the extent of our dismay. This is not an attempt at politicisation; it is genuine upset.

I hope that the Foreign Secretary will now go to look at the website of the Iranian judicial authorities, where his remarks are repeated for all to see. I think it is difficult, therefore, for him to absolve himself of responsibility. We know, and I hope that the Foreign Secretary is aware, that the Iranian authorities do not deal with ambiguity. They need clarity—clear words. Anyone who has engaged with them, as I and many others have done over many months to try to secure Nazanin's release—we have been critical of them—will be aware of their approach and know that they need clarity. We need six words from the Foreign Secretary: "I'm sorry; I made a mistake." Please give us those six words now.

Boris Johnson: I say respectfully to the hon. Lady that I think the mistake, the error and the fault lie with the Iranian authorities. It is to them that she should direct her anger.

Points of Order

3.21 pm

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Foreign Secretary has come to the House this afternoon to provide a statement clarifying the comments he made to the Foreign Affairs Committee last week. He said in his statement—my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) has already read this out: “My point was that I disagreed with the Iranian view that training journalists was a crime, not that I lent any credence to Iranian allegations that Mrs Zaghari Ratcliffe had been engaged in such activity.” The transcript from the Committee says:

“When we look at what Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe was doing, she was simply teaching people journalism, as I understand it”.

Those two statements are inaccurate and contradictory.

In addition, Madam Deputy Speaker, could you give me some advice? The Foreign Secretary accused me of performing on the Foreign Affairs Committee with “glassy indifference”—I think those were the words he used. May I just say to the Foreign Secretary, if he does not like me asking questions about Iran and US sanctions, that my expression was one of incredulity at his incompetence at answering the questions and not glassy indifference?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. On his first point, as the House knows, it is not for me to opine on this matter. We have had quite a considerable time this afternoon during which these questions have been put to the Foreign Secretary, and the Foreign Secretary has now answered those questions. If there is a difference of opinion, that is in the nature of political debate and not a matter for the Chair.

On the second point, the hon. Gentleman has put a description rather different from the one that the Foreign Secretary gave of him. Once again, that is a matter of

opinion, and the two opinions have been expressed. It is not for me to rule which one is correct.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Earlier today, during the urgent question on the Brexit sectoral analysis, the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray), who is aware that I was going to make this point of order, said, quite rightly, that the Secretary of State for Scotland had said at Scotland Office questions that the sectoral analysis of the impact on the economy of Scotland existed and had been shared with the Scottish Government. My colleagues in the Scottish Government had not, and have not, seen such analysis despite repeated requests. Madam Deputy Speaker, can you give us some advice on how we can correct the record?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I appreciate the point that the hon. Gentleman is making, but, once again, it is not a matter for the Chair. He asks for my advice on correcting the record, and I think that he has just put his issue on the record. It will be noted, and I am quite sure that those on the Treasury Bench will note it.

BILL PRESENTED

TRADE BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Liam Fox, supported by the Prime Minister, Secretary Boris Johnson Secretary David Davis, Secretary David Mundell, Secretary Alun Cairns, Secretary James Brokenshire, Secretary Michael Gove, Secretary Priti Patel and Greg Hands, presented a Bill to make provision about the implementation of international trade agreements; to make provision establishing the Trade Remedies Authority and conferring functions on it; and to make provision about the collection and disclosure of information relating to trade.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Monday 13 November, and to be printed (Bill 122) with explanatory notes (Bill 122-EN).

Leasehold Reform

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

3.24 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about the regulation of the purchase of freehold by leaseholders; to introduce a system for establishing the maximum charge for such freehold; to make provision about the award of legal costs in leasehold property tribunal cases; to establish a compensation scheme for cases where misleading particulars have led to certain leasehold agreements; and for connected purposes.

The working title of this Bill is the Leasehold Reform Bill, but it has been suggested to me that a better title might be the Leasehold Emancipation Bill. Although I welcome the Government's recent consultation on ending unfair leasehold practices, and I urge Ministers to hold their nerve and end this outrageous practice, sadly there is little to suggest that the Government are going to address the ongoing situation of leaseholders, many of whom feel trapped in their homes.

I hope that the genuine cross-party support for this Bill will encourage the Government to facilitate its passage through Parliament, or at least to come up with a Bill of their own to deal with these proposals. On cross-party support, I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), who have been true champions of the leasehold community.

The principal aim of the Bill is to deliver a fair and simple mechanism to help tens of thousands of our constituents to escape from their current leasehold agreements. Before I set out how that will work in practice, I will briefly explain the background. Many of my constituents, and those of other hon. Members, have spoken about how they bought what they had thought were their dream homes on new housing developments, built by household names, more often than not in the last decade or so. Many, but not all, of the buyers knew that the property was being sold to them on a leasehold basis. Between the salespeople and the solicitors recommended to them by the developer, however, very few were fully aware of the finer detail of what they were signing up to.

Almost all were left with the impression that they would have first refusal on the freehold of the property and that it would be possible to purchase the freehold for a reasonable price. However, the figures that were quoted for the purchase of the freehold by the salespeople working for the developers bear little relation to the costs that people were quoted later on, because, shortly after they moved in, the freehold of their property was sold, without their knowledge or consent, to a third party that they had never heard of. In many cases, the freehold to their house was moved offshore, so that what they had thought was their home became, in fact, the property of a string of shady companies operating from a tax haven. Often, it is impossible to say who the ultimate beneficiary is.

Under the terms of the lease, to continue to live in their own home, the buyers are charged an annual ground rent, which, in some cases, doubles every 10 years,

taking an initially modest sum of a few hundred pounds to an exorbitant annual fee of thousands of pounds within their lifetime. In some cases, that renders the property unsellable.

The ground rent, it should be pointed out, is separate from and in addition to a service or maintenance charge. Although the latter charges pay for something clearly definable, I have never been given a satisfactory answer by a developer as to exactly what ground rent pays for, other than to provide an additional cash cow for the builder and a revenue stream for the freeholder. The person living in the house gets absolutely nothing in return for their annual payments.

When those living in their leasehold home inquire whether the new freehold owner is willing to sell them the freehold of their home, they are often told no. Sometimes, they receive no response at all, and I have had to threaten freeholders with naming them on the Floor of the House just to elicit a response. Such responses are not consistent either: neighbours in almost identical houses in my constituency have been quoted wildly different prices to purchase their freeholds.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) has brought to my attention such a situation in her constituency. The company, Keepmoat, has asked many residents to pay huge additional sums to avoid their freeholds being sold to a private company. At the same time, others were told the freehold was unavailable, yet a lucky few were actually given theirs for free. Such an inconsistent and unfair approach would no longer be possible under the Bill.

When the leaseholder eventually receives the quote for purchasing the freehold, they are often quoted an astronomical sum and are told that it is non-negotiable. These quotes are always many times higher than any figure the developer's sales staff have told them. The same has been true when residents of a block of flats have collectively sought to purchase their freehold and take responsibility for the shared areas themselves.

Instead of the simple purchase of the freehold for a set price that the developer led them to expect they could take advantage of, the leaseholder enters the convoluted and expensive process called enfranchisement. This is a process of incessant horse-trading, which at present exists to establish correct valuations and provides a lucrative market for surveyors and lawyers. The provisions of the lease often require the person wishing to buy the freehold to pay the freeholder's costs in dealing with the application. We have the indefensible situation of people footing the bill for the costs of professionals, whose job is actually to maximise the amount of money they will take off those people.

The Bill's first aim is to introduce a simple and fair scheme, with a clear and transparent statutory pricing model, and the amount for a leaseholder to purchase their freehold would be capped at no more than 10 times the annual ground rent. At the moment, leaseholders are often quoted costs of over 100 times the ground rent to purchase the freehold. We can change this: such a system already exists in many other countries, including Scotland and Northern Ireland, and I believe it is time that people in England and Wales had the same rights.

Such a system would involve a simple formula for calculating the value of the freehold, based on the ground rent and the number of years left on the lease,

[Justin Madders]

with a cap on the maximum payable. This would be set out in statute so that everybody knows at the outset what they are dealing with. While this would come as very bad news for surveyors and lawyers in this field, it would provide a mechanism to enable our constituents finally to own their own homes in a straightforward way and provide security for their futures. Currently, too many leaseholders are prevented from exercising their rights because they cannot afford to do so. One recent example was of a retired couple paying £38,000 to buy their freehold. Such people are being ripped off when they first buy the house, and then ripped off again when they try to buy the freehold.

The Bill's second provision seeks to rebalance the awarding of costs at leasehold property tribunals. The system as it stands reinforces the existing imbalance of power between the leaseholder and freeholder, and the Bill ensures that a leaseholder will not have to pay the freeholder's costs just to enforce their own rights under the lease.

Finally, I have deep concerns about both the information provided to purchasers by developers and the advice given by solicitors. Solicitors are often recommended by the developer, which is why I am calling for a statutory compensation scheme. I have labelled this scandal "the PPI of the house building industry", and that phrase has caught on precisely because of the similarities. We need a similar process to compensate those who have fallen victim to this scam.

In some cases, I have evidence that developers insisted that purchasers used solicitors nominated by them if the sale was to go ahead, or offered large incentives, including paying for the leaseholder's legal fees. In many other cases, buyers were put under pressure to use a recommended solicitor because they were told that there was a short window of time available to complete the purchase and that only a solicitor from its panel would be able to complete the relevant searches within this timeframe. This has meant that many of my constituents ended up using firms whose advice on these leases was that they were standard documents. Such a document

may have been standard for that particular development, but that does not make it fair or reasonable.

The third element of my Bill therefore seeks to establish in law a system of compensation where misleading particulars have led to certain leasehold agreements. Alongside this, I would expect there to be a full independent inquiry to look at the relationships between developers, freeholders, finance companies and conveyancers and to establish how a system was allowed to develop that has left so many innocent people feeling ripped off. It is time we held to account the guilty men and women who must have known that this scam would ultimately be at the cost of their customers.

The leasehold scandal is one from which nobody emerges with credit. The Government, lenders, freeholders and lawyers have all played a role, but I must reserve the lion's share of the obloquy for developers who have deliberately and systematically created a set of toxic assets, with those left in the lurch finding that the biggest purchase of their life is a pup. When people bought their houses, they thought they were doing just that—buying their home. They never contemplated for a moment that the true owner of their home was actually someone—they might never know their identity—who could then sell on their interest in the property to somebody else without their knowledge or consent. We need to give people the chance to escape that trap fairly.

It will take years for the stench of ignominy that envelops guilty developers to wear off, but this Bill may help in that process. Until we come up with an effective way to release people from the shackles of leasehold, the authors of this injustice will never be forgiven. I commend this motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Justin Madders, Jim Fitzpatrick, Sir Peter Bottomley, David Hanson, Ian Austin, Mary Glendon, Justin Tomlinson, Ruth George, Antoinette Sandbach, Bill Esterson, Gareth Thomas and Derek Twigg present the Bill.

Justin Madders accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 2 February 2018, and to be printed (Bill 121).

Backbench Business

Temporary Accommodation

3.35 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes with concern the increased use by local authorities of temporary accommodation for 77,240 homeless families in priority need, including 120,540 children or expected children; further notes more than a quarter of those households have been placed in temporary accommodation in a different local government area; further notes the draft consultation on a homelessness code of guidance for local authorities; is aware of the pressure on local authorities and the increasing demands that they face; and calls on the Government to provide a framework for monitoring and enforcement to ensure the appropriate level of quality and location of temporary accommodation, to require that local authorities appoint a designated officer for homeless families in their area and to ensure that homeless families have appropriate contact with health, education and social services when they are in temporary accommodation.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting today's debate on such an incredibly important issue.

Madam Deputy Speaker,

"Our housing market is broken."—[*Official Report*, 7 February 2017; Vol. 621, c. 229.]

That was the damning verdict of the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government earlier this year. The 9,712 residents on the housing register where my constituency is based, in the London borough of Merton, would absolutely agree with him. Perhaps the most visible indication of the broken housing market are the thousands of people sleeping on our streets, but the homelessness crisis facing this country is far greater than that. It is also hidden—hidden in hostels, hidden in bed and breakfasts, and hidden at the heart of an industrial estate. If a homeless applicant has nowhere to stay and is in priority need, their local authority has a duty to ensure that immediate temporary accommodation is made available. That is the reality for 78,180 households across the country, where 120,170 children do not have a permanent home. That staggering figure is rising fast.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this debate and for giving way. Does she accept that, through universal credit, we have a state recruiter of people who will be homeless? We know that more people will be hungry. The Government are not collecting any figures on that or on homelessness, which is the theme of her debate. Is that not a shameful reflection of the Government's concern?

Siobhain McDonagh: I agree with my right hon. Friend and thank him for all his work over the decades for the most forgotten in our society. The truth is that universal credit will be yet another driver that forces families out of the private rented sector, which is not where most of them should be in the first place.

The staggering number of homeless families is rising fast, with an additional 960 households in temporary accommodation in the last quarter alone. Incidentally, that figure has risen quarter on quarter since 2010, with the number of children in temporary accommodation increasing by 66% since the Conservatives came to power.

Despite public misperception, housing benefit data suggests that a third of householders in temporary accommodation in England are in work, with the proportion rising to half of householders in temporary accommodation in London. Three quarters of families in temporary accommodation in London have been there for more than six months, with one in 10 there for a not-so-temporary five years. That is without mentioning cases in Harrow and Camden involving households in temporary accommodation for a baffling 19 years. Of course those are extreme cases, but the fact is that more than 100 councils across the country have households who have been living in temporary accommodation for more than a year.

May I make it clear that the purpose of this debate is not to bash local authorities, which are dealing with very difficult situations as best they can? I give particular praise to the head of Merton's housing department, Steve Langley, whom I have known for more than 20 years. I have seen the distress that it causes him to place families hundreds of miles away from home and in accommodation that he would not accept for his own family. I thank him for his public service.

There is a cost to the taxpayer. In November 2016, the BBC reported that councils in Britain had spent more than £3.5 billion on temporary accommodation over the past five years. The net cost has tripled in the past three years alone.

Now that the scene is set, I will deal with three main reasons why I applied for the debate. I will start with out-of-borough temporary housing. I will then move on to the need to enforce legislation, and finish by assessing the standard of temporary accommodation for the 78,000 families affected.

More than 28% of households in temporary accommodation are housed outside their local authority area. That represents a remarkable increase of 248% between March 2011 and March 2017. The figure for London boroughs increases to a staggering 36% of households, and there has been a fivefold increase in households placed outside the capital since 2012. Last year, the London borough of Harrow temporarily moved residents as far as Bradford, Wolverhampton and even Glasgow.

Birmingham is a regular recipient of residents, and the scale of the problem is illustrated by a letter from Birmingham City Council to all London councils that calls for the practice to end because its resources are at breaking point. For the families, that is 140 miles away from their homes, their children's schools, and their friends, families and communities. Only last Thursday, my office took a call at 5 pm from a lady who was told she was to go off to Birmingham with her four children under the age of eight. It took a collection from the parents at her children's school to pay for a Travelodge that night before she was offered a one-bedroom flat for herself and her four children the next day.

Similarly, at my advice surgery last Friday, I met a full-time nurse at St Helier Hospital who had just been offered temporary accommodation 44 miles away in Luton. Meanwhile, for a homeless resident in Kensington and Chelsea, there is a remarkable 72% chance that their temporary accommodation will be outside the borough. It therefore might seem odd that a Communities and Local Government Committee report states:

"Housing people away from their homes and support networks should be an action of last resort."

Frank Field: I apologise for intervening again, but I am intrigued and appalled by the record that my hon. Friend describes. It is worse than the Poor Law. Under the Poor Law, people were sent back to the village it was believed they came from; under the current rules, people are sent to any old village or city, provided that the local authority can dump families on them.

Siobhain McDonagh: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right.

Currently, 22,000 households face such a “last resort” and are placed in temporary housing outside their borough. Under the Housing Act 1996, when a local authority undertakes its housing duty to people by placing them in temporary accommodation in another borough, it should notify the receiving borough that it has done so. That notice should be in writing and made at least 14 days before the household is placed in the area. Is the Department confident that each household is accounted for in their new, temporary home?

I have received a letter from the chief executive of Thurrock Council, which had 183 placements from London boroughs between April 2016 to February 2017. She said:

“Unfortunately, our experience has often been that the notifications are either not sent or sent to the wrong contact within the Council.

Over the past couple of years housing departments have noticed an increase in the number of cases who report that they were placed in another borough from London without the formal notification being received.”

Housing outside a borough is not unlawful, but councils are legally obliged to ensure that relocation is suitable and appropriate to a family’s circumstances, taking account of potential disruption to education, medical needs and employment. Does the Minister agree that processes must be put in place, and enforced, to ensure that a receiving local authority is fully aware of a family’s arrival and that they can receive the healthcare, education and welfare support to which they are entitled once they are there?

Let us consider the enforcement of legislation. In 2004, the Homelessness (Suitability of Accommodation) (England) Order 2003 came into force, providing that homeless families with children should not be placed in a B&B except in an emergency. If such an emergency were to arise, it could last for no longer than six weeks. In June this year, 6,660 households were being temporarily housed in B&Bs. That was twice as many as in 2011, and three times as many as when the Conservatives came to power in 2010. A deplorable 2,710 of those households trapped in B&Bs include children. For 1,200 of those families, their living hell has gone on for far longer than the six-week legal limit. The local authorities that are housing them are, quite simply, breaking the law.

One of these families joins us in the Gallery today. Kelly’s family were evicted earlier this year, making them homeless. Sutton Council placed Kelly, her husband and her two young children in a single room in a B&B in Wimbledon. They had so little space that Kelly’s stepson had to leave the family home. For 10 weeks, the family were left in one tiny room, hidden from society in a B&B. No one told Kelly when the nightmare would end. After 10 long weeks, Kelly is now finally out of the B&B, although her temporary home is not much better. Kelly tells me that she simply does not feel safe there, and I completely understand why. The oven does not

work, the electricians are precarious, and the flimsy door is a precarious barrier to the outside world. Only yesterday, Sutton Council’s planning department knocked on her door to tell her that there was no planning permission to allow the flat she lives in to exist.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the manner in which she is leading this debate. In the sixth richest economy in the world, does she think it is an abuse of human rights that we have so many people living in these Dickensian conditions?

Siobhain McDonagh: It is an abuse of human rights. There is a moral duty on us all to bring a resolution—this is possible—to the situation.

Kelly’s daughter is old enough to question but too young to understand the situation. When she returns from school, she queries why none of her friends have to share a room with their parents. Both Kelly and her husband hold down good jobs, but she tells me that she simply does not know how to get out of this situation. If she complains, will she be moved far away from her job and her children’s school?

Kelly is not alone, however. Birmingham City Council currently houses 85 families with children in B&Bs for longer than six weeks, while Croydon, Harrow, Redbridge and Southwark local authorities have all housed hundreds of families with children in B&Bs for longer than the legal limit of six weeks over the past year alone.

Take Renee and her sister Jade, two young brave girls whom I had the pleasure of meeting in Parliament just a fortnight ago. After living in their friend’s house for over a year, Renee and Jade’s family became homeless and had to move to temporary accommodation in Acton, away from their friends, family and school. A double bed, single bed and a bunk bed filled their tiny room, with their bathroom and kitchen shared with another family. They tell me that they felt brushed under the carpet because they were unseen by society, too ashamed to open their curtains to the outside world. This makes Renee’s recent GCSE success even more remarkable and I congratulate her on her well-deserved achievement. Does the Minister agree that a B&B is no place for Renee—in fact for any family—for longer than six weeks, and that a law against that is superfluous if there is no way to enforce it? What tangible changes would he suggest to ensure that local authorities abide by the laws that this House has agreed?

Behind the facts and figures that I have described today are real homes, real people and real families—and, in my constituency of Mitcham and Morden, one very real building named Connect House. At my advice surgery, the name Connect House has become an increasingly regular feature over the past year, with constituent after constituent calling me for help, desperate to escape what they describe as their living nightmare.

It is incredibly difficult to summarise the conditions at Connect House without visiting it in person. I therefore invite each and every right hon. and hon. Member in the Chamber to join me in Committee Room 9 after the debate, where I will be releasing a video so that each of them, as well as the general public, can see with their own eyes the appalling conditions that the 84 families living inside Connect House find themselves in. For now, however, I will do my best to find the right words.

Willow Lane industrial estate is home to a plethora of successful businesses in my constituency. With its businesses ranging from the manufacturer of timber windows to motor works, and from scaffolders to joiners, it is one of the busiest industrial estates in south London. Almost two years ago, however, there was a peculiar change on the estate. The businesses began to notice prams being pushed past their front doors and children playing while their lorries and vans raced through. They began to notice hundreds of residents using their working industrial estate as a home.

Connect House is at the heart of Willow Lane industrial estate. It houses 84 families who have been placed there by four local authorities: Bromley, Sutton, Croydon and Merton. There is little collaboration between the authorities as to who is placed in Connect House, which heightens the danger of vulnerable residents being placed among completely inappropriate neighbours. To reach the nearest amenities, the residents have to walk through the industrial estate itself. Cars line the pavement, forcing families with prams or wheelchairs into the lorry-filled road. It is fair to say that local workers simply do not expect 84 families to live within their industrial estate.

Waste surrounds Connect House because its industrial bins are ill equipped for the needs of the residents inside. This naturally attracts rats and foxes, and litter is strewn across the adjacent car park. Litter is also found throughout the building itself, causing considerable damage to both the building and its few facilities. The building is not staffed at evenings or weekends, and one resident found herself locked out in the middle of the industrial estate when she arrived back at night. A single key fob is allocated to each room, but additional fobs come at a deposit of £20. It is no wonder that young children have escaped into the dangerous industrial estate outside.

As for those who are able to enter, one resident told me of the danger that she and her daughter were in when a man was able to follow her right to her front door. Incidentally, the doors have neither a spy hole nor a door chain for safety. For a vulnerable family, their security is nothing more than the thin door separating their room from the industrial estate outside. Importantly, there is no communal room in Connect House, and neither is there anywhere for children to go, other than their tiny bedroom, where they are so often forced to share a bed with their parents and/or siblings. Residents complain of children running through the corridors at night, while the car park outside the building has been described as a playground in the evenings. Does the Minister agree that an industrial estate car park is no fit playground for the hundreds of children inside Connect House?

Residents and businesses have described Connect House as an “accident waiting to happen” and a “death trap”, yet this is a property that Bromley Council has not even visited, despite placing families there. It argues that there is simply not enough time or resource to do so, and that in its own words:

“This is compounded by the fact that a significant number”
of properties
“are out of the borough”.

The building’s remote location means that there are no immediate shops or amenities for the residents. The location is so remote, in fact, that even an ambulance

was unable to find it when called by a heavily pregnant lady housed there who had to have her baby in the car park outside. It truly fills me with sadness to tell this Chamber that the baby is no longer with us.

The property provides the landlord with an estimated—and simply staggering—£1.25 million to £1.5 million of taxpayers’ money each year, with the local authorities charged between £30 and £40 per room per night. Connect House is therefore a 21st century, multi-million pound death trap in the middle of my constituency. In the Gallery today sit dozens of residents from Connect House. They have joined us here to have their voices heard, to find out why the Government consider Connect House to be a suitable place for them to live, and to listen to what changes the Minister will propose before this death trap takes its next victim. From down here in the Chamber, I would like to tell their experiences, their challenges and their stories. Take Laura. She shares a room with her teenage daughter, despite having a spinal disability. Her room is so small that she had to move items out just to show me inside. She sleeps in her bed in the day so that her daughter can sleep in a bed at night.

Then there is Alice. She has a three-hour return journey to collect her children from school, finishing at the tram stop outside the industrial estate. It is dark by the time they return and so, before making the final walk home, Alice and her children pause to pray that they will make it safely. Finally, there is Sarah. Her two children are not yet of school age, so they are confined—day in, day out—to the industrial estate. It is no wonder that when Sarah’s baby boy was taken to the doctor’s with a wheezy cough, the doctor put it down to the constant fumes he was inhaling from the factories outside the window.

There are Connect Houses in so many of our constituencies, and today is our chance to shine a light on them. So what can be done? If there are tangible actions that should be taken from this debate, let them be as follows.

First, does the Minister agree that if a local authority is forced to house residents temporarily in another local authority area, it is fundamental that a designated officer in the receiving authority should be clearly informed of those people’s arrival so that their safety and welfare can be ensured? Secondly, I cannot help questioning why we have laws and regulations on temporary accommodation if they are simply not enforced. Does the Minister agree that local authorities should be held to account under the regulations on which the House has decided? Assuming that he does, may I ask how he proposes to ensure that families like Kelly’s are no longer illegally housed in B&Bs for more than six weeks?

Finally, do the Minister and colleagues agree that there should be a minimum standard for temporary accommodation, and that the conditions that I have described are simply not fit for purpose? I encourage anyone who is in any doubt about that to join me in Committee Room 9 after the debate.

The 78,180 families who are in temporary accommodation are hidden from our society, whether in a hostel, in a B&B, or lost in an industrial estate. Today many of those families sit proudly in the House of Commons. Today their stories will be hidden no more, and I urge each of us to be their voice and to call for change.

3.56 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on securing the debate, and on the passionate way in which she delivered her speech and described what is going on in her constituency. I can almost certainly say that I agree with nearly every word that she uttered in expressing her desire for regulation—for proper, appropriate measures to be applied to temporary accommodation.

The present position has three aspects. When people who face homelessness approach the local authority, that is the crisis point. They have nowhere to live and, if they are “priority need” homeless, the authority must find them somewhere to live immediately. That is expensive, and the accommodation is often not suitable: in London, people are likely to be offered accommodation way outside the area in which they have been living.

There are two other elements. First, as the hon. Lady said, there are families who have been living in temporary accommodation for 19 years or more. Given that most people who own their homes move, on average, every seven years, it is absurd for someone to be in temporary accommodation for that length of time. We need to take appropriate action. Secondly, there are people who literally have nowhere to live except with friends, perhaps sleeping on sofas. That is a hidden form of homelessness, because it is clearly a form of temporary accommodation.

I am pleased to say that my Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which secured support from the Front Benches of both parties and, I think, from Members in all parts of the House, will come into force on 1 April 2018. It will produce some remedies for the problems described by the hon. Lady. First, as a result of a Government concession, local authorities that offer either permanent or temporary accommodation must visit and inspect the premises to confirm that they are fit for accommodation and fit for purpose, and we should all ensure that our local authorities honour that requirement.

Siobhain McDonagh: There can be anything in law, but if it is not enforced, it does not work. Unless there is an organisation like Ofsted or the Care Quality Commission for housing, it is not going to work.

Bob Blackman: The hon. Lady is absolutely right: unless laws are enforced, there is not much point in having them. I ask the Minister to say in his response to the debate what he is doing to ensure that the existing rules are enforced. Some of the cases that the hon. Lady mentioned clearly fall foul of the existing requirements on local authorities, so those requirements are not being properly enforced.

We must deal with the consequences of the temporary accommodation crisis. In London about £600 million a year is spent on providing temporary accommodation. Most of that accommodation is not fit for purpose, and is certainly not fit for the accommodation needs of the individuals placed there. We must seek to reduce that bill dramatically, and how to achieve that is clear.

Under the Homelessness Reduction Act, anyone approaching the crisis of homelessness will be able to approach their local authority two months before they face that crisis. The aim is that no one should become

homeless at all—that the local authority should take the appropriate action prior to someone’s becoming homeless. If local authorities carry out their duties properly, we will not have that crisis of temporary accommodation, which is incredibly expensive. That is a cost-effective way of addressing the challenge.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): I welcome the Homelessness Reduction Act. Is any extra money available for councils to deal with the extra demand they will get as a result of it?

Bob Blackman: The Government have given extra money: £81 million over a two-year period for the implementation of the Act. That might not be sufficient, but we can bet our bottom dollar that the Communities and Local Government Committee, which is going to look at the implementation of the Act, will be on the Minister’s case to make sure that extra funding is provided if it is required. If local authorities do their job properly, they will make savings in the temporary accommodation budget, which should then balance up the costs of their requirements under the Act.

The greatest cause of homelessness is the end of an assured shorthold tenancy. They usually run for six months and at the end of that period families often have to move. The solution is clear: we need longer tenancies and more security of tenure for families, but also assurances to landlords that they will get paid their rent and that the tenants will behave themselves in accordance with the contract they have signed. I ask the Minister to update us on where we are going with lengthening tenancies, which would dramatically reduce homelessness at a stroke. Perhaps we can do that.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that not all tenants want to sign a longer tenancy, as it ties them into something they might not want to be tied into for so long? What we need are asymmetric tenancies, so the landlord signs up to a longer period—three years, perhaps—but the tenant can have a break clause to leave earlier, which would encourage them to sign that longer tenancy agreement.

Bob Blackman: Clearly, any tenancy agreement signed would have break clauses in by mutual convenience. That would be appropriate.

Large numbers of children and young people are currently in temporary accommodation, and for far too long. What are the Government doing to make sure that children are put into permanent accommodation with their families in an appropriate way?

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman made an important point about landlords being assured that their rent would be paid. Was he not present for the debates last week and the week before on universal credit? We have increasing evidence that the universal credit system, with its built-in delay of six weeks, is making it more and more difficult for landlords to get the rent that they are owed.

Bob Blackman: The reality is that under universal credit, a tenant can choose to have the rent paid directly to the landlord, and I would certainly recommend that families in this position choose that option. I also

believe that the delay in paying universal credit should be reduced from six weeks to four weeks. That is my personal view, which I have advanced to Ministers.

On the question of solutions, I have already mentioned the idea of introducing a rent deposit guarantee project and a help to rent project. Many households face the crisis of not being able to raise a deposit in order to rent a property, and they become homeless as a result. It is estimated that by investing some £31 million a year, we could help 32,000 families in England alone to raise a deposit and secure a property at a rent they could afford. That could save the temporary accommodation budget £1.8 billion over a three-year period. That seems to be a sensible route to follow. What lobbying is the Minister doing of his friends in the Treasury on that issue? That proposal could clearly save money, save a lot of angst and perhaps save lives.

I also want to talk about the rise in rough sleeping. I applaud the Government for setting out the need to halve the number of rough sleepers in this country—and, indeed, to eliminate rough sleeping completely—but the reality is that it is on the rise and we need to take urgent action.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Bob Blackman: I have given way several times already, and I know that many colleagues want to speak in the debate.

Will my hon. Friend the Minister update the House on the question of rough sleepers—in particular, the question of their designation? In London, only about half the rough sleepers are UK citizens; a large number in London and beyond are from outside the United Kingdom. This is a serious problem. People are coming to this country, and they may have been trafficked or whatever: we need to get to the bottom of why they are sleeping rough on our streets today.

These are my asks for the Minister. Bed-and-breakfast accommodation is the most expensive form of temporary accommodation, and its use is on the rise. Obviously, we need to exclude the Grenfell Tower situation, because that involves a very different position, but bed-and-breakfast accommodation is an expensive and unsatisfactory means of accommodating families. The solutions to these issues will be key. It is more than 40 years since we built 250,000 properties in this country. That is the fault of Governments of all persuasions. We clearly need to build 300,000 properties just to deal with the need that exists right now. Will the Minister update us on how we are improving the level of house building in this country, so that we can address the fundamental issue of providing enough homes for the people who want to live in them?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The House will be aware that a great many people want to speak in this short debate, so I must impose a time limit of seven minutes.

4.10 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak and to have supported my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) in calling for this important

debate—her opening speech was fantastic. I hope that the Government are listening, because what Members across the House are seeing in their constituencies amounts to a serious crisis.

It is no longer accurate to talk of “temporary” accommodation; in the past three months, I have represented two families in my constituency who have been living in so-called temporary accommodation for over 10 years. Temporary accommodation is becoming permanent accommodation. If we look at the broader context, that is happening due to a huge shortage of social housing across the country.

One family in my constituency have been living in temporary accommodation for 14 years. Another family have been there for 17 years. That family have seen their children grow up in temporary accommodation—the only home that the children have ever known, from their first day at primary school to their first day at secondary school. Next year, the 18th birthday of the eldest child will be celebrated in this so-called temporary accommodation. Another of my constituents has been placed in temporary accommodation with her son, who suffers from cerebral palsy. The room is too small to accommodate the equipment he needs. Another two cases came into my postbag this month involving two households who have lived in temporary accommodation since 2010.

There are 3,140 households living in temporary accommodation in my borough of Haringey, and let me be clear about the conditions in which people are being housed. If the Minister has not visited an emergency accommodation hostel, I would be happy to facilitate a visit. In the past couple of months, I have asked the Department about the state of temporary accommodation, but it seems unable to answer me. I hope that the Minister can tell the House today what he failed to tell me last month. How much of our temporary accommodation stock is unfit for human habitation or is in disrepair and requires refurbishment? How many children are living in inappropriate accommodation? What is the average length of time that a household spends in temporary accommodation? How many households have spent more than a year in temporary accommodation—or more than two years, or three years? How many households in temporary accommodation are being moved into a permanent social home? In my borough of Haringey, the wait for social housing is around 10 years even for those families in the direst need of a home.

What will be the impact of the freeze in the local housing allowance? As night follows day, households currently renting in the private sector will become homeless as they fall into rent arrears, and the number of homeless families whom councils will need to house in temporary accommodation will increase. Some 92% of councils fear that the freeze will cause a surge in homelessness, yet the Minister for Housing told me in an answer to a written question last month that the Government have not even carried out an impact assessment.

However, this is not about the numbers, as awful as they are. This is about the reality of life for hundreds of thousands of people in this country—one of the wealthiest in the world. The hostels in which people are being placed are not acceptable places for vulnerable women escaping abusive relationships or for parents to bring up their children. Clearly, there are real problems in the system when vulnerable people are being left in temporary

[Mr David Lammy]

accommodation for many years. What steps will the Minister take to improve the system of assessing vulnerability and the needs of families placed in temporary accommodation? Over the years, I have heard horror stories of needles in stairwells, of young children sharing bathrooms with strangers and of vulnerable women being abused and exploited. Ultimately, the story comes back to the chronic problem of the decimation of our social housing.

Local authorities, stretched to breaking point after years of austerity and budget cuts, spent £845 million on temporary accommodation last year. The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, which has been at the centre of the Grenfell storm, has built just 10 new council-funded social homes since 1990. Only 1,102 social homes were built with Government money in England in 2016.

We have a serious, serious crisis. The Chartered Institute of Housing estimates that by 2020 nearly 250,000 social homes will have been lost in just eight years. We have to grip the issue of houses sold off under right to buy. It is criminal for the state to give people a subsidy to take even more houses off the market and to see the sorts of people we are talking about today in even direr circumstances as a result.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making an extraordinarily powerful speech. Manchester City Council is currently having to buy back ex-right to buy council houses to cope with the demand of homeless families presenting at Manchester town hall. Does he agree it is a disgrace that councils are being put in that position?

Mr Lammy: It is shocking and appalling that councils are being put in that position. Many councillors across the country are having to make the hardest of decisions on behalf of people—frankly, as Members of Parliament, we are all pleased that we do not have to make those decisions. We now have a ridiculous situation in which we are spending almost £10 billion a year of taxpayers' money on housing benefit that goes straight to private landlords. Slashing social housing funding is a false economy. This is dead money. Instead of lining the pockets of private landlords, it should be used to build new social homes.

Siobhain McDonagh: I worked out last night that we could build 88,000 prefabs with the money we are giving in one year to the private rented sector in housing benefit.

Mr Lammy: Absolutely. We have to find new ways of building homes. We would be better off giving people a home for what may be 40 or 50 years by building those prefabs than handing out money in the way we have.

The state grant available for social landlords to build social homes was slashed to zero in the 2010 spending review. In its place we got new categories of homes: homes for affordable rent, and affordable homes for first-time buyers. It is important to place on the record that the crisis will not be solved by building affordable homes that cost £400,000 to £450,000 in London. It is time almost to banish the word “affordable” from the

lexicon, as it means nothing to ordinary people when it comes to housing policy. We have already heard that the Government are not building social homes, but they are spending 80% of the total housing budget on subsidising private homes through Help to Buy and discounted starter homes. The Government are not even really serious about their own affordable homes programme.

The dire situation we are seeing in temporary accommodation is symptomatic of the intrinsically linked shortage of homes and housing crisis. We will get to grips with the crisis only through a mass social housing building programme. The Government are beginning to recognise that, and I welcome the Prime Minister's promise of a council house building “rebirth” in her speech last month.

The crisis will not be solved by further overheating the housing market by offering Help to Buy loans to first-time buyers, who have help from the bank of mum and dad anyway. The crisis will not be solved by building 5,000 homes each year. That is a drop in the ocean given the scale of the problem—it is only half of the households waiting to be housed in the London Borough of Haringey. Some 1.2 million households across the country are waiting to be housed, according to Shelter.

I hope the Government are listening and, on behalf of the 3,000 families in Haringey, I hope they will finally act.

4.19 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), and I congratulate the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on securing this important debate. There is no question but that we have a problem in this area; no one can be comfortable with a situation where 78,000 people are in temporary accommodation. That is a 7% increase on the previous year's number and a 63% increase on the 2010 figure. The number of people living in temporary bed-and-breakfast accommodation is 6,600; there has been a slight decline, of 4%, since the previous year. On the overall context of temporary accommodation, let me try to take some of the party political heat out of this by pointing out that the figure peaked in 2003 at 100,000. Therefore, we need to look at the issue in its overall context. However, that is not a justification or excuse for the fact that we need to move people out of temporary accommodation and into decent housing.

The Government are taking a deal of action on the issue. Obviously, we are allocating £550 million by 2020 to homelessness reduction. The first thing we have to do is reduce the number of people who are becoming homeless. The Government's ambitious objectives to halve homelessness by 2022 and completely abolish it by 2027 are profound and must be welcomed. I also welcome the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017; I served on the Bill Committee. It is important legislation. We heard lots of anecdotes and saw lots of evidence about people who just were not well served when they presented themselves to local authorities in desperate need of advice to prevent them from becoming homeless or to be rehoused. The Act will have a profound effect in trying to help them. It includes new duties for local authorities and a new code of conduct.

I also welcome the Government's actions on supported housing, which will have an effect in this area. There was concern about the new policies on supported housing, but the Government listened to the Joint Committee comprising the Communities and Local Government Committee and the Work and Pensions Committee on the issue. We looked at that and tried to form a policy that was going to work better nationally and locally. The Government listened and then put in place pretty much what we recommended in terms of looking at the different types of supported housing, including a new sheltered rent category, and ensuring that we have moneys allocated for short-term supported housing.

On wider solutions, I agree with a number of earlier contributors that the fundamental problem we have to solve is the number of houses we are building in this country. That drives all the affordability issues, which are driving many people into homelessness. So we need to build more homes. Clearly, we are building more than were built during the nadir of the housing market crash—it was difficult to build homes in 2008. New homes are being delivered at about twice the rate they were in 2008, which is good—[*Interruption.*] That is a fact. But we also need to build more affordable homes and more social homes. I agree with the right hon. Member for Tottenham: 80% of market value in many cases is simply not enough. So we must deliver more affordable homes. That works for many people.

Ruth Cadbury: How?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Lady asks how, from a sedentary position, and I will address that point. The Government have announced an extra £2 billion, bringing the total contribution to £9 billion by 2020.

We must get to grips with the viability assessments. They are a way for developers to avoid their responsibilities to deliver affordable homes or social housing. Some 79% of the affordable homes that should have been delivered through section 106 contributions have been avoided through the use of viability assessments. It was right to bring in viability assessments in 2012, when sites were not viable, but now that that time has passed we should consider a completely new policy on contributions from developers and of course landowners—the money is supposed to come from the landowners—to pay for affordable homes and social homes to rent. I favour a simple system of tariffs, either per bedroom or per square foot, rather than the complex section 106 system, in which a local authority requires a certain percentage of affordable housing. I think such a system would work much better.

Ruth Cadbury: The hon. Gentleman is making an interesting point, but if the private sector was expected to meet the need for new truly affordable social rented homes alone, and was required by law to comply with tariffs to the extent that he suggests, is it not likely that the private sector, particularly in London, would just walk away from delivering homes at all?

Kevin Hollinrake: No, I do not accept that. There is already a requirement for the private sector to deliver on section 106 commitments. It needs to be fair, not only to the landowner but to the community. For me, too much of the planning gain is going to the landowner and not enough is going back to the community.

The viability assessments allow developers to have a race to the top in terms of land prices. I would happily have a longer debate about the matter with the hon. Lady, but I absolutely think that the existing system creates a loophole for developers. Of course it is not just the responsibility of the private sector, and of course the Government need to contribute, as they are, although they need to contribute more.

I have just remembered that I should have drawn the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I have some business interests in the housing market, but that does not affect my keen desire to see more social homes delivered.

Another idea we might consider with respect to delivering more social rented homes is to allow investors to put private rented sector property into a self-invested pension, which they cannot do currently. They can buy commercial property and rent it out, but they cannot do that with residential property. I have talked to the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government about why we cannot allow private sector investors to put residential property into a pension, as long as they are willing to let it out at a social rent, or less than 50% of market rents. That is another way we could deliver the social rented homes we need.

