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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Thursday 21 December 2017

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS
AUTHORITY (ANSWER TO ADDRESS)

The VICE-CHAMBERLAIN OF THE HOUSEHOLD reported to the House, That the Address of 12 December, praying that Her Majesty will appoint Mr William Lifford to the office of ordinary member of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority for a period of five years with effect from 11 January 2018, was presented to Her Majesty, who was graciously pleased to comply with the request.

Oral Answers to Questions

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—
Channel 4

1. **David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): When she plans to announce her decision on a new location for Channel 4. [903075]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): We have been clear all along that this is a publicly owned broadcaster. Channel 4 must provide for and reflect the country as a whole. We are still in discussions with Channel 4 about how it should do this, including through relocating staff out of London, and we will set out next steps in due course.

David Hanson: Merry Christmas, Mr Speaker. Will the Secretary of State confirm that moving Channel 4 out of London would bring an approximate £600 million benefit to broadcasting, and that it is unacceptable that only four of the 120 commissioners of programmes for Channel 4 currently live outside London? There is an economic benefit, whether it is Salford, which I prefer, Birmingham, Sheffield or Leeds, and it should be done now.

Karen Bradley: I thought it was going to be a bid for Wrexham, so I am interested to hear the right hon. Gentleman's views on other locations. There are many estimates of the benefit, but Channel 4 relocating out of London would have a clear benefit to the country. It is a publicly owned broadcaster and as such we expect it to deliver public benefits above and beyond commercial benefits, and that includes relocating out of London.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): While I welcome the reports that Channel 4 will be employing more people and investing more money outside London, does my

right hon. Friend agree that to send the message that Channel 4 is an alternative broadcaster serving different audiences, its headquarters should not be in SW1?

Karen Bradley: My right hon. Friend speaks with great experience and knowledge on this matter, and the House does well to listen to his wise words.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Does the Secretary of State agree that, as Channel 4 is not a programme maker but only a programme commissioner, there is limited benefit in moving staff, and surely it should be the programme making that reflects the diversity of the country?

Karen Bradley: This is one of the arguments that has been made about how Channel 4's business model operates. We have seen what happened with the BBC's move to Salford—although I accept that the BBC has a different business model. That creativity and clustering of talent has had benefit. One has only to look at the analysis of the amount of programming that is currently commissioned outside London to see that basing Channel 4 outside London could have significant benefits for those independent production companies that are not in SW1.

National Lottery Funding: Charities

2. **Wes Streeting** (Ilford North) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to ensure that the level of National Lottery funding for charities is maintained. [903076]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): May I start by wishing you and Members of the whole House a happy Christmas, Mr Speaker? We are working with Camelot and the Gambling Commission to ensure that returns to good causes are as high as possible for the future, and with the lottery distributors to highlight the link between playing the lottery and supporting good causes.

Wes Streeting: Merry Christmas to you, Mr Speaker, and to everyone else. I thank the Minister for her answer. Charities doing important work across the country depend on the money they are awarded by lottery distributors, but due to the fall last year and the expected fall next year of lottery income for good causes, distributors may not be able to meet their financial commitments. The Government have already agreed to underwrite any shortfall for UK Sport. Will the Minister now commit to doing so for other funding bodies?

Tracey Crouch: We are working with the Gambling Commission and Camelot to review their strategy, to ensure that there is no continuous fall in lottery funding. The national lottery has raised more than £37 billion for good causes since it started in 1994. Indeed, the hon. Gentleman's own constituency has received £35 million across 400 lottery grants. Clearly, every Member of this House has an interest in making sure that the national lottery is a success. May I encourage everybody to go out and buy a ticket?

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): May I wish you, Mr Speaker, and everybody else a happy Christmas too? It is not only the national lottery that provides

invaluable funding for charities and good causes; so, too, do society lotteries. Last week we had an excellent Westminster Hall debate about society lotteries, and it was clear that there was cross-party support for reform. Will my hon. Friend commit to looking at society lottery reforms at the earliest possible opportunity in the new year?

Tracey Crouch: As my hon. Friend has said, we had an excellent debate last week in Westminster Hall. The answer to her question then and now is yes.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Since my election in 2016 I have held funding advice surgeries twice a year to encourage charities in my constituency to gain lottery funding. One of the reasons for that is that the Big Lottery told me that it receives a very small number of applications from my constituency. What more can the Minister do to get the lottery out into constituencies such as mine to enable charities to access the funds and to help them with applications?