Local authorities and housing associations are clearly part of the solution. We should allocate, or allow local authorities to borrow, more money to develop more affordable homes or homes for social rent.

On the issues in the private rented sector, I believe that most landlords are very responsible in delivering decent-quality accommodation in the rented sector, and they will remain a key part of the delivery of decent temporary and permanent accommodation. Nevertheless, we should consider having a property rental standard. The draft Tenant Fees Bill, or other legislation, may give us the opportunity to tag in a property rental standard to ensure that all property in the private rented sector is of a decent quality and that we have decent enforcement, using redress schemes or other bodies.

I agree that we should consider longer tenancies. They should be voluntary for landlords, but there should be incentives. I wonder whether one such incentive could be to allow some dispensation around the section 24 mortgage interest provisions that have been introduced, because they have been received quite badly by many landlords. If landlords are willing to offer longer tenancies, perhaps there should be some dispensation around how we treat mortgage interest in the private rented sector.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden again on securing the debate. Like her, I am keen to see much higher-quality accommodation in the private rented sector and temporary accommodation.

4.29 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) on his speech and thank him for reminding me to bring Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for her speech and for securing this important debate.

The situation in my home borough—Newham—is dire. The local authority reports that more than 5,600 people approached the council last year, worried about

[Lyn Brown]

homelessness. In total, 4,725 Newham households are in some kind of temporary accommodation, and more than half of those are currently in the least stable form of nightly paid accommodation. I hope that hon. Members across the House will agree that those statistics drive home the scale of the problem we are discussing. As we know, temporary housing conditions can massively damage families' wellbeing and opportunities. To illustrate my point, I will talk about just one case out of the hundreds that I have received recently.

In August, I heard from Camila, a grandmother writing on behalf of her grandchildren and their mother, Lisa. Camila's three granddaughters are 14, 11, and five. Lisa has had to live in temporary accommodation for 15 years. The children have known nothing else. The conditions in Lisa's flat are awful and the situation is having a real impact on the family's health. The walls are either black with mould or covered with mildew because of the damp. One of Lisa's daughters has breathing problems and the whole family are frequently sick with infections.

Lisa and her daughters have had to move a number of times already, as we all have experience of in London. On one occasion, Lisa was moved out of Newham, and she was recently told that her family might be moved out of London entirely. Camila is really worried about Lisa's mental health due to the stress caused by her family's living conditions. Camila believes that having to move out of London and away from the support network of her family could push Lisa "over the edge" entirely, leaving the family in very difficult circumstances.

The problems of homelessness, debt, unstable homes and constant moves have an impact on children and families, preventing them from putting down basic roots—making friends, getting on doctors' registers and even joining a library or a youth club. We are really storing up social problems for the future.

I often say that I was privileged to grow up in a council flat in east London. I was moved there at the age of two and a half, during the slum clearances around the docks. That flat provided me with the security to learn and to do as well as I could. My little—well, younger—sister is a well-respected solicitor. [Interruption.] She is actually both; that is true. And I am standing in this House. We could not have done that without the security of an affordable and secure tenancy—the security of a council property—behind us.

The social housing shortage requires urgent extensive long-term policy responses, but one decision is crucial and would help to continue to improve the housing conditions across the board in my constituency. The Secretary of State could today approve the renewal of Newham's widely respected scheme for private sector licensing. The scheme has run utterly successfully since 2013, but its renewal now requires approval from the Department for Communities and Local Government and the decision is overdue. The current scheme expires on 31 December, so there is a real risk that my constituents will be left without these protections if a decision is not made quickly.

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Those of us who grew up working-class and spent time in social council homes had security. What we

see so often in our constituencies is deep insecurity and the depression, mental health and other health problems that go with that insecurity. Does she agree that that is the difference between yesterday's working classes and today's?

Lyn Brown: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Things were not easy at home, but my mum never let us feel that we went without. Both my parents worked in factories in Silvertown, and although there was not a huge amount of money, there was always enough to pay the rent, because it was a social rent. Now, my constituents have two jobs, and they work in very hard circumstances, but they still cannot afford the private sector rents—that is all that is available to them—in my home borough.

Let me get back to the scheme in Newham to protect residents. The scheme's value in terms of the enforcement of housing standards is clear. It gives Newham the information and powers it needs to monitor and enforce standards in the private rented sector. All private landlords have to register and agree terms with the council, and they are held to account for failures to live up to the agreement.

Just last week, enforcement officers working as part of the scheme found a man living in a 1 metre by 2 metre space under the stairs of a property. There were 11 other people living throughout the rest of the house, and dangerous electrical and fire hazards were found as well. Through the scheme, Newham Council has helped to bring more than 1,200 prosecutions against criminal landlords, which is 60% of the London total—more than every other London borough combined.

If standards are continually driven up in the private rented sector locally, and if enforcement operations are strengthened so that there are fewer rogue landlords and there is less scope for exploitative practices such as the horrendous overcrowding I described, conditions will improve in temporary housing, and that can only be for the good of the children and our society at large.

I hope we will see some serious commitment from the Minister today to deal with the root causes of the ills of long-term, expensive, poor-quality temporary accommodation. Given that he has sat generously listening and nodding away as I have spoken, I also want to hear some positive noises from him about the scheme, and I hope he will soon be in a position to announce that approval for the extension has been granted.

4.37 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh). It is a great pleasure to follow her and other hon. Members in highlighting the importance of this critical issue. I understand the importance of temporary accommodation, which plays a vital role, because no child should be left without a roof over their head at a time of their lives when they face a crisis.

This is not a new problem. The number of children in temporary accommodation was at its peak in 2006, and it has come down somewhat since then. However, I absolutely accept that the Government should not be complacent and must do more to continue to bring the number down.

I have sought assurances from Redditch Borough Council, which has 21 units designated as temporary accommodation, that as few families as possible will be

sent outside the borough, and I commit to doing more to work with the council to ensure that those numbers are not excessive.

This issue has a number of root causes, which have been admirably tackled by other Members, and I will highlight just three today. The first is, of course, ending homelessness. The Government have shown their commitment to preventing and reducing homelessness, particularly through the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which was introduced and championed by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), and I thank him for his detailed description of the Act.

Kevin Hollinrake: That was not detailed.

Rachel Maclean: Well, he has done a fantastic job of championing this issue, and I welcome the work he has done, which all our constituents will benefit from.

The Government are committed to preventing and reducing homelessness, as well as to halving rough sleeping and eliminating it altogether by 2027. Clearly, that is challenging, but they have committed to making real progress by spending over £550 million between now and 2020 to tackle this serious issue. That includes £11.7 million that I am assured has gone to local authorities to help them and that places duties on them to intervene earlier, so that they can be there when families most need their help, which is what we all want to see.

Of course, we need to fix the broken housing market. My goodness, how many times have we heard that in this place? Again, this is not a new issue. For 30 or 40 years, no Governments have built enough houses. We heard absolutely fantastic stories from the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) about her experience in a social home. That is definitely where we need to get to. We have heard the commitment to fixing the broken housing market—to diversifying the market—and we have seen progress there, with 333,000 affordable houses, including 240,000 for affordable rent, since 2010.

I accept what the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) said about the definition of “affordable”. That does need to be looked at, particularly in the Greater London area that many Members here represent. I welcome the fact that in my own constituency of Redditch homes are more affordable in general. In fact, the average age of a first-time buyer in Redditch is 25. There are massive differences across the country, and policy needs to reflect that.

Another reason for homelessness can be the ending of an assured shorthold tenancy. I have heard that there will be some announcements on that in the Budget, so I hope that the Government will bring forward plans to ensure that private landlords can offer longer tenancies where it suits the individual’s situation, as was highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). More security of tenure would very much help families in that situation and help to reduce homelessness. There is no simple solution to this issue, as I hope that I have made clear.

Labour Members have raised the issue of universal credit, which was rolled out in my constituency last week. I visited the housing providers who provide the most homes in my patch, and I also visited the jobcentre. I asked people there what they are going to do to help prevent anyone being made homeless as a result of the

changes. They said that they welcome universal credit because it is helping people to get back into work, while for those families who are in work, it is helping them to take on more hours. Debt counsellors told me of the difficulties that families had had before when they could not take on more hours even if they wanted to. This system can work and it can support people out of poverty. In Redditch, there is a very proactive approach, so every claimant is being given the advance by default. I really hope that with this proactive approach families can benefit from universal credit, as we all agree is within the scope of the policy.

Mike Kane: The hon. Lady is making a considered speech, and I am listening very carefully. Did her social landlords not also say that there has been a huge increase in rent arrears because of the roll-out of universal credit in her patch?

Rachel Maclean: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I asked them that question directly, and the answer I got was that many tenants are already in arrears when they come on to the universal credit system. It is therefore important that social landlords work closely with those tenants to help them through the process to get them back earning so as to reduce those arrears. There is support. Neighbourhood workers who work with those tenants assure me that the risk of their becoming homeless is very low, if not negligible. I assure the hon. Gentleman that I will keep in close contact with those social landlords to ensure that that does not happen.

Again, I congratulate the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden and thank her for raising this important issue. I very much hope that the Minister, given the copious notes he is taking, will be able to reassure us that he is listening and that we can all work together to resolve some of the issues highlighted.

4.43 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) and thank her for bringing this very important debate to the House.

The use of temporary accommodation is currently increasing and will continue to increase unless we tackle the root causes. Every day, 150 families in Britain become homeless, according to the housing charity Shelter. Overstretched and underfunded councils such as Bedford Borough Council are trying to deal with homelessness in the midst of a housing crisis. There is a lack of affordable housing, and private sector rents continue to rise above household income, fuelled by the freeze of housing benefit in the private rented sector.

It is becoming very difficult for councils to procure accommodation within an affordable financial framework, and we have the ridiculous situation of councils offering cash incentives to private landlords to persuade them to rent to low-income tenants to bridge the gap between low incomes and high market rents. Landlords’ refusal to rent to people on low incomes is a serious problem, and Government need to look into it urgently.

There has been a 229% increase in the use of temporary accommodation in Bedford borough. In 2016-17, a total of 7,219 nights were spent in emergency accommodation, compared with just under 2,400 in 2015-16. That represents

[*Mohammad Yasin*]

a 229% increase, and I really hope that the Minister is paying attention to that figure. The sharp increase in the number of low-income families in temporary accommodation is a disease created on this Government's watch.

We are discussing the housing needs of the most vulnerable people in society. Families and vulnerable individuals are losing the roof over their heads and, in desperation, accepting accommodation many miles away from the communities in which they belong. Displacement, uncertainty and months spent in an unfamiliar B&B only add to the hardship of someone who is already in disadvantaged circumstances. According to Shelter, 118 children are living in temporary accommodation in Bedford alone. That is a very poor situation, and we need to look into it urgently. It is worth noting that nearly 1,400 families are on the council housing waiting list in Bedford. The only target that the Government are set to meet is to reach record levels of child poverty, which will rise to 5.2 million over the next five years, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies.

How can we expect a child suddenly to move away from their school—perhaps their only stable environment—friends, family and support network and enrol in a new school in a new town, only to have to change once again a few months down the line? That causes great damage to their life chances, their mental health, their education and their ability to form secure relationships. A long-term solution must be found now. Temporary accommodation cannot become the permanent solution to this Government's homelessness problem, and the Government need to look into the issue urgently. In Bedford borough, the situation is getting worse every minute.

4.43 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on securing the debate and on her description of the situation in Merton. Other colleagues, particularly those in outer London, have described the situation in their constituencies, and the examples that they gave do not differ too much from my constituency experience.

In the London Borough of Hounslow, which I represent jointly with my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), there are 768 households in temporary accommodation and 3,500 households in housing need. The debate has focused on temporary housing for those who have been accepted as homeless and whom the local authority may have a duty to house. But let us remember that there are other people in temporary accommodation: those who are being housed by social services. The local authority has no duty to house those people, but there is concern about, and a duty of care towards, children in that situation.

I meet families being housed by social services in temporary accommodation who do not even have as much information confirming how long they will be there as those being housed by the homelessness team have. As other Members have so rightly said, with adequate, affordable social rented housing, those 768 families would be able to move fairly swiftly into permanent homes locally.

Since the Labour Government's programme of 40,000 new starts of social rented homes was stopped in 2010 by the Conservative-led coalition, the housing need situation has reached crisis point. The lack of social rented housing coupled with rising rents in London, declining real wages and punitive income cuts for those on benefits—particularly with the local housing allowance cuts—has fuelled this crisis. The Government have left local authorities with the job of picking up the pieces by trying to find adequate temporary accommodation in which to place people while they are waiting to be assessed and then waiting for suitable permanent accommodation.

I want to pay tribute to frontline housing staff. They have to deal with this trauma and stress, and their own jobs are incredibly stressful. They did not go into housing management to be in such a position, but they are having to deal with this situation. It is just not fair on them, and neither of course is it fair on the families affected.

Local authorities are chasing an ever-declining stock of accommodation in which to place homeless families who are within the local housing allowance limits. Such accommodation needs to be fit for human habitation and the right size for the household in need.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware that there are 3,311 households in temporary accommodation in my borough, Enfield, which is the second highest figure in the country? One solution we have tried in Enfield is to set up a housing gateway organisation to buy stock, but that is only a temporary solution. Does she agree that the best solution is to build more council housing?

Ruth Cadbury: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I congratulate local authorities, including my own, that are trying to find solutions to the temporary accommodation crisis, but they really need the powers and the security to invest in proper, good-quality permanent housing.

I want to move on to the lack of local temporary accommodation. Boroughs such as Hounslow in west London, where rents are very high, find that they cannot square the circle between quality and rent levels. Demand is increasing and supply is drying up, even for private sector accommodation. Families are in temporary accommodation not for weeks or months, but for years. A couple of weeks ago at my surgery, I met a mother who has been in temporary accommodation for nine years, which is longer than many of us stay in our permanent home.

Too often, therefore, temporary accommodation is not local. I have met a family who are being housed in Birmingham. Another family moved about 20 miles away, but the wage earner, the father, is a restaurant worker and finishes work after public transport has stopped, so he cannot get back to his family at night. There is an impact on children in relation to changing schools. Should they not change schools and carry on with the two-hour journeys each way, or should they decide that their new temporary home may be permanent for some time and therefore change schools? Making such a decision is stressful for the children—it is difficult for their educational outcomes—and for their parents.

What about people, many of whom I have met in my surgery, with medical needs, those whose children have special educational needs or those whose already severe

mental health is getting worse with the stress? Should they shift their kids and their clinic or consultant when the local authority moves them to temporary accommodation a long way away, or should they fight their case with housing officers for some of the already too little local accommodation that is available locally?

There is an issue about what is local. If people seek help or advice from their MP, who is their MP: how long do they have to be in temporary accommodation before the MP of their last permanent home is no longer their MP and is no longer empowered to respond to their approach? I think we will have to take up this matter in the House, because it is confusing when we are trying to deal with casework or have casework referred to us involving someone from another authority.

Let me turn to the quality and suitability of temporary accommodation. I had a family expecting their fourth child living in one room in a bed and breakfast for months. I have had families living in homes that are damp, that are dangerous and where the repairs are inadequate. There are homes that are inaccessible for those with disabilities or that are unsuitable for children with special needs such as autism.

Temporary accommodation is becoming more unaffordable, as landlords in west London expect a higher return. The local housing allowance cap has fallen, so the local authority is left finding the difference between the rent and the amount that the Department for Work and Pensions is prepared to pay. It is not just non-working families who are suffering here, but working families as well. We should not be using taxpayers' money to fund housing benefit to pay the high rents of temporary accommodation and to line the pockets of private landlords.

Local authorities are forced to take drastic action to reduce the demand for temporary accommodation, including tightening up the rules on the duty to house. In Hounslow, if a person is served with an eviction notice but leaves their home before the bailiffs arrive, they will be defined as intentionally homeless and therefore will not receive any help from the council in finding a place in a B&B or temporary accommodation as it will have discharged its duty to house. Too many families think that they are doing the right thing by planning ahead, but are then not helped by the local authority.

Hounslow has been reducing the use of temporary accommodation in the private sector by using council properties that are waiting to be repaired, but the funding should be available to make those homes adequate for permanent social-rent letting, rather than for temporary housing.

Temporary accommodation should be just that—temporary, a stopgap, and used for a short period. That was what temporary accommodation was when I was first a councillor and when need and supply of affordable accommodation balanced out. Temporary accommodation is not the solution to the housing crisis in this country. The solution lies in the delivery of adequate, truly affordable, social-rented housing. Instead of blaming the previous Labour Government for the problem, this Government should act now.

4.56 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): It is usually a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), but I am afraid

to say that my speech paints a similarly bleak picture from the other side of London suburbia. I should declare at the outset that, until May next year, I am still an elected councillor in the London Borough of Redbridge, albeit unpaid, and a vice-president of the Local Government Association.

I want to begin by reflecting, as I prepare to leave the council, on the dire state in which local authorities find themselves as they try to wrestle with the scale of the housing crisis in London. Councils are providing temporary accommodation for more than 77,000 households, including more than 120,000 children, which is a net increase of 37% since the second quarter of 2014, and a 10% increase in numbers on the past year alone. Last Christmas, my borough, the London Borough of Redbridge, was looking to—and did—house more than 2,000 families in temporary accommodation, with more than 8,000 waiting on the housing register. I fear that the picture will be even bleaker this Christmas, as my casework is beginning to bulge even further with some pretty horrifying cases, to which I will refer in the short time available.

It is really hard to describe, except by telling individuals' stories, just what this situation means in human terms for the people whom we are sent here to represent. One of my constituents used to live in a three-bedroom flat in Wanstead, in the west of the borough. She lost her home due to a fire in August 2016. She and her four children—aged 11, nine, six and 18 months—were rehoused in a two-bedroom flat. It was temporary accommodation but, as we have already heard from other examples, it was not at all temporary, as she is still there. She has GP letters about her stress and anxiety, which has been made worse by her housing situation. Her eldest daughter, who is just 11 years old, is also showing signs of stress and anxiety, and her school sent a letter expressing concern about the impact of the situation on her education. The response from the council is that it does not have anything bigger. My constituent does not feel that the council is listening or taking anything into account, but when I challenge the council's housing officers, they say, "What can we do. Look at the pressures that we are under." I do understand why my constituent feels that her situation is unreasonable and intolerable, but I also understand the dilemma that housing officers face, as the supply of accommodation simply is not there.

I was heartbroken when one of my constituents came to tell me about living in one tiny room, with very basic facilities, in a hostel with her 15-year-old daughter. Her daughter is preparing for her GCSEs, but she revises for her exams and does her homework under the duvet with a torch at night because she does not want to disturb the little sleep her mother gets in between looking after her daughter, managing to get to work to earn what little she can to try to make their lives better, and doing basic household chores, such as washing and laundry without basic laundry facilities.

One of my first cases was that of a victim of domestic violence who fled her home and was therefore deemed intentionally homeless. We in my office had to ask for the decision to be overturned, which it duly was. She was then placed in the Earl of Essex pub, an old pub on Romford Road, which gained notoriety in a BBC news segment that was a powerful piece on the housing crisis generally, and in Redbridge more specifically. The conditions are not suitable for her or her two children. They all sleep in the same room and their beds are next to each

[*Wes Streeting*]

other. Her son has been referred to child and adolescent mental health services, which had taken the trouble to redecorate his room in the previous home to try to give him a better environment in which to live. However, that was also temporary, insecure accommodation. He was moved on and he is now back to square one. The daughter is going through puberty, and is very uncomfortable about having to sleep in such close proximity to her mum and younger brother.

The housing case I found most troubling was that of the 11-year-old boy who approached me at the end of a lesson during a school visit to say that he wanted to speak to me privately. It is unusual for an 11-year-old to demand some of their MP's time, and I spoke to him in the headteacher's office. He said, "You grew up in a council flat, didn't you? Can you help me, my mum and my two brothers because we live in one room in a hostel?" That was in my neighbouring constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes).

This breaks my heart because one of the things that motivated me to get involved in politics was an awareness that I did not have the same opportunities when I was growing up as other people from wealthier backgrounds. A good education changed my life and meant that a Stepney council estate boy could become a Member of Parliament, having gone to one of the world's best universities.

I have no doubt that the boy approached me because he thought that I would understand his position, but the truth is that I do not. Growing up in that council flat in the 1980s, I thought it was terrible, but I realise how lucky I was to live in a place where my mum had security of tenure, where we were not at risk of being evicted overnight, and where I could go to the same school with the same friends and have some stability, if not all the opportunities that money can buy. Kids growing up today in the same circumstances as me are in a worse position than I was in the 1980s. This country is going backwards, not forwards, and that is intolerable.

I have heard some pretty clichéd speeches in this place about how to afford to revamp the Palace of Westminster or Buckingham Palace. We can make a case for ensuring that we look after our national institutions and fabric, but people have a point when they ask why we can always find money for those projects, which are considered indispensable, but not for housing.

I make a final point to the Minister—this does not all rest on his shoulders. Almost every policy we heard at the Conservative party conference this year and in previous years was about tackling the demand side of the problem—helping people to buy their own home or helping with rent—but this is a supply crisis. About the only sensible thing the Secretary of State has said in recent months is that we need £50 billion to build the generation of homes that this country needs. I can support that, and it is a tragedy that the Chancellor will not.

5.4 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on securing this

important debate and her powerful and moving speech. It is pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting).

My constituency covers part of the London borough of Lambeth and part of the London borough of Southwark. Both councils have among the most ambitious council house building programmes in the country. They are doing everything possible to deliver new, genuinely affordable homes, to prevent households from becoming homeless, and to source temporary accommodation within or very close to the borough, paying as much regard as possible to people's support networks and where children go to school. However, they face an impossible task with the current policy and funding environment.

In 2015-16, Southwark Council placed about 3,400 households in temporary accommodation. In Lambeth there are currently about 1,500 households, including 5,000 children, in temporary accommodation. Southwark's spend on temporary accommodation has gone up fivefold since 2011-12. Temporary accommodation is funded from a council's general fund, and the increase in expenditure has come at exactly the same time as the Government have cut more than 50% of the direct support grant of both councils.

Across the country, more than 78,000 households, including 120,000 children, are living in temporary accommodation. The figure is up a shocking 60% since 2011 and continues to rise at 7% a year. Each one of those households is placed at greater risk of physical and mental ill health, and children in particular are more likely than their peers to have respiratory problems.

Across the country, expenditure is going up, and about £845 million was spent on temporary accommodation nationally in 2015-16. This increase in expenditure, both locally in the boroughs that cover my constituency and across the country, is not money well spent to deliver better outcomes, but money spent in a situation of last resort, delivering distress and instability for the households concerned.

Responsibility for that growth rests squarely at the door of the Government. According to the National Audit Office, Government policy is directly driving the increase in homelessness. It was the Government who imposed an arbitrary cap on the local housing allowance, which has caused an exponential increase in the number of people becoming homeless because they are unable to afford the cost of a rent increase that the LHA rate falls behind. The impact of the LHA cap could not be more stark than in Southwark, where the capped rate is just 38% of the average private sector rent. Average rent in the borough for a two-bedroom home is £694 a week, but the LHA is capped at £265. Soon, residents who are reliant on the LHA will be able to afford no private sector accommodation at all. The situation forces hundreds of households who would not previously have needed help with their housing to seek support from the council, because they find themselves facing homelessness. Temporary accommodation, much of which is both more expensive and of a much lower quality than general needs housing in the private rented sector, is often where such households are placed.

It is the Government who are refusing to listen to the overwhelming evidence that the six-week delay in receiving a universal credit payment is directly contributing to an increase in homelessness in the areas where that has

been piloted, including Southwark. It will certainly continue to do so as it is rolled out, unless the Government decide to take notice of the evidence and pause the roll-out so that the problems can be addressed. It is the Government who have presided over a 95% drop in the number of social homes to rent funded by central Government grant since 2010.

I was proud to have supported the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which emerged from the Communities and Local Government Committee's inquiry on homelessness. The Act, which places an emphasis on providing support for people facing homelessness to prevent them from becoming homeless, comes into force next year. However, preventing homelessness is labour-intensive work and there are grave concerns that the funding that the Government have committed to the Act's implementation will not come close to fully resourcing councils for its implementation. The Act was largely based on legislation already in place in Wales, but the scale of the challenge in England is completely different. Southwark, for example, made more homelessness application decisions last year than were made in the whole of Wales over the same period. The Act must be properly resourced if it is to be effective. If it is not, the Government will have missed an enormous opportunity to take meaningful action to prevent homelessness.

I want to say a word about the personal consequences of living in temporary accommodation for my constituents. Every week in my surgeries, I see families who are at their wits' end, living in accommodation that is overcrowded, damp and sometimes shared with strangers. Their experiences are among the most harrowing and distressing I hear. I think of my constituent who lives in a single room with her two-year-old daughter, sharing kitchen and bathroom facilities with other residents she does not know, some of whom cause disturbance and smoke cannabis on the landing outside her room. I think of the woman who, while she was pregnant, was placed in a studio flat with no running water, where she remained after the birth of her child, with the only alternatives available at the time for a mother and new-born baby being a mixed-sex hostel, or accommodation a long way from her family and support network. I also think of the couple who live with their three children, two of whom have sickle cell disease, in accommodation that is damp, cold and mouldy—conditions that precipitate frequent sickle cell crises and make it impossible to manage this painful condition effectively.

The conditions in which these constituents are forced to live are distressing enough, but these people also suffer the profound psychological consequences of living in insecurity without a permanent home, being unable to put down roots, and often travelling a long way to maintain employment and supportive relationships, particularly with their children's school. The Government are perpetuating the problem, most notably by the LHA cap and universal credit. The public sector funds that are being spent on poor temporary accommodation could be used instead to sustain private tenancies and prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place. This would deliver much better outcomes.

In his Budget statement, the Chancellor has an opportunity, a month before Christmas, to stem the increase in the number of families living in temporary accommodation and to take meaningful action to address homelessness. The Government must lift the cap on LHA, because doing so would have an instant impact

on the ability of hundreds of households to sustain their private sector tenancy. They must commit to the full implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act, with funding at the level that councils require. They must also make funding available to councils and housing associations to address the supply shortfall in the short term.

The increase in the number of families living in temporary accommodation is to the Government's shame. They must take meaningful action to reduce the distress and damage that their failed housing policies are causing.

5.10 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for bringing forward this debate and for her heartfelt and passionate contribution. None of us could fail to be moved by her call for change for the families here today and the many more affected by the scourge of homelessness and temporary accommodation. I also recognise the contributions of the hon. Members for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and for West Ham (Lyn Brown), who rightly and proudly spoke of her working-class background and about growing up in a council house. No one in the House should be ashamed to talk about where they came from. We must make sure that young men, such as those the hon. Member for Ilford North spoke about, see that there are people in this place who represent them and that they understand where we came from, too.

The right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) spoke at great length about the right to buy, which we abolished in Scotland. It is absolutely necessary that the Government replace the lost social housing and define exactly what they think constitutes an affordable home. What exactly is an affordable home? I would like to know. The hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) spoke at length about the roll-out of universal credit, which was rolled out in her constituency only last week.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The roll-out of universal credit started with a pilot in Inverness in 2013, and ever since we have been reporting to the DWP the problems it is causing for people. These problems are leading to people being evicted from their homes and adding to the homelessness numbers. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is a ridiculous situation, and a stressful one to put people through, and that it is contributing much greater distress than is necessary?

Angela Crawley: Absolutely. I thank my hon. Friend for his comments and echo his sentiments. My constituency in south Lanarkshire witnessed the roll-out of universal credit some years ago. Scotland is not unused to the idea of a Government and this particular governing party trialling their catastrophic programmes in Scotland. The hon. Member for Redditch kindly informed us that it happened to her constituency last week. I ask the Minister to come to my constituency or to the highlands and the islands and see how the roll-out of universal credit really works, because it is really not working.

I am sure that everyone in the House will agree that our approach to homelessness and temporary accommodation is pivotal to predicting which vulnerable families will be

[Angela Crawley]

impacted. It is clear how harrowing and stressful the situation can be for many of the people who come to our constituency surgeries. Having grown up myself in a damp council house, although not temporary housing, I am here to represent my neighbours and friends who continue to live in those houses and conditions.

It is refreshing to hear people talk unashamedly about their backgrounds. Not everyone in this place has the same level of privilege, and it is important to remember that in this House we are all equal.

Homelessness is most often a result of complex and difficult circumstances. It can arise from a need to escape abuse in the home, job loss or financial insecurity, but it can also result from holes in the social security system that allow people to fall through what should be a safety net. That is a result of things beyond the control of most of our constituents.

When people threatened with homelessness approach us in their time of need, they are in an extremely vulnerable position. They are scared and stressed, with insecurities in their lives that, I suspect, reach far beyond any that many Conservative Members could possibly imagine. I may be generalising, but the point is that to leave people with nowhere to go is downright immoral. [Interruption.] I hear chuntering from Conservative Members. I hope that they have constituents who can enlighten them, and I hope that the Minister will explain to his constituents why he has not yet resolved an issue for which he has ministerial responsibility.

The Government have recognised the position. Although housing policy is a devolved matter in Scotland, all four nations of the United Kingdom have legislated to introduce a legal duty to secure accommodation for at least some of the people who are rendered homeless. Scottish local authorities have a statutory duty to find permanent accommodation for all applicants who are unintentionally homeless, or who face the threat of homelessness. As a former councillor, I know how difficult and challenging that task is, and I appreciate the work done by housing officers in South Lanarkshire, throughout Scotland and throughout the United Kingdom. They work hard, each and every day, to ensure that no one is left without a roof over their head that night. When people have nowhere to sleep, housing officers will make arrangements for them not to have to sleep on the street.

Every time someone comes through the door of a council office or surgery to visit the local councillor, I am reminded of the story of a mother and her two children who had been sleeping on a friend's sofa after escaping from an abusive relationship. I witnessed the housing officer go above and beyond what was required to ensure that she would have somewhere safe to sleep that night, but there is no doubt in my mind about the conditions in which she was forced to stay. No matter how great it was for her to have a roof over her head, it was temporary accommodation. It was damp, it was ill-equipped, and it was not fit to house two vulnerable young children. That is the reality that many families face throughout the country.

Some experience homelessness as a result of drug and alcohol abuse. Others experience it as a result of depression, and veterans may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder after returning from active duty. I do not want to generalise about people who find

themselves without a home in which to sleep tonight, but the fact is that it is not enough for housing officers to make temporary accommodation available. They need to be able to offer the support that is necessary, and to act as counsellors. They need to be able to give advice to people in crisis, and to listen daily to truly harrowing stories. They need to be able to help people to get back on their feet. That means that they need support as well: they need funding, and the Government must recognise that they have a role in ensuring that it is provided. We must ensure that our council officers and services are appropriately funded, and that the key communication that should take place between local authorities is indeed taking place.

As I have said, and as many other Members have pointed out, housing is a devolved matter in Scotland. While the Scottish Government have gone to great lengths to ensure that those who find themselves homeless are protected, many are not afforded those protections, for a variety of reasons. I realise that that is a challenge, no matter how hard Governments may try. For all the failures and losses of this Government, which I may stand on this side of the House and criticise, I recognise that tackling homelessness is a challenge for any Government, and I do not wish to stand here and throw stones at glass houses. I hope that that will count in my favour; I have asked the Minister some questions, and I hope that he will recognise that I want to work with the Government.

Will the Minister acknowledge the impact of universal credit? Will he acknowledge that the delays of between six and 12 weeks, of which I have personal experience through the pilot in my constituency, are not acceptable? Will he acknowledge that the Government must do more to tackle homelessness throughout the UK, and will he come to my constituency to witness the impact of universal credit at first hand? What action will the Government take to prevent people from having to sleep in the cold tonight, and to ensure that a family does not have to sleep on someone else's sofa? What commitment will they make to tackle the inherent problems of homelessness and temporary accommodation? Will they provide the necessary funds and support to ensure that those who deliver valuable services are able to do so?

Ultimately, I am saying to every Member, "Check your privilege, and do not forget why you came here in the first place." There is a reason for our being here. We have an opportunity to change the present position. I want to work with the Government. Let us do more to tackle homelessness.

5.19 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): This powerful and moving debate is testament to the importance of the introduction of the Backbench Business Committee and its debates. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on securing this debate. She told me previously that there were 44 Members from both sides of the House behind her bid for it, and she has led it very effectively. However, this important debate has been very badly squeezed for time this afternoon.

My hon. Friend gave a speech that those of us who know her well have come to see as characteristic: it was passionate, practical and laced with the personal

commitment and care she gives to her constituents. At one point, she said she was worried she might not find the right words to convey the anguish of some of her constituents; she did, however, and in doing so she did her constituents proud and this House a real service. In a country as decent and well off as ours, it should shame us all that 120,000 children this Christmas will have no home and will spend Christmas day in bed and breakfast-style accommodation, hostels and in some cases private rented accommodation that is not fit for human habitation, as we have heard this afternoon.

This has been a very important debate. As a number of contributions have underlined, temporary accommodation is too often not temporary but can last up to a decade and more. It is too often substandard and sometimes downright dangerous, and is too often not available in people's own areas.

Some of the solutions have been set out for the House today. The hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) argued for tougher planning obligations. My right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) and my hon. Friends the Members for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) and for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) recommended building more new social rented homes and council homes. My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) said we should back private landlord licensing. The hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) argued that we should end out-of-area temporary housing. The hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) said we should replace all right-to-buy sales with new council and social rented homes, and the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) called for longer tenancies and an end to six-month assured shorthold tenancies.

Homelessness is both highly visible, with the rapidly increasing number of people we see sleeping rough on our streets, but also hidden, and the homelessness crisis is essentially a hidden crisis today. The figures for temporary accommodation, which are in the motion before us today, are just the tip of the iceberg. Our councils across the country are, irrespective of political party leadership, doing their best, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) said about his own in Redbridge. As well as the 60,000 families accepted as statutorily homeless in the last year by our councils, together they helped prevent homelessness and helped house 215,000 more families. But they are doing their best at the same time as the numbers and the pressures are rising, and the options available for housing for councils are declining. That is why the number of people accepted as statutorily homeless has risen by nearly 50% since 2010, and it is why we are seeing the number of rough-sleeping homeless more than double; it has gone up by 50% in the last two years alone.

The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, promoted by the hon. Member for Harrow East and on which my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) led for Labour in Committee, is a good step. It had all-party support, including from our Front Bench, but it comes to something when the one stand-out piece of housing legislation and policy from a Conservative Government in the last seven years has come from the Back Benches, not the Front Bench.

I pay tribute to the Minister, however. I am well aware of how hard he worked with colleagues behind the scenes, first to get backing for the Bill and then to get some financial resources behind it. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood has said, there is very much more to be done. She was also right to say that the Homelessness Reduction Act was modelled on the Housing (Wales) Act 2014. That legislation was introduced four years ago this month by Carl Sargeant. Today, the House will want to pay its deepest sympathy to Carl's family, his wife and his close friends. He was a passionate politician who put community at the heart of all his politics, and his Act was the first ever piece of housing legislation to be passed in Wales. Today we mark his legacy, because every month hundreds of families in Wales are helped to avoid the trauma of homelessness because of what he did.

The reason why the Homelessness Reduction Act offers some remedies but no solutions is that it does not deal with the root causes of rapidly rising homelessness. Many of those causes are now being driven by the decisions taken by this Government over the past seven years. They include: the big cut in investment in new affordable homes; the ending of all Government investment behind new social rented homes; crude cuts to housing benefit; the introduction of the roll-out of universal credit, unreformed; the reduction in funding for homelessness services; and the lack of action to protect private renters. I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden that Connect House probably exists only because of the changes in the planning regime that our Government brought in to prevent councils from being able to withhold permission for that kind of development.

We know what works because we have done it before. The Minister is sometimes guilty, when responding to questions about rapidly rising homelessness, of saying, "Oh well, it was higher under Labour." And he is right. When we came into power in 1997, the level of statutory homelessness was already over 100,000 and rising. It peaked in 2003, but the critical question is the action that we took then. After that, the independent Joseph Rowntree Trust and the Crisis homelessness monitor described what happened as an unprecedented decline in statutory homelessness, and the level of rough sleeping homelessness went down by more than 75%. So it can be done. We know what works, so let us do it.

This Government have no majority in the House and no real mandate in the country, and they have no domestic policy programme because that is not covered by the deal with the Democratic Unionist party. In the spirit of a Backbench Business Committee debate, let me offer some actions that the Government could take to start to get to the bottom of the issue and deal with the homelessness crisis that we are facing.

The Government could overhaul how we measure rough sleeping so that we know how many people are sleeping rough on the streets; transform capacity and get people off the streets for good by making 4,000 homes available now for people with a history of rough sleeping; halt their plans to change how supported housing is funded, which could still lead to the closure of homelessness hostels; protect the housing cost element of universal credit; and, above all, build the tens of thousands of new affordable homes, homes for social rent and council homes that are needed to fix the housing crisis. They could also increase the security for private renters, make

[John Healey]

three-year tenancies the norm, and cap and control the rise in rents. In that way, we will start to tackle the homelessness crisis.

Bob Blackman: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

John Healey: I was just winding up, but I will if the hon. Gentleman presses me.

Bob Blackman: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way and also for his support for the Homelessness Reduction Act. While I am on my feet, Madam Deputy Speaker, may I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests? I inadvertently forgot to do that when I made my speech.

Can the right hon. Gentleman tell us what the Labour party's policy is on the local housing allowance? The hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) has drawn our attention to that issue, but so far in the right hon. Gentleman's speech he has been silent on the matter. I think the whole House would be quite keen to hear the Opposition's view on what should happen on the LHA.

John Healey: That is a disappointing intervention to take right at the end of this speech at the end of this debate, but I will send the hon. Gentleman the Labour housing manifesto. We have committed to ending the bedroom tax; the Conservatives brought it in. We will restore housing benefit support for 18 to 21-year-olds; they cut it. We will review the whole housing benefit system, including the local housing allowance and the lack of link with rising rents, which they brought in.

Problems in the system are directly driving the rapid rise in homelessness and the need for the temporary accommodation that this debate has been about. I hope that this debate will give the Government a lead. Accepting that there are problems and agreeing with the concerns is not enough; action is needed now. Let us hear from the Government that that is what they will take.

5.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): I congratulate the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on securing this debate on such an important subject. The provision of good temporary accommodation is a vital part of getting people the help they need and ensuring that a family are never without a roof over their head. The number of households in temporary accommodation remains well below the peak levels experienced in September 2004, but this Government are certainly not complacent. In order to ensure that families are moved into settled accommodation more quickly, and spend less time in temporary accommodation, we took a major step and changed the law in 2011, so that councils can now place families in decent and affordable private rented homes.

The quality of temporary accommodation is, of course, extremely important. The quality and standard of all temporary accommodation is ensured through a legal duty placed on local authorities, which must undertake an assessment of suitability before placing anyone in

accommodation. Affordability, size, condition, accessibility and, importantly, location should be taken into account. The assessment includes the possible disruption to jobs and children's schooling, points that were made during the debate.

I will respond to as many of the hon. Lady's questions as possible. To pick up on her first point, we should take health and safety extremely seriously. All homes should be of a reasonable standard, and tenants should have a safe place to live regardless of tenure. Local authorities have strong powers to deal with poor-quality and unsafe accommodation. The housing health and safety rating system assesses the health and safety risks in all residential properties. If a property is found to contain serious hazards, the local authority has a duty to take the most appropriate action, and we would expect local authorities to use those powers. It is important that safety levels are always met and that we ensure that homes are of a decent standard.

We are also embarking on an ambitious programme to reform the response to homelessness, which will place prevention right at the heart of the approach. So far, that has included replacing the DWP's temporary accommodation management fee with a flexible homelessness support grant, which enables local authorities to more strategically prevent homelessness. Taking action earlier and getting on the front foot in order to help to prevent homelessness will result in fewer households having to face the stress and upheaval of a homelessness crisis, and we expect it to relieve pressure on temporary accommodation. The funding will drive change in local areas, and my ambition is to see local authorities, voluntary sector organisations, health services and the wider public sector work in partnership to deliver services that support people's needs. Overall, we have allocated £950 million until 2020 to reduce homelessness and rough sleeping, as well as supporting the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which was introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman).

The Act is the most ambitious legislative reform in decades, and it will fundamentally transform the culture of homelessness service delivery. Local authorities, public bodies and the third sector will work together actively to prevent homelessness for all those at risk, irrespective of priority need, intentional homelessness or local connection. The Act will require local authorities to work with those in need to develop personalised housing plans, which will be tailored to focus on the needs and circumstances of the individual. That can include actions by other support services that are best suited to support the individual.

Alongside the Act, we are making positive changes in the way we gather statutory homelessness data, as the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) rightly said. The additional data we gather will enable us to get a better insight into the causes of homelessness and the support that people need. The data will also enable us to monitor the help people have received from their local authority and whether it helped to prevent them from becoming homeless. The data will also provide us with more detail on the temporary accommodation provided to those in need, including on its size, location and quality.

To support the delivery of the Act, we are consulting widely on the revised statutory homelessness code of guidance for local authorities. We will also be providing

£72.7 million of funding, in line with the new burdens doctrine. We want to see fewer individuals and families face homelessness, we are committed to ending rough sleeping, and we want to reduce homelessness overall. We are therefore setting up a homelessness reduction taskforce, which will focus on prevention and the important issue of affordable housing.

I will now address some of the other points raised by the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden. On the Homelessness Reduction Act, the Department for Communities and Local Government has employed a team of advisers. She rightly mentioned how we will hold local areas to account. It is not just about holding areas to account but about supporting them to ensure that the right systems and working practices are in place. The team of advisers will go out to support local authorities on implementing the Act.

It is extremely important that we get to a place where the code of guidance reflects some of the challenges that the hon. Lady mentioned. It is also important—my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East is a strong advocate for this—that the Act makes provision for the Government to introduce a code of practice if it is deemed necessary because local authorities are not taking on their responsibilities under the code of guidance.

I heard what the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden had to say about some of the temporary accommodation in her constituency. I was not aware of the meeting she is holding in Committee Room 9 this evening, and unfortunately I cannot make it, but I take her comments very seriously indeed. I would be extremely grateful if she were willing to meet me in the Department to discuss her concerns in more detail.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East mentioned bed and breakfasts, the usage of which has started to fall in the past few quarters. That is good news but, again, we are not complacent. Importantly, certain local authorities, such as Barnet, Haringey and Tower Hamlets, are now not using bed-and-breakfast accommodation at all. We need to learn from places where good practice is happening, and my Department's team of advisers will focus on spreading that best practice across the country.

The affordable housing supply has also been mentioned. It is an extremely important part of this. The Government have delivered 240,000 affordable homes for rent since 2010, but we want to build on that and bring forward another 225,000 affordable home starts by 2020. On the recent announcements, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has been clear that we want to bring forward houses for social rent, particularly in areas with extreme affordability challenges.

My hon. Friends the Members for Harrow East and for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) mentioned another important issue: the ending of an assured shorthold tenancy, which is a common cause of people becoming homeless. To answer the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East, let me say that my Department is absolutely committed to looking at how we can incentivise landlords to provide longer tenancies. I hope that we will be coming forward with details on that soon. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne shakes his head, but incentivising landlords is the right thing to do, rather than introducing things

such as rent controls, which, as has been widely acknowledged across the sector, will reduce supply rather than increase it.

I certainly hear what the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) said about the Newham private sector licensing scheme—she made an impassioned plea to the Department on that. I am not directly making the decision, but I will make sure that the information she has put into this debate is fed back to the Minister for Housing and Planning.

Lyn Brown: I am genuinely grateful to the Minister for listening and for that assurance. If the Department is not going to make a positive decision very soon, I would be very grateful for a meeting to discuss that with the Minister responsible, if there is anything that this Minister can do to enable that to happen.

Mr Jones: I will certainly do what I can on that. I expect that a decision should not be too far away on the issue the hon. Lady mentions. She also mentioned rogue landlords. We have to be clear that they form a small part of the private rented sector, but wherever they exist we must work to drive them out of the system. That is why in the Housing and Planning Act 2016 we introduced further measures, such as the power to levy civil penalties of up to £30,000 on a rogue landlord, with the money then going back to the local authority to invest in respect of further enforcement powers. We have also introduced banning orders, so rogue landlords can be banned from renting property to people or from being a property agent.

The hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) mentioned the situation in Southwark. I was delighted to go there several weeks ago to visit its housing options team, who are an early adopter of the Homelessness Reduction Act. I was struck by the progress being made in Southwark and the positivity of the team there. They seem to be doing a fantastic job and have embraced the principles of the new legislation. It was obvious that they were helping more people earlier to stay in their home, and I was extremely pleased with what I saw during that visit.

Helen Hayes: The Minister is right to commend the excellent work that Southwark Council is doing as a trailblazer to implement the 2017 Act early. I hope that officers and members at Southwark also shared with him their grave concern that the Government's commitment to funding for that Act extends for only two years, and that without a commitment to fund at the extent that is needed all that good work will quickly be lost.

Mr Jones: As the hon. Lady knows, we have invested £72 million in funding for the 2017 Act. The Act is coming into force in April, but we are putting a significant amount of that funding into councils earlier, so that they can gear up for the new Act. She will know, from being heavily involved in the Bill Committee and through the process of the legislation—I commend her for that—that the Government have committed to reviewing the new burdens funding that is being provided within two years of the Act's implementation.

Time is moving on, so if I may, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will mention a point that the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne made about that Act. I assure him that we were looking carefully at the

[Mr Marcus Jones]

legislation that was introduced in Wales, but while we were considering it, an excellent opportunity arose when my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East came forward and the Government embraced his proposals.

It would be remiss of me not to offer on behalf of the Government my condolences following the death of Carl Sargeant, the Welsh Assembly Member who has regrettably passed away. I want to put it on record that the work he did on homelessness reduction in Wales has made a significant difference to the lives of people there, and the House should remember that.

The right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne mentioned Labour's action in 2003. When we look at what happened at that time, we should not forget that a lot of people were moved from their own areas during that period. A lot of people were moved out to places such as seaside resorts, where there was often little by way of job prospects or opportunities for people to make decent lives for themselves. In some of those areas, there are still social challenges caused by the decisions made at that time. The Government are committed to tackling homelessness, but also to an approach in which we try to do the best thing by people. Several Members mentioned people being moved out of areas; people should not be moved out of their area by compulsion. There should be a discussion between the local authority and the individual, based on the individual's circumstances at the time.

The right hon. Gentleman also mentioned the rough sleeping data, which we have improved since 2010. I should point out to him that in 2010 councils were not even compelled to provide rough sleeper data to the Department. They are now, but we want to go further and to obtain more data, because we know that if we do, we will be able to work out exactly what the challenges are and why people become homeless, and we will be far more effective at dealing with it. He also mentioned rent controls, which I certainly do not think are a way to help the situation, as I said earlier. They would compound the situation and make it worse.

I thank the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden again for allowing me to set out the Government's position on this extremely important issue. There is still a considerable amount of work to do. The Government are making progress, but we now need to accelerate it, and I think we will, particularly through the Homelessness Reduction Act, the additional funding that we have

provided to local authorities, and the homelessness reduction taskforce that the Government are going to convene shortly.

5.48 pm

Siobhain McDonagh: I thank all Members from all parties for being involved in this important debate, and I thank the Minister for agreeing to meet me to discuss Connect House—I am grateful.

I do not wish to sound angry or petulant, but I feel both, because 84 families will still be living in the middle of an industrial estate tonight, tomorrow night, next year and the year after. The most common eviction is now eviction from an assured shorthold tenancy. No amount of advice at any point in the cycle is going to change that, because landlords can get more money if they rent their properties to people who are not dependent on housing benefit or universal credit. That is a financial fact. We can wish it better, but that is not going to work. The only thing that is going to work is a proper requirement for standards in temporary accommodation that are fearlessly enforced by the Government. God help us: we require councils to tell other councils when they move a homeless family to their area. That would be revolutionary.

I worked in housing for 35 years. I found accommodation for homeless families and dealt with people in bed and breakfasts in the 1980s. I have never ever seen such numbers and the sort of accommodation that people are currently living in. We can get real about it and do something real, or risk a crisis among poor, dispossessed families of the like that we will have difficulty dealing with. I ask people to get real about the situation that many of our constituents find themselves in.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes with concern the increased use by local authorities of temporary accommodation for 77,240 homeless families in priority need, including 120,540 children or expected children; further notes more than a quarter of those households have been placed in temporary accommodation in a different local government area; further notes the draft consultation on a homelessness code of guidance for local authorities; is aware of the pressure on local authorities and the increasing demands that they face; and calls on the Government to provide a framework for monitoring and enforcement to ensure the appropriate level of quality and location of temporary accommodation, to require that local authorities appoint a designated officer for homeless families in their area and to ensure that homeless families have appropriate contact with health, education and social services when they are in temporary accommodation.

Autumn Adjournment

5.50 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

I start by giving the apologies of the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), who was intending to lead this debate. As the business has been rather squeezed, he has had to get back to his constituency to attend an urgent function tonight, so I will lead this debate on behalf of the Backbench Business Committee. I will first touch on some local issues that affect my constituency and constituents before discussing some rather more parliamentary and international issues that urgently need to be raised before the House goes into recess.

The first issue—I have raised this matter a number of occasions in such debates—is the lack of step-free access at Stanmore station and Canons Park station. Both stations are on the Jubilee line and are in my constituency. There is no way of getting to the normal roadway from the station platforms, except via steep staircases or alternatively, at Stanmore station, through an almost inaccessible car park route. There may be good news on the horizon: the Department for Transport is conducting a consultation about disabled access at stations, although, as everyone will be aware, Jubilee line trains are matters for the Mayor of London. I am assured by the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), that, given the failure of successive Mayors of London to remedy the situation, he is prepared to intervene if enough residents from my constituency respond to the consultation asking him to do so.

Work continues after my Adjournment debate on the scandal of the sale of the public asset of the Hive stadium to Barnet football club. There has been a succession of freedom of information requests to Harrow Council to itemise exactly how the scandal arose and to Camden Council to see how it is getting on with claiming the money back that it should have received as a result of the sale of the public asset at a vastly reduced rate.

I turn to police funding and activity in Harrow. There are concerns about the police station closures that the Mayor of London is intent on introducing. These closures will have a dramatic effect on the level of policing and the police presence in Harrow and many other boroughs right across London. It is quite clear that the Government have to stump up more money for the Metropolitan police's counter-terrorism duties. They have to review the policing budget, so that the next year's budget includes a three-year settlement for police funding at the requisite level, given that London is the capital city. I would like the Mayor of London to spend some of the £2.3 billion of unallocated reserves on policing, where the people of London want to see it actually spent.

I am working on two proposed free schools in my constituency. The Mariposa Primary School has been resisted like billy-o by the local authority but has the support of parents and many other people who want to see it brought into operation. The Department for Education and the Education Funding Agency have supported the proposal, but there is opposition from Harrow Council.

I am also supporting the Hujjat free school, which would be the first state-sponsored primary school for Muslim children in the borough of Harrow, and it is definitely well needed. I have been working with the sponsors for some time, and I am hopeful that we will have a site for it and that the school will be blessed with council and Department for Education approval in the immediate future.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Perhaps I could use this opportunity to place on record the concerns I have about schools in my constituency, particularly John Bramston Primary School and Ilford County High School, which are both in desperate need of refurbishment. Like the hon. Gentleman, I also want to see a free school application succeed—in this case, from the trust running Avanti Court Hindu Primary School, which wants to develop a secondary school. There is pressure across London, and I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way so that I could put those parochial wishes from my neck of the woods on the record.

Bob Blackman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and he gives me the opportunity to make it clear that the first state-sponsored Hindu primary school and, indeed, the first state-sponsored Hindu secondary school are in my constituency. I wish him well with that application.

There are two other local issues I want to raise, and they follow on from the debate we have just had. There has been a dramatic increase in the number of unauthorised houses in multiple occupation in my borough. That is becoming a running sore, and it requires stringent Government action, and it requires local authorities to carry out their duties.

Equally, we still have the problem of casual labourers touting for work on Honey Pot Lane outside B&Q and Selco. One solution I have suggested is that, as police station closures are going ahead and there would be no police presence on the ground in my constituency, the police could site an operation in B&Q or Selco. They could use their equipment there, and they could come and go, which would disperse the labourers at one fell swoop.

Let me mention two or three things in Parliament before I sit down and allow colleagues to have their chance. First, I was pleased, on behalf of the all-party parliamentary group for British Hindus, to hold a very well-attended Diwali celebration on the Terrace. A number of right hon. and hon. Members were present, and there was huge representation from across the Hindu community. The celebrations have been going on for some time; the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) led them originally, and he bequeathed it to me to continue their wonderful progress. When we celebrate people's religions, it is particularly pertinent.

May I draw hon. Members' attention to the fact that, last week, we beat the other place at bridge? Our team delivered a stunning blow for the House of Commons, and I was pleased to captain it. This year—finally—I managed to get a second actual Member of Parliament to join me on the team. They were from the SNP, which shows that we are truly becoming an all-party group. I invite Members from the other parties to come and join us so that, next time, we rub home our advantage against the Lords.

[Bob Blackman]

I was pleased to welcome Elmira Akhundova MP, who has just launched her triple-volumed biography of Heydar Aliyev, the former President of Azerbaijan. I would recommend this multitudinous-paged biography as a right riveting good read for anyone who wishes to read it. It does, of course, raise an issue that remains unresolved—the plight of the internally displaced persons who continue to suffer as a result of the illegal occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding regions in the dispute with Armenia.

I sponsored early-day motion 483 on the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in human rights abuses in Iran. One of the things that continues to blight relations between the UK and Iran is that despite the attempts we are making to normalise those relations, human rights abuses continue in that country.

We have debated the plight of the Rohingya Muslims, but Rohingya Hindus have also fled in fear of their lives and are now in Bangladesh. The Government of Bangladesh have decided to introduce a voluntary sterilisation programme for the Rohingyas in their camps because of the exploding birth rate. This has been widely reported in the press in the UK and on the Indian subcontinent. I think that there is a sinister position on this, because what starts as something voluntary can very rapidly become compulsory. People who literally flee in fear of their lives may go down this route because they fear that they will not get help or assistance. I hope that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will actively take up this issue.

We are celebrating the centenary of the Balfour declaration because of a historic decision by the British Government that I warmly applaud. The relationships between the United Kingdom and Israel grow ever stronger. This week Prime Minister Netanyahu visited this country—something that is very well worth celebrating. We also had the centenary celebration by the Board of Deputies of British Jews in Speaker's House. I and many other right hon. and hon. Members attended that function, which was graced by speeches by those from all political parties, demonstrating the support that there is from Members right across the House. When we are trying to combat the rise of anti-Semitism in this country, it is vital that Members on both sides of the House and from all parties speak out about that scourge.

Wes Streeting: The hon. Gentleman is being very generous in allowing me to put a number of things on the record. I was not able to make it to the well-attended debate in Westminster Hall on the Balfour declaration, but I strongly support what he says. I was delighted to attend the Board of Deputies' reception in Speaker's House as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on British Jews. This country can be proud of the role that it has played in the creation of the state of Israel. We must now, along with the Israelis, the Palestinians and many others, turn our face firmly to the future and make sure that the future for Israel is a two-state solution that ensures a secure and viable Palestinian state alongside a secure state of Israel.

Bob Blackman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I trust that he will lean on his party leadership to make sure that they echo his views, because occasionally they do not appear to do so.

I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, the other Deputy Speakers and Mr Speaker. I thank the brilliant staff of the House of Commons for the service we have had, and wish them a good short break. I wish my staff who work in my parliamentary office an opportunity to get on with work while I will not be here.

Lakshmi Kaul used to work in my office and has now gone off to work for the Confederation of Indian Industry: I wish her all the best in her new endeavours. I congratulate her on raising more than £14,000 towards the Nainika Tikoo Memorial Foundation and being nominated for a JustGiving award. For those colleagues who do not know, her daughter tragically died of an allergy, and she has spent a lot of time since raising awareness of this dreadful problem that confronts parents and children alike. It is a tribute to her that she has got on with doing that, so that other parents do not have to go through what she has had to go through.

6.4 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). I thank him, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) and all members of the Backbench Business Committee for ensuring that matters that are important to Back Benchers are regularly debated in this House. I will be touching on such matters in my contribution.

Tomorrow, it will be five months since the general election. I have tried to continue to be a left-wing, anti-austerity Member of Parliament, and to serve the constituents of Glasgow South West to the best of my ability. Being a Member of Parliament is an honour and a privilege. It is a job in which we should highlight our constituents' concerns and celebrate constituency successes, such as those set out in several early-day motions. Early-day motion 349 congratulates all involved with the Govan stones, which continue to win archaeological awards and are one of the six hidden gems in Scotland. The Govan stones are a unique collection of early medieval stones found in the Govan old church. Hon. Members are more than welcome in Govan, and I hope that they will all take the opportunity to see those stones.

The work of the Coming Home Centre is celebrated in early-day motion 499. The centre assists military veterans, providing practical advice, furniture and food, and it gives a daily hot meal to the hundreds of veterans in Glasgow who require assistance to adjust back into civilian life. The 50th anniversary of the opening of the Bellahouston sports centre is commemorated in early-day motion 459, and the awarding of the Glasgow Saltire Award to young volunteers from St. Angela's Participation Centre in Darnley is mentioned in early-day motion 411.

One seasoned parliamentarian put it to me that this debate is nicknamed the "moanfest".

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Michael Ellis) *indicated dissent.*

Chris Stephens: The Deputy Leader of the House shakes his head in disbelief. On the basis of that nickname, I wish to raise a number of issues, the first of which concerns the process for parliamentary questions. One of the frustrations of the job of being a Member of Parliament is that we regularly receive answers from

Ministers that end with the catch-all phrase “disproportionate cost”. That often happens when information requested in a parliamentary question has already been provided under freedom of information procedures. In such cases, it is quite confusing to receive responses from Ministers stating that information can be provided only at disproportionate cost. I fear that if I were to table a parliamentary question to the Deputy Leader of the House asking how many parliamentary answers end with the phrase “disproportionate cost”, the response might very well be that that information can be provided only at disproportionate cost.

I also want to raise the question of the cost of telephone calls to Departments, which the Deputy Leader of the House will have heard me raise many times at business questions. As a member of the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, I was delighted to hear the Secretary of State say that telephone calls to his Department will be free by the end of the year. The Deputy Leader of the House will be aware that I have raised that issue for more than two years. However, that does not affect other Departments, including the Home Office, which runs the spousal visa hotline. Will the Government explain how my constituent Amera Hussain, who has telephoned that hotline twice in the past month, has received a phone bill outlining that the total cost of those two telephone calls was £28.77? The Home Office says that the spousal visa hotline charges £1.37 a minute, over and above network charges, but it has also said in response to a parliamentary question I tabled that that should apply only to non-UK residents. I hope that the Deputy Leader of the House will ask the Home Office why UK residents are being charged such premium, astronomical rates to telephone a Department.

I want to raise a general point about enforcement, because there has started to be a real focus on that since the election in June. I will cite some of the figures revealed by the Government in answer to parliamentary questions. At present, 399 staff members are working in the national minimum wage compliance unit, yet it has 83 vacancies, and the Government have intimated that they have no plans to fill them. Is it any wonder that there are 200,000 workers in the United Kingdom who are not being paid the national minimum wage when there are so many vacancies in Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs compliance unit?

I asked Ministers yesterday to confirm whether there were 420 HMRC staff in the high net worth unit, which deals with tax avoidance and evasion. Last year, it was revealed that there were 420 staff in that unit, with 700 in the affluent unit. I have been told by the Government today that those two sections of HMRC have been combined, so I was expecting to hear that there were 1,120 staff working in the merged unit. However, I have been told that there are only 1,040 staff, so it seems to me that there has been a reduction in the number of HMRC staff dealing with tax avoidance and evasion. In addition to that, given the office closures, in 2017 alone HMRC will lose 17,000 years of staff experience, which will surely lead to a decrease in enforcement.

Such a reduction does not, of course, apply to chasing social security fraud. As I said in the House yesterday, the latest figures show that 3,605 employees in the Department for Work and Pensions are chasing social security fraud. I have been told today in a written answer that the figure for full-time equivalents is actually 4,045.

If 4,045 employees can chase social security fraud estimated at £1.2 billion, just imagine how much money HMRC could bring in if it had 4,045 employees chasing tax avoidance and evasion.

We need to ensure the House is always pursuing how to help the most vulnerable in our society. Today’s Trussell Trust report exposes the real situation in our communities where universal credit has been rolled out, with food bank use up by 30% in those areas. I am clear that food banks are not and do not wish to be part of the social security system. In my constituency of Glasgow South West alone, there has been a 56% increase in food bank use in the past year. That is why my constituency office will now be a collection point for those who wish to make cash or food donations to my constituents.

Real poverty is on the rise and wages are low. As the Member for the constituency with the largest percentage of public sector workers, I hope that the Government will give such workers a real wage rise shortly. The job of all of us is to hold the Government to account, and I hope that they will, in the weeks and months ahead, address the many challenges that our people face.

6.13 pm

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), who has demonstrated both his effective use of early-day motions and raised some constituency issues, although he did say he would not use the debate as a moanfest.

I am not going to use this debate as a moanfest, but as a celebration. I want to use it to recognise the very powerful and important contributions made by three exceptional sets of constituents in my constituency, whom I have met over the past few years in my role as Rugby’s MP. The common factor among them is that they have all faced massive adversity in their lives, but have turned it into something positive for others. I hope to be able to give a brief account of their achievements.

The first, and the one I met most recently, is a gentleman called Andy Martin. He has always considered himself an active and healthy person, but about five years ago he was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease. He has always been a keen rugby player—we josh each other about the fact that I used to be an Old Laurentian, while he used to play for Newbold rugby club—and he continues to play for AEI and Coventry Welsh. Once he was diagnosed, he decided that he wanted to do something to show that a diagnosis of Parkinson’s disease was not a barrier to going out and achieving great things. He asked himself what he might do to raise the profile of the disease. He said that he could have curled up in a corner and hidden, but he chose instead to fight and to do something absolutely extraordinary. He told me that he had heard about Ian Botham walking from John O’Groats to Land’s End, and became determined to do that himself. He did, on his own, throughout the month of September 2017.

The journey entailed walking, on average, 35 miles a day, booking himself into a hotel or guest house, getting up early in the morning, and cracking on and walking another 35 miles. On occasion, because of the gaps between guest houses, he covered distances of between 40 and 45 miles. He achieved his goal in just 30 days. He needed a police escort as he went over Dartmoor because it was pouring with rain. He also had to travel on

[Mark Pawsey]

A roads entirely on his own, but he achieved his objective. It was a huge endeavour and an absolutely major achievement. He has shown that, despite suffering from Parkinson's, he can still get on with his life and achieve a great deal. He has already raised £4,000 for Parkinson's through a JustGiving page. He is planning to go one better next year and walk from his home town of Rugby to Amsterdam. I take my hat off to him. His achievement is magnificent, and something of which I am exceptionally proud.

Another constituent who came to see me very shortly after I became an MP was Peter Realf, who, with his daughter Maria Lester, has devoted his time to raising awareness of brain tumours. Peter himself endured his own battle with leukaemia from 2002 to 2012, but his condition has stabilised. I first met Peter in 2007 when he came to see me with his son, Stephen, who, at 19, had been diagnosed with a brain tumour while training to qualify as an RAF pilot. Very, very sadly, Stephen passed away in 2014 aged just 26.

In August 2015, Stephen's sister, Maria Lester, started a parliamentary petition to commemorate the anniversary of her brother's death and to promote awareness of brain tumours. On 9 January 2016, the petition secured 100,000 signatures, which meant that it could be considered for a debate in Parliament. The debate took place in Westminster Hall where in excess of 30 Members took part; the Chamber was as full as I have ever seen it. That led to a parliamentary inquiry, which was attended by Peter, Maria and Peter's wife Liz. As a consequence, there is now a much greater awareness of brain tumours. The shortage of funds, particularly in respect of young people, was also highlighted. A parliamentary task and finish group was established. The final report of the House of Commons Petitions Committee found that

"successive Governments have failed brain tumour patients and their families for decades."

Peter has now become very involved with the all-party group on brain tumours here in Parliament, and there is a real move towards positive change.

We know that brain tumours are the biggest cancer killer of children and adults under 40; fewer than 20% of those diagnosed with a brain tumour survive beyond five years, compared with an average of 50% across all cancers. Thanks to the work that Peter and his family have done, Cancer Research UK has recently announced a new multi-million-pound investment in brain tumour research at the University of Wolverhampton and Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham. That has been labelled a "game-changer" by Sue Farrington Smith, who is the chief executive of Brain Tumour Research.

It is extraordinary how Peter, having suffered a huge loss—the loss of his son—has been motivated to put his time and effort into improving awareness of this disease so that others may benefit. I take my hat off to him. He has done a tremendous job.

I also want to draw attention to my constituents George and Giulietta Galli-Atkinson. I first met them in April 2012, when they came to tell me that they had moved from London to Rugby and I was now their MP. They asked me to get involved in their campaign to improve road safety and develop a series of awards in memory of their daughter, who was tragically killed in 1998 when a car mounted the pavement as she was

walking to a ballet lesson. They founded the Livia awards, which began in 1999 and are being given this evening in the Attlee Suite in the company of the Metropolitan Police Commissioner. The hard work of Metropolitan police officers in investigating road traffic accidents is being recognised there.

George and Giulietta Galli-Atkinson did not just initiate the awards, but fought tirelessly for more appropriate punishment of those found guilty of causing death by dangerous driving. On both fronts, they have been incredibly successful. I was invited to join the judging panel of those who had been put forward for awards, and I read and heard accounts of police officers who had to attend the most harrowing incidents. It was interesting for me, as a provincial MP, to understand some of the challenges of policing in a capital as large and sophisticated as London. Often the people who have to pick up the pieces and bring families together are police officers, and we heard a great deal from family liaison officers. It gave me a window into a world that I would not otherwise have seen.

The Galli-Atkinsons have campaigned to make the penalties for causing death by driving more severe, and they have succeeded. There has been a long overdue change in the law as a consequence of their campaigning. They were assisted by the former MP for Enfield, Southgate—where they lived—David Burrowes.

George and Giulietta continue to campaign on road safety, and they have set up the Safe Drive Stay Alive initiative, which works with young people to make them aware of the dangers on the roads. It celebrates its 12th year this year. Although it runs predominantly in London, it is working its way through the country more widely, and I am delighted that it will come to Warwickshire next year. Again, they are two people whom I have met in my role as an MP, but perhaps would not have got to know in another walk of life. I have been incredibly moved by the amount of effort they put into raising standards in memory of their daughter. They turned great adversity into something for others.

I have mentioned three sets of constituents, whom I am immensely proud to have as my constituents. I am immensely proud that they are all in Rugby and making an impact on different sectors. They put their loss and grief to one side and their energy into making improvements for others. I am pleased to have had the opportunity this evening to recognise the work of Andy, Peter and Maria, and George and Giulietta. I hope that they all continue with their very good work.

6.23 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I will spend a few minutes responding to yesterday's Adjournment debate on the 50th anniversary of the Abortion Act 1967. It was a short Adjournment debate, and only the ministerial response was possible.

Criticism was made of a grant from the money raised by the tampon tax to the charity, Life. Since it was founded in 1970, Life has helped to house more than 12,000 vulnerable mothers and babies and provided help and non-directive counselling to tens of thousands more. Life was described in the debate as an anti-choice organisation. Far from being anti-choice, Life seeks to give women a genuine choice about whether to keep their baby and to offer them much-needed support if

they choose to do so. The grant of £250,000 awarded to Life over three years was described in yesterday's debate as:

"the largest sum from the tampon tax fund".—[*Official Report*, 6 November 2017; Vol. 630, c. 1307.]

That, too, is incorrect. It was, in fact, only about the 10th largest. But that sum, so stridently objected to by some in the Chamber yesterday, is dwarfed by the amount paid to abortion providers. The sums are staggering. Over the past decade, hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money have been paid to private sector abortionists. *The Times* reported that the head of Marie Stopes International, to which we pay millions of pounds to carry out abortions in the UK and overseas, received a phenomenal £420,000 in one recent year alone—four times the Prime Minister's salary. Twenty-two of its employees were paid more than £100,000 each. What kind of charity is it that pays its staff these sums out of public money? Surely the Charity Commission should be investigating this.

On the 50th anniversary of the Abortion Act 1967, may I express my concern at reports resulting from Care Quality Commission's investigations into the abortion practices of Marie Stopes International, which is described by some as an industry? Last year, the CQC's inspection report identified a wide range of concerns about the way in which abortions are carried out by MSI, including criticism after finding dead, unborn babies in open bins. Again, what steps are Ministers taking to address these concerns? This is not just about me as one individual expressing concern, but the Government's own regulator doing so.

We should also be concerned about another abortion provider and charity, the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, which describes itself as a not-for-profit charity but appears to be involved in lobbying to change abortion law, despite statements made by the previous Government that

"taxpayers won't be made to foot the bill for political campaigning and political lobbying."

My right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), who was then Minister for the Cabinet Office, said in February 2016:

"Taxpayers' money"

must not be

"wasted on the farce of government lobbying government."

Yet I recently received a letter from BPAS, which included the following:

"I am writing today to ask that you consider defending and extending reproductive rights in the UK during the course of this Parliament...all Parliamentarians—regardless of their personal view on abortion—should support decriminalisation of abortion in the UK."

The letter, dated 10 July 2017, asks me—I presume it was sent to all MPs—to support a campaign. I am placing a copy of it in the Library. I understand that Ann Furedi, chief executive officer of abortion provider BPAS, is on record as saying, at the London launch of the "We Trust Women" campaign, the stated aim of which is decriminalisation of abortion:

"I want to be very, very clear and blunt...there should be no legal upper limit".

The campaign's website states that it campaigns to see the 24-week abortion time limit "removed from criminal

law." What steps are being taken, both by the Government and the Charity Commission, to address lobbying of this nature by a government-funded organisation?

In yesterday's debate, mention was made of Professor Lesley Regan from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, who I understand supports decriminalisation and persuaded its council—but not the membership—to back decriminalisation in a ballot. I understand Professor Regan has argued that the practice of abortion should be no more restricted by the law than the practice of having a bunion removed. If so, I find this incomprehensible. In her response to the debate last night, the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), reflected this when she said:

"I am sure that everyone in this House agrees that no woman undertakes a termination lightly. For many, it is extremely traumatic".—[*Official Report*, 6 November 2017; Vol. 630, c. 1306.]

I agree. That is why there are protections within the current law, such as the requirement for two doctors to certify approval, and that, apart from in exceptional circumstances, late-stage abortions after 24 weeks should not take place. And the public appreciates this. I know that polling figures can be questioned, but it is interesting to note that very recent polling from ComRes shows that a massive 72% of people believe that, far from lifting the practice of abortion outside the current legal parameters in place today, such as the requirement of legal consent from two doctors, these parameters should remain in place.

That this message is not a fluke is underlined by an unlikely source: recent, extensive BBC-commissioned polling by ICM that clearly showed respondents supporting two doctors continuing to approve an abortion. It showed a clear rejection on the grounds of abortion due to disability and far lower support for abortion under other circumstances than may have been expected, and certainly would be expected if one listened only to the campaigning of those who are pushing for decriminalisation. As these polls indicate, that is not what the British public want. A ComRes poll from May shows that 70% of people want the 24-week time limit lowered—not surprisingly, bearing in mind medical advancements in foetal viability over the last 50 years—and that 91% want a specific ban on the practice of abortion on the grounds of a child's sex.

It is important that we remember here that those who campaign for decriminalisation and the sweeping away of the safeguards that that would entail never mention that a modern and humane abortion law should consider and uphold the dignity and rights not only of the woman but of the unborn child.

6.31 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): Given the gravity of the headlines and the news in recent days surrounding abuse and moral questions such as tax avoidance, I would like to take this opportunity to highlight the fact that the House recognises that these are serious matters and that changes are needed to ensure due process, but we also need to remind ourselves that, for our constituents, it is the day-to-day business of politics that has huge impacts on people's lives and that it is our job to make laws, scrutinise the Government and in effect make sure that business continues to be done.

[Karin Smyth]

We must also keep sight of our priorities. In my constituency, in one of the wealthiest cities in the country, we have some of the worst pockets of deprivation in the country, with more than a quarter of children living in poverty, and some of the lowest higher education attainment rates of any constituency in the UK. We are now also faced with some of the biggest challenges to have faced British politics in a very long time: the uncertainty posed by the Government's handling of Brexit, huge cuts to local government spending, the longest decline in real wages since records began, rising poverty and massive inequality. We have people unable to leave acute and specialist hospitals because of the lack of social care provision, which is leaving providers unable to continue and families in silent misery as they try to support their loved ones.

We as MPs of all constituencies will face daily questions on housing. This afternoon, we have had an excellent Backbench Business debate secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), which contained some horrific examples of what is happening in our constituencies. Members have brought to us concerns about interest rate rises, the economic future of employers and the security of decent work that allows people to live in dignity and support themselves and their families. These are the daily challenges that people are facing, and it is for us to focus on them. That is indeed what colleagues have been doing over recent weeks and in today's debate.

I pay tribute to the work of the Backbench Business Committee and its Chair in providing the House with a stream of interesting and valuable subjects for debate, particularly in the absence of Government business in the last few weeks. We, the Opposition, are resolute in attending the Chamber to do our job, and we will continue to press the Government for responses to urgent questions, for statements and on Opposition days—we are particularly enjoying winning every week on Opposition-day motions. We will continue to use every method at our disposal in parliamentary terms to ensure that this chaotic and crumbling Government are held to account for as long as they continue to last.

The Prime Minister started the Brexit debate by expressing a desire to have no running commentary and to avoid debate in this place. Opposition Members have made it clear that as we take back control it will be taken back to this place and not to some back corridor between Downing Street and Whitehall, with a couple of trusted Ministers and an army of civil servants, and my colleagues made that clear again by raising issues and questioning Ministers throughout today's business.

The House will be in recess for just three days. I shall not be taking a holiday, although I want to express my gratitude to the Secretary of State for International Development, who has managed to make all future family holiday planning a great deal easier for me. Like many other Members, I look forward to catching up on constituency visits. I shall be visiting the Hartcliffe Health and Environment Action Group, meeting NHS leaders to discuss the sustainability and transformation plan, and visiting local schools.

The annual remembrance service in Bristol on Sunday, like others throughout the country, will again allow people to pause, reflect and remember the sacrifice of

those who have given their lives so that we can engage in democratic debate and scrutiny in the House; and, as we leave this place for the next three days, we will also remember those who are currently serving to keep us safe.

6.36 pm

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Michael Ellis): This is, I think, my fifth opportunity as Deputy Leader of the House to close such an Adjournment debate. It is, in many instances, a pleasant opportunity to achieve cross-party consensus. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who is a member of the Backbench Business Committee and who is present now, for what he and the Committee do and for organising the debate. We do not normally have such a debate before this very short recess, so this is, if you like, Mr Speaker, a bonus edition.

My hon. Friend spoke about—among many things—step-free access on the Jubilee line. I note that a consultation is taking place about that. My hon. Friend said that the Mayor of London would be listening to the responses, and I hope that that is true. The Mayor clearly has substantial reserves at his disposal—more than £2 billion.

My hon. Friend's support for all sections of his community is recognised nationally and certainly in all quarters of the Chamber. He is rightly acknowledged and popular inside and outside his constituency as a result of the work that he does—and not just because he plays bridge better than those in the other place, although I noticed that he could not resist mentioning that. He is popular because of the hard work that he does for everyone in his community and in the national community.

My hon. Friend spoke about the centenary of the Balfour declaration and acknowledged the strong relationship between our countries today. He also referred to the celebrations in your House, Mr Speaker. He was right to mention the frightening rise in anti-Semitism: no doubt every Member will want to fight that scourge.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) began by saying that he did not want to embark on a "moanfest", and he certainly did not do that. He spoke of Glasgow with pride, and rightly so. He invited everyone to come to see the Govan stones, and I should indeed like to do so, because he made them sound very attractive. He also mentioned other activities in his constituency, such as the Glasgow Saltire Awards. He talked about the friendly people of Glasgow and said that it was always worth a visit; I certainly acknowledge that. He is an effective Member who has campaigned doughtily on matters such as the cost of hotlines, about which he has spoken effectively many times in the Chamber.

The hon. Gentleman also referred to the work of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. Let me take this opportunity to praise those at HMRC who do so much work to recover the sums that are due to the Treasury purse. The Government have increased its resources substantially since 2010, and rightly so, because vast sums now come into the Treasury from that quarter. We want to make sure that all that tax, which is rightly due to the Treasury to fund our valuable public services, does come in. It is right that HMRC is properly funded for that purpose, so we want to continue with the work we have done since 2010 in that regard. I think that the hon. Gentleman will find that the sums coming in have,

so far as tax evasion and avoidance are concerned, dramatically increased since 2010, because of the extra resources put into that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) spoke very eloquently, and with pride, about several residents in his constituency. Their hard work and service to their community and the wider community is to be applauded, and I want to mention them again. He mentioned Andy Martin, who has worked as a campaigner on Parkinson's disease and walked from Land's End to John o'Groats in some 30 days, which is a substantial achievement, and has no doubt helped raise awareness, not least in this place, of Parkinson's disease, which, sadly, afflicts too many people in our society.

My hon. Friend also mentioned Peter Realf and Maria Lester and their campaign on brain tumours. Sadly, that also afflicts far too many people of all ages in our country. They lost their son and brother Stephen at the age of just 26. It is crucial that we take these opportunities to promote awareness of these tragic situations and conditions. They raised 100,000 signatures for a petition for a very effective recent debate in Westminster Hall.

My hon. Friend also mentioned George and Giulietta Galli-Atkinson and their work on road safety following the tragic death of their young daughter in 1998 when walking to a ballet class. The Livia awards are being held this evening in the Palace of Westminster; they offer the opportunity to thank our police service, particularly police officers involved in road traffic duties for the extraordinary work they do in investigating road traffic accidents, including fatal ones. Officers receive these awards for exemplary duty and service when, as detectives, they have either investigated the cause of an accident or many accidents throughout a career. We should take this opportunity to thank all those officers for their service, and the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis is coming to Parliament this evening to do just that. I am sure Members on both sides of the House will want to thank the police for their service, particularly, with these awards this evening, in the road traffic field. My hon. Friend is very proud of all his constituents, and so are we all.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) raised a matter close to her heart. Members know how passionate and committed she is to her constituents. She holds issues dear to her heart and has spoken on many of them before. She has also on previous occasions spoken passionately and eloquently about making sure children have the best start in life, which I know we all would support; we can all agree with that. I commend her on her hard work for her constituents in all these fields and in family life.

The shadow Deputy Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), to whom it is a pleasure to be an opposite number, mentioned some of the issues about which her party has concerns. I would gently point out that the economy of this nation is some 15.3% larger than it was seven years ago, that the deficit we inherited has been cut by some two thirds since 2010 and that we collected £55 billion in corporation tax just last year, which helps to pay for our treasured public services, including billions more for the national health service, which we all value and treasure so dearly. I point out that employment is up by some 3 million since 2010 and that the unemployment rate has not

been lower since 1975. Income tax has also been cut for more than 30 million people, and there are some 950,000 fewer workless households. So there is a lot that is positive to refer to at this juncture, before the start of our very short Adjournment.

I want to take this opportunity—through you, Mr Speaker, if I may—to thank the wonderful, hard-working staff of this House. I want to thank you, Mr Speaker—not just because you are here in the Chair but because of the work you do—and your deputies. I want to thank the Clerks, the Doorkeepers and all the staff of this place. They work all year round to enable us to function in the Palace of Westminster as a Parliament and as a legislature in the effective way that I think we do. We thank everyone for that. I would like to give a special mention to the Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod, Lieutenant General David Leakey, who is retiring after more than five years' service in the other place. I worked with him on the occasion of Her Majesty the Queen's diamond jubilee, and I know that he will be missed in the other place.

On the subject of those to be thanked and perhaps congratulated, later this month is the 69th birthday of His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales. I know that his long and dedicated service, his philanthropy and his exemplary work ethic will be an example to us all, and I should like to take this early opportunity to wish him a happy birthday. Also later this month will be the 70th wedding anniversary of Her Majesty the Queen and His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh. Although it is still a few days away, I would like to be one of the first to express my congratulations from the Dispatch Box and to wish them many more happy years together.

Perhaps I should close by remarking that this coming weekend is Remembrance Sunday. Members on both sides of the House will no doubt take that opportunity to commemorate the fallen in wars and conflicts that took place a long time ago and far more recently and the loss of life of so many over the generations that has affected so many families around the country. We shall have the opportunity to commemorate their service to this country and to the causes that this country and all the parties in this House hold dear: freedom, democracy and the rule of law. Those are the important matters in our lives, as we recognise on Remembrance Sunday those who have gone before us and who have given their all to serve their country.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Deputy Leader of the House for what he has just said and for the gracious way in which he has said it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment.

PETITIONS

Kingsway Golf Course, Scunthorpe

6.49 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to present this petition on the behalf of local people who are concerned about the future of Kingsway

[*Nic Dakin*]

golf course. It is surprising that I am presenting this petition here before they have had the opportunity to present it to the Conservative council. I particularly thank Neil Herrick for co-ordinating the petition so well that it has received over 1,500 signatures.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Scunthorpe County,

Declares that Kingsway Golf Course in Scunthorpe has been open since 1971 providing local people with an opportunity to take up golf; further that thousands of local people have used the course; and further declares a wish to retain a golf course on the site for the use of local people.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to reach out to North Lincolnshire Council and encourage the Council to engage with local campaigners to reach a compromise to retain a Golf Course on the Kingsway site.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002074]

South Western Railway

6.50 pm

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): It gives me no pleasure to have to present this petition, which is of local residents against changes to the South Western Railway service, particularly from Hook and Winchfield—two much-loved and well-used stations. Services should be protected at all our stations.