Tracey Crouch: That is an excellent idea. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to write to colleagues across the House to explain how he set that up in his constituency and how they can benefit from doing the same.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Happy Christmas to you, Mr Speaker, and to my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), who does not seem to have any Christmas spirit.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Humbug!

Ms Ghani: Does the Minister agree that national lottery funding should also be made available to smaller charities? Although they may help fewer people, in my constituency of Wealden there are very few options for vulnerable young and old people. In particular, *clued-up.info* in Crowborough helps teenagers; *Sussex Oakleaf* in Hailsham helps people with mental health issues; and the *Now! Charity Group* provides furniture for unemployed people and those on low income across East Sussex.

Tracey Crouch: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating the small charities in her constituency. Small charities provide a huge benefit in their locations. We celebrated the work of small charities on Local Charities Day last Friday, and we will continue to do all we can to support them in the future.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her responses so far. Will she further outline whether she intends to oversee a more streamlined approach to administration, which would allow more funding to go to charities, and how would she envisage such a scheme?

Tracey Crouch: We look at administration issues all the time. This was reviewed recently and I am sure it will be a key part of the conversation as we take forward the next licence discussion.

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): I would like to announce to the House that the Commonwealth games have just been awarded to Birmingham. As you know, Mr Speaker, the lottery provides vital support for sport, which is why it is so disturbing that this week the

National Audit Office published a report saying that since 2009, lottery income for good causes has risen by just 2%, while the shareholder profits of the lottery licence holder, Camelot, have risen by 122%. Does the Minister think that those ratios seem fair? Will grassroots sport and the Commonwealth games be secure for lottery funding in the future?

Tracey Crouch: The cheek of the hon. Gentleman! We did all hard work on the Commonwealth games, along with Mayor Andy Street. It was announced formally at 9.30 this morning in Birmingham. I was pleased to sign the host city contract and I am pleased that we will hold the Commonwealth games in 2022. Obviously, the hon. Gentleman's constituency will benefit from that, as will we all. Turning to the substance of his question, the Secretary of State and I are not unsympathetic to the points he made.

Public Libraries

3. **Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment she has made of the role of public libraries in increasing social mobility. [903077]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (John Glen): Libraries play an important role in giving everyone opportunities to improve their life chances and achieve their full potential. That is why the Government have established the libraries taskforce and funds under Libraries Deliver to assist in that goal.

Luke Pollard: The Minister will know from his time as a parliamentary candidate in Plymouth how important libraries are to social mobility in the city. The Conservative council in Plymouth has this year closed six of our libraries—two in the constituency I represent and four in the constituency in which the Minister stood. Will he spread some festive cheer and tell library users in Plymouth that there will be no more library closures in the new year?

John Glen: What I can say is that Plymouth City Council received £56,000 for cultural learning activities last summer, which saw 5,000 young people visit, and 3,000 were given healthy lunches, involving a collaboration with the Theatre Royal, Music Makers and the National Marine Aquarium, which represents the sort of grown-up thinking about the way libraries act in our constituencies across the country.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I congratulate the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) on his tie, which is as flamboyant as my own.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Northamptonshire County Council is proposing to cut 28 of its 36 libraries. Will the Minister send in the Government's libraries taskforce to see whether a county-wide libraries trust might be set up to save these vital public services?

John Glen: My hon. Friend makes a reasonable point. I will be visiting a number of libraries in the new year, following the seven I have already visited, with the new

chair of the libraries taskforce, and I will be happy to engage with my hon. Friend and his local authority to see whether there are alternative ways forward.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Ebenezer Scrooge, and indeed Charles Dickens, would recognise exactly the mood in this country at the moment, with libraries closing and children being unable to go there to do their homework or access computers. What kind of Britain is this, when we think of Dickens and Scrooge at this time of year, with this Government?

John Glen: I think that is an unfortunate characterisation of the hard work of thousands of librarians up and down the country and thousands of volunteers. Libraries are working hard to deliver a range of social outcomes, promoting literacy and digital skills, providing support for jobseekers, and career and business decisions are helped by library services. It is unfortunate that the hon. Gentleman takes such a downbeat view at this time of year.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Mr Speaker, I am sorry that my tie has not caught your eye as well as the tie of my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone), did but I will try harder in 2018.

Does the Minister agree that all libraries can play a part in social mobility? Will he join me in thanking the volunteers of Colehill community library in my constituency for all their hard work? It is not just a traditional library; there is a jigsaw library and there are one-to-one computer sessions, and I have even held my surgery there.

Mr Speaker: It sounds very exciting.

John Glen: I think that my hon. Friend's tie is fantastic. I am very happy to pay tribute to his local library. We are seeing a range of models up and down the country delivering a range of outcomes appropriate to the needs of different communities, and Dorset is no exception.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): My tie is very plain, Mr Speaker.

I can announce to the House that over 100 libraries closed this year. Libraries are genuine engines of social mobility. Why are the Government content with that situation, because the Minister seems to be? Does he agree with the editor of *Public Library News*, who recently stated:

"The example of other countries shows that the decline of the library in this country is not a natural thing: this is a man-made disaster, brought on by short-sighted but long-term cuts?"

He is right, is he not? And merry Christmas.

John Glen: Merry Christmas to the hon. Gentleman, and to you, Mr Speaker. The reality is that different library services tackle the provision they deliver for their local communities in different ways. There are clearly challenges in the libraries sector. I am working hard with the libraries taskforce, and with librarians across the country, to look at ways of delivering better services, and I will continue to do that. In many communities we are seeing more volunteers enthusiastically engaging with library provisions in order to deliver better services.

Broadband: Scotland

4. **Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): If she will assume responsibility for ensuring the delivery of broadband in Scotland. [903078]

The Minister for Digital (Matt Hancock): Merry Christmas to you, Mr Speaker, and a happy Christmas to friends across the House, including the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury). In the past we decided to deliver broadband in Scotland through the Scottish Government. We provided additional funding in February 2014 to support further roll-out, but the Scottish Government have only just begun the procurement process using the funding and are not expecting to have an agreed contract until the end of next year—over three years behind Wales, England and Northern Ireland. In future, therefore, the Government will implement the new full fibre programme and the 5G programme directly with local authorities to ensure efficient delivery.

Stephen Kerr: I thank the Minister for his response and for his recent visit to my constituency. Given the Ofcom "Connected nations" report, which describes the situation he has summarised—the Scottish Government have not even started the second phase of delivery—will he confirm that his Department will work directly with local councils in Scotland to implement future phases of broadband roll-out?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I will.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Scottish Tory Back Benchers have agreed that clause 11 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill is flawed and amounts to a power grab. Is the situation with broadband not the same, and is it not time that the Minister worked with the Scottish Government instead of trying to bypass them?

Matt Hancock: We have tried to work with the Scottish Government for years, but when the First Minister first took my hand on a cold Christmas eve, she promised me broadband was waiting for me. It is three years later and we are still waiting for the Scottish Government to get on with it.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): My constituency is on the southern side of the border, which is just a line on the map as far as they are concerned. North Northumberland is still struggling to get the broadband it needs so that my many small villages are not cut off. Will the Minister ensure that, in 2018, we will see progress there?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely, and increasingly we need to ensure that the delivery works on both sides of the border. Obviously, what matters is getting the roll-out of superfast broadband to everybody in the borders and throughout the country. No matter where the administrative boundaries are, what matters is getting broadband connections to people.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): In this the season of good will, will the Minister join me in congratulating the Scottish Government following last week's announcement that, despite it being a reserved

matter, they are to invest £600 million in rolling out 30 megabit superfast broadband across Scotland, with priority given to rural Scotland, thereby making Scotland a truly world-class digital nation by 2021?

Matt Hancock: I will certainly join the hon. Gentleman in wishing a merry Christmas to everybody in the Scottish National party and the SNP Government in Scotland. I am delighted that, finally, three and a half years after being granted the money, they have got on with the start of the procurement, but it will take another year for the second phase of the roll-out to get going. He, and more importantly his constituents, will understand why we have grown tired of waiting for the Scottish Government and are getting on with delivering directly through local councils in Scotland in future.

Public Libraries

5. **Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the effect on public libraries of changes to local authority budgets. [903079]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (John Glen): Local authorities have a duty to provide a comprehensive and efficient service that meets local needs within available resources. The Government fully recognise the importance and significance of public libraries for local communities.

Liz McInnes: I thank the Minister for that response. My local authority, Labour-run Rochdale Borough Council, has endeavoured to keep all our public libraries open, recognising their importance to our communities. They are much more than just books; they are information, support and advice centres. I hold surgeries at our libraries, as does the citizens advice bureau. What action will the Minister take to support such good practice and, in the face of further cuts, how will he ensure its sustainability?