The petition states:

The Humble Petition of people of North East Hampshire,

Sheweth that urgent action must be taken concerning the South Western Railway and the change of their timetable coming into force in December 2018; further that this line is particularly highly valued, especially the Fleet, Hook and Winchfield stations; further that if any morning peak-period services are removed this will be detrimental to commuters and is clearly not in the best interests of our community; and further that these proposals need not and must not be implemented, as demonstrated by their ability to provide good Hook and Winchfield services during evening peak-period.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House urges HM Government to take all possible steps to urge South Western Railway to reconsider the decision to make their proposed changes to the train timetable due to come into force in December 2018 and to make sure that the train timetable considers the economic, social and familial implications to commuters across North East Hampshire.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.

[P002075]

Users of the No. 67 Bus Service in Torbay

6.52 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I rise to present a petition on the behalf of my constituents, who are deeply concerned about the withdrawal of the No. 67 bus service, which allowed them to travel from Brixham to Torbay Hospital and The Willows. I would like to thank Madge Forrester, who has collected over 1,200 signatures, demonstrating the strength of feeling about the value of this service.

The petition states:

The petition of users of the No.67 bus service in Torbay,

Declares that the cancellation of the number 67 bus service between Brixham, Marldon, Torbay Hospital and the Willows will have a detrimental impact on local residents, in particular, elderly residents.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges Torbay Council to commit to providing a similar service to the previous No.67 service for sake of the local residents as soon as possible.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002076]

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You have been very clear about the outcome of last Wednesday's vote and about what is expected from the Government in light of the overwhelming result. The Government have been mandated on a binding vote of this House to deliver analysis papers to the Exiting the European Union Committee, as directed in the motion. As the motion clearly intends, they have to do so without qualification, redaction or equivocation. There is also an expectation that the Government comply with the will of the House as a matter of urgency.

Today, in response to the urgent question, the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), indicated that no such commitment will be made. The House was told by the Minister that we may expect the publication of papers within three weeks, which appeared to be an intention, not a binding promise or guarantee. He also suggested that the publication of the papers could be partial and qualified. He even went as far as to suggest that they did not even exist.

Mr Speaker, you have said that a failure to comply fully would mean that the Government could be in contempt of this House. I have now written to you regarding a privilege complaint that this Government have held the House in contempt by refusing to fully comply with a binding vote of this House. It is of course entirely within your gift how you choose to reply to this letter and indicate whether you are prepared to see any progress. "Erskine May," on page 273, says that you may allow precedence so that a motion may be tabled

"formally calling attention to the matter, and either proposing that it be referred to the Committee on Standards and Privileges or making some other appropriate proposition."

Mr Speaker, I am sure you are aware of the significance of such a process, and I would be grateful to you for any response or guidance on this matter.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for his courtesy in giving me advance notice of his intention to raise it. He is quite right in his assessment that the correct way in which to proceed with an allegation of contempt is in writing to the Speaker.

The hon. Gentleman has just informed the House that he has written to me, and he will understand that I have not yet seen his letter. I can, however, assure him that I will study his letter most carefully. I am sure he will also appreciate that I will not and cannot be expected to entertain, and to be fair he has not really asked me to entertain, hypothetical scenarios on what might follow. I will consider his letter carefully and, when I have formed a view about it and any allegation that it contains, I will revert, in all probability, not only to him but, as necessary, to the House.

Given what I have said, I think it reasonable for people to deduce that there cannot be further legitimate points of order on this matter today.

Tax Avoidance and Evasion (Isle of Man)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Nigel Adams.)

6.56 pm

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): Thank you for selecting this issue for debate, Mr Speaker. I thank the Minister and my hon. Friends for being in the Chamber tonight.

The past few years have seen a mountain of leaked documents: the Panama papers; the Falciani papers; the Luxembourg leaks; and those about the so-called Russian laundromat. Less than three weeks ago, I secured an Adjournment debate based on leaked documents about Azerbaijan and the money laundering activities of its ruling elite.

All those important leaks involved substantial disclosures that exposed money laundering, aggressive tax avoidance and possible tax evasion. They revealed how the proceeds of organised crime have been used, and how powerful global corporations and the super-rich use nefarious, unethical and sometimes criminal financial wheezes to hide their money and avoid their taxes.

Then, on Sunday night, we started to hear about further outrageous wrongdoings in the Paradise papers. The leaked papers reveal documents that passed through the global law firm Appleby, mostly operating out of our own Crown dependencies and overseas territories. They reveal a completely toxic mixture of every imaginable wrongdoing involving money—wrongdoing on an industrial scale, with household names, revered institutions, global corporations and international criminals implicated. I am afraid that that wrongdoing is not just ignored or condoned by the UK Government and our regulatory bodies, but only made possible by our rules and practices. We are not just complicit in what happens; we are central to its success.

Our country, our tax havens and our corporate structures have become the place of choice for every ne'er-do-well who wants to hide their wealth and avoid tax. If our Government are serious about guaranteeing a fairer society, and if they mean what they say about an economy that works for everyone, they really have to tackle tax avoidance and tax evasion, rather than just claiming progress by tinkering at the edges. They must start by clamping down on our own tax havens—the British overseas territories and Crown dependencies. This does not need another inquiry; it needs action now.

I pay tribute to all the journalists in 67 countries who worked through the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists to uncover these wicked practices and open them to public gaze and public scrutiny. In particular, I congratulate—

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Nigel Adams.)

Dame Margaret Hodge: In particular, I congratulate the team at *The Guardian* and “Panorama” on their brilliant investigative work to make sense of the tens of millions of documents and files that the leaks contained. This is journalism at its best and I salute all the journalists.

I also want to salute the brave whistleblower who put him or herself at enormous risk by passing the papers to the media. Every time this happens, the accused attack the accusers—the whistleblowers—and try to undermine their credibility. In this case, Lord Ashcroft's public relations agent told *The Guardian* that Lord Ashcroft would not comment because

“you are referring to stolen data.”

The whistleblower obtained the information in the public interest; they did not steal it for private gain. Unlike Lord Ashcroft, the whistleblower was driven not by selfish greed, but by public-spirited, selfless bravery. That should be commended, not defamed.

In the next few days, we will see more data about famous rich people, about greedy global corporations, and about advisers—lawyers, accountants, bankers and other clever people who give advice to rich people about how best to hide their money. All are guilty of immoral if not illegal behaviour. It must be completely obvious to us all that anybody who is found to have used artificial financial structures offshore simply to hide their wealth and to avoid tax should not be awarded with an honour from the Queen. Lewis Hamilton should not receive a knighthood. Anybody in the political system who has deliberately used offshore accounts in tax havens to hide their money and avoid paying their fair contribution, through the taxes they pay to the common purse for the common good, should not, in my view, hold public office.

Much attention in the past 48 hours has been focused on the royal family and the funds held by the Duchy of Lancaster, and today's focus has been on funds held by the Duchy of Cornwall. The royal family command admiration, respect and love across all the world. I am in no doubt that the Queen was as appalled as the rest of us to discover that her money had been invested offshore in Bermuda and the Cayman Islands, and that some of her money was invested through the private equity firm Vision Capital in unethical companies such as BrightHouse. BrightHouse rips off poor people who have no other option than to rent essential household goods from it, meaning that they can end up paying £1,092 for a washing machine that retails at £358. Indeed BrightHouse has just been forced by the Financial Conduct Authority to pay back £14.8 million to nearly a quarter of a million customers.

This is the Queen's money invested offshore in unethical businesses. If there had been proper transparency in the Duchy of Lancaster's affairs, this would never have happened. If the Treasury had properly monitored the financial affairs of the Duchy, the Queen's reputation would not have been tarnished. Will the Minister please explain why we cannot have transparency in the affairs of the Duchy of Lancaster? Why did the Treasury fail to monitor the Duchy properly, sanctioning investments in offshore jurisdictions? The fact that the Queen's financial advisers saw nothing wrong with investing offshore in dodgy companies shows how deeply entrenched and acceptable the practices of hiding wealth offshore and avoiding tax have become. It is the establishment norm for the rich and powerful, yet it is plain wrong and we need to stop it.

I wish to focus on issues that have not yet received the public scrutiny and attention that they deserve. The Paradise papers contain details of a tax scam that operated out of the Isle of Man, facilitated by the law

[*Dame Margaret Hodge*]

firm Appleby, with advice from one of the big four accountancy firms, EY—Ernst and Young. It is a lethal cocktail of accountants, lawyers and the super-rich. This is how the scam works. The super-rich buy private jets, which can cost anything up to £70 million. Lewis Hamilton spent £16.5 million on his. To avoid paying VAT on the purchase, the rich buy their private jets through companies they set up in tax havens. Lewis Hamilton used the British Virgin Islands and avoided VAT. Owners want to fly their planes in Europe, however, for which they need a certificate issued by a European jurisdiction to show that they have accounted for VAT and any other taxes.

At this point, in steps the Isle of Man, a jurisdiction that boasts the Queen as Lord of Mann. The advisers, EY and Appleby, create a company in the Isle of Man, controlled by the private jet owner Lewis Hamilton, which leases the jet from the BVI company controlled by Lewis Hamilton. The Isle of Man Government issue a VAT refund on the grounds that the jet is part of a leasing business, although the only customer is one Lewis Hamilton. The Isle of Man company then leases the jet to another offshore company in Guernsey, which is also controlled by Lewis Hamilton. This carousel of leasing companies, all controlled by Lewis Hamilton, exists simply to enable Lewis Hamilton to avoid a £3.3 million VAT bill, yet the plane has been leased only to Lewis Hamilton and he has never returned to the Isle of Man in his jet. Lewis Hamilton may wrap himself in the Union flag at Formula 1 races, but he should hold his head in shame at his contrived and deliberate refusal to pay the British taxes he should.

In the 10 years since the Isle of Man launched its aircraft registry, it has let hundreds of private jet owners off £790 million in VAT bills. It has never, ever turned down a request for a full VAT refund. Even if some of the VAT exemption was legitimate, in that the planes were used for some commercial rather than a personal purpose, a huge chunk of that money should have been paid to the Exchequer. Will the Minister tell us why Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs has allowed this to happen? At best, the scheme is artificial and potentially unlawful; at worst, Lewis Hamilton deliberately lied about using his jet for commercial purposes. Either way, money that we urgently need for our hospitals and schools is not being collected while the rich jet-setters simply get richer.

The Isle of Man has 80,000 inhabitants, who enjoy the highest living standards in the UK. The Isle of Man Government have issued a statement saying that they

“have found no evidence of wrongdoing or reason to believe that our Customs and Excise has been involved in the mistaken refunding of VAT.”

In my view, that is simply not true. The details in the Paradise papers demonstrate clearly that they knowingly and purposefully bend the interpretation of the rules to help the super-rich to avoid VAT. The Isle of Man is a tax haven that thrives on secrecy and half-truths. Since 2007, the Isle of Man has had a zero corporate tax rate for all businesses—domestic companies and offshore ones—except for banks. That was why Apple had the Isle of Man on the list of tax havens when it held its beauty contest as it looked for a new country to house its money.

By the way, for Apple to piously declare that it is not paying less tax in Jersey than it was in Ireland as evidence of its good behaviour beggars belief. Of course it is not paying less tax, because it was not paying much tax in Ireland before. We want Apple to pay more tax—fair tax and proper tax—on the profits it makes from its business outside the USA.

Back to the Isle of Man, one might ask how this small country can afford to raise enough in taxes to run its public services without any contribution from corporation tax. The answer is simple: we subsidise it. It is our tax money that substitutes for the tax income that it could receive from charging businesses properly. It is our money that enables it to be a tax haven. Our Government do not just tolerate tax havens; they are using our taxes to enable the Isle of Man to operate as a tax haven. As with all these things, the Government refuse to be transparent, so let me try to unravel this.

Because we and the Isle of Man share a border, we also share what is called a common purse for VAT and other import duties. All VAT and import duties collected by the Isle of Man are passed to Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, and then the Exchequer gives the Isle of Man a sum on the basis of a formula that is supposed to reflect how much VAT has been generated from the economic activity that takes place there. In 2016, the then Chief Secretary to the Treasury renegotiated the formula and agreed a generous annual uplift of way above the level of inflation.

We give the Isle of Man more than £300 million a year, which is just under one third of its entire budget for public expenditure. That figure is set to rise to £340 million by 2019. This sum appears to have nothing to do with what is happening in the Isle of Man's real economy, where employment is down and the population is declining. It has everything to do with what seems to be a deliberate policy intention of our Government to subsidise the Isle of Man and thus promote and support it as a tax haven. The Treasury has refused to publish the details of the formula on which our payment is based. I ask the Minister to release those details so that we can see how the sum is determined.

What this shows is that we are not innocent bystanders who simply put up with the utterly unacceptable activities in tax havens that have been exposed in the Paradise papers. We actively support and enable tax havens to function and exist. Without our subsidy, the Isle of Man could not afford to have a zero rate of corporation tax and could not function as a tax haven. The Isle of Man is well and truly a UK tax haven. Far from being at the head of the fight against tax avoidance and evasion and money laundering, we are at the heart of the evil conspiracy involving advisers, the super-rich, global corporations and Governments. We are aiding and abetting the very few wealthiest and most powerful in our society to keep their wealth secret and avoid paying their fair share of tax.

The Minister will try to claim that his Government have achieved a lot to tackle avoidance and evasion. He might try to say how much better his Government have been than the previous Labour Government. I have never defended the record of the Labour Government in this area, but his Government's record is also shameful. It is not what is done that really matters, but what is left undone.

I urge the Minister to tear down the shroud of secrecy and force all our tax havens to have public registers of beneficial ownership. This simple ask for

better transparency about who owns what and where is utterly central to our desire to expose avoidance and hence stamp on it. I ask him to toughen up our regulatory bodies and to hound the Bonos, the Mrs Brown's Boys and the Lewis Hamiltons of this world through the courts to make sure that they pay their proper dues. I ask the Minister to introduce legislation that will ensure that the advisers who dream up these tax avoidance wheezes are held to account for what they do, and held responsible and punished when schemes that they invent are found to be unlawful. Those three actions would go a long way to ensuring we have a responsible tax system that is fair to us all. I look forward to his response.

7.14 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): May I begin by congratulating the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) on securing this important debate and on raising these important issues in her speech? She has, of course, been a determined campaigner over many years on these matters, especially as the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate and to be given the chance to discuss the Government's approach to tackling tax avoidance and evasion. I will respond to as many of the points that the right hon. Lady raised as I can.

The Government take all allegations of tax avoidance and evasion extremely seriously. If any new allegations come to light, we will treat them with similar seriousness. We have a strong track record of tackling tax avoidance and evasion. By implementing 75 measures since 2010, we have secured £160 billion in additional tax revenues. But more on that later; I will now respond to the points raised by the right hon. Lady.

The right hon. Lady has raised the allegations regarding aircraft importation into the Isle of Man, which were also covered in the BBC's "Panorama" programme in the last two days. I should first note that the Isle of Man, like all Crown dependencies, is a separate jurisdiction with its own democratically elected Government, under which it is responsible for fiscal matters. However, under the Isle of Man Act 1979, it has agreed to follow VAT rules very similar to the United Kingdom's.

While the Isle of Man must apply VAT rules similar to the UK's, the administration of the tax, including tackling avoidance and evasion, is the responsibility of its tax authorities. However, when required, the UK Government are always happy to provide advice and technical assistance to help the Isle of Man counter evasion and avoidance. I welcome the announcement from the Isle of Man Government that they are conducting a review of their procedures on VAT and the importation of aircraft. I also welcome their invitation for Her Majesty's Treasury to carry out an assessment of these procedures, and I can inform the House that Treasury officials have been in the Isle of Man today, engaged in that important process. That is a responsible and appropriate approach to addressing these allegations and correcting potential non-compliance.

The UK Government will continue to work with the Isle of Man to help it address these issues and take steps to put an end to any evasion or avoidance. Where there are any problems of tax avoidance and evasion, these

should be dealt with by us fixing these issues together and not by ending our co-operation with the Isle of Man.

Let me turn now to some of the specific points the right hon. Lady raised. She referred to the plethora of leaks there have been over the years, and she is quite right. She congratulated *The Guardian*, among others, on its part in ensuring the dissemination of the information that has come to light. However, there is an important point here, which is that HMRC is determined to follow up any information, from whichever quarter, to ensure we clamp down on tax evasion and non-compliance. Yet despite repeated requests over the last 10 days, *The Guardian* and the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists have refused to hand over that information. If the right hon. Lady is able to assist in that, as well as congratulating the individuals concerned, that would be of great assistance to the Government and to her endeavours.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Last night, the chairman of the Cayman Islands stock exchange said that journalists should be imprisoned. Does the Minister not agree that that was outrageous?

Mel Stride: I was not actually aware of those comments, but I can say that, from the Government's perspective, we are certainly not in the business of advocating the locking-up of any journalists.

The second point the right hon. Lady raised was that we were "tinkering at the edges"—I think that was the expression she used—in clamping down on avoidance. Nothing could be further from the facts of the matter. Since 2010, we have brought in £160 billion, as I said, and £2.8 billion of that was from clamping down on those who have sought to hide wealth in overseas jurisdictions. We have one of the lowest tax gaps in the world, and the lowest in our history. She will probably know that if we were to have today the level of tax gap that we saw under the previous Labour Government, we would be about £45 billion worse off as a consequence. That is important money that we need in our Exchequer for the purposes of employing doctors, nurses, teachers and members of the police force, and of keeping our hospitals and all those vital public services that are the hallmark of a civilised society.

The right hon. Lady referred to the Duchy of Lancaster and transparency. The Duchy does of course publish its accounts—it lays them before this House, in fact. There has been no suggestion that I am aware of that any of the Duchy's activities or investments have been improper or illegal. Of course, the Queen voluntarily pays tax on all the earnings from the Duchy of Lancaster.

The right hon. Lady referred specifically to Bright-House. She is correct in her assertions that it has been fined by the FCA for the kinds of activities that she mentioned. However, those investments were, I understand, primarily made in 2005 under the previous Labour Government rather than under this Government. I believe that the amount invested as at today's date is something in the order of £3,000 in total.

The right hon. Lady asked why HMRC allowed the Isle of Man situation to happen in respect of VAT and aircraft. Let us see what the investigation yields rather than perhaps jumping to a series of conclusions currently based on—from what I have seen, at least—a couple of

[*Mel Stride*]

television programmes. However, there may well be something there, and we will get to the bottom of it in due course.

The right hon. Lady asked about the sharing agreement in place between the Isle of Man and the United Kingdom in respect of VAT. She is right that there are at the moment ongoing discussions on a new formula. She referred to an automatic uplift in the Isle of Man's share under that formula—it is a 4.5% uplift—and suggested that it may be overly generous. It will not be in the long run; once all the surveys and research have been carried out, in the event that it is found to be more generous than it should have been, there will be a clawback mechanism within the arrangement. In terms of transparency, once the formula is concluded it will be available within the public domain. On her assertion that this is a one-way subsidy from the United Kingdom to the Isle of Man with regard to VAT, I should say that there have been years when quite the reverse has been the case and there has in fact been a transfer from the Isle of Man to the United Kingdom from which we, and indeed her constituents, have benefited.

The right hon. Lady made a clarion call for us to tackle avoidance schemes and those who enable them. I confess that the Finance Bill that went through this House very recently was not the most entertaining of Bills; it ran to about 775 pages and was highly technical. However, I point her to the provisions within it for ensuring that those who enable tax avoidance will now be subject to sanction and penalty.

I hope that I have covered the majority, at least, of the points that the right hon. Lady raised. I again recognise the sterling work on this issue that she has done over many years, and pay tribute to her for it. I conclude, Mr Speaker, by wishing you a very—

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab) *rose*—

Mel Stride: I give way to the hon. Gentleman—how could I refuse?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman; I will now be kinder to him if he is in front of the Treasury Committee.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) raised the long-standing issue of overseas territories and Crown dependencies being required to introduce a public register of beneficial ownership. Will the Minister address that point? Is there not an opportunity in the forthcoming Budget, as Oxfam has called for, to introduce public, country-by-country reporting for all multinational companies operating in the UK? Those are two practical measures on transparency that this Government could take leadership on.

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman raises two important points, and I will certainly take to the bank his offer to go easy on me when I appear before the Select Committee. His first point was about whether we should create registers of overseas interests in the public domain. What matters is that we give HMRC the tools to do the job. I file a tax return every year, and I have a last will and testament. They are not in the public domain, but HMRC is entitled to look at my tax return and ask me questions about it. What matters is the information available to the relevant tax authorities, and that is why the common reporting standard that we have introduced—in fact, a year earlier than the OECD suggested was required—is so important. Information is transferred between more than 100 countries to make sure that HMRC has the tools to do the job.

Country-by-country reporting is another important issue. Our view is that it is best met on a multilateral basis, so that all countries get involved at the same time. We continue to work with our European partners and others through the OECD in that endeavour.

Finally, for a second time, which is even more delightful than the first, may I wish you, Mr Speaker, and everybody in the House—all the staff, and all who make this extraordinary and wonderful institution work so well—a very happy and productive recess?

Question put and agreed to.

7.25 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 7 November 2017

[Ms NADINE DORRIES *in the Chair*]

Community Policing

9.30 am

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered funding for community policing.

Policing in our communities and neighbourhoods is “the cornerstone of the policing model in England and Wales”—not my words, but the judgment of Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary in March this year.

Good community policing responds to the needs of local people with a consistent, visible police presence; it involves working in partnership to gain trust, gather intelligence and get to the heart of a community’s concerns, in order to prevent and fight crime. Yet cuts to community policing across our country have stretched most local police forces to their limit at a time when crime is rising significantly. My constituency has lost more than 40 police officers since May 2015, so it should not surprise us that last year, Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary found that

“local policing is the area of operational policing that shows the greatest decline in performance”;

that is linked to the budget cuts. For those reasons, I feel that Ministers need to be held to account for the growing crisis in community policing.

I have three arguments to make, which I hope the Minister will address in turn. First, it is clear that crime is rising. We need to recognise that fact and act. Secondly, the falling police budgets were set before the emerging trend of rising crime took hold; the facts have changed, however, and so must police budgets. Thirdly, a good part of any significant increase in police funding must go to community policing, given its vital role as the cornerstone of policing.

First, I want to persuade the Minister to accept in this Chamber that crime is rising, and alarmingly so. There can be no dispute about recorded crime, which is up 13% in the year to June. What should worry us in particular, however, are the categories of crimes with the largest recorded rises: the rise of 19% in violent crime, of 8% in murder and manslaughter, of 26% in knife crime, of 27% in gun crime and of 19% in sexual offences. Recorded crime is what the police have to deal with, and what they have to investigate and clear up, and it drives their activity, so when Ministers counter accusations of rising crime by pointing to the crime survey, which is the other main way that we assess the level of crime, they should be careful.

While it is true that the crime survey suggests that crime last year fell, Britain’s top statisticians at the Office for National Statistics make interesting comments about how we should interpret the mixed signals from recorded crime and the crime survey. John Flatley, who heads on crime statistics and analysis for the ONS, said on the release of crime stats last month:

“Today’s figures suggest that the police are dealing with a growing volume of crime. While improvements made by police forces in recording crime are still a factor in the increase, we judge that there have been genuine increases in crime—particularly in some of the low incidence but more harmful categories.”

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): My right hon. Friend is making some excellent points. Will he acknowledge that the police themselves are often victims of crime? Recently I was in my local police station in Kendal; three officers were on long-term sickness because they had been sent single-handed to dangerous incidents, when normally they would have been sent as a pair. The cuts in police numbers meant that those officers could be sent only one at a time, and they are off sick as a consequence. Last year alone, 5,000 hours were lost to police sickness in Cumbria. Does he agree that that paints a picture of the police bearing the brunt of the rise in crime and the reduction in resource?

Sir Edward Davey: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. As the number of police officers declines, they have to work overtime and, as he described, put themselves in greater danger, which is not acceptable.

When Mr Flatley, the ONS’s leading crime statistician, says

“low incidence but more harmful categories”,

he means murder. He means rape. He means knife crime. He means gun crime. Those relatively low-volume crimes—relative to, say, burglary—are poorly reported in the crime survey but reasonably well recorded by the police. In other words, it is a fact that the most serious crimes have risen steeply in incidence in the past two or three years; Ministers cannot hide from that.

The ONS makes another key policy and evidence point about the comparison between the crime survey and recorded crime: recorded crime is much better at spotting emerging trends—short-term fluctuations in crime that can easily become long-term trends if action is not taken. Police-reported crime rose by 13% in one year alone, and I hope that Ministers will not dismiss that. They need to ask themselves and their officials some deep questions about that trend, because if it continues and they wrongly dismiss it, people will pay a heavy price.

Another reason why the recent upturn in crime demands urgent action is the complexity of the rising crime we are seeing. Complexity can demand significant police resource for just one difficult crime. Counter-terrorism is the obvious example. The record spate of terrorist attacks and plots this year clearly marks a shift in terrorist activity, and the intensity of the demand that that makes on the police requires a response from Government. It is no good Ministers saying that police reserves can sort that out, as the Home Secretary claimed recently. First, some police forces have very small reserves; secondly, those with large reserves have them because they have so many unfunded and unpredictable cost pressures, from unfunded pay decisions to terrorist attacks.

The police also face other examples of similarly resource-intensive complex crimes: cyber-crime, child sexual abuse, fraud, modern slavery and human trafficking.

[*Sir Edward Davey*]

The UK has among the highest proportions of complex reported crime in the world, demanding ever more resource, yet police resources have been cut.

I fully admit that those cuts are not new. The Prime Minister, when she was Home Secretary during the coalition, presided over cuts, which she continued after the 2015 general election. As a result, today we have nearly 17,000 fewer police officers and more than 4,500 fewer police community support officers.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): A recent poll that included my local police force showed that more than 70% of officers were stressed, many citing excessive workloads because far fewer officers are on the street. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that we should bear in mind the impact of the cuts on police officers, as well as on the communities they serve?

Sir Edward Davey: I totally agree. As my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) said, police officers are bearing the brunt, not only because they are stretched and having to do more, working longer hours and overtime, but because they and their families are facing the impact of the cuts. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) for making that point.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): Recently the chief constable of Bedfordshire police said that the funding cuts had left him without enough officers even to return 999 calls. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the situation is so serious that the Government need to look into the funding urgently, so that the police can at least attend 999 calls?

Sir Edward Davey: I agree strongly with the hon. Gentleman. I had an example of just such a case in my constituency recently. The gentleman concerned phoned my office because he was getting no response from 999. We answered the phone, I am delighted to say, and got on to the police. The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point, and those fewer police officers and PCSOs are what the debate is about.

When we look at the history of the cuts, and the reduction in police officer numbers—over a long time, as I said; this happened during the coalition—it is worth remembering that for the first four or five years of the cuts, during the coalition, crime was falling. Crime, whether measured by recorded crime or by the crime survey, went down during the first few years of the cuts, but it is not going down now; that is the point that Ministers have to grasp and act on. Crime up and police down will not keep people safe.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I have been doing the tour in my constituency of the local area commanders, as all new MPs do. They tell me that burglary is up, especially in the south-east, but that local people do not feel that the police have the resources they need. An email I recently received from a resident in Yarnton says:

“I’m afraid the only beneficiary is the criminal and their chances of arrest are slim, the insurance companies who have to increase premiums and the Government who gains additional tax on the insurance premiums.”

Is not how local people perceive the police just as important as whether they can respond, and should we not recognise the intense resource pressures that they are under?

Sir Edward Davey: My hon. Friend is right in so many ways. She pointed to the issue of burglary; I have knocked on doors in my constituency, and it is the rise in burglary that has most hit people. In many ways, burglary has the largest impact on ordinary people, and it can be quite dramatic, so she is right to say that. The example I gave of the police not responding was to a burglary, and the impact that has on the fear of crime is amazing. When the police do not respond, because they are so stretched, that has an impact on people’s view of the police, and their concerns that the police are not there for them when they expect them to be. She is absolutely right to say that the public want more local police to respond to their needs and to deal with the fear of crime, but we are seeing quite the reverse.

James Cartledge (South Suffolk) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman’s point was about falling crime when numbers were being reduced, and about that trend apparently changing. That implies that the two are not directly linked, but surely we have to try to understand the factors causing that trend to change. Will he outline the steps that he thinks should be taken to ensure that, if we increase numbers, there is still productivity and crime is reduced?

Ms Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Order. Some interventions are a little long; I remind Members that interventions should be sharp and punchy.

Sir Edward Davey: I agree with the hon. Gentleman’s point. To say that only police numbers are related to crime is clearly not true, and the figures that I mentioned suggest that.

It is fair to say, from looking at police budgets and how the police have reacted to this difficult time, that they are becoming more effective. In response to the recent debate on Metropolitan police funding, the Minister talked about the efficiencies that the police are already making, including through technology; the use of cameras on lapels has a good impact on reducing tensions when making arrests. In my experience, the police are being more effective and efficient, and are thinking of new ways of doing things, and of smarter and more intelligence-led policing, but we still need the officers; that is my fundamental point.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman makes an excellent case. The demand on our police service comes not just from the increase in crime. The assessment of police resources by the National Police Chiefs Council and the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners, which was sent to the Minister, talks about non-crime demand, including increasing 999 calls, incidents involving people with mental health issues, missing persons, suicides, ambulance-related police demands where problems in the health service have an impact on them, and police demand from unexpected death in care homes. Do all those things not need to be taken into account in looking at the demands placed on our police forces?

Sir Edward Davey: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. Budget cuts in social services, the health service and local authorities and the impact on youth services are all part of the picture that right hon. and hon. Members will see in their constituencies.

The police settlement of 2015 was a real-terms cut—flat cash. When a budget is frozen, the compound impact of inflation bites harder and harder over time. In other words, if the Chancellor does nothing in this Budget, we ain't seen nothing yet.

However, the 2015 police settlement was agreed by the Prime Minister, as Home Secretary, before the emerging trend in recorded police crime really took hold, before the rise in serious violent crime, before the step change in terrorist activity and before the rise in gun and knife crime. In other words, the assumptions on which the 2015 police settlement was made were wrong. The Liberal Democrats are offering Ministers a chance to change their minds, because the facts have changed. I sincerely hope that the Home Office makes that case to the Chancellor and sets out what it would do with the extra hundreds of millions that are urgently need. The Liberal Democrats are clear that one of our top police funding priorities is more funding for community police, and we are not alone. The National Police Chiefs Council set out four clear priorities for additional funding before the Home Affairs Committee just two weeks ago, one of which is neighbourhood policing. That is because chief constables view community policing as essential to their counter-terrorist effort, because of the police's role in helping to prevent crime and because the public expect and demand the police to be proactive and responsive.

When I came back from my enforced sabbatical from this House, I was struck by how incredibly stretched the police in my constituency are—far more than they were even just two years ago—and this picture is widespread. Liberal Democrats in Kingston upon Hull told me earlier this week that additional community police were the top priority for more than 70% of the residents whom they recently surveyed. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) told me of the shock in his constituency when it was announced that every single police and community support officer in North Norfolk was going.

We should always remember that our police do one of the toughest jobs imaginable, with courage, skill and dedication. We have seen time and again, especially in the recent terrorist outrages, that the police do not run away, but put themselves in harm's way to defend our way of life. That imposes a heavy responsibility on all of us in this place, and especially on Ministers, to make the right calls for the police and for the public. When crime rises, especially violent and complex crime, police budgets need to rise, too, starting with those of our local community police. To do anything else in the face of that evidence is just wrong.

9.47 am

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Ms Dorries. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) on his timely and important debate. I do not think that anyone would dispute its importance, given how the election

and terrorist attack in Manchester focused the nation's attention on policing, police numbers and the key priorities that we face for policing.

I want to primarily give the Suffolk perspective. When we talk about funding in Suffolk, we always talk about the way the pie is divided more than the overall pie. Whether it is school funding, early years or other areas, we seem to be a long way down the league table, and that is certainly true in police funding. The Minister will know that, because he has received a letter from the chief constable and the police and crime commissioner setting out the fact that we are one of the lowest funded police forces in England. It is not a coincidence that we inevitably compare ourselves with Norfolk, a county in many ways very similar to us. If we received the same spending as Norfolk, our budget would be up by £3.5 million per year, which is a significant sum. We receive 44p funding per day for policing compared to a national average of 50p.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman mentions Norfolk, but I wonder if he is aware of the comments from Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary about the role of PCSOs in the area. It says:

“Where dedicated local policing teams exist, too often the warranted police officers on them are routinely taken away from their local policing duties to handle immediate tasks elsewhere. That leaves police community support officers...as the mainstays of these teams.”

Is it not extraordinary, therefore, that the chief constable of Norfolk has chosen to completely disband the PCSO workforce?

James Cartlidge: I was referring to the broader pay settlement, and how the chief constable spends that is obviously his decision. I will come on specifically to PCSOs very shortly, but I think that the message from the Suffolk police and crime commissioner in particular, who came to Parliament recently to meet Suffolk MPs—unfortunately I was not able to attend—is that we want to see a fair share of funding or some very difficult decisions will have to be made.

We have to be even-handed in this. We all know the financial pressure that the country is under—there is no point pretending that we are not. The national debt is still extremely high, and despite the declining deficit, all the Office for Budget Responsibility's public spending predictions for many years hence show that it will go only one way, partly because of changing demographics. A responsible approach would balance those things.

I am interested in parish policing—I do not call it neighbourhood policing—which is the idea that rural communities might fund their own PCSOs. I accept the point that the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) made about the importance of PCSOs. I would not rationally expect the chief constable of Suffolk to take on lots of fully warranted officers to prioritise shed theft. Shed theft sounds fairly unglamorous, and it is; it is certainly not as important as terrorism or cyber-crime. However, in rural communities that suffer from it—sometimes many sheds are targeted at once—it is a cause of great concern, particularly to farmers. A farmer near my village recently had a brand new vehicle stolen from a shed. That does not sound like a headline crime, but it is distressing for the communities concerned. Realistically, the chief constable of Suffolk is not about

[James Cartridge]

to get his officers to prioritise that sort of crime, so we need to look at the idea of communities being able to fund their own PCSOs.

I have liaised with Suffolk constabulary about that idea. We could do it on a ward basis; parishes could come together along ward lines. It would cost £10 per voter per year—in other words less than £1 a month—for Brook ward, which is one of my largest wards, to have a dedicated PCSO. That would provide very visible policing. Parish councils commonly complain that the police no longer go along to parish meetings. When I was a district councillor in a rural ward in my constituency, the police tried to come along. They do their best, but that is obviously a big burden on their time—as it is, by the way, for district and county councillors. The point is that if we pursued a parish policing model, we would empower communities at least to have the choice to think about how they could sort this issue out themselves and have a greater police presence, in the form of someone who could prioritise matters such as shed theft and reassure rural communities.

When I was first elected, we had a spate of lead theft from churches in Suffolk. South Suffolk has some of the most beautiful churches in the country, a prime example of which is Lavenham church, where I walked on the roof to see for myself the way the lead had been stripped from it. I am pleased that there was recently a significant arrest—of a Romanian gentleman, I believe—in connection with lead theft in East Anglia, but the point is that these are specific crimes in rural communities.

My concern—I add this caveat—is that I have not detected a great deal of enthusiasm from Suffolk constabulary about communities recruiting PCSOs. One of the reasons they give for that is that they struggle themselves to recruit. We can talk about how wonderful it would be to get those extra police and so on, but as far as I can see, Suffolk police are struggling to recruit. My point is that if we had a more local focus, we could attract people to apply—people who live in and know the community—who would not apply for a more regional post.

I really have two points. I emphasise again to the Minister—I know that he has heard about it many times—the dire funding position in Suffolk relative to other counties. This is not about the overall allocation; it is about the way that allocated funds are divided. I would also be interested in his thoughts about what more can be done to allow communities to fund their own officers, who would provide reassurance and deal with lower priority crimes that the warranted force will never be able to prioritise. There are those of us who recognise the funding pressures and acknowledge that there is no magic answer, but there are reforms that can make a real difference in rural communities.

9.53 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) on bringing it forward and setting the scene.

I want to bring a Northern Ireland perspective to this issue to give a flavour of what is happening elsewhere, although I know that Northern Ireland policing is not

the Minister's responsibility. I also want to back up what the right hon. Gentleman said, which I believe is correct. I will give some examples of what we are doing in Northern Ireland—or perhaps of what we are not doing in Northern Ireland; that is a better way of putting it—and thereby underline the importance of community policing.

I have always been a strong advocate of community policing. Seeing police on the beat helps people to feel safe. When a police officer is able to come to a school, youth group or event, that helps young people to create bonds of respect and appreciation, and to build up a rapport with officers. On many occasions in the past, people came to be on first name terms with officers, as I found before I came here during my time in local politics as a councillor and a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly. It is also useful for people who are intent on doing wrong to be aware that there are police officers on the streets who are able to respond in short order. There is a twofold purpose to community policing: building up relationships and reminding people of police officers' role.

Our local Police Service of Northern Ireland officers used to be able to attend youth groups, church groups and mums and toddlers groups, they used to be well-known figures in local residents' associations, and they were accessible, but funding cuts have left us with a community policing team that simply does not possess the time to be part of the community. That is a central theme, which almost everyone who speaks in the debate will mention. Relationships with the local PSNI meant that more people felt able to give anonymous information. That was one of the great things about such relationships in Northern Ireland; on many occasions, young people and adults were able anonymously and confidentially to pass on information to the police that was important to catching people who were involved in criminal activity, because they knew the officers and were happy to trust them. That is one of those things that takes a bit of time to build up; it is hard to do when contact is by phone and someone is unsure about their anonymity.

There really can be no reasoned argument against community policing. The issue is not the need for community policing but how to fund it. If we revert to direct rule—there is the spectre of that happening, if I may use that terminology—the general issue of police funding in Northern Ireland may well be before us all soon. Back in May, the news was full of reports that the PSNI was to lose 238 officers over the next two years due to severe budget cuts of £20 million. We cannot ignore the financial reality.

To give an example of how that issue was portrayed, one news article stated that those cuts are the equivalent of the annual cost of all the region's neighbourhood policing teams. Why did the newspaper mention the issue in that way? It was because people needed to understand the impact. Every one of us in Northern Ireland and, I suspect, across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland understands what a neighbourhood or community policing team is and the presence and availability that it provides on the ground. Community policing is vital to most people. Funding cuts that mean less community policing get a reaction in the media and across the board. It was therefore important for the media back home to give that explanation.

The number of officers in Northern Ireland will drop by 138 in the next year to 6,700, and the resilience level will fall to 6,600 the following year. That is in direct opposition to the review of police strength in 2014 that concluded that a minimum of 7,000 officers were needed for a resilient and effective PSNI. The community policing team will be the first thing to go; community police will feel the brunt early on. It is easy to say that we should do away with them or cut their numbers without knowing the full implications of doing so.

The hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartledge) referred to the need for officers who are able to respond to rural theft. My community has a mixture of urban and rural areas, but I live in a rural area, so I understand the issues of agricultural and rural crime. The crime prevention officers in my constituency have a good scheme for marking vehicles such as tractors. He might suggest that traceability method to his police, if he has not done so already. That has been effective in my constituency, and other Members might consider it if they do not already have it.

I am blessed in my constituency with a fantastic police team who seek to attend the meetings they are called to and who seek to build rapport, but all too often I am told, "Jim, I simply don't have the manpower to attend, but please let me know how the meeting goes and what the outcome is, and then I can respond to that." I do not believe for a second that officers cannot be bothered to attend an annual general meeting of a community group; they just are not able to. That does not foster good relations. Too many communities feel ignored and unable to access police help and guidance. That alienation means that there is less possibility of compromise in scenarios where there is tension, and more communities feel that they have to take things into their own hands. I am not sure whether that scenario occurs on the mainland, but in some of my communities in Northern Ireland it sometimes falls to others to take action. I do not condone or support that in any way, but people are frustrated whenever things are not seen to happen.

Lilian Greenwood: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point that in many ways goes to the heart of the debate. Of course we do not want people to start resorting to vigilante action, but that is what can happen when we face the loss of legitimacy of community policing. It is deeply worrying, and he is right to raise it.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. She understands the point clearly and what can happen whenever police are not available to respond in the way that perhaps they should.

The people who are losing out are the police officers, who want to do what they are capable of doing in the communities but are prevented from doing so, to the detriment of all. While this debate is specific to England and Wales, it is clear that community policing does work if it is funded and allowed to work. The situation in Northern Ireland shows that.

Ms Dorries, I am conscious that you are looking at me in relation to time, so I will try to come to a conclusion as quickly as I can. To bring us back to England and Wales, I read a report that highlighted that the police workforce has reduced by some 36,800, with workforce reductions ranging from 23% in Cleveland

to 1% in Surrey. It is clear that, no matter what the postcode, the sweeping cuts must be reconsidered. The cuts are not sustainable and cannot continue.

While we must cut our cloth to suit our needs, and I am all for trimming the fat, the cuts are not trimming the fat or the excess of the cloth; they are comparable to making a hat with no head covering. For me, as someone who is follicly challenged, it would be a great disappointment to have a hat with nothing on the top. A police force that has no community links does not possess the ability to police properly.