John Glen: I was delighted to see that the Manchester combined authority, which includes Rochdale, received £250,000 from the libraries opportunities for everyone fund. I will continue to work with the libraries taskforce to extend benchmarks, toolkits and best practices, and to look at different models of delivering services to ensure that libraries continue to thrive, as we see in Rochdale.

Superfast Broadband

6. **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of progress towards the target of 95% superfast broadband coverage. [903080]

13. **Lee Rowley** (North East Derbyshire) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of progress towards the target of 95% superfast broadband coverage. [903089]

The Minister for Digital (Matt Hancock): Superfast broadband is available to more than 94% of homes and businesses in the UK. We are confident that that will reach 95% by the end of the year. More than 4.6 million additional homes and businesses have superfast broadband available for the first time thanks to the Government's superfast broadband programme.

Sir Edward Leigh: When it comes to broadband in rural Lincolnshire, there is not much of a season of good will. The fact is that even 150 years ago, the Post Office could roll out a universal service—it did not matter where people lived—but in many rural villages in Lincolnshire, including mine, the broadband is appalling. People are trying to do business in these villages, so will the Minister get his skates on and get BT to roll out broadband to them?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is quite right, and I have some Christmas cheer for people in Lincolnshire who want better broadband, because yesterday we announced that we are taking forward the legal guarantee for decent high-speed broadband under the universal service obligation. All I can say on this, Mr Speaker, is that all I want for Christmas is USO.

Mr Speaker: Very well done.

Lee Rowley: I am not sure how to follow that, Mr Speaker. A number of villages in my constituency, including Spinkhill, Renishaw and those bordering the Peak District national park, are suffering from similar issues to those that have just been raised. Will the Minister outline all the work the Government are doing to try to improve that?

Matt Hancock: Of course, the USO for broadband will be UK-wide, so wherever someone lives in the UK they will have a legal right to high-speed broadband by 2020.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman makes it all sound very exciting, I must say. I obviously have not lived yet.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): Will the Minister join me in welcoming moves by the Advertising Standards Authority to ensure that providers advertise more accurate average broadband speeds rather than “up to” speeds? Will the Government push for that to be introduced immediately rather than next May, as currently proposed?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I strongly agree with the hon. Gentleman that the promises made on broadband need to be based on what people actually get, and the end of these so-called “up to” speeds cannot happen too soon.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Constituents in parts of my constituency, such as Cadney, Howsham and Cleatham, are getting very poor broadband services at the moment. Do they really have to wait until 2020 for the USO or will the Minister act more quickly?

Matt Hancock: I would like it to be in place more quickly if possible, but I am not willing to commit to that because this area has been bedevilled in the past by people overpromising and underdelivering. If we can go faster, we will, but we will have it in place by 2020.

Online Ticket Sales

8. **Paul Masterton** (East Renfrewshire) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to tackle problems associated with online ticket sales. [903084]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): We are committed to cracking down on unacceptable behaviour in the ticketing market and improving fans' chances of buying tickets at a reasonable price. We are strengthening the existing ticketing provisions in the Consumer Rights Act 2015, and we intend to introduce a new criminal offence of using automated software to buy more tickets than allowed. We also welcome the work of the Competition and Markets Authority in this area, as well as the industry's own initiatives.

Paul Masterton: Too many of my constituents will not be getting the tickets they had hoped for this Christmas as a result of mass harvesting by electronic bots. I welcome the Secretary of State's commitment, but will she confirm when this new offence will be introduced and when my constituents will see changes?

Karen Bradley: I sympathise greatly with my hon. Friend's constituents and their concerns. At Christmas in particular, when parents, friends and family are looking to buy tickets for events, it can be very frustrating. That is why we introduced the offence in the Digital Economy Act 2017 and are committed to introducing these changes as quickly as possible, hoping to bring in secondary legislation in the spring.

Mr Speaker: From Christmas goose to online ticket sales in fewer than 24 hours. I call Mr Clive Efford.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is no good the Secretary of State coming here and wringing her hands; the Government had plenty of opportunity to put the restrictions in place to prevent the resale of these tickets online. The Government were warned about this and failed to act—small wonder since they had one of these online ticket touts on the board of directors giving them advice. It is time they stood up for consumers.

Karen Bradley: I am slightly confused, Mr Speaker. We changed the law. We did something. We have acted on this and we will introduce the secondary legislation in the spring.

Grenfell Tower Fire

9. Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What estimate she has made of the amount donated to support the victims of the Grenfell Tower fire; and if she will make a statement. [903085]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government made a statement to the House on Monday that set out the latest position on the £26 million raised in charitable funds, of which £20 million has now been distributed to survivors and next of kin.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Will she explain the criteria that are being used to distribute this much-needed money to the victims and survivors and whether there are any restrictions on its use by the survivors when they receive it?

Tracey Crouch: I will write to my hon. Friend with the specific details on the criteria. Of the £6 million that is still to be distributed, £2 million is being looked after by the charities for eligible individuals whose claims are in progress or who have not yet submitted a claim. The remaining £4 million will be allocated to longer-term support projects that will benefit the wider community.

Public Funding: Charities and Voluntary Organisations

10. Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to increase the number of public funding sources available to charities and voluntary organisations. [903086]

Merry Christmas, all.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): That warms my heart—thank you.

Charities and voluntary organisations are receiving funding from Government through a number of programmes, including LIBOR fines, the tampon tax and, for youth organisations, the youth investment fund and the iwill fund in partnership with the Big Lottery Fund.

Mike Amesbury: Charities are set to lose a massive £250 million a year in EU funding, but the Government appear to have no plans to replace it. Will the Minister give charities some Christmas cheer and ensure that no charity loses out post-Brexit?

Tracey Crouch: I am discussing with the whole charity sector how we can look more closely at the EU funding that the hon. Gentleman refers to and what we will focus on in future. Those discussions have been taking place for some time, and we are already working with organisations, including in the voluntary sector, on how we will set up the framework.

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): The Government have promised to repay the remaining £425 million borrowed from the national lottery to build the Olympic stadium, but at the current rate of repayment they will not pay it back for 30 years. Charities are struggling to house the homeless and feed the hungry this Christmas, and they need that money now. Will the Minister spread a little more Christmas cheer, back the Big Lottery Refund campaign and commit to repaying the money they owe during this Parliament?

Tracey Crouch: We are committed to repaying the funds that the hon. Gentleman refers to, but we are working hard to ensure that our charities across all sectors are well funded. He will be aware that we will be launching a civil society strategy in the new year, which will work across all Departments in Whitehall to ensure that the sector is well recognised and that we continue to fund it so that we get to the heart of the social issues that we face. Furthermore, we will shortly look at what to do with the next tranche of dormant assets, which will go to support many good causes such as those he refers to.

Topical Questions

T1. [903093] **Mrs Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): I am delighted to be able to confirm to the House again that the Commonwealth Games Federation has this morning announced that the 2022 Commonwealth games have been awarded to Birmingham. Our commitments now come into effect, and I am sure that the games will demonstrate the very best of global Britain and Birmingham to the world. May I add my congratulations to all involved, particularly Mayor Andy Street and the Sports Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), who has done an incredible amount of work with her team to ensure that we secure this important event for Birmingham? Even better, thanks to our announcement yesterday that people have a legal right to demand high-speed internet in their home by 2020, more people across the country will be able to enjoy the games.

On the subject of sporting successes, I would like to congratulate Sir Mo Farah on being named BBC sports personality of the year and the England women's cricket team—we will not mention any other cricket team—on being named team of the year. I am sure the House will agree that both accolades are very well deserved.

I have spent many an oral questions session telling Members that I cannot comment on the UK city of culture bids, given that one was from my local city, Stoke-on-Trent, so it is a great pleasure to finally be allowed to talk about the city of culture, although I am sad that it is not Stoke-on-Trent. I would like to congratulate Coventry on its success in being named UK city of culture for 2021, and my commiserations go to the unsuccessful cities.

Finally, I would like to wish you, Mr Speaker, and all Members of the House—[*Interruption*]*—*even the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson), a very merry Christmas. I take this opportunity to thank all the charities working so hard over Christmas and throughout the year for all that they do.

Mr Speaker: Yes, and I think that the BBC overseas sports personality of the year is the inimitable and unsurpassable Roger Federer, my all-time sporting hero.

Mrs Latham: May I take this opportunity to wish you, Mr Speaker, and the whole House, including all the members of staff here, a very merry Christmas and a happy new year?