Quite simply, with respect, I ask the Minister that the matter be looked at. I will continue to address the issue with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, as I have in the past. It is a matter of ring-fencing additional funding both on the mainland and in Northern Ireland. For the safety and security not only of the community but of the police officers themselves, I urge the Minister to pledge to undertake a real and serious review of community policing funding as a matter of urgency.

10.1 am

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) on arranging the debate. I want to make a couple of points because the debate is timely, given the approach of the autumn Budget in a couple of weeks' time.

In the west midlands, our police force has lost £145 million in real terms from its budget since 2010. That has resulted in a loss of 2,000 police officers and a further loss of a considerable number of civilian non-uniformed policing staff. Crime in the region is up 14% in the latest figures, and some crimes are up by more than that. Burglary is up 31% and car crime by a similar amount, all at a time when the country is having to cope with a significant terrorism threat, which requires significant police resources.

The effect of all that is obvious, deep and profound. If people do not feel safe in their community, on their streets or in their homes, they are not free to go about their lives. Fear of crime destroys liberty. Nor does it apply equally: lower-income communities and people on lower incomes suffer the most, because they do not have the options available to some wealthier citizens. They cannot live in a gated community. They do not have the option sometimes of moving to a more expensive property, perhaps in an area with lower crime levels. Crime is therefore an issue not just of safety but of liberty and of equality, too. That is why we should be deeply concerned at the juxtaposition of falling police numbers and rising crime, which is what the country now faces.

Sir Edward Davey: I want to stress my support for what the right hon. Gentleman has just said. It is an argument that is not heard enough that policing and police resourcing is an issue about social justice and freedom. We have to make that argument, because whether it is the newspapers, the House or the establishment, there is not an understanding of the significance of extra police in our communities for the poorest and most vulnerable in our communities.

Mr McFadden: I wholeheartedly agree with the right hon. Gentleman. As I said, this is an issue of liberty and it is an issue of equality, too. I want to make an obvious political point. Let us imagine the roles were reversed

[Mr McFadden]

here and we had a Labour Government presiding over a huge cut in police numbers and a significant rise in crime. Do we honestly think that Conservative Members would be saying, “It’s got nothing to do with police numbers”? I do not think so. I know that opposition can do strange things to a political party and the conclusions it sometimes reaches, but so too can government make Government Members—particularly Back-Bench Members—end up defending the indefensible.

It is simply indefensible to continue with police cuts after what we have had in the past seven years, in the light of both the terrorism threat and now the recorded crime figures showing the rises that I have set out in the west midlands. I want to use today to make my appeal to the Minister to consult with the Chancellor, to say, “Enough is enough.” Cuts in policing have gone too far. They are affecting people’s liberties, and it is an issue of equality, too. We want to see fair funding for police forces right around the country so that we can give the community both the visible presence and the real protection against crime that they deserve.

10.6 am

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) on bringing this important debate forward. I will try to keep my comments concise. I want to look specifically at community policing in Scotland and draw a few comparisons with the rest of the UK. As many Members will know, policing is a devolved issue in Scotland, but that does not mean that we should not consider how policing is handled in Scotland, draw conclusions and perhaps pull out a few lessons from Scotland for other parts of the United Kingdom.

As many Members have already said, community policing is an effective way of tackling antisocial behaviour. It helps to build community relationships through officers’ visits to schools, local businesses and local community groups, and it means that police officers are not a faceless voice of authority when dealing with troubled people in our communities. They are known, they know the individuals and their backgrounds, and they can often recommend a more informed course of action than many centralised or unknown police forces. Crucially, as has been stated, we can steer away from having a police force controlled by politicians many miles away.

In Scotland, we used to have eight regional police forces, which were centralised into one: Police Scotland. Sometimes, centralisation does make sense. When we are looking at issues of national security—we have touched on terrorism—we need to co-operate across the entire country, so a centralised force makes sense. That is also right in transport, with the British Transport police—it is important that we do not change forces at certain parts of the country when trying pursue a criminal from one area to the next. However, it is far less effective when we are talking about policing in our towns and villages, especially in rural constituencies such as mine. In Ochil and South Perthshire, I have a number of small towns and villages, which require a car and a fair bit of journey time between each. Therefore, having local officers who know the towns and streets is very important.

A lot of the people and officers who work in Police Scotland are very hard-working, as I am sure they are in other parts of the United Kingdom. They give their best, working under stressed conditions, and they have to deal with many difficult situations on a regular basis. However, since the centralisation of Police Scotland, it has unfortunately faced a number of high-level blunders. There have been address mix-ups, especially when it came to the closure of the Aberdeen control centre. There was also a horrific incident near my constituency where a call handling error left a couple in a car wreck on the side of the M9 for three days. That is not acceptable.

When Police Scotland started out, it had the Strathclyde model—it was very centralised—and I am pleased that gradually we are moving back towards more of a community-based model. However, it has not been embraced quite as fully as some community policing measures have been down in England and Wales. We have heard examples of where that is effective.

A couple of weeks ago I had the great fortune of accompanying two officers in Clackmannanshire, which is part of my community. I shadowed them on a Friday evening, and we walked through the high-street in Alloa and the estates in the Hillfoots, and I was able to see at first hand some of the challenges that they face, and some of the issues that blight our communities. Some of those issues are more extreme, such as the increase in knife crime, but others include lighting and the use of CCTV, where through underfunding—that is not necessarily all the Scottish Government; it is local government as well—some of our CCTV cameras are not working in the town centres, and police officers do not have the support and coverage that they require when dealing with situations, especially on a Friday night.

One major cause of crime, certainly in my constituency, is mental ill health. Again, community policing can help with that—this does not need to be a devolved or centralised matter, and it is probably something that colleagues across the United Kingdom will experience. In almost every situation that we encountered on that Friday night, whether talking to young people or attending incidents in residential flats, it came back to issues of mental ill health. When I asked the officers whom I was lucky enough to be accompanying, they told me time and again that the biggest cause of crime was mental ill health.

Mental ill health was not just the cause of crime; it also had a knock-on effect on community policing because of resource restrictions in the area. If a person who has committed a crime has mental health issues, they might require some form of medical treatment, and the officer will have to accompany them to the local hospital, taking the officer off the beat for two to four hours that evening. Mental ill health is an enormous issue, and I encourage the Minister—I would be more than happy to engage with colleagues in the Scottish Government and in Westminster—to consider what we can do for community policing across the whole United Kingdom to try to improve mental health services and prevent crime, and to consider how we can help the treatment of mental ill health once a crime has been committed so that we do not put a further drain on frontline police forces in our communities.

One of the downsides of centralisation as part of Police Scotland is that there are now no local cells in Clackmannanshire or Stirling. Police officers in my patch have to go to Falkirk to take someone to a cell, and if they have to queue that takes them off the beat for a considerable time. On a busy night—we were out on Halloween weekend, although I was not dressed up—with eight to 10 officers out for the evening, if one or two had to take someone to the cells or deal with a mental health issue, the rest of the team was put under significant pressure.

Community policing is incredibly important. It is not just about money—I know a lot of colleagues in England and Wales are facing money constraints, but in Scotland the block grant has gone up by £612 million in real terms—it is about choices. The SNP Administration in Edinburgh chose to centralise all police forces into one. They were warned about the impact that would have, and the fact that a centralised police force would incur VAT payments, but they still went ahead and did it. That took upwards of £25 million from Police Scotland. Instead of focusing on community policing as we should, they are fast-tracking the scrapping of the British Transport Police which, as I said at the beginning of my speech, is one area where centralisation and co-operation across our country is incredibly important.

As I have said, I have seen community policing first hand with officers in my constituency, and as colleagues have said, it is incredibly important and must be correctly resourced. However, this is not just about money; it is about where the police forces put the resources. I hope that we can work together as MPs, MSPs and councillors to find solutions that ensure not only the right frontline resources, but the right policies to look at the causes of crime, especially those involving mental ill health.

10.14 am

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Since 2010, Avon and Somerset police has had to make drastic savings in services, including £65 million of cuts and the resulting loss of more than 600 officers. The way it has dealt with that challenge has been exceptional and is to be commended. Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary has judged Avon and Somerset to be "outstanding" at understanding demand and delivering efficiencies, and it has done all it can to try to cope with the level of cuts that has been imposed. It has tried to innovate where asked, and to make all the back-office savings required. Despite a strict curb on pay increases, police officers and staff have shown tremendous resilience, professionalism and commitment in carrying out a really tough job in increasingly difficult circumstances.

In a major conurbation such as the Bristol area, sometimes even the strictest financial planning can be disrupted. All too often we have major traffic incidents on motorways around Bristol, which require a substantial clean-up and a huge amount of police time. Tragic cases, such as the murder of my constituent, Becky Watts, involve a long police investigation, and obviously a lot of police time. The volatile nature of police work sometimes makes it difficult for the police to plan financially, but nevertheless they have managed to cope with that.

Avon and Somerset police has been impressive in the way it has dealt with these challenges, and that adds a lot of credibility and weight to the concerns raised by

Sue Mountstevens, the police and crime commissioner, and Andy Marsh, the chief constable, in their recently published report, "The Tipping Point". The force is now being asked to make another £17 million of cuts by 2022, which is the equivalent of another 300 officers. The report states that that is simply unsustainable without extremely serious consequences. They are stating clearly to the Government that their ability to prevent harm, keep the public safe, protect the vulnerable, and respond to escalating threat levels depends on having enough resources to do so. Having done all they can to try to manage within tight budgets, they cannot go on like this.

We have heard from other speakers about the more complex problems facing police services across the country, with new priorities such as tackling child sexual exploitation, modern slavery, and technological advances that provide new challenges. I recently spoke to the chief constable and the police and crime commissioner about the huge rise in online fraud. That is not easy to police and often requires a great deal of expertise. We also have the ever-present threat of terror and the need to keep us safe. The way that police work is conducted has changed.

I pay tribute to the police's recent efforts to highlight modern slavery in the Bristol area. Police officers were ridiculed on the front page of *The Sun* for wearing bright blue nail polish in an effort to draw attention to the fact that many young people in nail bars are being exploited, but that was important and a good example of community policing, and as a result, people have been arrested. Serious work is also being done on female genital mutilation. We have not yet seen a prosecution, which is sad, but it involves a lot of outreach work and knowing communities, and communities being able to trust the police enough to go to them and say what is going on.

The problem is that most people's experience of policing now is a less visible police presence, an inadequate response to less serious crimes, and in many cases, the closure of their local police station. I am concerned that we are seeing a real erosion of community policing as we understand it, but it is a core part of how policing works. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) said, this is about people trusting and feeling safe in their communities, feeling valued and protected, and knowing where they can go to voice their concerns.

In the past, some communities have had strained relationships with the police, and we cannot underestimate the value of community policing. I do not represent the area of St Pauls, which saw riots in Bristol many years ago in the early 1980s. However, I know how important it is for community policing to be visible and proactive in that area, and police and community support officers have played a crucial role in that.

In conclusion, in "The Tipping Point", the police and crime commissioner and the chief constable stated that the situation is simply unsustainable and will have extremely serious consequences. They have written to the Home Office, but they were not happy with the response, which pretty much just outlined the current financial situation. I urge the Minister to listen to them.

10.19 am

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): It is good to see a Bedfordshire Member of Parliament in the Chair, Ms Dorries. Bedfordshire Members from all

[Andrew Selous]

parties have always worked together, under Labour, coalition and Conservative Governments, to stick up for Bedfordshire police; and I hope that we shall carry on doing that.

For many years, Bedfordshire police were adversely affected by what the Home Office called damping. That meant that they got between £3 million and £4 million a year less than the Government's funding formula said they should receive. Bedfordshire is in the lowest quartile, for both budget and officers per head of population, of all police forces in England and Wales. It also has one of the smallest budgets in England and Wales, at £102 million. As a Bedfordshire Member of Parliament, I am not happy that residents of Hertfordshire and the Thames valley area receive higher levels of protection and response from their police forces than the people of Bedfordshire get from theirs.

In meetings over the years, we have met five, six or perhaps seven different police officers, and you have commented in the past that I make the same speech every time, Ms Dorries. I am frankly getting tired of wasting my breath. Enough is enough as far as the people of Bedfordshire are concerned; things are getting serious. Comparing the period from 1 April 2016 to 31 August 2017 with the same period for the previous year, there was a 48.9% increase in the number of burglaries of residential homes and dwellings in Bedfordshire. That is a massive increase. There has been a 24% increase in the number of calls to the police requiring immediate response by officers, and a 12.2% increase in crime. On the increase in calls requiring immediate response, a businessman in Leighton Buzzard was recently threatened with a metal bar, but when he called 999 no officers were able to attend. As the Member of Parliament I am not happy for that situation to continue in my area.

Mohammad Yasin: As I mentioned in an earlier intervention, the Bedfordshire police chief has said that he does not have enough officers to attend 999 calls. In his interview with *The Daily Telegraph* he also mentioned that he does not have enough officers to protect children and vulnerable adults. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that Ministers need urgently to look into the funding of Bedfordshire police? If we do not do something about it, the people of Bedfordshire will really suffer.

Andrew Selous: I am grateful to my county colleague for his points, and would simply return to my point that the effect of damping on Bedfordshire police—the £3 million to £4 million every year that the Government's formula said we should get, but which we have never received—has come home to roost in an ugly and unacceptable way.

Something I want to say to the people of Bedfordshire is that a couple of years ago we all had the opportunity to do something about the situation, because we had a vote to increase the police precept. I voted for it, because I want more officers on the streets, and I know that it must be paid for. I do not want to go over ancient history, but unfortunately the vote was probably not put to the people in the best way, as they were charged and then asked for permission. I do not think that people liked that; we were not able to get things the right way

round. However, I voted for it, and if the vote had gone through there would be more funding for Bedfordshire police, and more officers. To be fair, I think that the people of Bedfordshire need to think about that, should the opportunity come around again. In Leighton Buzzard, at the police station that we used to have, many more sergeants and officers than now used to be based there on a regular basis; yet we are all paying more tax as a nation.

In 2011-12 there were 1,264 police officers in Bedfordshire. There are now 1,124. That is a decrease of 140. We used to have 128 police community support officers; we now have 53. That is a decrease of 75. There used to be 864 police staff; there are now 758. That is a decrease of 106. We need to remember the stresses on police officers. There is burn-out and real strain; and people leave the force as a result. I give credit to our current police and crime commissioner, Kathryn Holloway; in her project of boosting the frontline, she managed to get an extra 96 officers on to the streets last year, and another 100 this year. That is the right thing to do.

I want to tell the Government, however, that things are serious. A few days ago, I saw that they had allocated £5 million for a 100th anniversary celebration. The event in question is worthy, and I am not quibbling as to its worth. However, I should like the Minister to take the message to the Treasury that we are now in an era of hard choices. I am sure that the anniversary is worth while; but the £5 million is half of the £10 million that Bedfordshire police need. Other colleagues present would fight me for it, and of course there must be a rational and fair way of allocating sums; but in an era of hard choices, when we need money for frontline police forces, can we really afford £5 million to celebrate a centenary, however worthy it may be? I should say that we cannot; we need to put the money where it is really needed.

We have wonderful officers. I want in particular to give credit to Inspector Craig Gurr. He is a terrier on behalf of my constituents, and I rate him highly. I take the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) about the efficiency of officers. A few years ago Bedfordshire police were one of the first forces to issue officers with BlackBerrys. I remember hearing from the chief constable and the Police Minister at the time that issuing those BlackBerrys led to a 12.5% increase in the time that each officer could spend on the streets. Of course efficiency and productivity are important. However, the figures show that recorded crime is rising in Leighton Buzzard, Dunstable and Houghton Regis. I am also well aware of the crime that isolated rural communities face; so I welcome the new rural crime force that our current commissioner has brought in.

I shall return to this issue, because I have a half-hour Adjournment debate on the funding of Bedfordshire police on Monday evening, when I shall expand at further length on their needs. However, I am grateful for today's opportunity to stand up for my constituents.

10.27 am

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) for bringing the debate to the Chamber this morning. I pay tribute to my local community police in Partick and Drumchapel police stations, who

work together with police across Glasgow to get to know the communities, and attend community council meetings and local events. That is all about building relationships, which is important in dealing with local issues.

The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton painted a picture of rising crime and budget cuts, and some Conservative Members seemed to suggest that possibly those two things are not linked. I think there is probably a delay: when budgets are cut it takes time for crime to build up, and when they are reinstated it will take time for it to disappear. I suggest that something must happen now if we want a reduction in crime over the next 10 years. The right hon. Gentleman also mentioned violent crimes and high levels of complex crime, and the fact that many police forces in England and Wales are stretched operationally.

The hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartledge) talked about parish policing, which is an important point. Across the UK there are many diverse communities and one size certainly does not fit all. An urban police force will not have the same expertise in particular areas as a police force in his constituency, or indeed in many areas of rural Scotland. It is important that communities are not defined necessarily by geographical boundaries but by the demographic issues particular to them.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned that budget cuts have meant that the Police Service of Northern Ireland is less able to attend the community events that I have already spoken about. He also talked about the importance, especially in Northern Ireland, of members of the public being able to pass on information confidentially and the fact that relationships had to exist for that to take place: we all understand the seriousness of that. He mentioned that dropping police numbers were affecting police resilience and wanted to see some ring-fencing of police budgets to ensure there was no further erosion in that area.

The right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) talked about the massive budget cuts in the West Midlands, coupled with massive cuts to the number of officers on the beat. I think he mentioned a figure of 2,000 officers being cut. He made an important point about the fear of crime that some people experience and how that affects their liberty, especially in less affluent areas. That is something we can all understand. In possibly one of the best points of the debate so far, he also asked what would happen if the tables were turned, his party were in government and the Government were in opposition. That certainly made a number of hon. Members sit up and think, so I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that.

I was surprised to hear the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) start with some positive comments about Police Scotland; that was good. I am also glad that the police have now shown him around his constituency. However, he struggled to stay positive, and started to get caught up in minutiae. I will talk a little more about the picture in Scotland—

Luke Graham: The hon. Lady said I was getting caught in minutiae. I was talking about two specific incidents, one of which left a couple in a car wreck on the side of the M9. That is not minutiae, but an abject failure and a very serious point.

Carol Monaghan: I was not referring to that particular incident. We can all agree that that was a failure, and obviously bereaved families were left extremely upset and angry about that particular incident.

The hon. Gentleman made some good points about local and community police dealing with the challenges of mental health, and how that took them out of action for a period of time. That is very important work that they do. He also mentioned that he did not see centralisation as a success in Scotland. I argue that the centralisation in Scotland has brought the crime rate down to its lowest level in 43 years, and I would say that is a massive success.

The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) talked about how Avon and Somerset police have made all possible efficiency savings and are now finding that their ability to keep the public safe is in jeopardy. That is a serious claim, but from listening to other hon. Members I think it is one we can all accept and understand. The hon. Lady also mentioned the great work that Avon and Somerset police were doing on dealing with modern slavery and raising issues on female genital mutilation.

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) talked about damping and how Bedfordshire is now in the lowest quartile for budget and officer numbers. I think he quoted a figure of a 48.9% increase in burglaries, which is deeply concerning. He also made an important point about the operational stress on the remaining officers, and the increased pressure that that puts on them.

In Scotland, we are committed to supporting our police service and have protected the police budget in real terms. We have also committed £61 million to support the transformation of the service. The Scottish Government have set out strategic policing priorities, which seek to strengthen the focus on community policing. I have said that we are reaping the benefits of that in Scotland. We have 1,000 additional officers in Scotland since 2007, and recorded crime is the lowest that it has been in 43 years—a great success story. Of course, there is always more we can do but, crucially, people in Scotland feel safer and police officers are visible out and about in the local community.

I was pleased that the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire raised the fact that Police Scotland is the only authority in the UK that is unable to recover VAT on its expenses. That is something that we have been pushing for, and I hope we will see some shift from the Government on that.

10.35 am

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I too congratulate the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) on securing the debate. I concur with him and with my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) that policing and tackling crime are fundamental issues of social justice and equality. People are far more likely to be victims of crime if they are poor, an ethnic minority or living in a vulnerable community.

Crime and antisocial behaviour can make people feel under siege in their community. We cannot tackle, prevent, investigate or bring to justice offenders without a robust, well-resourced neighbourhood policing presence, as we

[*Louise Haigh*]

have heard clearly today. If we speak to chief constables and policing leaders across the country, as I have done, they tell us exactly that. The model for policing in this country was developed on that basis, and it makes us the envy of the world.

Lilian Greenwood: Is that not precisely why the very people my hon. Friend talks about—police chiefs and police and crime commissioners—write:

“The legitimacy of policing is at risk as the relationship with communities that underpins all activity is fading to a point where prevention, early intervention and core engagement that fosters feelings of safety are at risk of becoming ineffective”?

Is that not precisely why we need today’s debate, and why we need the Minister to respond to their calls for extra funding?

Louise Haigh: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The neighbourhood policing model, which I will come on to, is not just a “nice to have”. It is a fundamental component of our policing model in this country. It is therefore completely disingenuous for the previous Home Secretary, now the Prime Minister, to tell the police that their only job is going out there and reducing and attacking crime. The police do much more than that, as I will come on to shortly. Our police, and our police staff, who are often excluded from the debate around police officers, are the eyes and ears of the fight against crime and terrorism. Neighbourhood policing is an irreplaceable component in the battle to keep our communities safe and prevent crime.

Norfolk has been mentioned a couple of times. Other police forces across the country looked on in horror as Norfolk announced that it would be abolishing every single one of its police community support officers in the new year. I hope that Norfolk will look to examples such as my force in South Yorkshire, which merged neighbourhood policing with response two years ago, effectively abolishing it. It now has to divert resources away from response and restore neighbourhood policing because of the disastrous effect of abolishing it. The police chief and police and crime commissioner did that without consultation. Does the Minister think it is appropriate for such a major change to a police force, and such a divergence from a police and crime plan, to happen without consultation? It sets a dangerous precedent for changes to other forces.

As we have heard, crime is up. The crimes that most concern the public are once again on the rise: knife crime, gun crime and all violent crime are up, as is acquisitive crime. What angers us is that all of that was foreseeable and foreseen. If we look across Europe, only three other countries chose to cut their police force by proportionately more than we did. Two of those—Lithuania and Iceland—were reeling from chaotic and deep depressions. It was a political choice to preside over the erosion of neighbourhood policing, and when the police raised the alarm, it was a political choice to attack them for crying wolf, rather than listening to their legitimate concerns.

Only last week, we saw the Home Secretary castigating policing leaders for problems she had created, accusing them of not grounding requests for additional resources in evidence. As we have heard, there is a wealth of

evidence. The country’s top counter-terror officer, Mark Rowley, told the Home Affairs Committee that there had been a 30% uplift in counter-terror work. He said that with the huge growth in the number of investigations, “frankly...we have a bigger proportion of our investigations that are at the bottom of the pile and getting little or no work at the moment.”

It is not enough to say that funding has gone into counter-terrorism, because as we know, for every £1 spent on the Met’s counter-terror budget, £2 has to be spent by that police force on mobilising officers. On top of that, there is an £85 million funding shortfall in the armed officer uplift that the Prime Minister promised the Government would cover, which means that forces are picking up 50% of that cost. Is that the kind of evidence that the Home Secretary was looking for?

How about the document written by the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners and the National Police Chiefs Council, which my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (*Lilian Greenwood*) mentioned, and which laid bare the perilous state of neighbourhood policing in this country? Does the Minister accept that the funding settlement means accepting “higher risk for communities” and

“a reduction in the services resilience to cope with major emergencies”?

Will the Minister confirm, as the document laid out, that proactive crime prevention policing is down 25% on the last year alone; that local policing is fading to the point where it is ineffective, due to degradation in local intelligence collection; and that emergency 999 systems are failing too often? When exactly were Ministers planning to tell the public that the funding settlement risks a further 6,000 police officers being cut over the next three years?

The Minister knows the pressures the police are under; he has exactly the same conversations as I do. We have heard this morning about a wide range of forces—from large forces to smaller, rural ones—having record 999 and 101 calls, record levels of unsolved crimes and record mental health and missing persons call-outs. I was a special constable in the London Borough of Lambeth just five years ago, and policing has already changed drastically from what I experienced on the frontline.

As hon. Members have said, the facts have changed since the last budget settlement was agreed. It is time for the budget to change as well. Before the Minister responds and tells us that the police are sitting on reserves of £1.6 billion, £1.7 billion or £1.8 billion—it depends on which side of the bed he gets out of in the morning—will he take this opportunity to correct the record and confirm that, for all 43 forces across the country, just £363 million is genuinely usable and is not earmarked for capital spending? Will he also take the opportunity to tell us what models of local policing he has seen work across the country, and how important he sees neighbourhood policing as being to the fundamental British model of policing?

As I have said, neighbourhood policing is not just nice to have; it is vital to our policing system. It underpins the police’s ability to police by consent. It is almost wholly responsible for building and maintaining relationships with communities, and if we reduce our police to nothing more than a blue light that arrives only when the absolute worst has happened, we risk

rolling back all the progress that has been made in police accountability and trust over the last generation. We have heard about the erosion of trust in officers and the police if they do not turn up when something as serious as a residential burglary—one of the most invasive and intrusive crimes someone can fall victim to—happens.

Finally, I refer to comments made to the House less than two weeks ago by the Policing Minister:

“we will...ensure that the police have the resources they need to do the job”—[*Official Report*, 25 October 2017; Vol. 630, c. 132WH.]

We have heard categorically that the police do not have the resources they need to do their job. Will the Minister finally take this opportunity to announce that we will see an end to real-terms funding cuts, which have left our communities exposed?

10.43 am

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Ms Dorries. I join others in congratulating the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey), not only on securing the debate but on framing it in a typically thoughtful way.

I start by completely agreeing with the right hon. Gentleman about the importance of community policing. As constituency MPs, we all know what matters to our constituents. He quoted Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary. I thought Matthew Scott, the police and crime commissioner for Kent, put it very well:

“Neighbourhood policing is fundamental to delivering policing in the county. By focusing on local problem solving, together with partners and local communities, it improves the quality of life within those communities, helps keep people safe, and importantly builds public confidence and trust.”

The right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) also made the connection between local policing and the counter-terrorism effort, and he was right to do so.

Neighbourhood policing matters enormously, and I agree with the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton that it is obviously under a great deal of pressure at the moment. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) made a powerful case on behalf of Bedfordshire, which I know you will have listened to carefully, Ms Dorries. His example of Leighton Buzzard was powerful. The system is under a great deal of pressure. As the shadow Minister pointed out, we have a devolved system, so these are local decisions about how to allocate inevitably finite resources in very difficult circumstances.

However, I have to say to colleagues that, having just completed an exercise of speaking to or visiting every single one of the 43 forces in England and Wales, I am struck by the degree to which police and crime commissioners and police chiefs are absolutely determined to keep the community policing model as core business, as it were, and I join my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire in saluting Kathryn Holloway’s work in Bedfordshire. However, as a London MP, I am also pleased to note that the Met, in its business plan for 2017-18, states it will ring-fence 1,700 officers to neighbourhood policing, providing two officers and one police community support officer to all 629 wards.

It is also striking how much creativity police chiefs and PCCs are showing to challenge and redefine the

local policing community model under very difficult circumstances. My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) had some interesting ideas about parish policing, and across the system forces are looking again at the model. For example, Durham has had success in blending safeguarding teams with neighbourhood teams. The inspector rated Durham “outstanding” for effectiveness and efficiency, and noted that

“Neighbourhood policing remains the hub of the constabulary’s problem-solving activity”.

There is a huge amount of effort across the system to maintain and improve the community policing model.

I agree with the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton that the system is very stretched, but I do not think it is broken. The local police chiefs, in my conversations with them, have made that point: they are very concerned about sustainability and stretch—that is very clear—but no one is saying this model is broken at this point.

Mohammad Yasin: I believe that the Bedfordshire police chief has written to the Minister and other Ministers, and has also met them. He is really concerned that the system in Bedfordshire is not working, and he is worried about the safety of people in Bedfordshire. Will the Minister urgently look into the funding of Bedfordshire police and meet the chief constable again?

Mr Hurd: I have been to Bedford, been on patrol in Bedford, sat down with the police chief and have had numerous conversations with the police and crime commissioner. I assure the people of Bedfordshire that the case for its policing is well understood, as it has been for years; my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire has been a tireless champion of this cause.

The context has changed. My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk reminded the House that we are still in an environment in which public finances remain constrained; we know the reality of that and so do the police chiefs. This is what we have to manage our way through. However, we are also in a situation in which the operating context has changed in a striking way in recent years. The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton is right that demand on the police has risen, but it has also shifted. As the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East mentioned, we have seen the escalation of the terrorist threat.

We have also seen a big increase in digitally enabled crime and increases in areas of high complexity, where frankly, as a society, we are now at long last turning over the stones. On modern slavery, sexual abuse and domestic violence, people are at long last coming forward, which we should welcome, but it means increased demands on police time in areas of greater complexity and required resource. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) said, an increasing amount of police time is being spent safeguarding the vulnerable, particularly those on the mental health spectrum.

That is the reality of modern policing that we must be sensitive and tuned to in this House, and it raises some powerful questions. First, are the Government on top of emerging crime? I could take the House in painstaking detail through all the new laws on knife crime, domestic violence and modern slavery. I am proud of what we are doing to try to stay on top of emerging crime, particularly

[Mr Hurd]

in some of the murky areas where what we find when the stone is turned is very alarming in terms of the reality of life, particularly in some of our great cities. For example, I saw yesterday the statistics on modern slavery in Manchester, and they were very powerful.

In terms of what Government can do through regulation and law, I think we are on top of emerging crime. We have to ask ourselves whether the police have the resources they need, which I will turn to, but we also have, on behalf of the taxpayer, to continue to be rigorous in pushing the police and asking, “Are you making the best use of the resources you’ve got?” That is not just about efficiency. Police have done an incredibly impressive job over years on taking out unnecessary cost, but HMIC is very clear that there is more to go for, through procurement and collaboration. There is still opportunity.

There are questions about demand management and workforce planning, but there are also tough questions about whether we are really embracing the full power of technology, which can be transformational. I have seen in Lincolnshire and Surrey, and I saw yesterday in Manchester, the power of mobile working, game-changing technology such as body-worn video and changes to operating systems that give police much better information and therefore the scope to make better decisions. Those are areas where we will continue to probe and push the police and support them in their capability-building, to stay on top of this change.

In relation to resources, which is the focus of the debate, the reality is that this year, the taxpayer will be investing just over £11 billion in our police system, through direct force funding. That is an increase of just over £100 million on 2015. The way that that money shakes down is that some of it is held at the centre for strategic investment through vehicles such as the police transformation fund, where the taxpayer invests to upgrade the capability of the police and to fund innovation. Avon and Somerset police were a recent beneficiary of that funding, I am delighted to say.

Andrew Selous: I am listening carefully to what the Minister is saying. Would the Home Office consider having a look at what the Department for Education did in managing to take quite a lot of money from the central functions of the Department and get it out on to the frontline? I do not know if there is scope to do that in the Home Office, but it would be hugely welcome.

Mr Hurd: I will return to that.

We invest strategically from the centre. We have a system of 43 individual police forces. It makes sense to have a strategic investment capability to invest in things that can have an impact across the system, and we must continue to invest in innovation, not least given the context we are dealing with. The settlement at the moment is flat cash for all police forces. We recognise, as I have said publicly, that demand has grown and is changing. We are also extremely sensitive to the strain that the police are under. This is a can-do organisation that is saying, “We are very concerned about stretch and sustainability.” I have heard that directly from police commissioners and cops.

Mr McFadden: Will the Minister confirm that in this Budget, as in any other, flat cash is a cut in real terms?

Mr Hurd: Flat cash is flat cash, which means there are cost pressures that police forces have to absorb, and I will come back to that. However, there is no getting away from the fact that the overall amount of money that taxpayers are investing in the police system has grown, not shrunk.

Sir Edward Davey: May I push the Minister on the difference between what the crime survey and police recorded crime are telling us and the lessons that he, as a Minister, is drawing from that? I sought to argue in my contribution that there is a real concern that the previous trend of declining crime that we saw for quite a number of years has changed. If it has, that demands that this House and this Government change policy.

Mr Hurd: I could not have been clearer in my remarks; demand on the police has grown. We have two sets of data, which is sometimes confusing. We track people’s experience of crime through the crime survey. That shows a long-term decline in people’s experience of crime, which I hope every Member will welcome. In terms of police recorded crime, which is trying to capture something different, we are seeing an increase. Part of that is a genuine increase in crime, which I totally accept, as the Office for National Statistics does. Part of it—I know the right hon. Gentleman will welcome this—is people feeling more comfortable to come forward about crime, particularly in some of the murky, difficult, complex and often tragic areas, and police getting more effective at recording crime. It is confusing. People’s experience of crime is down, according to the official survey that has run for many years, but recorded crime is up. There are two sets of data trying to do different things.

I want to address the point about stretch. Whenever I visit a police force, I have a meeting with frontline officers, and the message from those officers could not be clearer: they feel extremely stretched. They are working very hard under very difficult circumstances indeed. As I say, the fact that that message is coming out of a can-do organisation means we have to listen to it.

That is why we are conducting a demand and resilience review, led by myself. I will be visiting or speaking to every single force in England and Wales. The review will update our understanding of demand and how it is being managed, the implications of flat cash force by force and the strategy for reserves, which are public money. The last audited numbers in 2016 showed reserves of £1.8 billion. That figure is now down a bit, to perhaps around £1.6 billion, but it is still public money, and we need to know the plans for it.

Louise Haigh: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hurd: If the hon. Lady will forgive me, I will not, because I want to finish my remarks.

That review will be assessed in parallel with the fair funding review that colleagues will have tracked and that is of particular interest to Suffolk, Bedfordshire and other counties that feel they have been on the wrong end of the allocation in recent years. It will come together as a piece of analysis and work with the provisional grant report and provisional settlement for 2018-19, which I expect to come to the House before the year end.

I would like to assure colleagues who are concerned about whether the Government are listening to the messages from their local police chiefs and police and crime commissioners that we feel strongly that we have to take decisions based on evidence, not assertion, and that is feeding into the review. We owe that to the taxpayer. We are determined to ensure that the police have the resources and the support they need, without giving up on the challenge we have to give them to ensure they are using that money in the most effective way.

For this Government, as for any Government, public safety is the No. 1 priority. I assure the House that in the work we are doing, we are determined to ensure that hard-working police forces up and down the country doing incredibly difficult work under very difficult and often dangerous circumstances have the support they need. With that, I close, in order that the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton can conclude.

10.57 am

Sir Edward Davey: I thank all Members who have contributed to the debate. The Minister will have heard concern from Members on both sides and from the grassroots and our constituencies that this is having a real impact on people's lives and our communities. He will also have heard that there is huge support for the model of community policing; and, to be fair to the Minister, he acknowledged that.

Many of us have listened to the Minister over many years in different guises, and we know his support for strong, healthy communities. I end the debate by saying that community policing is fundamental to that strength. I saw in my constituency the impact that more investment in community policing had on tackling low-level crime and antisocial behaviour, helping on the estates, driving out serious crime and being really strong against the drug pushers and so on who make the lives of some of our constituents a misery. Community policing is a fundamental part of what this House, this Government and this country should be about, and I hope that in the forthcoming Budget later this month we will see extra support for our community police services up and down the country.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered funding for community policing.

Wales and Borders Franchise

11 am

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the devolution of the Wales and Borders franchise.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries, for what I believe is the first time.

The comedy of holding a debate on the delayed devolution of the Wales and Borders rail franchise will not be lost on the thousands of passengers who rely on the consistently tardy rail operator in Wales. In reality, however, it is no laughing matter. It is a tale of how an uncaring Westminster and incompetent Welsh Government have already cost taxpayers millions of pounds and could derail the whole franchise procurement process.

My speech will have three central elements. First, I will outline the development of a distinct Welsh rail franchise. Secondly, I will trace in, I hope, forensic detail how we got into the current mess. Finally, I will seek clarity on the next steps for the franchise and what passengers can expect.

Let me begin by setting the scene. Until the current franchise started in 2002, Wales was covered by myriad different operators. One franchise covered south Wales and south-west England, while mid-Wales and north Wales were linked to larger franchises based in Birmingham and Manchester respectively. Three inter-city franchises also served Wales.

Despite rejecting the idea of devolving the franchise, the British Labour Government did recognise that the Welsh rail network should form one unified system. The 2002-03 franchise competition was managed by the UK Government and the now defunct Strategic Rail Authority. In 2002 the British Labour Government awarded the first Wales and Borders franchise to the German state-owned train operator Arriva, and for the last 15 years we have been stuck with a service unfit for purpose. The Arriva Trains Wales-run Wales and Borders franchise has been dubbed the "no growth" deal. In effect, the poorly procured franchise failed to account for any growth in passengers. It was a franchise procured on the cheap and fundamentally not fit for purpose.

As would have been obvious to anyone with the semblance of an understanding of transport policy, passenger numbers continued to grow, and in the desperate scramble to keep up with the growth, money meant for devolved services was ploughed into the franchise. Sprinter units from the 1980s were bought using the Welsh block grant as a substitute for the increased UK Government subsidy that Arriva had originally envisaged. In fact, passenger numbers continued to grow, with overcrowding becoming "a daily struggle", according to Transport Focus. In the last four years, 250,000 extra commuters have been using rail services in south Wales alone.

The 2002 franchise agreement is widely seen as one of the worst and most unimaginative since privatisation of the railways. It is unsurprising, therefore, that support for devolution of the franchise is overwhelming. The 15 years of chaos on Welsh railways lies at the door of the Department for Transport, and if something is not done soon, the next 15 years could be the same.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Does my hon. Friend agree that the previous franchise emphasised punctuality above all else in terms of success, and that for the next franchise to be a success, it must also include customer satisfaction in its criteria?

Jonathan Edwards: I am grateful for that intervention. My hon. Friend, who is the parliamentary leader of our party, serves on the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs, which has done very detailed work on this issue and specifically on the initial franchise procurement. The Committee, which consists of members from across the House, was especially damning of how that franchise was constructed.

Let us fast forward to 2015, when the story of this not-so-great train robbery steps up a gear. The then Prime Minister, David Cameron, and his deputy, Nick Clegg, graced Wales with their presence to announce a new devolution deal. As part of the so-called St David's day agreement, we were told that powers over the procurement of the next rail franchise would be devolved. The cheers at our national stadium, where they made the announcement, were reminiscent of those at a Six Nations match. Finally, we thought, Wales would get the power to create a rail system fit for our people. Sadly, as is often the case, that optimism was misplaced.

In the next section of my speech, I will try to piece together what is a complex picture of confusion, chaos and ineptitude by Governments at both ends of the M4. As is often the case with such matters, each individual element of the story seems unremarkable—inconsequential even. However, in the round, we see an intriguing episode of incompetence, which has already cost millions of pounds and could mean chaos for rail users in Wales.

The story starts just over a year ago, in September 2016. Combing through what was then the Wales Bill—it is now the Wales Act 2017—I spotted what I assumed was an error. Despite the Government's boy scout promises, devolution of the franchise was not included in the Bill. Being the assiduous and diligent parliamentarian that I am, I decided to flag up that omission to the Secretary of State for Wales. Following the appropriate procedures, I tabled an amendment to the Bill that would devolve the franchise. On 12 September, in a Report Stage debate on the Wales Bill, I sought the Minister's assurance that the error would be rectified. I said:

"Before I get into my speech, may I say that I will gladly not say a word"—

regarding devolution of the franchise—

"if the Secretary of State or the Minister intervenes to say that they will proceed with that promise and if they outline the legislative vehicle whereby these powers will be devolved to Wales?"

The Secretary of State replied:

"We are negotiating with the Welsh Government over the use of a transfer of functions order under the 2006 Act."—[*Official Report*, 12 September 2016; Vol. 614, c. 671.]

The more naive may have thought that that was job done, but as a veteran of many a Wales Bill, I know that devolving powers is not such a simple task, so we continued to push. During the Welsh Affairs Committee inquiry into procurement of the next Wales and Borders franchise, my hon. Friend the Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) repeatedly asked how the Welsh rail responsibilities would be devolved. Every time she asked the question, whether to a UK or Welsh Government representative, she met with the same complacent response, "It's just a technical thing; it will

all get sorted," yet everything seemed not to add up. Why wait to devolve the franchise if we could already do so? Why risk waiting? Why circumvent parliamentary scrutiny? Why be so complacent about the powers required for a multibillion-pound contract? Was the reason ignorance, incompetence or something more sinister?

Thanks to my hon. Friend's excellent work, people will find on page 13 of the report two recommendations calling on the UK and Welsh Governments to update the Committee on the progress of the talks on the transfer of functions and to ensure that there is effective scrutiny of the transfer of functions and the way in which the Governments have agreed to devolve the powers. Of course, neither of those recommendations has been followed.

On 13 October 2016, despite still not having any powers actually to procure the franchise, the Welsh Government announced four shortlisted operators for it: KeolisAmey, a joint venture between French transport giant Keolis and public service provider Amey; MTR Corporation, which has interests globally from Australia to Sweden and is based in Hong Kong; Abellio Group, which operates bus and rail networks across Europe and is the international arm of the Dutch national rail operator; and the existing German state-owned operator Arriva. Those were the only four to enter a bid to run the next franchise.