I encourage people to visit places in my constituency such as the Derwent Valley world heritage site, which encompasses the Strutt's mills in Belper, which won the first Great British high street award. We are working towards having a cycle way up the entire Derwent valley, to encourage international visitors to the area. Does my right hon. Friend agree that visitors would have an amazing visit if they came to the Derwent valley and other parts of Derbyshire rather than just staying in London?

Karen Bradley: I have to agree with my hon. Friend. I know that part of the world very well, as I am sure you can imagine, Mr Speaker, and I agree, particularly about the use of cycling to get people to see these incredible parts of our country, the scenery, the UNESCO world heritage sites, and others. However, I would point out that you do not have to go to Derbyshire to enjoy the Peak district; you can also enjoy it in Staffordshire.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): Merry Christmas to you, Mr Speaker, and to one and all, in particular my opposite number, the Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), who it is a pleasure to serve opposite.

The Gambling Commission's annual report confirmed that children as young as 11 are being introduced to forms of online gambling. The Gambling Act 2005 was introduced before many young gamers could trade in loot boxes. Right now, there is nothing to stop a child gambling away money for virtual prizes in video games. Can the Minister please tell me when the Government will look to close this loophole and put an end to loot box gambling?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): May I extend my Christmas festive wishes to the hon. Lady and to all those on the Opposition Front Bench? She raises an important point. The recent report by the Gambling Commission was an incredibly useful document. We are doing all we can to protect children and vulnerable people from the harm and risk of gambling. We are working with the Gambling Commission on these issues. It keeps the matter very much under review. It is an emerging issue in the market, but the Gambling Commission has strong powers to regulate gambling, and the convergence between gambling and video games is being monitored quite closely.

T2. [903094] **Robert Jenrick** (Newark) (Con): The opening of the Louvre in Abu Dhabi by President Macron last month demonstrated the power of culture to drive foreign and trade policy, but we all know that the glories of France are as nothing compared with the glories of our own country, so what can the Secretary of State and her Ministers do to advance British cultural diplomacy around the world, and might one element of that be our excellent cultural protection fund?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (John Glen): My hon. Friend raises an excellent point. The cultural development and cultural protection funds are both top of my list. The cultural protection fund has done an enormous amount internationally. I would draw his attention to what has been highly successful diplomacy, including the V and A opening a new gallery in Shekou design centre in China earlier this month, which is one example of the advances we have made.

T3. [903095] **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): This week the German competition authority ruled that the collection and use of data by Facebook was abusive. Does the Minister agree?

The Minister for Digital (Matt Hancock): The hon. Lady raises an important question. Of course, competition rules are rightly decided on independently in this country,

so she would not expect the Government to express a definitive view one way or the other, but the question she raises is a very interesting one.

T7. [903100] **Mr John Whittingdale** (Maldon) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend aware that estimates show that something like over 1 million people will be watching their festive TV and films using illegal streaming devices? Does she agree that this does huge damage to our creative industries, and will she look at what more can be done to tackle it?

Karen Bradley: My right hon. Friend again speaks with great knowledge and experience. He has very wise words for us—one very wise man in the Chamber at Christmas time is a start—and his points are well made. We want to ensure that content is protected and that those who provide and produce it are able to make the money that they should rightly make from it. We are working with the creative industries as part of the sector deal in the industrial strategy on how to protect content in the most effective way.

T4. [903097] **Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure the Minister agrees that a vital aspect of creating a thriving and exciting community for all parts of the UK is safeguarding our national built heritage. In my city of Glasgow, the Glasgow Building Preservation Trust, of which I am a member, the renovation of the Fairfield Heritage Centre, in which I am involved, and the Springburn winter gardens project in my constituency could be threatened as we come out of the European Union, as European regional development funding is unavailable to safeguard these heritage projects. Can the Minister guarantee that any funding available to these projects will be safeguarded when European Union funding is no longer available?

Mr Speaker: Order. Just as a general piece of advice to the House, may I say that the best way to cope with the additional time pressure in topical questions is not to blurt out the same number of words at a more frenetic pace, but to blurt out fewer words?

John Glen: I assure the hon. Gentleman that all my colleagues in the Department are working very hard to make sure that all funding is protected, as far as possible, beyond the changes following Brexit.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): As the Secretary of State is aware, Dundee city has put together a transformative bid to be the European city of culture. I desperately want Dundee—its bid will have clear benefits for all of Tayside—and the other cities to have a chance to test their bids. May I urge my right hon. Friend to find an alternative way of taking forward this contest so that all the time, money and, most importantly, vision for Dundee is not put to waste?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend has been an absolute stalwart in campaigning for Dundee, both before the very disappointing announcement by the European Commission and since, and in finding a way of recognising the work that has been done. Dundee should be congratulated: it made a bid for city of culture in 2017, when Hull was given the award, and since then, the same team has worked together and really built up the

Dundee waterfront, with the new V&A coming next year. We are working with Dundee and the other cities to find a way through this, but I once again commend my hon. Friend for her incredible work in promoting the bid.

T5. [903098] **Ian C. Lucas** (Wrexham) (Lab): The Prime Minister herself referred to allegations of police misconduct in her correspondence with the former First Secretary of State last night. Is it not high time that the Secretary of State commenced this unfinished business, and honoured the promise of a previous Conservative Prime Minister to get Leveson 2 under way?

Karen Bradley: We have consulted on Leveson, and we will release the responses and our response to the consultation in due course. We are currently having conversations with all those involved to make sure we follow the proper process that is required before we can release the figures.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party group on commercial radio. Will the Minister update the House on the long-awaited but positive deregulation plans announced this week? Commercial radio has long been struggling with outdated, old-fashioned restrictions, meaning that the industry has been unfairly treated.

Matt Hancock: This week, we published the response to the consultation, which was incredibly warmly received. We will remove over 100 measures in the very outdated legislation on commercial radio to free up commercial radio stations to support their communities and to deliver for their audiences in the best way they see fit.

T6. [903099] **Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): On the Minister's current consultation on reducing the maximum stake on fixed-odds betting terminals, will she place in the Library the Treasury's estimate of the fiscal impact of each of the four options being consulted on?

Tracey Crouch: The impact assessments, which we published alongside the Government consultation document on 31 October, have already been placed in the Library. I hope that answers the question posed by the right hon. Gentleman.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): The residents of West Oxfordshire have welcomed the recent announcement by the district council and Gigaclear on the roll-out of broadband. Will the Minister join me in pressing for real progress in 2018 not only on broadband, but on mobile signals, with which so many villages suffer problems, including in my constituency?

Matt Hancock: Oh, yes. Tell me about it. My hon. Friend is completely spot-on. I pay tribute, at this Christmastime, to his personal leadership locally in delivering better connectivity across West Oxfordshire.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): Members on both sides of the House may enjoy many festive films over the Christmas period. The Secretary of State will be aware that there are plans for a new film studio in my

constituency, but will she do everything possible to ensure that that studio and creative industries across the UK flourish post-Brexit?

Karen Bradley: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady. The creative industries are a real UK success story. They are growing much faster than the rest of the economy, and they make up a significant proportion of our economic value and our power in the world. We have a brilliant film industry in the UK, and I urge all hon. Members, if they have not yet done so, to go and see “Paddington 2” and “Star Wars” this Christmas, as they are both British-made films. I also welcome the initiative in her constituency. I assure her that we are working closely with the creative industries to make sure they are on the same secure footing post-Brexit as they are today.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Since we are focusing on “Paddington 2” I should announce an interest because we are going this weekend—please don’t tell my son! “Paddington 1”, which we intend to watch on catch-up the day before, will be problematic because while some people are enjoying fibre lines and some have copper, we in some parts of Kent appear to have a hemp line that connects us to the rest of the internet.

Matt Hancock: I am pretty sure that my hon. Friend’s son does not watch Parliament TV, so his secret should be safe—[*Interruption.*] Well, he certainly does not watch it yet. My hon. Friend makes the point that we need decent connectivity everywhere, and the Government are bringing in the universal service obligation to ensure that decent broadband can be available to everybody, fulfilling our manifesto commitment and delivering that by 2020.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): Last week the Gambling Commission issued a report that highlighted that 80% of young people aged between 11 and 16 have seen gambling on television, 70% on social media, and 66% on websites. Does the Minister agree that more action must be taken to educate young people positively about the risks of gambling, as that could help them to avoid gambling-related harm later in life? A statutory levy on bookmakers could go a long way to funding that education.

Tracey Crouch: The quick answer is yes, and GambleAware will lead a responsible gambling advertising campaign as part of the consultation that we publish.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): May I say, Mr Speaker, that flamboyant scarves have just as much place in the Chamber as flamboyant ties? I congratulate the Minister on the work she has put into securing the stakes and prizes review, but will she make strong representations to the Treasury about the associated consequences of problem gambling? Mental health issues and antisocial behaviour costs the public purse more than £1.2 billion annually, and the reduction in stakes will help not only the individual concerned, but society in general.