According to the original plan, the four bids would be assessed by Transport for Wales, a Welsh Government-owned company. Through a process of "competitive dialogue", the four bidders would work to create one of the most ambitious franchises ever, with the south Wales metro and the rest of the Welsh network covered by a single operator.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab) I am listening carefully to what the hon. Gentleman is saying. He referred to the 2016 Bill. He will remember that both he and I supported amendments for a not-for-profit franchise. Does he believe that that is now possible? In 2017, both his party and mine, in our manifestos, asked for that. The Conservatives were soundly beaten in Wales, so they should not pursue this. There should be secondary legislation to add that to the Bill, so that Wales can have a fall-back situation.

Jonathan Edwards: As ever, the hon. Gentleman speaks with great experience and makes a very valid point. With the two major parties supporting such a policy, it is clearly the will of the National Assembly. I am not sure whether that is the reason why the UK Government are delaying the transfer of functions. Is ideology driving what we are seeing at the moment?

Let me reiterate that on 13 October 2016, when the shortlist was announced, the Welsh Government had no authority to procure a Welsh rail franchise. That still remained in the gift of the Department for Transport and the Minister. Now let me pull focus back to Westminster for a moment. On 6 December 2016, I asked, in Transport questions,

"now that the UK Government are devolving responsibilities for the Welsh franchise to Wales, is it not logical to devolve responsibility for the Welsh network?"

The Secretary of State's response was dumbfounding. He said that

"we are not devolving responsibility for the whole Welsh franchise as he describes; we are doing so in part. I have said to the Welsh Government that I am happy with their taking control of the

Welsh valleys lines, with a view to developing the metro system that they hope to put into service, but the Welsh franchise is not purely Welsh; it runs through large parts of England as well. We cannot have a situation where we, the Government in Westminster, give up control over services in England to the Welsh Government without checks and balances. That is not going to happen.”—[*Official Report*, 6 December 2016; Vol. 618, c. 128.]

Whether it was ignorance or incompetence, the UK Government and the Welsh Government were saying and doing diametrically opposed things. In fact, the UK Government, in the form of the DFT, and another bit of the UK Government, the Wales Office, were saying and doing diametrically opposed things. The Transport Secretary’s response set alarm bells ringing in Cardiff. As a result, later that day, Plaid Cymru forced an urgent question in the National Assembly. On 6 December, the very same day, the Welsh Government Cabinet Secretary responsible for railways, Ken Skates, assured the Senedd that everything was on track. He said that the Welsh Government

“have agreed with the UK Government that all services operated under the current Wales and Borders franchise will be included in the next Wales and Borders franchise and that we”—

the Welsh Government—

“will lead in the procurement of these services.”

Mr Skates’ response clearly stated that the Welsh Government continued to believe that responsibility for the procurement and management of the whole of the next Wales and Borders franchise, which covers all of the existing routes, will be devolved in time.

It is clear that the Wales and UK Governments have a fundamental difference of understanding. I wrote to the Secretary of State to notify him of this confusion and continued to raise the issue in Westminster, and my colleagues did the same in Cardiff Bay, in the hope of shunting them along the track, but still there is nothing: no clear plan, no public timetable, no parliamentary scrutiny of how the devolution of rail was—or more correctly, was not—happening.

It was only a few months before the snap election. Over this period we continued to raise concerns regarding the devolution of the franchise with questions in the National Assembly. From our conversation with industry we knew that deadlines were drawing closer. On my return to Parliament, I therefore tabled written question 3534, seeking clarity on when the devolution of powers over the rail franchise will take place. This clearly acted as a catalyst, as a few days later, on Sunday 13 July, Pandora’s box was opened. The UK Government confirmed that the necessary transfer of functions will not take place until autumn 2017. This meant the 18 August date set for the official tender submissions would be missed. However, the Department for Transport said that all would be resolved by moving that date to 26 September. What transpired, however, was hardly a simple procedural matter. An exchange between the Secretary of State and the Cabinet Secretary in the Welsh Government came to light, which showed a plethora of unresolved issues, including disputes over the ownership of the valleys lines infrastructure and how the Welsh Government will exercise powers over English railway stations served by the Wales and Borders franchise.

Most startling, however, was a £1 billion dispute over funding. A rebate, which is linked to track charges, is passed to Network Rail via a grant for improving railways. For the Wales routes, that amounts to £1 billion over the 15-year span of the contract. Due to a catastrophic

breakdown in communication, the Welsh Government had been procuring the franchise in the belief that this was there to be used as they wish, but the Department for Transport believed that as the Welsh Government had no responsibility for the actual rail infrastructure, this money should remain in Whitehall. You could not make it up, Madame Chair, but what does all that mean for Welsh passengers?

According to Welsh Government, the delay in procuring the franchise in August cost around £3.5 million. Further delays could cost tens of millions of pounds and put the whole procurement process at risk. Surely that was all resolved by the time we got to the later September deadline I referred to earlier. Not this time. In a committee meeting with the Cabinet Secretary and his officials at the National Assembly for Wales on 27 September, it was confirmed that powers necessary to decide who runs most of Wales’ rail services may not be given to Wales until 2018. In fact, the official tender published the same day was made by the Department for Transport and not by the Welsh Government.

I appreciate that this is a long and complex narrative, but only a few twists in the track remain. Eight days ago the latest bombshell dropped: Arriva, the current franchisee, pulled its bid. Few tears will be shed at this revelation. Some commuters might even rejoice at the news, but it speaks to a deeper problem with the handling of the procurement process. The only reasonable conclusion is that Arriva’s decision to pull its bid to run the next Welsh rail franchise is largely due to the whole bungled process. Rumours are circulating that other companies are also teetering on the brink of pulling out of the franchise bid. To be fair, who can blame them? They do not know who they should be dealing with, the timetable of the process and, to put it frankly, whether this franchise will even go ahead.

In this final part of my speech, I want to understand what the next steps might be and seek clarity for commuters, train companies and perhaps even for Labour Ministers back home, as they seem incapable of getting these answers from the Department for Transport themselves. Devolution of the franchise was first on the list of hurdles in the Welsh Assembly Infrastructure Committee’s June report. Let us be frank: we are approaching a situation where the whole thing could collapse. I do not want to see that and I am sure the Minister does not want to either. I hope in his response he will be able to offer assurances that the powers will be devolved in the coming days, but contingencies must be made clear. Can the Minister confirm whether there has been any exploration of an interim arrangement with the existing operator to continue running their franchise under a direct award or—as is written into this franchise contract—there is an extension of seven “reporting periods” at the end of the franchise, which could take the existing franchise into spring 2019?

The option which I prefer, and I am sure the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) would prefer, and which has always been the policy of my party, is a truly nationalised rail operator. Under the Railways Act 1993, it falls on the relevant authority to run franchises where there is no franchise agreement in place. These are known as the operator of last resort powers. The botched devolution job means there is no clarity on who exactly the relevant authority is in this case. Can the Minister confirm whether he understands the Welsh Government or Westminster to be the relevant authority?

[Jonathan Edwards]

On a more general point, my speech has been peppered with technicalities, dates and jargon, but the events surrounding the devolution of the franchise are symbolic of a wider and more fundamental symptom suffered by my country. Westminster does not care about Wales and a lethargic Labour party passively watches our managed decline. The examples can be technical, but the effects are tangible. Our society suffers at the hands of an apathetic Westminster and an inert Labour Welsh Government. The handling of the devolution of the franchise is yet again a reason for Wales to wonder why Westminster clings so tightly to our reins, when all we want is the ability to stand on our own two feet. Diolch yn fawr.

11.16 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I congratulate the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) on securing this debate. He has taken a long-term interest in this issue, as indeed have the hon. Members for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) and for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen). I hope that I can provide some reassurance. I realise it is tempting to provide a running commentary on these issues, particularly when one is not involved in the negotiations, but I hope that I can set the mind of the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr at rest. He has asked many questions on the issue, both of me and in the House more generally, so I know he is very knowledgeable on these matters.

I start by reassuring the hon. Gentleman that we are committed to devolving rail powers to the Welsh Government, as we stated in 2014. The devolution of these powers takes forward one of the Silk commission's recommendations and is an important part of the St David's day Command Paper that he referred to. Like him, I want improved rail services for passengers in Wales. I always focus on the output for the customer, not just the input into the train set.

Last month, we saw the launch of the invitation to tender for the next Wales and Borders franchise. I agree with the hon. Gentleman's comments about the previous franchise. It was a very good example of some of the flaws of the earlier franchising models, and one that we hope to learn from in setting out what we aim to do with this franchise. I am sure he will recognise that it is one key milestone among many on the journey towards a new franchise.

It may help if I set out the other milestones that we seek to achieve. First and foremost, we hope that bidders will respond by 21 December this year to the ITT. The evaluation will take place over January and February, and between March and June 2018 there will be a contract award by the Welsh Government, signed on 13 June 2018, we hope, with a new franchise commencement date of 18 October 2018.

We have a clear set of timelines ahead that we are looking to achieve. I remain committed to supporting the Welsh Government in progressing with the procurement of the next Wales and Borders franchise to make sure that it does indeed commence in October 2018. I also repeat our commitment to progressing with the procurement

of an infrastructure provider for the south Wales metro. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would agree that devolution cannot be a simple task, and it is worth reminding ourselves of what the Government are actually doing. We have seen tireless work by officials, both here and in Cardiff, to give effect to the formal transfer of powers, which had required the resolution of a number of very detailed policy and practical considerations, particularly around cross-border services, but I am pleased that we have been able to agree the broad principles under which that devolution should happen. This will see Welsh Ministers' statutory powers in Wales supplemented by powers exercised on behalf of the Secretary of State.

These proposed arrangements will, for the first time, enable Welsh Ministers to procure a franchise that, like the current one, includes important cross-border services to and from parts of England, as well as services entirely within Wales. I am sure the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr will agree that it is in Wales' economic interests to have a strong set of cross-border connectivity, not least to Manchester airport to the north of Wales, and to London along the Great Western main line to the south of Wales.

Both the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Ynys Môn raised the point about not-for-profit services. As they will understand, because this franchise involves cross-border services, the nature of the contracting vehicle cannot be a decision solely for the Welsh Government. That is why a not-for-profit solution, tempting though it may be to hon. Members, is not necessarily appropriate in this case.

Jonathan Edwards: Will the Minister give way?

Paul Maynard: I will give way just once, but I am keen to make sure that I answer the hon. Gentleman's questions.

Jonathan Edwards: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Can he explain why, if it is indeed his Government's intention to improve the transport links between Wales and England, they have taken the treacherous decision to cancel the electrification of the main line all the way to Swansea?

Paul Maynard: The hon. Gentleman is almost tempting me to give another 10 minute speech on how to improve rail services for passengers. I am afraid, as ever, that he falls into the trap of focusing on how we power the trains, and not the benefits for the passengers. As he will be aware, if the 40 miles from Cardiff to Swansea were to be electrified, that would have a cost-benefit ratio of less than 0.3, with no added benefits for passengers—not a single extra seat, mile per hour of the train, or minute off the journey time. As he will also be aware, the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee have been clear that the Department needs to consider each electrification project in isolation to ensure that it still represents good value for money.

It is my duty as Rail Minister to focus on how to deliver the benefits for passengers in south Wales, including in his constituency, and to bring those benefits forward as soon as possible. That is what we are doing with the Intercity Express Programme trains that are already in operation. When electrification to Cardiff is complete, that will save 15 minutes on the existing journey time.

Electrifying further to Swansea would not reduce that journey time by a single minute; nor would it add a single seat to any one of those journeys.

Albert Owen: The Minister makes an important point on the not-for-profit issue. He will know that the Secretary of State for Transport has the power, if a franchise were to go wrong, to operate it directly from the Department for Transport, which would run the franchise. Are those safeguards in the devolution settlement, so that the Welsh Government could take over if the franchise were to go wrong? That is very important. They could be a not-for-profit organisation, and that could lead to investment back into the railways.

Paul Maynard: The hon. Gentleman is right to identify the importance of the operator of last resort. Discussions are still ongoing with the Welsh Government, but those will need to be concluded before we lay the transfer of functions order before Parliament, which I am about to come to. If he bears with me, he will find out the answer shortly.

I reiterate the importance of ensuring that the Secretary of State has some duties relating to journeys in England. English passengers will be travelling on those trains, perhaps even between two English stations, so it makes sense for the Department for Transport to have a degree of oversight. It is worth further recognising efforts on both sides, in Cardiff and Whitehall, to make sure that we continue to draft the transfer of functions order appropriately. This very detailed set of functions—I gather more than 40—will need to be transferred under existing railway legislation. Technical work is progressing well, and I anticipate that the order will be laid before Parliament early next year. The proposed order will be subject to the affirmative resolution procedure in both Houses, so Members of this House can be assured that they will have the opportunity to scrutinise the detailed provisions. I am confident that we are on track to complete the transfer of franchising powers in Wales and other necessary agreements over the next few months, in good time for Welsh Ministers' planned award and commencement of the new franchise contract.

Much positive and practical work has been done by both Governments in readiness for these responsibilities. As the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr identified, Transport for Wales has been established to help deliver both the new franchise and the south Wales metro project. As a Department, we are providing extensive support to help to progress all its aims and ambitions. He will no doubt be aware that the procurement process is already well underway. He referred to some of the bidders, and mentioned Arriva. It might be worth my explaining to hon. Members that every owning company in the country has only one bid team. When there are multiple franchise competitions at any one time, it can stretch the resources of individual owning groups, which may be participating in more than one competition at any one time. So I would caution against reading too much into Arriva's specific decision on the Welsh franchise.

Both our Governments have worked together to deliver a series of milestones, most recently the ITT. Importantly, this has been facilitated by an agency agreement with the Secretary of State, whereby the Welsh Government published the ITT on behalf of the Secretary of State. Over the coming months, my officials will continue to

work with Transport for Wales to develop the day-to-day franchise working arrangements to ensure that they are fit for purpose under the new contract.

I recognise the ambition that many stakeholders in Wales have to discover more about what the invitation to tender will contain and what the likely shape of the future franchise will be. I share that ambition; I am always keen to look at what the outputs for passengers are, and not just at the inputs might be. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Transport for Wales document, "Rail Services for the Future", gives some indication of the future direction the franchise will take; but I am sure that like me, he would welcome more information from the Welsh Government about service enhancements that may or may not be proposed as part of the future vision.

I recognise that concerns exist that the rolling stock is not as good as it could be. That is always an important part of any part of franchise consideration, but I must reiterate that decisions about rolling stock will now be taken by the Welsh Government. I share the hon. Gentleman's frustration about the fact that Pacers remain on our network. I very much hope that we take this opportunity to see the back of them, as we are doing on the northern franchise, for example. They are long past their sell-by date. I recognise the need for new rolling stock, but that will have to be a decision taken by the Welsh Government.

I continue to urge a collaborative approach with the Government in Wales. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman, as a Plaid Cymru Member, will judiciously judge both sides' performance with equal criticality of eye. All options need to be considered in the development of future services, and I remain optimistic that passengers will see big improvements delivered in the next franchise, which will have to include devolution of the core valley lines infrastructure in some way, shape or form. We are committed to £125 million of investment as part of the wider deal in south Wales. I recognise the importance that the Welsh Government attach to their ambitions in this regard, and hope that we do all that we can to support them in that. I also recognise the ambitions for Cardiff station. Although predicted passenger numbers to 2043 show an increase, there is a particular issue in Cardiff around sporting and entertainment events, and I know that more thinking is going on in that regard.

We have already discussed Cardiff to Swansea, but it was important that our decision on that be accompanied by a commitment to work with Network Rail on how we can deliver further journey time savings both on the line out as far as Pembrokeshire and on the north Wales line, and to look at what other improvements we can make around the Swansea-Cardiff corridor.

It is worth stating clearly that we recognise that electrification can bring benefits to passengers; therefore, we do not rule it out on any stretch of the network, but it has to deliver benefits for passengers. There has been a tendency to regard electrification as the gold standard, but that is not always the case. Often, the benefits that accrue from electrification are because parallel infrastructure works deliver the journey time savings instead. I caution all hon. Members about assuming that if somewhere is not on an electrified line, it is a second-class destination in some way. That is very far from the case. Anyone who has travelled on the new IEP trains will see that they are very much state of the art. I do not think passengers on

[Paul Maynard]

them notice when they change from diesel to electric power. They are high-quality rolling stock with 130 more seats per service and, when electrification is complete, journey time savings of 15 minutes.

I hope I have explained where I believe the process of the franchising and devolution to be. I have no doubt that the hon. Gentleman will come back with more questions in due course—I would expect no less from him—but I hope that that gives him enough to work on for the moment. I thank him for his time, and thank you, Ms Dorries, as well.

11.29 am

Jonathan Edwards: I thank the Minister for his comments. There was one area of concern in his comments: he said that the franchise would be devolved but under the supervision of the Department for Transport. That indicates to me that there would be a Westminster veto over the actions of Welsh Ministers. I am sure that that would be an area of high contention back home in the motherland.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Ukrainian Holodomor

[MR CHARLES WALKER *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Ukrainian Holodomor.

What a delight it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker, and it is even better that the Minister managed to make it here, having been very busy in the Chamber until this point. The motion is that the House has considered the Ukrainian holodomor, but I hope that we can widen the scope slightly to, “That this House is aware of the panorama of horror of the Ukrainian holodomor, and recognises this man-made famine as genocide.”

I recognise that because everybody is on a one-line Whip and we are about to go into a short recess, not many people will speak in today’s debate, but that does not mean the issue is not of great historical, social and political significance. In 2013, I spoke in this Chamber about the Ukrainian holodomor. Since then, I have repeatedly called on the UK Government to recognise the holodomor in Ukraine as genocide. I stand here today to remind colleagues of that atrocity, which occurred in Ukraine from 1932 to 1933, and to ask again that the Government recognise that politicised act of evil as genocide.

Holodomor literally means “death by starvation”, and the Ukrainian holodomor was a campaign purposely orchestrated by Joseph Stalin to decimate a large segment of the Ukrainian population—the peasants. The Soviet Government tried to requisition as much food out of Ukraine as possible at that time. It is broadly understood that the genocide began in 1929 with mass deportations of prosperous farmers and the execution of Ukrainian religious, academic and cultural leaders. In the 1930s, Stalin’s food programme called for peasants to give up their land and join collective farms. Stalin was particularly opposed to the Ukrainian kulaks, who were slightly more prosperous and therefore thought to be more dangerous than poor peasants. Kulaks were turned out of their homes, forced to give up their land and sent to labour camps.

It is clear that Stalin’s regime wanted to teach Ukraine’s farmers a lesson they would not forget for resisting the collectivisation. Soviet authorities set unachievable goals for Ukraine’s basic grain production of 44% in 1932. That was exceedingly high, and achieving it was even more difficult given that the communists had already ruined the nation’s productivity by eliminating their best farmers.

In 1932, not a single village was able to meet the impossible quota, and under Soviet rule, no grain could be given to a peasant until the quota was achieved. Men, women and children—we must not forget that they were fathers, mothers, daughters and sons—were slowly starved to death through the implementation of a policy intended to put an end to the Ukrainian aspiration for independence. Stalin believed that the Ukrainian ethno-cultural self-assertion was a threat to the pre-eminence of Russian culture in Soviet affairs, and to the centralisation of all political authority.

Ukrainian peasants had their basic freedoms stripped away. They were banned from leaving their home towns and villages. There was no escape. The ways to rescue were intentionally blocked. Soviet troops detained hundreds of thousands of farmers, 90% of whom were forcibly returned to their hungry villages to die. Although the exact number of those who died during the holodomor is not known, it is estimated to be between 7 million and 10 million Ukrainian people. At the height of the famine, 17 people died each minute, 1,041 people died each hour and 25,000 people died each day. More than 3 million children born in 1932 and 1933 died of starvation. Many people died of starvation in their homes, with some trying to end the process by suicide, if they had the strength for it.

While that was happening, the Soviet Government injected 1.7 million tonnes of grain into western markets. That grain, which could have saved millions of lives, was processed into vodka.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing this debate forward and thank her for doing so. Although I had a little knowledge of this part of history, I did not know entirely about it. Does she agree that the Ukrainian holodomor stands as a reminder to the entire world that a nation can rise up from the ashes of hatred to take its rightful place, and will she join me in applauding the Ukrainian people for the indomitable spirit that remains within them to this day?

Mrs Latham: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. Hundreds of thousands of people in this country are descendants of people who were part of and who died in the holodomor, so they do have an indomitable spirit, and even now in Ukraine they show that they will not be bowed by the people of the Soviet Union.

The historian Dominic Sandbrook recently wrote in the *Daily Mail* about the brutality of this “Marxist experiment”. He said that there were

“Starving children, mass graves, vigilantes, even cannibalism: the famine saw human nature stripped to the bone.”

The disregard for the life of the Ukrainian people was abominable. The corpses of those who had died seeking food lay on the roadside. In the winter, many of the bodies were concealed by snow until the spring thaw, at which point they were callously dumped into mass graves by communists. A third of all Ukrainian villages were put on blacklists, and those villages were turned into ghettos of famine. There was no chance to survive. People started to eat corpses. At the peak of the crisis, in 1933, policemen barged into farmhouses and seized everything that could be eaten: not just grain but potatoes, squash and peas—everything in the cupboards.

It is our duty not only to raise awareness of this historic atrocity, but to acknowledge this event as what it was: genocide. The dictionary describes genocide as “the deliberate killing of a large group of people, especially those of a particular nation or ethnic group.”

As I stated, the Ukrainian holodomor saw the systematic starvation of a huge proportion of the Ukrainian nation, particularly of the peasant class, as a consequence of Stalin’s dogma. In the same way that the holocaust is an example of genocide perpetrated by an overtly racist, fascist regime, which had as its avowed purpose the

annihilation of the Jewish people, the Ukrainian holodomor is an example of a crime deliberately perpetrated by a communist regime contaminated by Russian chauvinism, targeting one nation of people.

As the Government acknowledged in response to my 2013 debate, the fact that during the famine Stalin closed the eastern border of Ukraine to stop starving peasants entering Russia in search of food is perhaps one of the strongest indications that his policies were at least in part motivated by hostility to Ukraine as a nation with an identity, tradition and culture of its own. Today, that would be called ethnic cleansing. Members may be interested to learn that Dr Raphael Lemkin, the author of the convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide—adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948—called the destruction of the Ukrainian nation a “classic example” of genocide. He noted that the intention of the holodomor was to eliminate Ukrainian nationalism and tackle the Ukrainian national resistance, and in an attempt to achieve that, the peasantry were sacrificed.

In the debate I held on this topic in 2013, my right hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington), then the Minister for Europe, argued that since the UN genocide convention was enacted in 1948, the holodomor could not legally be defined as genocide retrospectively. He argued that it is necessary for judges, rather than Governments, to make a designation of genocide, as courts are better placed to make decisions on essentially criminal matters. If that remains the case, I ask the Minister to consider the following questions. What needs to happen for the UK judiciary to consider the question of whether the holodomor was genocide? Is there a UK legal precedent that could be used by a potential prosecuting body as a route map? Which of all the UK courts, from the Supreme Court down to magistrates court, is most competent and best placed to evaluate the holodomor question? Would the Government consider initiating an inquiry or judicial process?

It is important to acknowledge that 17 nations have already recognised the holodomor in Ukraine as genocide, including Australia, Canada and the US. The Australian Senate recognised it as genocide in 2003, and the European Parliament identified the holodomor as a crime against humanity in 2008. It is only right that the UK should follow suit, and I fail to understand why we have not done so.

Interestingly, sociological research shows that 80% of Ukrainians consider the holodomor an act of genocide. In 2006, the Government of Ukraine passed a law recognising the disaster as genocide against the Ukrainian people. In the vote in the Ukrainian Parliament, pro-western parties voted in favour of the law. Ukraine has sought international recognition of the holodomor as an act of genocide, and says that Russia should accept responsibility for the famine as the Soviet Union’s legal successor. Russia says that it cannot be classified as a genocide, as millions of people from various ethnic backgrounds across the Soviet Union suffered.

Members might ask the significance of raising the issue today, 85 years after the event. There are a number of reasons. I stress that this is not simply a Ukrainian issue; the event had global implications. The Ukrainian holodomor is an example of a crime caused by a political ideology and fuelled by prejudice. It is a tragic and extreme example of the impacts of dictatorship

[Mrs Latham]

and the dangers posed by a regime whose rule removes freedoms from individuals. Important lessons can be learned from it, including ensuring that the world is never again blind to such a wide-scale atrocity.

Since 1932, using starvation to control people has become standard among communist regimes. We have seen it in China, North Korea, Ethiopia, Cambodia and Zimbabwe. We must send the strongest possible signal that it can never happen again. Furthermore, it must be understood that memories of the famine underlie much of the current tension between Russia and Ukraine. Our understanding of the issue is central to our grasp of current affairs.

It should be noted that Russian officials' questioning of Ukraine's right to exist as an independent nation and continued denial of the holodomor are troubling and dangerous developments, not only for Ukrainians but for all of us in this Chamber and around the world who love and value our liberties. People in Ukraine note that their current political and social troubles arise from boundless fear as a consequence of the holodomor. They fear reverting back to their national roots, because there have been times when being linked to those roots caused the deaths of millions of people. However, they also look at events positively. In a speech in 2015, the Ukrainian President said that Ukrainians must remember their past and draw conclusions from it. They are keen to get rid of the "nation-victim sentiment" and be proud that they defended their place on the European political map when up against great adversity.

It is vital that we commemorate those whose lives were stolen; we must remember them and reflect on the tragic way in which they were taken. I am sure that Members will appreciate that the holodomor is a never-ending trauma for Ukraine that had a catastrophic impact on Ukrainian national identity. Every year, Ukrainians mark a holodomor remembrance day on the fourth Saturday of November. This year, it will fall on Saturday 25 November, so it is appropriate to be discussing the holodomor at this time of year. It is our duty to the millions of victims to remember them and make their story known throughout the world, as one of the most tragic pages in mankind's history in the 20th century.

There are still those who deny the famine. For example, in Russia, it is illegal to commemorate the holodomor. By commemorating these events, we are taking a stand against that unjust stance. Ukrainians hope to establish a comprehensive social dialogue of memory, while moving on and developing as a fully free and democratic nation. In 1991, after Ukraine gained independence, the first memorial book was published. After 60 years of taboo imposed by Soviet authorities on this tragic subject, the family of Ukrainian journalists Lidia Kovalenko and Volodymyr Maniak collected and arranged testimonies from all over Ukraine. According to the book's authors, the survivors had reached their final stage in life and hastened to tell the terrible truth that haunted them all their lives. The totalitarian regime had tried to trample the memory of the terrible famine into the ground. Even today, there are still graves in yards and gardens in some villages where the living had no strength to take the dead to the cemetery, and buried them where they had lived and died.

As we are sadly aware, the 20th century was a time of great human tragedies. Although most British people know about tragedies such as the holocaust of 1939 to 1945, few British have heard about the horrors of the holodomor, and until recent years, world awareness was minimal. The crimes of Bolshevism and Stalinism are identical to those of Nazism. The very nature of those regimes is one and the same. In the Soviet Union, the holodomor was a taboo subject that was denied and covered up. In addition, Soviet authorities attacked western journalists who wanted to inform the public about the scope of the famine. It is hard for us to believe today that a large international power could keep an atrocity of that size secret for decades, but the holodomor nearly disappeared from world awareness.

On raising awareness, I support hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians in the UK and millions all over the world in calling on this Government to include the holodomor in the British school curriculum. I recently wrote a letter to that effect to the Secretary of State for Education, my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening), but have yet to receive a response.

Close to my constituency in Derbyshire is a Ukrainian national campsite that has been running for many years. It enables descendants of families caught up in the holodomor to come together to ensure that their roots and culture live on. I have the privilege of visiting the centre most summers; children come from across the country to participate. Quite a few people who went every year as children have ended up marrying each other in the church there, which is a rather nice end to their childhood relationship. Many volunteers go year after year to remember what it was like for their forebears and keep the Ukrainian community together.

I have built up a relationship with many of the young people and the organisers over the past 10 years or so, which is why I am concerned that this part of history is not being taught in our schools. I know that it would mean a great deal to them if their ancestors' stories were told and more people had a greater awareness of the horrors of the holodomor.

To summarise, I appeal to the Government to finally give the Ukrainian holodomor its rightful status as a genocide, just as many other countries have done before us. Stalin's weaponisation of hunger in Ukraine highlights the true evil of his communist regime and the impact that it had on the people quashed beneath it. We must highlight this historical wrongdoing, and raise awareness by taking affirmative action and showing our solidarity with the people of Ukraine, for whom that act of evil has had an intergenerational impact. Moreover, it is our duty to the millions of victims of the holodomor and their ancestors to remember them and to make their story known to the world as one of the most tragic pages of 20th century history.

I conclude with the words of a holodomor survivor—words that the Ukrainian President cited in 2015 in a speech commemorating the holodomor:

"Children do not run, they do not play, but sit on the roads. Their feet are so skinny, drawn up, and there is a big belly between them. The head is large and the face is bowed to the ground. And there is almost no face, only teeth. A child is sitting and rocking with its whole body...An infinite moaning song...And it demands—neither from a mother or a father—and pleads into the empty space and the world for only one thing: 'Eat, eat, eat.'"

2.50 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): It is an honour and a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. It is a common courtesy to pay credit to the hon. Member who introduces the debate, but on this occasion I emphasise and underline that it is more than a courtesy: the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) has done a great service to this House not just today but on past occasions on which she has spoken on this painful, agonising subject. She is absolutely right that, as we approach 25 November, it is entirely appropriate to speak of these subjects.

The hon. Lady referred to the fact that there may not be a huge number of hon. Members here, but believe you me, Mr Walker, this is an issue that resonates throughout the world. We are fortunate to have Natalia Galibarenko, the ambassador of Ukraine, present. She is here because this matters to Ukrainians today, and not just to Ukrainian people but people who love humanity and decency and who want to correct and at least recognise some of the horrors of the past.

I apologise for the absence of the right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), who is the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Ukraine. He has been summoned to Brussels to meet Monsieur Michel Barnier. It will have been difficult for him to choose whether to go or stay. As a stalwart friend of Ukraine, he would have wanted to be here to join me in paying tribute and credit to the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire.

Famine comes in many guises: the Bengal famine, the Irish famine, the Highland clearances. When Lemkin spoke of genocide in 1943, he referred to two specific instances: the holodomor and the Armenian genocide of April 1915. Those two genocides—I think the hon. Lady is right to use that word—are particularly terrible, each in their own special way.

Let us try to define our terms about the holodomor. There is some confusion as to the exact number of people who died, as the hon. Lady said. In 2010, a court of appeal in Kiev figured that the actual number was nearer 10 million, especially if Kuban, a very large region bigger than a Ukrainian oblast, is included. Sometimes we have to pause and think of the significance of that number—10 million people.

We have to ask ourselves why it happened. It was not because of a failure of the grain crop. Ukraine was and is the bread basket of Europe. It has been the greatest producer and supplier of high quality grain and bread throughout the centuries. Hitler always said that his main point in invading the east was to seize that bread basket and get the waving fields of corn—the grain of Ukraine. It must be the impact of collectivisation—I hope that that is not controversial anymore. Joseph Stalin perceived the kulaks as enemies of the state. Collectivisation resulted in nothing quite as serious as Ukraine, but there were similar crises in the 1930s in four other provinces such as Uzbekistan.

Anyone who has read “And Quiet Flows the Don” by Mikhail Sholokhov will know that when collectivisation was forced on villages, the commissars would come round every few months to see what was happening. Sholokhov writes so brutally in that story that when the commissar inspects the horses in the village and asks the groom, “Is everything was going well, comrade?”, the groom says, “I fear not, comrade commissar, because

every day I have to water the horses. I have to brush the horses. I have to feed the horses. And every day, one horse gets more food, more water and better attention because that was my horse and I can no longer loose those bonds that I had with that one horse.” The commissar shoots him. That was the extent to which human nature was being forced against the grain in Ukraine.

A most successful people were suffering in that brutal way. I hope it is not controversial to say that the holodomor was, by any definition, a man-made famine and a genocide. The individual spirit and courage of the Ukrainian people that we have seen over and over again was a threat to the Comintern and to the Communist party in the 1930s. Anyone who was in the Euromaidan or who has seen the heroic reaction to the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Donetsk and the Donbass region will recognise their immense courage and strength.

Another aspect was the brutal anti-clericalism—the attack on organised religion. One of the actors in the holodomor was Yemelyan Yaroslavsky, who ran an organisation called the League of the Militant Godless. Stalin could never quite come to terms with how the Ukrainian people clung to their faith, whether Catholic in the west or Orthodox in most of the country. Stalin could not cope with that and, although he moderated his anti-clericalism—his brutality, his slaughter of the bishops—after he came to some accommodation with the patriarch in the late 1930s, there was a distinct anti-clerical aspect to the slaughter in Ukraine.

Ukraine was considered an awkward place. As we all know, the word in old Russian means “borderland”. It was perceived as the borderland between Europe and Russia. Of course, Ukraine is far greater than a borderland—it is a great nation in its own right with its own language, culture, poetry, music and football team—but that was how the Russians saw it and they wanted to keep that border safe and sanitised. That meant crushing the religion, crushing the people and crushing the nation, but it absolutely did not work.

For 20 years, I have chaired an organisation called St Michael Mission Trust. It is committed to rebuilding churches mostly in and around the Kiev oblast, Fastiv and Lviv, where we have rebuilt a number of churches. To our amazement, we discovered that faith survived in Ukraine even through the equivalent of penal times when it was pretty awful—in this country we are looking back to the horrors of the gunpowder plot in 1605 so we know what penal times were like. The churches were still there, as were the priests and thriving religion. It is my duty, and I am proud and delighted to be able to say, that we continue to work with people in those churches to re-establish the churches in western Ukraine. I thank my colleague, Małgorzata Zajączkowska, who has worked with me for many years and who represents the finest spirit and emotion.

I hope that hon. Members will indulge my talking about the wider issue of genocide, in particular the Armenian genocide. It was unfortunate that on the hundredth anniversary of that genocide in April 2015 we were distracted by a general election and could not mention it on the floor of the House, but I have had many debates about it there. I sympathise with the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire—I reach across the Chamber to clasp her and say that I, too, have suffered from miserable pettifogging bureaucratic Ministers who are

[Stephen Pound]

incapable of opening their hearts and recognising the full horror. In my case, it was a Minister called Geoffrey Hoon who said that there could be no such thing as “genocide” before 1943. People died of cancer before anybody called it cancer, and that did not make it any less painful.

This was genocide—race murder, by Lemkin’s definition, which was adopted by the United Nations on 9 December 1948. The Ukrainian word “holodomor”—famine genocide—is more specific, but still refers to genocide. When 1.5 million people in Armenia were systematically slaughtered, murdered and driven into the desert to die by agents of the Ottoman empire, particularly in Aleppo and all along the Anatolian coast, that was another genocide. When Lemkin referred to those genocides, he noted the famous statement in Hitler’s speech: “Who now remembers the Armenians?” The Armenians were slaughtered, and so were the Ukrainians.

Is it not extraordinary that until very recently, whenever we in this country spoke about genocide and famine, we did not mention the holodomor in Ukraine? That is because we did not understand it—we did not appreciate the full horror of it. It is much to the credit of the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire and others that we are finally able to confront the issue. I join her enthusiastically, vehemently, powerfully and as strongly as I can—I hope my Front-Bench colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood) will agree—in urging the Government to accept once and for all that the definition of genocide applies to the holodomor. For a nation’s people to be slaughtered and made the victims of genocide is a terrible thing, but the fact that that is not recognised with the word that we all understand as applying to it makes it even worse.

The Minister has had the busiest of days. His Front-Bench duties this afternoon have covered Israel, Yemen and Ukraine, and he is probably exhausted by the number of times he has been called a great, good and decent man on the Floor of the House. I do not resile from that; he is a good man, and I hope that that does not curse his political ambitions. He is flanked by some of the finest brains in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and has a great weight of intellect behind him. However, I urge him: let us stop pettifogging about exact etymologies and chronologies. Let us simply say that what happened in the holodomor in Ukraine was genocide—nothing more, nothing less. It was a specific, targeted genocide that destroyed the best of a generation. It never destroyed the Ukrainian people; it never destroyed their pride, courage and strength; but it took away a generation and it left a painful scar that people still suffer today. No one can visit Ukraine today without seeing that it is still a live wound, a bruise and a source of pain.

Recognising that genocide is the proper description of the holodomor will not bring anybody back, but it may make people feel a little more assured that the rest of the world feels the pain that their ancestors and their families suffered. It may make them feel slightly more vindicated in what they know. We can argue about the origins, argue about Stalin or throw stones at the Communists, but whatever we do, nearly 10 million people died in the most abject agony.

The hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire quite rightly read out the paragraph that we all know so well. We have seen the photographs and we know what it was like—but we cannot feel what it was like. We know through the prism of history, the pages of our textbooks and the screens of our computers—but we cannot know what it is like for people whose grandparents and great-grandparents starved to death. Perhaps they did resort to cannibalism—God forbid, but in moments of desperation, people do desperate things. Is it too much to ask that today we should say, “The Ukrainian people have suffered long and hard. Today we will accept and acknowledge that suffering. We will give it its proper title, its proper name: genocide.”?

3.4 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): There can be nothing more harrowing for parents than watching their children slowly die in front of them over many weeks and months. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) on securing the debate and on her work on the subject; she painted a picture of horror, brutality and oppression. She is absolutely right to call on the Government to recognise the holodomor as genocide. As we have heard, between 7 million and 10 million people died; the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) said that it is now recognised that the number is closer to 10 million than to 7 million. As the hon. Lady pointed out, the holodomor did not simply happen over two years; it was an ongoing oppression that started in 1929 when peasants had their rights stripped away.

One thing that the hon. Lady mentioned made me think of our own islands: the grain that was grown but taken and shipped away from the peasants. This part of the world has also suffered from a man-made famine in which nature had a part to play. In the 1840s, there was a potato blight across the north of Europe. It affected the highlands of Scotland, but it more brutally affected Ireland, particularly in areas such as Donegal and west Cork. While the potatoes that people relied on were being ravaged by the blight, crops were being grown and shipped away to other parts of Britain. Even in our own islands, we have some experience of man-made famine.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about famine and genocide and mentioned a number of famines across the world. He described Ukraine as the breadbasket of Europe and made the point that there was no shortage of grain; the famine was caused by oppression. It was about crushing the people—attacking the peasants. He mentioned the particular targeting of the faith community. He also said that Ukraine was not a borderland, but a nation in its own right—a concept that my party recognises and respects. He raised the important point that some people believe that there was no genocide before the 1940s. We recognise that other genocides have taken place, and it is only right that the holodomor is put in the same category.

May I say a few words on behalf of Scotland? The Scottish Parliament notes the day of remembrance of the holodomor and will recognise it on 25 November. We recognise that it was an entirely avoidable tragedy—a deliberate act of genocide committed by the Stalin regime against the people of Ukraine. I completely agree with the hon. Lady and the hon. Gentleman that the UK Government must recognise that, as other

European Governments have. That recognition is important, not only for people who want to find out more about history, but for relatives of the victims of the holodomor, including in the Ukrainian community in Scotland.

Stephen Pound: I apologise for interrupting the hon. Lady's flow, because she is speaking well, powerfully and passionately, as always. I sometimes despair of the way we tie ourselves in knots. Barack Obama referred to the Armenian genocide as the *meds yeghern*, which simply means "great crime" in Armenian. It seems to me that we are going round and round the houses with these expressions. Surely genocide—from "genus" and "-cide"—is the murder of a race. It is perfectly simple. Let us once and for all stop the obfuscation and the nonsense of trying to justify things with different names. Genocide is genocide. Until we call it that, we cannot be justified in addressing it, attacking it and—most importantly—preventing it.

Carol Monaghan: Absolutely. Work has been done by many campaigners who want to raise awareness of the holodomor. Recognition is important if we are to avoid making the same mistakes again.

The present-day political situation in Ukraine remains tense and the Scottish Government continue to extend their support and solidarity with the people of Ukraine. We look forward to a time when tensions in Ukraine are significantly eased and dialogue is used rather than oppression. I will reiterate the words of my colleagues here: we must recognise the genocide. We must call it out as genocide and we must make sure that history is not repeated.

3.11 pm

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): It is a pleasure and a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) for securing this important debate, in which, as has already been expressed, a huge amount of concern has been raised. She has helped to raise awareness of an issue that is generally under-discussed in this country, including in Parliament. I congratulate her on raising our awareness. She has also given us a timely reminder of why our commitment to helping to resolve the ongoing ethnic tensions in Ukraine remains important.

It is absolutely right that we recognise the famine of the 1930s for the humanitarian catastrophe that it so clearly was. As the writer Anne Applebaum documents in her recent book, "Red Famine", roughly 13% of Ukraine's entire population are likely to have been wiped out in the famine. Even today, the full extent of the death toll may never be known, in part because of the inevitable difficulties involved in determining whether deaths were caused directly by famine or by the widespread malnutrition and disease that inevitably came with it. Whether or not the famine came about because of the deliberate policies of the Stalin regime, it is surely undeniable that it was a man-made disaster that could and should have been avoided. As Anne Applebaum's book reminds us, the highly emotive and sensitive question of whether the episode amounts to a genocide against the Ukrainian people remains unresolved.

The Opposition share the Government's view that the definition of genocide is necessarily a matter of law. All three speakers in today's debate have raised that issue

with a great amount of passion, and the substance of the debate has recognised that. The matter must be tested in a court of law for us to be able to move forward and deal with it. Until that is done, it is difficult for Parliament to do anything, and whether the Government want to do that will be an issue for us in future. The question of whether the precise legal threshold for a classification of genocide has been met in any particular case must be left for the courts to decide.

That said, we must try to avoid becoming so preoccupied with the legal questions that we risk losing sight of the very real consequences of the tragedy for the Ukrainians of the time and of today. Entrenched divisions in the region, most predominantly but by no means exclusively between ethnic Russians and Ukrainians, continue to drive the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine and to hamper efforts to resolve it. We should remember that, in Ukraine, debates about whether the 1930s famine constitutes a genocide often play out as debates pitting the ethnic Ukrainian majority against the Russian-speaking minority, who have often felt marginalised by Kiev.

We should also remember that, more than any other factor, it is the Russian Government's outrageously reckless and irresponsible efforts to fan the flames of grievances, particularly by continuing to provoke separatist sentiment in the Russian-speaking eastern regions, that continue to prolong a devastating conflict that has so far claimed more than 10,000 lives. As we remember the tragic events of Ukraine's past, we must also redouble our efforts to help to resolve the challenges of the present. In this regard, we must first and foremost re-focus attention on the need for a peaceful resolution to the conflicts in eastern Ukraine and in Crimea under Russian occupation.

It is disappointing that, under this Government, the UK has largely been an observer of the diplomatic process led by France and Germany, rather than an active participant. Can the Minister therefore tell us what specific steps the Government are now taking to support that process? What plans does he have to secure more active participation by the UK in efforts aimed at resolving the crisis peacefully?

Secondly, as the Government's Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill moves through Parliament, what guarantees can the Minister give that, when we leave the EU, there will be no attempt to revoke or otherwise water down the sanctions that we have in place against Russia with regard to its actions in Ukraine and, specifically, that those sanctions will remain in place until the Minsk agreements have been implemented in full?

Finally, given that we are leaving the EU, it is important to remember how valuable the ability to co-ordinate on foreign policy with our European partners has been both for the UK and for the rest of the EU. This is particularly the case with regard to Ukraine, from co-ordinating sanctions between 28 EU member states to providing trade and other incentives for the political reforms that the Government of Ukraine must continue to pursue. Securing a formal set of arrangements on continuing close co-operation when we leave should be one of the Government's top priorities. As far as I can tell, no plans have been made and there has been no progress on this issue in the negotiations, either. If I am wrong, I would be very happy for the Minister to correct me.

[Mr Khalid Mahmood]

We need more than just warm words from the Government. We need an actual plan—a detailed and credible one—for securing a framework for the foreign policy co-operation that is so vital to sustaining British influence in places such as Ukraine. Seventy-five years on from a devastating famine, the country once again finds itself in a crisis. Just as we must commemorate the events of the past and give them their due recognition, so we must also bring our renewed commitment to healing the divides that are still very much with us today. I look forward to hearing from the Minister how the Government intend to do that.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Mrs Latham will get two minutes once the Minister sits down.

3.17 pm

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) for securing this debate, which, for her, is not just a matter of routine. She spoke eloquently, and with emotion and passion, about the difficulty of the events we are describing today. It was one of those speeches, like that of the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), that I wish there were more people around to hear; but I have no doubt that, through the miracles of modern science, more people will get the opportunity to hear the speeches. I congratulate hon. Members on what they have said.

I apologise on behalf of the Minister for Europe and the Americas, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan), whose portfolio includes Ukraine. He is travelling on ministerial duties, but would have been pleased to answer the debate. It therefore falls to me to do so.

The powerful opening speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire and the contributions of other hon. Members have brought home the immense suffering and brutality of the Ukrainian holodomor. I remember my own contact with the Ukrainian community in north Manchester very well. My wife and I visited the Smedley Lane community centre numerous times. We went one year at Eastertime to decorate the eggs. I think my children, who are now 30 and 32, still have them somewhere in a corner of the bedroom. We watched beautiful dancing, and we enjoyed being with the Ukrainian community in Bury and north Manchester. It is nice to have the opportunity to pay tribute to their courtesy and friendliness towards one of the local MPs, and to thank them.

The hon. Member for Ealing North spoke as fluently as he always does. He puts us all to shame. There is never a note in sight, and he speaks with a fluency clearly based on deep general knowledge and understanding of the situation. He represents his community very well, and, having travelled with him to eastern Europe with the Inter-Parliamentary Union, I know that those patterns are very deep. He spoke with immense clarity, on the Armenian issue and on Ukraine, and other issues; it was a powerful speech. His kindness towards me is appreciated, particularly when, as I am sure he knows, I

am unable to agree with his conclusion and change the Government's position. I appreciate the way he put things.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), speaking for the Scottish National party, drew attention to a part of British history—the Irish famine and the highland clearances—with echoes in the present context. My ancestors, the Robertsons, are buried in a common grave on Culloden field, and the story of the highland clearances and the writing of John Prebble have influenced many of us to try to understand more about rather forgotten elements of British history. Scots brought up in England do not hear a lot about Scottish history. However, history and memory more than a legal definition are at the heart of the matter. Definitions matter, and names and what things are called matter; but memory probably matters more—how communities remember what happened in the past, and recognising atrocities for what they are, whether a particular label is put on to those things.

When a community survives such a thing, the things that are highly pertinent are the development of tight relationships, as well as commemoration through poetry, song, dance or—particularly in the cases of communities that move abroad—spending time together and continuing the language and affection for the region. The debate must focus on the legal definition of genocide as the United Kingdom sees it, and the fact that, as I shall explain, the UK cannot change its position; but that does not detract from the understanding of memory on which this afternoon's speeches have been based.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire movingly quoted a poem, but there are others, such as "Through the Eyes of a Child" by Halia Dmytryshyn. The poem describes Ukraine as a land of song and plenty whose soil is enriched with minerals, and all the food that is available, and then moves on to death and famine stalking the land like ravaging wolves. Such language in a way does more than a legal definition of genocide.

Having made those general remarks, let me return to the issue that my hon. Friend has raised. She certainly made clear the immense suffering and brutality of the Ukrainian holodomor. It was a devastating chapter in Soviet and Ukrainian history. My hon. Friend and the Ukrainian community in her constituency—and throughout the country—deserve credit for keeping the memory alive. In doing so, they honour the victims and strengthen our resolve to ensure that such horrors never happen again. The famine, which reached its darkest depths during 1932 and 1933, was a tragedy of such magnitude that it is difficult to comprehend; 85 years later it remains a shocking reminder of the deadly consequences of the policies and political goals of the Soviet Union. As the hon. Member for Ealing North made clear, it is hard to comprehend how such an event would be covered today when, with modern communications, we would be able to see much more of what was happening, or to know what the impact of that awareness would have been.

There is still some debate about the exact number of people who died during the holodomor and the extent to which Stalin and his Government set out systematically to destroy Ukraine alone. However, it is not in question that the famine caused appalling suffering, and that responsibility for it lay squarely with the leaders of the

Soviet Union. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire has called on the Government to recognise the holodomor as a genocide. I understand the basis for her request. I remember dealing with a debate in this Chamber with similar aims, about what happened to the Kurdish community under Saddam Hussein, and how difficult it was to respond. As the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood) mentioned, there are certain legal requirements that successive British Governments have believed we must follow. It was hard, in responding, not to give the legal recognition that people would want. However, we believe that there are sound reasons to refrain from doing so.

The matters in question are essentially criminal ones, and we believe that the appropriate courts are best placed to make a judgment on them, taking all the evidence into account. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire asked in particular about direction to UK courts; but it is not necessarily for UK courts to decide. The legal definition can be decided by any court anywhere. Our approach has guided successive UK Governments in relation to other atrocities. The decisions to recognise as genocides the holocaust, the 1994 killings in Rwanda, and the 1995 massacre in Srebrenica came about only following judgments by appropriate courts in line with the definition set out in international law. Having been to Rwanda and Srebrenica and seen the after-effects, and spoken to people, I am aware that the definition matters. The definition was found appropriate in those circumstances, and used.

Stephen Pound: Earlier the Minister mentioned the contribution that Ukrainian people have made to this country. They made a huge contribution to coal mining and steel; there is a huge Ukrainian community in Sheffield. There was even a Member of Parliament—Simon Danczuk, who is no longer in the House—of Ukrainian origin. Many Ukrainian people will be listening today. Does the Minister agree that if the holodomor took place today, there would be no doubt that it should be called a genocide?

Alistair Burt: It is a good question, but I am not sure that I know the answer. As I have said, that is how the Kurdish community regards what happened to it under Saddam Hussein, and the chemical warfare inflicted on its people in relatively recent times. Because most, though not all, countries have recognised that the definition of genocide is a legal one, rather than a political act, I am not necessarily certain about what the hon. Gentleman says. I should hope that the world's response would be not to allow something of that magnitude to happen, but I have spent the past couple of hours dealing with events in the middle east, from Yemen through to the activities of Daesh in Iraq. It would be nice to say that we live in a world where “never again” means never again, but I do not think for a moment that we do. I am not sure what the definition would be.

However, the world might be able to stop such events, and action might be taken against the perpetrators. That is now possible, as it was possible after Srebrenica, when people were taken to court through the work of the International Commission on Missing Persons, which identified those who had died. The identifications of the dead and of the places where they had died led to the identification of those who had killed them, so

justice could be done. That is certainly something that would probably happen in the modern day. The purpose of today's debate is the world's recognition of the atrocity for what it was. That is the reason for the work of those who keep its memory alive—whatever dates are most appropriate for commemorating it.

Mrs Latham: The Minister mentioned what happened in Rwanda. That was never known as a genocide while it was happening, although the population talked about a genocide; it came afterwards. Does the Minister have an answer to the question why the world does not want to recognise something as genocide while it is happening? There is the Rohingya crisis at the moment, and there have been continuous genocides happening, but the world does not want to recognise them until they are over, which is too late to do anything about them.

Alistair Burt: I honestly do not believe that it is too late to do anything about them; the definition or designation of events, whether at the time or afterwards, does not prevent Governments of the world from taking appropriate action to deal with them. The fact that since 1948 it has been possible to designate events, and to strengthen the hand of the international community if it wants to take action in those cases, is important. Rwanda and Srebrenica were dealt with by a legal definition, and that is what the United Kingdom still depends on when dealing with more contemporary events. That the Ukrainian holodomor happened some 85 years ago makes no difference to the depth of pain and suffering endured, or to the horrors that my hon. Friend rightly described.

I am afraid that the Government remain convinced that recognition decisions should be based on credible judicial processes, and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr agreed with that. Our stance on the holodomor will continue to follow that approach. He asked a couple of questions, to which I would like to respond. On our engagement with Ukraine, the UK stands shoulder to shoulder with the Ukrainian people in upholding Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and we remain committed to providing political and practical support to Ukraine over the long term. The UK has been at the forefront of international efforts to hold Russia to account for its aggression in Ukraine, and the EU, NATO, the G7, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the UN will continue to do so.

We remain clear that sanctions are linked to the full implementation of the Minsk agreements and the end of Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, and we will continue to push for that commitment to be upheld. We believe that sanctions should continue until the Minsk agreements are fully implemented, and I have seen no suggestion that that should change in any way as a result of our leaving the EU.

As Members will know, my view is that our political relationships with the EU should be as close as possible. The United Kingdom has benefited enormously politically from our relationships throughout the EU when dealing with common crises in a common and united way. One of the more unfortunate consequences of the people's decision to leave the European Union is that that is called into question, but I see no need for that to be the case. It is clearly in the United Kingdom's interests, following March 2019, to ensure that political relationships

[Alistair Burt]

remain close. We will not be at Council of Ministers meetings in future, but Ministers in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office are particularly concerned to find alternative ways of ensuring the sorts of relationships that one could develop in the margins of those meetings.

Although I recognise the point made by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr, which it is perfectly fair to raise, my sense from the Department for International Development and the FCO, both of which I represent, is that there is determination to ensure that those close relationships with our friends and partners in the European Union are not broken in any way by our decision to take a different path in the future—a future in which they will be partners, but in a slightly different manner.

Before I ask my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire to conclude the debate, let me say that our approach to the legal definition should in no way diminish the importance or enormity of the Ukrainian holodomor and what the Government think about it; nor does it diminish the horror that we feel about it. It remains vital to remember and reflect on such tragedies, and to recommit to working to ensure that they do not happen again. The importance of that cannot be overstated. In the 85 years since the beginning of the holodomor, countless people, both inside and outside Ukraine, have fought to keep alive the memory of those millions who died, and the Government pay tribute to their efforts. This chapter in Europe's history is too important to be forgotten, and it is vital that it be commemorated, so that lessons can be learned for generations to come. We are indebted to all colleagues who have taken part in the debate for doing just that.

3.34 pm

Mrs Latham: I am disappointed, to say the least—I am sure that the Minister recognises this—that we will not recognise the holodomor as a genocide. We recognised the holocaust as a genocide retrospectively, so surely we should do the same for the holodomor, given the wealth

of evidence out there. I hope that the Minister will refer my thoughts to the Minister for Europe and the Americas, who is unable to be with us today.

I am really very disappointed—I cannot express how disappointed I am—that although this is the second debate that I have initiated in the House on this subject, we have not moved anywhere. I am also slightly disappointed that the Minister did not answer my four questions. Perhaps he or his Department will write to me with guidance about how the Ukrainian people can progress this matter, and in which courts, and on the best route forward. I thank the hon. Members for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), and for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood), for participating in this debate. The more people who speak about this issue, the wider the awareness will be among people in this country, who will recognise it.

Finally, lots of books have been written about this genocide, but I recommend the latest one by Anne Applebaum, “Red Famine: Stalin's war on Ukraine”. One has only to look at the photographs of the people in that book, or any photographs from that period, to recognise that those people starved to death. We must never forget that.

I thank the Minister for responding to the debate; I am delighted that he was able to, as I know it was a bit of a push. I also thank other Members, including the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who had to rush to catch a plane home. I thank Members for participating; we must not forget this issue.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): I thank the Minister for indicating to the Chair that he will be writing to the hon. Lady.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Ukrainian Holodomor.

3.36 pm

Sitting suspended.

Property Management Company Fees

[MR NIGEL EVANS *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered property management company fees.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I am delighted to have the opportunity to lead this debate on an issue that has affected a number of my constituents in Rochester and Strood and that has no doubt affected thousands more across the country. Over recent years, we have seen a model being used by developers where development sites are managed by management companies after the delivery of freehold and leasehold properties. A rising proportion of residents of such properties are left having to deal with property management companies when they have issues.

Some property managing agents do take the work out of owning a flat and offer great value for money for residents. Everyone acknowledges that property management fees are a standard part of owning a flat, but when people buy a freehold house on a large development, those fees are not something that always comes to mind. Management companies will typically cover repairs to the communal areas of a development, including to the windows, drainage and the roof. Often they will also cover recreational spaces within grounds, such as children's play areas or gyms. In some cases, the fees are also used to pay for other shared services, such as gardeners, landscapers, concierge services or cleaners. Understandably, service fees can differ between developments. Fees can be a flat rate for all premises, or they can be determined by the number of bedrooms or a property's floor space. However, some agencies can charge high fees and evidently do not necessarily offer a service worthy of the amount, even by modern standards.

Research last year found that the typical annual fee for new build homes is £2,777, while for older properties it is £1,863. For many families and individuals that is a significant added living cost, and it is understandable that residents become concerned and irritated when there is no value for money. I therefore want to use this ideal setting to highlight the impact that unjustified property management service charges have on local homeowners. A number of constituents have got in touch regarding exorbitant charges from local housing associations and property management companies for services that are simply not carried out.

In my constituency, many residents of the Chimes and the Pastures estates in Hoo are having ongoing disputes with their new property management company, SDL Bigwood. When householders on the estates bought their properties, they were informed that only when the whole of the estate was handed over from Taylor Wimpey and Bellway would they incur property management charges. Until then, Taylor Wimpey and Bellway would pay them. Unfortunately, the companies failed to communicate with residents as to when any handover would be made. In fact, residents were left completely in the dark over the reality, which was that the handover of the whole estate would no longer happen. Instead, only a few parts would be handed over. It then became

apparent that SDL Bigwood tried to bring forward debts from its former business for services that residents did not see being implemented.

Currently, there is no onus on the property management company to provide any evidence of the services they are charging for being carried out. They merely need to provide end-of-year accounts long after the end of the year. Some residents face paying thousands of pounds for a backlog of fees passed on from one of the former companies, with payment demanded by the end of the year. That is all despite the estate being in surplus. However, as the huge sums are still needed in advance, and as all this is legally tied up in title deeds and TP1 property transfer papers, residents find themselves having to pay with no right of challenge. It is wrong that so many people who only want to provide a roof over their families' heads find themselves trapped and helpless and see their money wasted.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady for securing this debate. I recently had a case raised with me where a couple purchased a leasehold flat from a developer. Once they had completed on the purchase, they were informed that the advertised service charge was going to be doubled. They were given no explanation, and when they asked questions, the company could not explain why it was doubling its fees. Does she agree that we need to clamp down on that kind of practice? We need to tackle rogue landlords who prey on people, including a number of my constituents in Barnsley East.

Kelly Tolhurst: I agree with the hon. Lady. I will come to some more examples from my constituency where charges are not transparent, but this debate is about leaseholders and freeholders in particular, as opposed to people who are renting their properties. That is what I am talking about today.

To give another example, one of my constituents reported that in the past financial year, their estimated service charge increased from £85 a month to £128 a month. If that was not already bad enough, the housing association, Hyde Housing, failed to get its figures ready for the April payment. As a result, the charge the individual paid in May increased by more than 100%.

The breakdown of Hyde's figures makes for astounding reading. For example, there is a charge for "Fire safety, including servicing and inspections" of £34 a month. The building in question consists of a block of 24 flats. If all properties are charged similar amounts, the charge brings in more than £800 a month. However, the actual inspection takes just 15 minutes, in addition to the time taken for paperwork, and only occurs annually. I understand there are fire extinguishers and a sprinkler system to maintain over the years, but £800 a month seems excessive to many of the families and individuals. In addition, there are charges of around £90 a month for grounds maintenance. I am familiar with the plots around the block, and it is clear that any maintenance is minimal, and certainly worth nowhere near a value of £90 a flat a month. My constituent's block is also paying nearly £250 a month collectively for unspecified provisions that many residents do not understand, and those provisions are not disclosed by the association.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. She raised the issues of uncertainty and hidden fees.

[Nigel Huddleston]

Does she agree that those are exactly what frustrates our constituents? If the fees were abolished and there was a higher up-front cost in terms of the house purchase price, that would be preferable, because at least people would then know with certainty what they had got themselves into.

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I completely agree. When I speak to my constituents, they say they want to be clear about the costs when buying a house or a lease on a property. Some of the management charges that are levied bring people into difficult situations. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: people would much rather have that up-front cost than the threat of the charges changing over time.

To return to the example I was discussing, it is regularly reported that simple repairs on things such as faulty lighting are not carried out and communication with energy suppliers seems to be non-existent. For instance, residents were issued a letter from E.ON informing them that the electricity for the building would be switched off. That would bring everything in the block to a complete standstill, and Hyde did not rush to the rescue. In that instance, my constituent took Hyde Housing to the Lands Tribunal, but unfortunately they met technical stumbling blocks when presenting the case, in particular around providing alternative quotations for the work involved, which no lay person can comprehend.

I will give one final example, which involves London and Quadrant Housing. It was given the right to levy service charges on all properties on the estate, which was formerly part of the Ministry of Defence land at Lodge Hill. I am sure the Minister will know it well. Another constituent has brought a grievance case to me on London and Quadrant's totalling of the amounts charged. The final figure for each property is based on expenditure and the management fee across the estate, which is divided by the number of houses. However, residents have argued on a number of occasions that the wording in the schedule relating to the original sale of the land only gives it a right to levy a service charge where there is a benefit to the parties involved.

All bar one of the items for which charges were levied related exclusively to older properties that predated the sale of the land—for example, the blocks of flats. However, London and Quadrant tried to charge for street lamps and street cleaning, which were both undertaken by the local authority, Medway Council. Similarly, charges around sewage collection—later deemed to be out of the association's remit—were also questioned. In fact, of the full list of initial charges, the only one that could vaguely be charged to the houses built in 2001 and 2002 was the play park on the estate, but given it is always in such a poor condition, it is rarely used.

What, then, is the management company there for, and how can residents be certain that they are paying fairly for the correct things? In that last example, some residents were so fed up that they refused to pay charges any more, and apart from their yearly statements there was no attempt to collect the money. I wonder whether that was simply incompetence or, more likely, because they knew full well that the charges were unjustified, and they would probably lose if challenged in court.

Those examples are from my constituency alone and I could, of course, go on, but it shows that something needs to change. This is an industry with too much room to rip off those with few options. The room for manoeuvre that leaseholders have to take back some control remains limited, and such action is not viable for a number of families and individuals. Ultimately, the best way to proceed if someone is having issues with their property management company is to buy the freehold. However, that may not be possible for a number of reasons, such as not having the minimum number of leaseholders in the block of flats to take over the management of the block, not to mention collective action challenges. Furthermore, as I have already outlined, the issue does not only affect leaseholders; it affects freeholders as well.

Some families and households are already struggling with rising bills and the like, which makes purchasing a freehold a more remote possibility. Those families and households are trapped under the direction and reliance of property management companies. We need a recognition of the flaws in the property management company sector when it comes to service charges. We are talking about people's livelihoods, and in too many circumstances they are being ripped off by a service that does not respect value.

Serviced residences throughout the country are being subjected to this unregulated scandal, and with the ongoing increase in house building, more and more people will be subject to the unfair will of private companies without any course of redress. I hope the Minister has heard enough to see that regulation is needed to protect families and individuals, many of whom work hard to put a roof over their heads. This Government have a proud record of standing up for fairness when it comes to families and workers, and I hope that we can lead the way in this area.

In my constituency of Rochester and Strood, in the local authority of Medway, we face high numbers of new homes being built over the next 15 years—something that I suggest is slightly unrealistic. However, if large numbers of houses are to be built under the current model, where people can buy freehold properties and leasehold properties on large estates that are run by property management companies, the problem that we are talking about today will only become greater for people in my constituency, and all those who want to buy homes across the United Kingdom.

4.14 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Alok Sharma): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) on securing this incredibly important debate, on an issue which matters to her constituents and those of many Members across the House. She has highlighted a number of individual cases with organisations. As a result of the debate, they will no doubt have heard the concerns that she has very publicly raised. I hope that those organisations will reflect and communicate with her.

The Government are committed to fairness in the housing sector. We recently committed to improving consumer choice and fairness for leaseholders, which I will come on to. We are also now doing the same in the property management sector, in recognition of the growing

concern about the quality of service that some managing agents provide to leaseholders, which my hon. Friend highlighted. I am aware that she has received representations from her constituents, and other Members have received similar representations from theirs. Clearly, we have to act to address those issues and create a housing market that ultimately works for everyone and has fairness at its heart.

As the number of leasehold and private rented homes in England has grown, so of course has the market for property managers. According to one estimate, annual service charges alone now amount to as much as £3.5 billion. All property agents, no matter their size or the type of property they manage—whether working with private landlords or indeed housing associations, as my hon. Friend mentioned—have a significant level of responsibility in the jobs they do. My hon. Friend is right: if one pays hundreds of pounds for a service, one expects the person providing the service to be a competent, experienced professional who will deliver what has been agreed.

Currently, however, anyone can set up a business as a property agent, even if they have no experience. Agents are not currently required to have any qualifications, undertake training or indeed be accredited, so unsurprisingly some experts believe that agents are overcharging by as much as £1.4 billion every year, with reports of poor service or even, in some cases, no service provided at all, as my hon. Friend has highlighted today. That is totally unacceptable, and I appreciate the frustration that my hon. Friend's constituents must feel when paying service charges over which they have little or no say and then, on top of that, finding it extremely difficult to challenge overcharging or a lack of delivery.

Existing processes for leaseholders to seek redress or decide to carry out their own property management are often lengthy and complex, leaving them at the mercy of agents who are not doing their jobs or, if they are doing them, doing them pretty badly. That is why the Government are committed to doing more to protect leaseholders' consumer rights. The housing White Paper of February this year promised to tackle abuse of leasehold—something that has struck a real chord with consumers. We saw that in the 6,000 responses that we received to the public

consultation. I can confirm that we aim to respond to that consultation before Christmas.

It is also right that we now take action to raise standards in the property management sector. To that end, we have issued a call for evidence on whether we need to regulate property management agents, and what approach would have the most positive impact. In doing so, our focus is on protecting and empowering those who pay for managing agents' services, including leaseholders. We want to make it easier for them to stop unfair fees and exorbitant service charges, and to access effective redress. We also want to make the process for removing or switching agents much easier.

With that in mind, the call for evidence poses questions about minimum entry requirements, promoting financial transparency and different regulatory approaches, such as a professional body for property agents, or perhaps a Government-established body to enforce standards and best practice. We want to hear the views of everyone who has an interest in those matters, and I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood will take that message clearly to her constituents. The call for evidence closes on 29 November. The easiest way to take part is online, by entering the title of the call for evidence—"Protecting consumers in the letting and managing agent market"—into the search box at www.gov.uk. We will listen carefully to feedback from those who know the market best to find the right way forward.

The sector has taken some encouraging steps towards self-regulation and sharing best practice. There are a number of industry bodies who champion high standards. However, poor practice undermines those laudable efforts, so it is vital that we root it out and raise standards across the board. We want to give agents a clear and consistent framework to operate in, and leaseholders confidence in the way their homes are being managed, which will ultimately create a fairer, more transparent system where professionalism is the norm. I know that is what all Members want to see.

Question put and agreed to.

4.20 pm

Sitting suspended.

Family Planning Clinics: Public Order Legislation

4.30 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered public order legislation relating to family planning clinics.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I thank all the people who helped me to come up with the content of my speech, including the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, Marie Stopes International and our local campaign group, Sister Supporter.

I have been the MP for Ealing Central and Acton since the year before last, but I have been an Ealonian for 45 years, and this issue has been bothering me on my patch for the past three decades. It had the eyes of the world on Ealing just last month.

The Marie Stopes clinic in my constituency provides legal NHS abortions. It is on a busy thoroughfare, Mattock Lane, which borders a park. There are a prep school and an amateur theatre on the road, and West Ealing and Ealing Broadway stations are on either side of it, so a lot of people walk through it. In recent years, it has become simply impassable because of the pro-life protesters outside the gates of the clinic, who proposition women on their way in and out with distressing imagery. They have had me seething with rage since the '90s. For the past two years, Sister Supporter, a counter-protest group, has been added to the mix. I am cheered to see those young women in their pink hi-vis tabards, because at a time when we are told that young people are not interested in politics, they are a shining counter-example of what people can do if they get active.

I find it uncomfortable to go down that street. I take my son to his theatre group there, and when he says, "Mummy, who are those people? What do they want? What are they doing?" it is quite difficult to explain. I will make a confession: I would rather none of those groups be there, because it is the women clinic users who are made to feel degraded.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her excellent work on this very sensitive issue. Has she considered the additional psychological impact that the anti-choice protesters have on those women, who may already be traumatised by having to go through the process of a termination? Some of those protesters hand out plastic fetuses and rosary beads, and tell women who are about to go into the clinic that they will be haunted by their baby. Does my hon. Friend agree that that has a significant extra psychological effect?

Dr Huq: I completely agree with my hon. Friend's powerful point. It is perhaps the most difficult decision that those women have to make, and then they have all that moral guilt heaped on them. She rightly describes the visual aids that the protesters bring along. The women's path is barred and their access is blocked; they are caught up in the crossfire.

This week, there has been talk all over the media about the harassment of women in Westminster, so some of these arguments are familiar. No woman should

be in fear of going about their legal daily business, whether that is going to work in the Palace of Westminster or anything else.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that this is not just about the women going into those clinics to seek advice about their medical situation, although they are the primary victims? It is also about the staff, who find it extremely intimidating and unpleasant to fight their way through those people.

Dr Huq: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I went to the other side of the barrage to speak to the staff of the Marie Stopes clinic, and people call out to them, "Mum, mum!" in a blackmail type of way. They are caught up in all this, too. They cannot get to work. As we have been saying in relation to the harassment scandal, no woman should be in fear of going to their daily workplace in Westminster, and the same applies to the Marie Stopes clinic and BPAS clinics all over the country. Those women are trying to access totally legal healthcare, and the staff are trying to deliver it.

Last month, Ealing Council passed a motion to prevent harassment outside our clinic, which has been going on for 23 years—I was not keeping count. Women have been subject to intimidation and harassment in what are called vigils. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) said, they are told that they will be haunted by the ghost of their baby and are presented with misleading faux-medical leaflets. In the age of social media, the activity has been ramped up. Women are Facebook live-streamed as they come and go from the clinics. Those actions cross a line. They are not about changing the law. That is not protest but harassment.

My local police have long told me that public order legislation is insufficient to do anything about what they describe as a stand-off between the two groups. My friends from Sister Supporter would completely agree that they should not have to be there. If the first part of the problem went away, they would, too.

I am pleased that the Minister is before us today, because as he said on social media yesterday,

"Decisions on future police funding will be based on evidence, not assertion. Thx to all CCs and PCCs who have helped us update evidence."

I hope he extends that to police practice. I have got some quotes from my local police force, which I will bring up later. I know that he has visited every police force in England and Wales as part of the Home Office's demand review. I urge him to pop over to Ealing nick—it is not very far away from his seat of Ruislip. He is a near neighbour, constituency-wise.

Paula Sherriff: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way one more time. Am I correct in thinking that some of the anti-choice protesters have taken to protesting outside the offices of MPs who are pro-choice, bringing very distressing images and handing out leaflets and other alarming literature? Does she agree that such behaviour is reprehensible?

Dr Huq: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, as always. At my office in Acton, a group called Abort67 unfurled huge graphic images of dismembered fetuses,

so speaking out against abuse invites abuse. I was in Westminster on that day, but parents complained to me because there are two primary schools in the vicinity of our office and they did not want to walk their kids past all that. My hon. Friend makes an excellent point.

Rather like with the Westminster scandal, there is a sense that things cannot go on as they are. It is unsustainable. The evidence pack that Sister Supporter compiled for the 8 October Ealing Council meeting is a powerful document. It includes statements from residents, photographic evidence, video transcripts and the leaflets that have been distributed by the pro-life lobby, which includes groups such as Abort67, the Good Counsel Network and 40 Days for Life. Their claims have been meticulously fact-checked, and they have been found to be lying, frankly.

I went to the other side of the barrage to speak to the people at Marie Stopes Ealing. The clinic logs every incident. Comments such as “God will punish you” are made to service users. People have been grabbed, their entrance has been prevented and they have been called “murderer”. The plastic foetus dolls, which my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury described, are wildly inaccurate. The groups use graphic images designed to shock, and teddy bears—pink for a girl and blue for a boy.

It is not just me who thinks this. Abortion has been legal in this country for 50 years. The week before last, with the help of the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, I compiled a letter that was signed by 112 other MPs from five different parties, including four party leaders. It called on the Government to take action in the wake of the historic Ealing decision. The fact is that 50 years on, women daily have to run a gauntlet to have that procedure done. This is not simply an Ealing issue. It happens in Portsmouth, Doncaster and many other places. It is one of the few issues that has united MPs such as our leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), and the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith). Lots of people were queuing up to sign the letter. Anyone who has a clinic in their constituency is supportive of it, because they know what goes on there. The present system is unsustainable.

Make no mistake: the protesters are implacably opposed to abortion under any circumstances. Their tactics are emotive. As an illustration of the cross-party support for this issue, when the motion came to Ealing Council, every one of the 61 councillors present, representing three parties, supported it, and just two people abstained. There was a reassuring degree of unanimity. Two Conservatives, who are medics—one a vet, the other a GP—and who fought me tooth and nail in the general election, pointed out that their anatomy classes have told them that the foetus drawings and the dolls are completely wrong, and ditto the bogus science in the information leaflets thrust into people’s hands. The mistruths include the description of how developed the foetus is at 24 weeks—it is shown as having fingernails and things when that is just not the case—and the statement that women get breast cancer as a result of an abortion, which is completely unproven.

I completely get the point about public protest. We have a long and honourable tradition in this country of many legislative changes coming about through protest by people such as the suffragettes, on the right to vote

for women—the Levellers and the Diggers. If the Ealing protesters really want to make a point through public protest, surely they should stage it here at Parliament where there are 650 legislators, or at the town hall or somewhere similar. Harassment is not protest; it is unacceptable. Buffer zones are needed to stop the gendered intimidation that is going on. With this debate, I am calling for a durable and lasting solution, because the Ealing idea only goes so far. It is being talked about as a test case, but it must be more than that; it should be the start of a national answer to the problem.

The Home Office identifies three pieces of legislation that cover harassment and intimidation outside clinics, but each of them has gaps and problems; there are grey areas that we need to turn into black and white. The Public Order Act 1986 covers words or images that are “threatening, abusive or insulting”, or people behaving in such a way as to cause “harassment, alarm or distress”, but it does not apply to every case or individual, and does not account for the stress or the coercion of women into non-attendance; women have been found to be simply delaying the decision and having to come back another day when the protestors are not there. That Act is wanting.

The Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 allows dispersal of individuals causing harm or distress, but only for 48 hours. If that had to be done every 48 hours over 23 years, there would be a total of 4,198 police actions; we came up with that with a calculator. That Act is also unsatisfactory.

A public spaces protection order, as proposed by Ealing Council, is more of a local byelaw type of thing that is used against antisocial behaviour, to move on street drinkers or drug dealers. Again, it is temporary and applies only to a certain number of streets. Imaginative use has been made of the order, and I salute Councillor Aysha Raza, who is in the Public Gallery, and Councillor Julian Bell, the council leader: they introduced a PSPO as a last resort to stop the 23-year campaign of harassment, but doing so was a long process. All the evidence had to be gathered, such as videos, clinic logs and testimony, through several years of work by committed volunteers, such as those from Sister Supporter, who would not take a no from central Government. We can do better.

My local police have said that they cannot wait for the PSPO to address the gaps in their powers, but they foresee problems. The pro-life people are often well endowed—from America, we believe—and they have said that when the order is implemented they will stage mass incursions and mount legal challenges. Furthermore, sections 12 and 14 of the Public Order Act have quite a high threshold to demonstrate “serious” damage or disruption and violence.

The Saturday after the council decision, I went with Sister Supporter to Mattock Lane. Many expected some kind of overnight change, but it had not happened because we are at the stage of the eight-week statutory consultation. Instead, there was an almost—I am sorry to put it like this—“West Side Story” stand-off, something like the Montagues and Capulets. There were six police who said to me that they would rather be doing other stuff than guarding women who should be able to go about their legal business in safety. The police recognised the physical and emotional trauma suffered by the women, and said that they would rather be dealing with

[Dr Huq]

shoplifting on the nearby high street, engaging with young people on neighbouring estates or carrying out weapon sweeps.

In January 2017, when I asked a question in the main Chamber, I was told that any such situation would inevitably require local police judgment of some sort. Our police in Ealing say that they have limited resources per ward—six police officers ties up the two Walpole ward officers plus four from outside, so that whole neighbourhood team is deployed to that one place. They say they would rather the protests were moved away from the gates of the clinic so a woman could get a taxi there and go straight in. With a radius of 150 metres or something like that, the protestors could not stop everyone at the perimeter.

The officer I spoke to said: “I recognise the right to protest. It is not an offence, but the turmoil from calling ‘mummy, mummy’ to someone at the 11th hour is not constructive or useful.” He said that both groups have perfected what they can and cannot do. The argument is often that no prosecutions have taken place for 23 years, but that is because people know how to operate within the law. Also, women often do not want the hassle of giving evidence for a prosecution, which is similar to what is happening in the Westminster harassment scandal.

The police want the protests moved away from the venue so that the “angst” would not be there and so that they would not be policing the two sides from “coming to blows”. They also raised the issue of better funding and resourcing: in the words of that same beat officer, “It is difficult to pull your boots on if you don’t feel supported and appreciated.” The Minister wished for evidence on the ground, so I have brought him some today.

Paula Sherriff: When the Minister responds, will he address the fact that his Government recently awarded an anti-choice charity called Life £250,000 from the tampon tax fund in what I believe is the largest award? Life’s website previously referred to termination as “murder”. I understand that the award is for specific activities, although one of the chief executives of the charity told me that if they were helping a woman who decided to go on and have a termination, they would withdraw any support from her, including housing. Particularly given the language that Life uses, is it helpful for the Government to fund such charities?

Dr Huq: I am interested to hear that. I have seen the story on social media—although I have not seen the detail—and like my hon. Friend, I am waiting to hear what the Minister says about that anomaly.

Ealing has been talked about as a test case, yet local government has suffered in the past 10 years. Ealing Council has had a cut of £168 million—half its operating budget—since 2010. Everyone is trying to do more and more with less and less. That is why we need a national solution at a time of unprecedented austerity in local government. The attacks on the budgets of police and local government make me think that the best solution is a national one, with new legislation to tackle this ongoing gendered street harassment—that is what it is. It is about shaming women for choices they have made.

No outside person can know why they made that choice; it may be for myriad circumstances. It is about controlling women in a horrible, public, misogynistic fashion.

Other criticisms I have heard of PSPOs is that they involve an arduous process. The burden is on the council to introduce the order and the police to enforce it. The conditions must be clear and well worded, so some direction from the top would be ideal.

The weight of expert opinion is substantial, even for a Government some of whose members have at times said they have had enough of experts. The law journal *Legal Action* concluded:

“Speaking to both sides on this issue, it is apparent that there is little or no common ground...The vote by Ealing Council, though, is one clear indicator of how out of step with mainstream...public opinion”

the anti-abortion protesters are. It cites precedent from Victoria in Australia, where there is a 150-metre radius zone around such clinics. There are also examples from 14 American states, France and Canada.

The BMA wrote to me only today to raise its concerns about intimidation of patients and staff outside facilities. That is the British Medical Association, not the Socialist Workers Party or anyone like that. It says that it has raised the issue with the Home Office and the police, but continues:

“Unfortunately, their responses have not reassured us that the situation is being adequately addressed.”

It talks about the “intimidating manner” in which views are professed outside abortion services, especially as women may feel vulnerable already. It says that the staff are providing a “lawful and necessary service” and continues:

“We are...pleased...that you have secured the debate this afternoon, and we hope it will provide an opportunity”

to address the issues.

Other groups that support the campaign include the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, the Royal College of Midwives, the End Violence Against Women Coalition, Women’s Aid, Mumsnet, the Family Planning Association and, as might be expected, Marie Stopes International. In fact, in a YouGov poll released today, 57% of MPs supported the Ealing approach to exploring the options for introducing a buffer zone, and only 24% were against. Petitions need to have 1,500 signatures to be brought to the council and debated; this one had an unprecedented 4,000 signatures, which shows the weight of public opinion in Ealing.

As a civilian in Ealing I have witnessed the situation for 43 years, and since becoming an MP, many people have contacted me. One said, “These protestors have become a permanent and unwelcome intrusion into our close knit, diverse and tolerant community.” Cars hoot their horns in support of Sister Supporter. Someone from a house opposite said, “I’m trying to put my baby to sleep”—we do not necessarily think about such things. People now swerve to avoid that road—that is what it has turned into. People do not want to go there because of this ugly situation. How are we doing for time?

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): I will assist the hon. Lady. Two people have indicated that they would like to speak. The wind-up speeches will start at 5.08 pm with Diane Abbott and ten minutes later the Minister will speak. You will have two minutes to conclude, so perhaps you could give enough time for the other two speakers.

Dr Huq: I am grateful for that advice, Mr Evans. I will dispense with most of my remarks on the Human Rights Act. One of my constituents, who is a lawyer, believes that the condition of article 10 of the Act would be satisfied because freedom of speech can be curtailed if there is evidence of harm to others. This particular, very well-educated constituent tells me that in this case clearly there is, but I will not go into that in detail.

Given how difficult and stressful the decision is, it is vital that women are able to access confidential medical and psychological advice and support without fear of harassment or intimidation. There is anonymity in any other medical procedure, so why not here? People have used Facebook Live to shame women in this way.

The Home Office eagerly awaits the outcome of Ealing's action, but the extensive work to get to the council motion—working around antisocial behaviour legislation—should not be the norm. As a society, we should not be forced to rely on good Samaritans such as the valiant Sister Supporter and grassroots campaigners. It should be the job of Government to protect our citizens from gendered harassment—that is what these protests are. The Home Secretary is very supportive, and there is a clinic in Hastings. On Sunday I was with her at the Sky TV studios, and I was being “unliked” and she was being “liked”, but she said, “Let's wait to see what happens in Ealing first”. I think we can go further.

There are other people who want to speak and I can make further remarks later, so I will finish for now.

4.52 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) for how she has spoken on this very difficult and sometimes emotional issue, but I believe that it is my duty to offer another point of view, so that Parliament hears both sides of this difficult issue. I would hope that the hon. Lady would listen to women who have benefitted from help from groups outside abortion clinics, who would be denied that help if buffer zones were imposed around those abortion facilities. I want to ask the hon. Lady whether she has talked to those women who say that they have benefitted from the offers of help by those groups outside the Marie Stopes abortion facility. If not, surely both sides of this story deserve to be listened to. It is very important that we listen to both sides. How does the hon. Lady account for the fact that if harassment were really occurring outside these facilities, it would be perfectly possible for Marie Stopes to call the police, yet we see no ongoing prosecutions for harassment or instances where police powers to disperse crowds have been used? I would have thought that it would surely be easy and common for the police to intervene if harassment were indeed occurring.

Paula Sherriff: The hon. Gentleman is very generous in giving way. Has he considered that the women going into those clinics will have spent many weeks, and potentially months, making their minds up? I am not aware of any specific help that they are given outside those clinics by people holding things such as rosary beads or giving them pictures of dismembered foetuses and things like that. I would be surprised if that would aid them in coming to a different decision.

Sir Edward Leigh: That is a perfectly fair point. I know that it is an agonising decision for women. I remember talking to one of the women who stands outside those clinics. She was an elderly lady, the kindest, most gentle person that one could possibly consider. So many children call her granny, because they feel that this lady, who is the kindest and gentlest person—admittedly, a religious person; there is nothing wrong with that—would never hurt a soul. She is simply trying to express a point of view.

I agree that harassment is quite wrong. Given that the current law allows for individuals who harass others to be reported to the police, yet does not affect others who protest peacefully, does the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton not think that it is unwisely illiberal to introduce a measure that would simply exclude all vigils of this sort, regardless of individual behaviour? Surely, that is a sledgehammer.

In the case of *Annen v. Germany*—I know that the hon. Lady dealt with this point, but I am not sure she did so adequately—a pro-life advocate, Klaus Annen, engaged in peaceful protest outside an abortion clinic and was found by the European Court of Human Rights to have a right to engage in such activity under article 10, the right to freedom of expression. If so, and given the precedent, how does she expect the European Court of Human Rights, which we are fully signed up to and continue to support, to treat a legal challenge to buffer zones?

I want to end by reading out the testimony that was given to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who cannot be here, from Kate—she does not want to give her full name, which is fair enough, for fear of retaliation. This is her testimony:

“I never wanted to go through with an abortion but I felt a lot of pressure from people around me who offered it as a no brainer solution.

On the way into the clinic at the Marie Stopes clinic at Ealing I was offered a leaflet by a woman who I spoke to briefly. She just told me she was there if I needed her. I then went into the clinic, still not happy about being there for an abortion, but under immense pressure from a group of people that were with me to go through with it.

Once in the clinic, while the group were distracted I leapt out of the ground floor window and cleared 3 fences to escape. I talked to the woman on the gate again, who offered any support I needed to keep my baby and this gave me the confidence to leave where I was supported by the group that this women worked with.

I didn't find any aggression from the people offering support outside the Ealing clinic at all. They did have leaflets documenting the development of a baby, a fetus, in the early stages.

The potential introduction of buffer zones is a really bad idea because women like me, what would they do then? You know, not every woman that walks into those clinics actually wants to go through with the termination. There's immense pressure, maybe they don't have financial means to support themselves or their baby, or they feel like there's no alternatives. These people offer alternatives.

I had my baby who is now three and a half years old. She's an amazing, perfect little girl and the love of my life. I want MPs here today calling to introduce buffer zones to realise, that she would not be alive today, if they had their way.”

4.58 pm

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): On 27 October, I received a delegation at my Ipswich surgery from a rights of the unborn child group. I believed it was right

[Sandy Martin]

for me, as the MP for Ipswich, to listen to what a section of my residents believe. Six women, with varying degrees of confidence, spoke to me about their reasons for opposing all abortions at all times. They wanted to know whether I shared their beliefs and I think I made it clear that I do not, but I am glad that I gave them the opportunity to speak and I listened carefully to what they had to say.

I agreed with them when they expressed their anxieties about very late terminations, but as soon as I suggested some of the ways that such late terminations might be prevented, they made it clear that they were opposed to almost all of those remedies. Their view appeared to be that all sex was wrong, except in the context of wishing to create a new life; that contraception was wrong because it enabled and encouraged sexual activity without such a purpose; that once conception had taken place, the life of the foetus was every bit as precious as the life of the woman in which it was growing; and that anything that interrupted that growing life—even on the morning after—constituted murder. They appeared unwilling to contemplate situations where a woman's life depends on having a termination, and they claimed that a woman who has been raped can gain a sense of closure from giving birth to the baby that results from that rape.

I believe that there are good reasons for wanting to minimise abortions, and that the best ways to achieve that are providing good sex education in schools; ensuring that girls and women are confident about making decisions about their own bodies; educating boys and young men about treating women with respect and as equals; making various forms of contraception, including male contraception and the morning-after pill, freely and easily available; and ensuring that good-quality, non-judgmental and timely counselling is available to support women who are uncertain about whether to have an abortion.

I believe that if a woman decides to have an abortion, the swifter that abortion takes place, the less trauma it will cause to her or her relatives. However, it is also important that she feels confident in the decision she takes and knows that she has had the chance to change that decision, so she needs to know how to access immediate counselling. She also needs to know how swiftly after that counselling she will be able to receive a termination.

It is right that arguments and discussions should take place at hon. Members' surgeries, at public meetings and in this place, so that all views can be aired and all issues can be explored in an objective and constructive manner. But all these difficult discussions and decisions are a world away from the binary arguments and confrontational persuasion techniques that demonstrators use with women who are usually in an emotionally traumatised state and have often come to one of the most difficult decisions of their lives. If we do nothing to protect those women at that sensitive time, we expose them to risks to their mental and physical health, and I believe that the time has come to act.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): If no other Member wants to make a short contribution, I call Diane Abbott.

5.2 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Abortion was made legal in this country 50 years ago, public opinion supports its current legal status and there is no majority in this House for doing away with a woman's right to choose. We have had debates about time limits and so forth, but I think that every Member knows that if this issue were debated again on the Floor of the House, we as a Parliament would still want to ensure a woman's right to choose. So what are these demonstrators doing? They are actually setting themselves up against the settled view of the House of Commons and, more importantly, of the public. Theirs is a sort of guerrilla attack on a woman's right to choose. That is what is so problematic about it.

I first raised this issue some years ago. In 2015, I tabled an early-day motion about it and I went to visit clinics, including the BPAS clinic in Blackfriars, where, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) described, activists carrying enormous, disturbing and graphic posters were menacing staff and patients. People talk about patients being menaced, but I spoke to staff at that clinic and the demonstrations are very upsetting for them, too. Activists hand expectant mothers horrifying leaflets and film conversations with members of the public without asking for consent. At urban advice clinics, that is particularly troubling for women from minority communities, who will feel particularly ashamed and conflicted about what they are doing. Someone who tries to walk peacefully into a clinic to get advice has to face those threatening demonstrations. Activists try to disguise their activism as prayer vigils or peaceful protests, but in reality they take advantage of the protections afforded to those activities.

These demonstrations are problematic partly because, as I have said, it is as if activists, through guerrilla actions and threatening activity, are trying to roll back 50 years, but they are also problematic because they are modelled on American tactics. A growing number of family planning clinics in America have been closed following demonstrations, attacks and even bombings. I am not saying that demonstrations here go that far, but let us remember that there have been bombings in America and that medical staff, including doctors, who offer women this sort of support have found themselves threatened and attacked.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): On family planning, we have seen cuts to the NHS and the closure of family planning centres across the country. We need to look at education—not just family planning support but education in schools, too. This debate is about protecting women who have made the most difficult decision of their lives. They will seek support in advance rather than doing so as they go into the clinic.

Ms Abbott: Yes, and the idea that people can be offered practical help from behind a horrible poster of a dismembered foetus as they go into a clinic is clearly false and disingenuous.

Of course people should have a choice. My generation of feminist activists did not march about this issue to impose a particular set of decisions on women; all we said was that women should have a choice. They are better offered that choice with proper family planning

advice and with sex and relationships advice in schools. That is where people should be shown their options and shown how they can genuinely have a choice—not outside clinics by people holding banners and shouting at them.

We heard a story about a lady who says that demonstrators saved her baby's life. I wonder. I do not say anything about the speech by the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), but I do wonder. What I have seen—I went to see it for myself—and heard about these demonstrations tells me that they are not a way to offer people practical advice.

Many of the groups involved also oppose contraception, sex education and even IVF treatment. The Society for the Protection of Unborn Children is running a homophobic campaign against kids being taught about sexual orientation. Other groups have links to the far right. So-called pro-life people had a “march for life” this year in Birmingham. They flew in speakers from the US. They brought in Jim Dowson of Youth Defence, who is linked with the British National party; he was a partner of the march for life. Sadly, although there are genuinely devout people in groups such as SPUC and 40 Days for Life, they have a history of using harassment and intimidation, because they have failed politically to win round public opinion. One leader of an anti-choice group calling itself Precious Life was convicted of harassing the director of a Marie Stopes clinic in Northern Ireland.

This is not about people expressing an opinion. I am a Member of Parliament; I believe in healthy and vigorous debate. This is about people trying to threaten, intimidate and harass staff members and women—members of the public—who seek desperately needed advice, and perhaps making those women too frightened to step over the threshold of a clinic to get the advice they need. It would be entirely wrong if, 50 years after it agreed that women should have a right to choose, this House failed to say now that that right to choose should be meaningful and should not be disrupted or opposed by these demonstrations. We have to look at ways of making women seeking advice and staff members in clinics safe, and there is no doubt that we have to look at the question of zones.

5.9 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): It is a huge pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I join others in congratulating the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) on securing the debate, and on the way in which she framed an argument that she clearly feels passionately about and has done for a number of years. If I heard her rightly, she informed the House that this has been going on for 23 years—an extraordinarily long time. I should say, I have sat and participated in some rubbish debates in this Chamber, but this has been a good one, in the sense that both sides of a highly sensitive argument have been presented with both passion and dignity. I congratulate all Members who have participated.

I say to the hon. Lady—she will know this from a brush-by in the Sky studios on Sunday—that the Home Secretary takes a personal interest in this issue and has made it quite clear that she will monitor closely what is happening in Ealing and consider whether further action is needed, if that is where the evidence points us. The

Government are absolutely clear that it is unacceptable that anyone should in any way feel harassed or intimidated simply for exercising their legal right to healthcare advice. She put it well: harassment is not protest. I think we all agree on that, so let us send that message clearly.

Where such behaviour occurs, I am clear that the police and local authorities should take action to deal with it, making full use of their powers to protect both patients and staff; that goes to the important point made by the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott). As well as ensuring that full use is being made of existing powers, the Government will explore whether any further action is needed to ensure that clinic staff and patients can go about their lawful business free from harassment, offence or alarm. I will go on to talk about existing powers; I was interested in what the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton said of her doubts about whether they are fit for purpose.

The Government are clear that the rights to share views and to peaceful protest do not extend to harassment. We believe that the law provides protection against such behaviour, but we are open to the argument. All protestors are subject to the law, and the police should act when they have evidence that crimes have been committed. It does seem clear that few complaints are made to the police by those attending healthcare clinics, which is the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh). However, my feeling is, and I recognise, that the reasons for that may include those who access the clinics wanting to maintain their privacy, and that having to give evidence in a court of law may be a deterrent in this situation.

I strongly urge anyone—as I hope all Members would—who suffers any kind of harassment or intimidation at the hands of protestors to contact the police. I also call on abortion clinics to contact the police if they witness such behaviour towards patients and their staff. Information provided helps the police to take action. I know that the national police lead, Deputy Chief Constable Rachel Swann, has previously written to forces to remind them of the importance of investigating such alleged crimes sensitively.

Ms Abbott: The hon. Gentleman will understand that at probably the most vulnerable time in a woman's life, the last thing she wants to do is present herself to a police station. That may account for the low level of complaints from women who have been harassed.

Mr Hurd: I totally understand that point, and I think I was sensitive to it in my remarks, but it is still the responsible thing to remind people that if we want the police to take action, they need information. This is absolutely not easy because of the context, but it is still a point worth making.

I would like to say a few words about the actions of pro-life groups, which have received criticism here. I should say that everything we have heard about accusations of intimidation and harassment is a million miles away from the experience I had, which was similar to that of the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin). Three ladies came to talk to me in Harefield library in my constituency about their deeply held views on the other side of the argument—the pro-life side—which were rooted in their deep faith and conviction and presented

[*Mr Hurd*]

with great calmness and dignity. That was a million miles from what we are talking about happening on the pavements of Ealing, and was rooted in faith that I am sure all Members would want to respect.

However, it seems that in recent years there has been an escalation in the adoption of extreme tactics by pro-life groups in the UK; the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington was right on that. Tactics such as those used by the American anti-abortion movement—displaying graphic images, the wearing of video equipment to film locations and direct engagement with individuals entering health clinics—are a feature of that. The police recently assessed that pro-life demonstrations do not ordinarily result in crime or disorder, and it is rare that police intervention has been called for. I am also aware that pro-life groups deny harassment and intimidation.

Sandy Martin: I thank the Minister for considering the point. However, whether or not a member of a pro-life demonstration intends to harass, the fact that they produce leaflets and push forward their views to women who are entering these clinics at a moment of extreme emotional vulnerability constitutes harassment. The only way to avoid such harassment is not to have demonstrations at such locations.

Mr Hurd: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point. I simply place on record something he has already heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough: pro-life groups deny harassment and intimidation and claim that they seek only to dissuade and offer support to those seeking the services of family planning clinics. There are clearly deeply held views on this. I have no doubt about the upset some of those actions can cause, which have been expressed powerfully, not least by the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton, but by other Opposition Members as well.

In terms of police powers and management of protests, the police have a duty to facilitate peaceful protests by providing a lawful and proportionate policing response that balances the needs and rights of protesters with those of people affected by the protest. Rightly, Ministers have no power to direct or control police operations, but I am absolutely clear that women seeking medical advice or interventions in such circumstances should not be harassed or intimidated by the illegal actions of protesters.

As I said before, we believe—but we are open to the arguments on this—that the law provides protection against such behaviour, and the hon. Lady referred to the legislation. Sections 4A and 5 of the Public Order Act 1986 make it an offence to display words or images that may intentionally or unintentionally cause harassment, alarm or offence. The Protection from Harassment Act 1997 includes criminal offences that protect individuals conducting lawful activities from harassment by protesters. That Act also allows for a person to take civil proceedings in respect of harassment.

The Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 provides the police with dispersal powers in public places, which can be used to disperse individuals or groups who are causing others to feel harassed, alarmed or distressed. The police also have powers under the Public Order Act 1986 to place conditions on the location,

duration or numbers attending a public assembly. They can use those powers if, in their professional judgment: the assembly will result in serious public disorder, serious damage to property, or serious disruption to the life of the community; or the organiser's intention is to compel others to act against their own rights. How and when any of those powers is used is an operational judgment for the police; there is no getting round that. They will judge each case on its merits, and will ultimately decide whether to use the powers available to them.

However, as part of our work to ensure the existing powers are used to the full, I will ask the relevant national police leads to ensure that the most appropriate tactics and best practice are being used. I will go further than that and extend an invitation to the hon. Lady: if she has good arguments and good evidence to support the argument that that package of legislation, which reads robustly to me, is somehow not fit for purpose, I am open to listening to her and the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington, if they want to make a case.

Paula Sherriff: I thank the Minister for the tone he is adopting. Does he agree that it is imperative that, given that we are celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Abortion Act 1967, the Government of the day adopt a pro-choice position, so that women are given a range of options if they have an unplanned pregnancy? By giving a charity that is firmly anti-choice a huge sum of money, they are in fact adopting an unfortunate bias.

Mr Hurd: Let me push back on that gently. As the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington, who speaks for the Opposition, said, we have a settlement in this place that we have come to. We have found a balance and a compromise, and I think any shift in that will be subject to personal votes in the future. To the point about the funding for the charity Life, that falls outside my Department, so the hon. Lady will forgive me if I read from the brief. It is basically set out in the grant agreement that Life will not be able to use the tampon tax grant of £250,000 to fund its counselling service or its Life Matters education service, and it is prohibited from spending the money on any publicity or promotion. The grant—as I think the hon. Lady mentioned—is for a specific project in west London to support vulnerable, homeless or at-risk pregnant women who ask for its help. All payments will be made in arrears and on receipt of a detailed monitoring report, but I will make sure that the hon. Lady's concerns are expressed directly to the Minister responsible.

I will say something about public spaces protection orders because, as the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton says, the local authority in Ealing has decided to consult on issuing such an order outside the Marie Stopes UK healthcare clinic in the borough. Public spaces protection orders, under the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, can be used by councils to stop people committing antisocial behaviour in a public place, applying restrictions on how that public space can be used. I apologise for the dryness of the prose, but there are clear legal tests that must be met. In particular, the behaviour that the order is seeking to stop must: have had or be likely to have a detrimental effect on the quality of life of those in the locality; be likely to be persistent or continuing in nature; be or be likely to be unreasonable; and justify the restrictions imposed.

It is for the London Borough of Ealing to determine, in consultation with the local police and any other community representatives, whether a public spaces protection order is justified. The Home Secretary and I will watch developments, and the response to them in the consultation, with interest.

I would like to give the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton a chance to respond and close the debate, so I will conclude. It has been a good debate on a highly sensitive issue. As I have made absolutely clear, the right to peaceful protest should not extend to harassment or intimidating behaviour.

Sir Edward Leigh: We all absolutely oppose harassment, but the Minister is defending the right to peaceful protest.

Mr Hurd: I think I have made that clear. The right to peaceful protest is incredibly important and is fundamental to our democratic process, but it cannot extend to harassment. The hon. Gentleman said so in his remarks, and there is agreement in this place. It is unacceptable that women seeking their legal right to healthcare, advice and support encounter such situations, and I expect any such cases to be robustly investigated and dealt with by the police.

The bottom line is that we are talking about vulnerable women at a point of very high vulnerability. The last thing we should want or accept is for them to feel any more vulnerable at that point in time, and when protest creeps into harassment, that is completely unacceptable. As I said before, it is essential for any democracy that individuals have the right to peaceful protest and freedom of speech, but with those rights comes a responsibility to ensure that individual views and protestor actions do not cross the boundary into criminal acts.

Finally, I assure hon. Members who have taken part in the debate that both the Home Secretary and I will carefully consider the important points made. We will monitor developments in Ealing to see the outcome of the decision to grant a public spaces protection order. I will ensure that the national policing leads responsible for the issue are made aware of the concerns expressed, and ask that they and local authorities make full use of their existing powers to prevent that kind of behaviour. I will also explore with my officials and the police whether any further action needs to be taken to ensure that clinic staff and patients can go about their lawful business free from harassment, offence or alarm.

5.23 pm

Dr Huq: I listened carefully to the Minister and was encouraged by the way he is on side regarding tactics and practice. We have had a good debate. I am grateful for contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), who was very thoughtful, and my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin), who described a real-life case in which the other side came to visit. The hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) asked me whether I had spoken to the other side. I took a leaflet from them the other day and I was horrified by the factual inaccuracies in it. If that advice is lying leaflets, I do not think it is useful or constructive. I have also been pitted against the other side in TV studios several times. I think that they peddle emotion. It is an emotive subject, with strong feelings on both sides, but we need some factual basis to arguments here, and that is often lacking.

We are conflating different things. We should take out the wrongs and rights of abortion, which has been legal for 50 years, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) pointed out. The debate is about the safety of women; surely we can all agree that women should be able to access confidential, NHS-provided facilities without loads of people in their face, annoying them. It should not be about the nuances of the number of weeks or about abortion, because that is legal. It is a given, and by the time those women get to the clinic they have made that decision. They have been through the agonising other stuff, maybe at the GP's surgery or somewhere else. As my beat police officer said, weaponising rosary beads at the 11th hour is not really useful or constructive. I think there is a bit of a myth about the number of women who have been "saved"; figures show that this only delays their going to the clinic, and that they come back on another day, although there may be some cases where it happens.

I have spoken to both sides, because I am MP for both sides and represent both. I do not think these women are protesting; they are trying to impose their view on the women who are trying to access services, and are trying to stop a termination at any price. We do not know why those women are there; they may have been raped. No outside observer can know those things.

This has been done in America, Australia, Canada and France. I have enormous respect for Sister Supporter, so I do not want to diss the organisation, or want what I am about to say to be misinterpreted, but as the police officer said, "In some ways, the sides are both as bad as each other." The thing is that one side feels that it should not have to be there at all. It is the pro-life people who will not budge, and do not accept that their actions are harassment. Harassment is in the eye of the beholder, and if someone is made to feel uncomfortable, then it is harassment; these things are legally drawn up.

In summary, I ask the Government to bring forward legislation to introduce buffer zones outside clinics and pregnancy advisory bureaux, not to stop protest. The protesters can take their protest elsewhere: there are Speaker's Corner, the House of Commons and other places. The women accessing clinics are not seeking debate. They are just trying to have a medical procedure done. Any other procedure would be done in complete anonymity, but they are filmed on Facebook livestreams, or their ex-partners are told, "This is what she's up to." There are some horrible, threatening examples that I do not want to go into the details of here.

Religion is often dragged into the debate. I bumped into the vicar of St Mary's church, Acton, the Reverend Nick Jones—Nick the Vic—in the street on Sunday, and he said, "Good on you for the stuff you're doing." He reminded me that David Steel—Lord Steel as he is now—is a devout Christian. There is nothing Christian about the way the anti-abortion lot have spoken about me on social media and elsewhere. They are anti-abortion, yet they keep saying about me, "I wish her mum had had one." But I am a big person and quite robust—sticks and stones and all that.

The Government should look at what further action can be taken to ensure that women can attend sensitive healthcare appointments, and that healthcare workers can do their jobs without fear of harassment or abuse towards patients or staff; my right hon. Friend the

[*Dr Huq*]

Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington put it very well. In particular, I believe the Government should consider the experience of other countries; this issue is not unheard of.

Returning to section 10 of the Human Rights Act 1998, it is unclear whether we will remain subject to that; I think some on the other side do not want us to. A legal opinion that I have says:

“if the evidence collected by Sister Supporter about the distress caused to women using their clinics stands up to scrutiny, this could persuade a court that the anti-abortion activists’ rights under articles 10 and 11 are outweighed by those of the users of the clinic”,

oddly under article 8, the right to a private and family life. Privacy has gone out of the window when protests are livestreamed on the internet. The Government should consider examples from elsewhere and consult with health service providers, patients and police about the potential to offer buffer zones around clinics.

I was a little disappointed that the Minister did not really address the points about the savage cuts to police and local government budgets. He will probably say that that is for another Department and not him, but I hope he has heard those words.

The courage of Sister Supporter and the queen of the suburbs, my home borough, where I have been for 45 years, have led the way. Let Her Majesty’s Government and the nation follow by finishing the job. Whatever happened to “Thou shalt not judge”? That is where I will end.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): I thank hon. Members for the common courtesy and moderation shown throughout the debate, and I thank everyone attending.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered public order legislation relating to family planning clinics.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 7 November 2017

TREASURY

Bilateral Loan to Ireland

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond):

I would like to update the House on the UK's bilateral loan to Ireland.

In 2010, the Government committed to providing a £3.2 billion bilateral loan to Ireland as part of an international assistance package of €67.5 billion including loans provided by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), European Union (EU), euro-area member states and other bilateral lenders Sweden and Denmark.

The UK provided this bilateral loan in order to help put Ireland back on a sustainable path, ensure economic stability and because Ireland is a key trading partner and ally. I regard Ireland's stability to be a key component of the stability of the UK economy and the banking sector, particularly in Northern Ireland.

The loan agreements of all other creditors under the assistance package, including the UK, each have a clause requiring that Ireland makes a proportional early repayment to them in the event that Ireland repays any creditor under its assistance programme ahead of schedule.

In 2014, following a significant improvement in Ireland's access to international credit markets, all creditors, including the UK, agreed to waive these clauses to allow Ireland to repay a substantial proportion of its loans from the IMF. A written ministerial statement updating the House on that waiver was laid in Parliament on 13 October 2014, *Official Report*, column 2WS.

Ireland has now set out its intention to repay early and in full the outstanding €4.5 billion owed to the IMF, as well as the bilateral loans of €0.4 billion from Denmark and €0.6 billion from Sweden, and replace these with loans with Irish sovereign debt.

I can inform the House that I have today provided a waiver under clause 19.3 of the Credit Facility Agreement (amended 4 October 2012) enabling Ireland to make early repayments to the IMF, Sweden and Denmark without the requirement to make pro-rata early repayments to the United Kingdom. This decision does not amend the amount or timing of interest and principal repayments owed to the UK as originally foreseen in the Credit Facility Agreement (amended 4 October 2012).

It is clear to me that, where all other lenders provide similar waivers, granting a waiver for the UK bilateral loan delivers material benefits to Ireland's fiscal position and debt sustainability in the coming years. However, the benefits of these actions are not exclusive to Ireland, as the potential improvements also enhance the likelihood of repayment of the UK's loan.

The waiver I have agreed is conditional upon the other remaining creditors—the EU and euro area member states—issuing similar waivers.

By repaying the outstanding amount owed to the IMF, Ireland will no longer automatically be eligible for post-programme monitoring. This has been a crucial part of ensuring the Ireland loan provides value for money for the UK taxpayer, and the IMF have given

assurances that they will continue to conduct staff visits up until the end of the originally envisaged post-programme period in 2021. This coincides with the scheduled repayment of the final tranche of the UK loan.

In addition to this announcement, HM Treasury has today provided a further report to Parliament in relation to Irish loans as required under the Loans to Ireland Act 2010. The report relates to the period from 1 April 2017 to 30 September 2017.

A written ministerial statement on the previous statutory report regarding the loan to Ireland was laid in Parliament on 18 April 2017, column 36WS.

[HCWS235]

ECOFIN

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss):

A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) will be held in Brussels on 7 November. EU Finance Ministers will discuss the following items:

European Free Trade Association (EFTA) dialogue

Ministers will have their annual meeting with representatives from the EFTA group of countries, to exchange views on how best to make economic growth inclusive.

Early morning session

The Eurogroup President will brief Ministers on the outcomes of the 6 November meeting of the Eurogroup, and the Commission will provide an update on the current economic situation in the EU. Ministers will also discuss the EU's common candidate for the position of Secretary-General of the World Customs Organisation.

VAT e-commerce package

Ministers will consider various items which make up the VAT legislative package, including Council regulation.

Review of the European system of financial supervision

The Commission will present to Ministers its legislative proposals on financial supervision, followed by an exchange of views.

Current financial services legislative proposals

The Council presidency will provide an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

Insolvency

The Commission will present its proposals on resolving existing non-performing loans, preventing the build-up of future non-performing loans and measures to increase the efficiency of the general insolvency framework in member states.

Follow-up to the G20 meeting of Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors and of the IMF annual meetings in Washington

Ministers will receive information from the presidency and the Commission on the outcomes of the 12 to 15 October G20 and IMF meetings.

European Court of Auditors' annual report

The president of the Court of Auditors will present the auditors' report on the implementation of the budget of the European Union for the 2016 financial year.

Statistical package

The Council will discuss the autumn statistical package, review progress achieved and exchange views on the prospects for European co-operation on statistics. Ministers will also be invited to adopt Council conclusions.

[HCWS234]

Finance (No. 2) Bill 2017

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): The Finance (No.2) Bill will be published on Friday 1 December.

Explanatory notes on the Bill will be available in the Vote Office and the Printed Paper Office, and placed in the Libraries of both Houses, on that day.

Copies of the explanatory notes will also be available at: www.gov.uk.

[HCWS233]

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT**Local Government Improvement**

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): I should like to make a statement on local government improvement.

Local government in Dorset

I am announcing today that, having carefully considered all the material and representations I have received, I am “minded to” implement the locally led proposal for improving local government in Dorset. This was submitted to me in February 2017. In the Dorset area, there are currently two small unitary councils—created in the 1990s—of Bournemouth and of Poole. They are surrounded by a two-tier structure of Dorset County Council and the district councils of Christchurch, East Dorset, North Dorset, Purbeck, West Dorset and Weymouth and Portland.

I am satisfied on the basis of the information currently available to me that this proposal if implemented is likely to improve local government across the area, establishing two new councils with a credible geography, and which would command local support. The existing nine councils will be replaced by a single council for the areas of Bournemouth, Poole, and that part of the county of Dorset currently comprising the borough of Christchurch, and by a single council for the remainder of the current county area.

I understand that all the councils in the area are already working together in joint implementation committees. However, further steps are needed to secure local consent, and I hope this announcement will facilitate the necessary discussions to conclude this.

Before I take my final decision, there is now a period until 8 January 2018 during which those interested may make further representations to me, including that if the proposal is implemented it is with suggested modifications. It is also open to any council in the area to come forward with an alternative proposal. The final decision would also be subject to parliamentary approval.

Once I have made my final decision on the Dorset proposal, I will also decide whether to implement, subject to parliamentary approval, Dorset councils’

proposal for a combined authority to facilitate collaboration on certain matters between whatever councils are to be in place in Dorset.

Local government in Suffolk

I am also announcing today that having carefully considered all the material and representations I have received, I am “minded to” implement the locally led proposal I received from Suffolk Coastal and Waveney district councils in February 2017 to merge their two respective councils to become a single, new district council.

I have reached this decision on the basis that I consider:

the proposal is likely to improve local government in the area (by improving service delivery, giving greater value for money, yielding cost savings, providing stronger strategic and local leadership, and/or delivering more sustainable structures); the proposal commands local support, in particular that the merger is proposed by all councils which are to be merged and there is evidence of a good deal of local support; and the proposed merged area is a credible geography, consisting of two or more existing local government areas that are adjacent, and which, if established, would not pose an obstacle to locally led proposals for authorities to combine to serve their communities better and would facilitate joint working between local authorities.

I intend to assess any further locally led merger proposals that I receive against these criteria.

Before I take my final decision on this proposed merger there is now a period until 8 January 2018 during which those interested may make further representations to me, including that if the proposal is implemented it is with suggested modifications. The final decision would also be subject to parliamentary approval.

[HCWS232]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS**Forestry Commission**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):

I am today announcing new arrangements for the governance and management of the Forestry Commission. The Scottish Government are legislating to complete the devolution of forestry, with the effect that from 2019—the centenary year of the Forestry Commission—the Commissioners’ statutory remit will be only in England. The Commission, its dedicated staff and above all our 250,000 hectares of English public forests are a great national asset. I am confirming today that the Forestry Commission will be retained in England, and will continue to manage our public forests for public benefit—including supply of timber, public access, and the environment.

We will establish a new Board of Commissioners of the Public Forest Estate. Commissioners will continue to be appointed by Her Majesty the Queen on the advice of her Ministers, who will retain a power of direction.

The Government will not allow any net reduction in the size of the Public Forest Estate, and will support the Commissioners in taking opportunities through active management of the estate to plant more woodland and increase natural capital.

We will continue our work to protect, improve and expand forests and woodlands in England beyond the PFE, as part of the Government’s commitment for this to be the first generation to leave the natural environment in a better state than it found it.

We will work together with the Scottish and Welsh Governments to promote strong forest science, to sustain high standards for forestry in the UK, and to protect our trees against pests and diseases. Our world-renowned research agency Forest Research will continue as an agency of the Forestry Commission, with new governance, commissioning and funding arrangements agreed with the devolved administrations.

These arrangements provide certainty for the future of the Forestry Commission, and a strong, sustainable platform for our precious forest and woodland environments to thrive for the long term.

[HCWS229]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

EU Exit: Sectoral Analysis

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): Following the Opposition day debate motion on 1 November, the Government are making arrangements to respond to the motion which called on the Government to provide the Committee on Exiting the European Union with “impact assessments arising from” the sectoral analysis it has conducted with regards to the list of 58 sectors referred to in the answer of 26 June 2017 to Question 239.

As the Government have already made clear, it is not the case that 58 sectoral impact assessments exist. During the Opposition day debate the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State told the House:

“there has been some misunderstanding about what this sectoral analysis actually is. It is not a series of 58 impact assessments.” —[*Official Report*, 1 November 2017; Vol.630, c. 887.]

I made the same point during my appearance before the House of Lords EU Committee on 31 October and to the House at DEXEU oral questions on 2 November.

The sectoral analysis is a wide mix of qualitative and quantitative analyses, contained in a range of documents developed at different times since the referendum. It examines the nature of activity in the sectors, how trade is conducted with the EU currently in these sectors and, in many cases, considers the alternatives following the UK’s exit from the EU as well as considering existing precedents. The analysis ranges from the very high level overarching analysis to sometimes much more granular level analysis of certain product lines in specific sectors. The analysis in this area is constantly evolving and being updated based on our regular discussions with industry and our negotiations with the EU. It is not, nor has it ever been, a series of discrete impact assessments examining the quantitative impact of Brexit on these sectors.

Given the above, it will take the Department, working with other Departments, time to collate and bring together this information in a way that is accessible and informative for the Committee. The Government are committed to providing the information to the Committee as soon as is possible. I have made plain to the House authorities that we currently expect this to be no more than three weeks.

As Ministers made clear during the Opposition day debate on this motion, there are a number of reasons why the Government believe that it would not be in the public interest for elements of the analysis, at least, to be released into the public domain.

The House of Commons has itself recognised that while Ministers should be as open as possible with Parliament, the Government also have an obligation to consider where it would not be in the public interest for material to be published.

Furthermore, it is important to recognise in some cases there may be confidential or commercially sensitive information in this analysis, and that in many cases this analysis has been developed to underpin advice to Ministers of the negotiation options in various scenarios. It is well understood—as was the case under successive administrations—that such advice to Ministers must remain private.

I have written to the Chair of the Committee on Exiting the European Union to set out the Government’s position as outlined above. I will also be meeting the Chair to discuss these issues further on 13 November.

[HCWS231]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Pre-Council: EU Foreign Affairs Council

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): The EU Foreign Affairs Council (Trade) will take place in Brussels on 10 November 2017. I will represent the UK.

The substantive items on 10 November will be: the state of play of preparations for the 11th World Trade Organisation Ministerial Conference, the state of play of the EU Trade Negotiations with Mexico, and the state of play of the EU Trade negotiations with Mercosur. Also, the Commission will present its report on the implementation of free trade agreements.

[HCWS227]

Trade and Customs Legislation

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): On 9 October 2017, the Government published two White Papers at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-sets-out-vision-for-post-eu-trade-and-customs-policy>.

These papers set out the Government’s approach to legislating for the UK’s future trade policy, establishing a standalone customs regime, and ensuring that VAT and excise legislation operates effectively upon EU exit.

The papers reaffirmed the Prime Minister’s commitment to maintaining and maximising the UK’s position as a global free trading nation, once it leaves the EU, both by boosting our trading relationships with old friends and new allies, and by seeking a deep and special partnership with the EU. The paper reiterated that, in assessing the options for the UK’s future customs relationship with the EU, the Government will be guided by delivers the greatest economic advantage to the UK and by three strategic objectives: ensuring UK-EU trade is as frictionless as possible; avoiding a hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland; and establishing an independent international trade policy.

The White Papers also confirmed the Government's intention to bring forward a trade Bill and a customs Bill before the end of the year, to put in place the necessary legal powers and structures to ensure the UK is ready from the first day after exit. This will help to provide continuity and avoid disruption for individuals, businesses, and international trading partners.

The Trade White Paper asked for comments on three specific aspects of trade policy: transparency of trade policy; trade remedies frameworks; and the design of a future unilateral trade preferences scheme. The closing date for comments has now passed and the Government will shortly issue its response. Wider engagement on our trade policy proposals will continue.

The Government have now tabled resolutions for a customs Bill—the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Bill—and is today introducing the Trade Bill to Parliament.

The Trade Bill will:

Create powers to enable the UK to transition trade agreements that currently exist between the EU and other countries, and which we are party to through our EU membership;

Create the powers needed for the UK to implement the obligations created by becoming an independent member of the agreement on Government procurement, maintaining current guaranteed access for UK businesses to global procurement opportunities and offering value for money;

Establish a “Trade Remedies Authority” to conduct trade remedies investigations and to assist with international trade disputes; and

Enable HM Revenue and Customs to share data on trade so the Secretary of State for International Trade can carry out other functions currently fulfilled by the European Commission, and share data with other bodies carrying out public functions, such as the Trade Remedies Authority and World Trade Organisation.

The Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Bill will:

Allow the Government to create a standalone customs regime by ensuring that, among other things, the UK can charge customs duty on goods, set and vary the rates of customs duty, and suspend or relieve duty in certain circumstances;

Allow the Government to define how goods are classified to determine how much duty is due.

Allow the UK to set preferential or additional duties in certain circumstances, for example, preferential rates for developing countries (unilateral preferences) and additional duties relating to trade remedies following an independent investigation by the Trade Remedies Authority, and when authorised following trade disputes.

Allow the VAT and excise regimes to continue to function whatever the outcome of the negotiations, for example, by enabling supplies of goods and services to continue to move as freely as possible.

Combined, these two key pieces of legislation represent a significant step in creating the statutory framework and powers needed to ensure that the UK is ready for EU exit, and providing certainty and continuity for businesses and consumers alike.

[HCWS228]

TRANSPORT

Planning Act 2008: Development Consent Order

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): I have been asked by my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State, to make this written ministerial statement. This statement concerns the application made by Transport for London under the Planning Act 2008, of 29 April 2016 for a proposed development known as Silvertown Tunnel.

The application will allow for the construction of a new twin bore road tunnel to pass under the River Thames, providing a new connection between the A102 Blackwall Tunnel southern approach and the Tidal Basin roundabout junction on the A1020 Lower Lea Crossing, London.

Under sub-section 107(1) of the Planning Act 2008, the Secretary of State must make his decision within three months of receipt of the examining authority's report unless exercising the power under sub-section 107(3) to extend the deadline and make a statement to the House of Parliament announcing the new deadline. The Secretary of State received the examining authority's report on Silvertown Tunnel on 11 July 2017 and the current deadline for a decision is 10 November 2017 having been extended from 11 October 2017 by way of my written ministerial statement of 11 October 2017 [HCWS153].

The deadline for the decision is to be extended to 10 May 2018 (an extension of 6 months) to enable further consideration of the effect of the scheme on air quality (including its compliance with the updated UK plan for tackling roadside nitrogen dioxide concentrations published by Government on 26 July 2017).

The decision to set a new deadline is without prejudice to the decision on whether to give development consent.

[HCWS230]

Petition

Tuesday 7 November 2017

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

Changes to the Number 23 bus route

The petition of residents of Erewash,

Declares that the number 23 bus route operated by Trent Motor Traction Company Ltd and Barton Buses Ltd (known as trentbarton), and which currently serves the community of Cotmanhay including Church Street and Nelson Street, acts as a vital lifeline for many local residents as their only way of accessing Ilkeston town centre and Ilkeston Community Hospital; further the proposed amalgamation of the number 21 and 23 bus routes will mean that residents living on and around Church Street and Nelson Street will be negatively impacted as they will have to walk a considerable distance to Cotmanhay Road in order to access an alternative bus service; further the residents will no longer have access to a bus service that calls at Ilkeston Community Hospital; and further that these new arrangements will also negatively impact the residents of Kirk Hallam.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Chief Executive of trentbarton to reconsider the proposed changes and to reinstate the original number 23 bus route.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Maggie Throup, *Official Report*, 11 September 2017; Vol. 628, c. 608.]

[P002053]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman):

Buses are the backbone of our public transport system, support our economy and connect our communities to vital public services such as health and education.

Around three-quarters of bus services outside London are provided on a commercial basis by private operators. Decisions such as where to run services, the frequency of those services, the type of vehicle used, the level of fares or agreed local concessions are mainly a matter for the operator concerned.

Where there is not enough demand for a bus route to be commercially viable in its own right, all local authorities have powers to subsidise bus services. Around one-fifth of all bus services are subsidised in this way.

There are no statutory requirements on bus operators to carry out consultation when introducing, amending or withdrawing services. The Government do, however encourage bus operators and local authorities to work together to ensure the interests of passengers, and consequently the wider community, are taken into account when deciding how best to provide access to services for residents.

The Bus Services Act 2017 introduces a number of new tools to help local authorities improve local bus services in their area. Through partnership arrangements, we have enabled local authorities and bus operators to work constructively to provide better services for passengers.

I strongly encourage local authorities and bus operators to work together, in consultation with local residents and businesses, to identify the right transport solutions that meet the economic and environmental challenges faced in the area and deliver the greatest benefits for the community.

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Transport

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**not later than
Tuesday 14 November 2017**

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