Tracey Crouch: It will not surprise the hon. Lady to learn that we regularly make strong representations to the Treasury on a number of issues, of which gambling is one. The gambling consultation is a live document,

and I encourage people to take part in it and make their representations. We are aware of recent reports about problem gambling and its cost and impact on society.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Given that we are not allowed to talk about what is in the Brexit sectoral analyses over the road at 100 Parliament Street, will the Secretary of State say what is not in them in relation to the creative industries?

Karen Bradley: I do not think there is anything that is not in there. The creative industries work with us, and these are sectoral analyses that set out the analysis we have made as Government, working with the industry. I am sorry to disappoint the hon. Lady at Christmastime if she feels that she is missing something, and I hope that when Christmas comes it will provide everything she is looking for.

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General was asked—

Prisoner Voting

1. **Ms Nusrat Ghani** (Wealden) (Con): What plans the Government have to implement the agreement reached by the Council of Europe on prisoner voting in the UK. [903063]

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): On behalf of the Law Officers may I take this early opportunity to wish all Members and staff of the House a very merry and, of course, lawful Christmas?

I very much welcome the decision by the Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers to support our proposals on prisoner voting. We hope to complete implementation of those proposals by the end of next year, and we have agreed to provide an update on progress to the Council of Europe on 1 September.

Ms Ghani: I thank the Minister for his response, and I am pleased that an agreement has finally been reached to settle what has been a long-running dispute between ourselves and the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. Will my right hon. and learned Friend confirm to me and my constituents that it remains Government policy that convicted offenders detained in prison should not be allowed to vote, and that the recent agreement will not start us off on a slippery slope?

The Attorney General: Yes, and it is important that the Government comply with the judgment of a Court whose jurisdiction we have accepted. As my hon. Friend says, however, it is equally important that we stick to the clear view of this House and those beyond it that convicted prisoners should not vote from their cells, and they will not do so.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Attorney General outline how many prisoners the extension will apply to and what type of short-term licences will make them eligible to vote?

The Attorney General: The extension will apply to prisoners released on temporary licence. We think it will affect something like 100 prisoners—so, very few.

Jermaine Baker

2. **Mr David Lammy** (Tottenham) (Lab): What the timetable is for the Director of Public Prosecutions to complete her review of the charging decision in relation to the fatal shooting of Jermaine Baker; and if he will make a statement. [903064]

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): The Crown Prosecution Service is very conscious that the family of Jermaine Baker is waiting to hear the outcome of the review of the charging decision in relation to his death. Senior counsel has been instructed to advise on the case and the CPS anticipate that a final decision will be reached early in the new year.

Mr Lammy: I am very grateful to the Attorney General for that answer. He will understand that in a democracy there is nothing more serious than death as a result of police contact. This case has caused tremendous concern across my constituency and beyond in the wider black community. It is a very important decision and a number of lawyers up and down the country think, following the Independent Police Complaints Commission's address, that this matter should come before a jury. I want it to be clear that the decision will be looked at very closely indeed by the wider country.

The Attorney General: I understand what the right hon. Gentleman says. May I take this opportunity to pay tribute to him for his advocacy on behalf of the family? He will understand, however, that the decision was taken initially at the highest levels of the Crown Prosecution Service. Because of that, and because of the victims' right to review process, it is right that external counsel is brought in to advise. That is taking the decision extremely seriously. That will mean, as he has already discovered, that the decision takes a little longer, but I think it is right that full attention is paid to that decision and he will hear about it in due course.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The charging process requires full and wholly objective analysis of all material held. I am sure the Attorney General will agree that the same applies to disclosure if charges are brought. Recent high-profile cases, together with the joint inspection report of the criminal justice agencies, have highlighted what the Attorney has called appalling failures in disclosure by the police and the Crown Prosecution Service. The Criminal Law Solicitors Association, in a review of its members, found the same. Given its significance, will the Attorney General ensure that the review he is carrying out, as announced by the Prime Minister, looks not just at the working practices but at the professional culture and the independence and objectivity of the Crown Prosecution Service in these matters? I add in parenthesis that I note it was an independently instructed member of the Bar, Mr Jerry Hayes, who was responsible for highlighting the clear failure of the Crown Prosecution Service and the police in this case.

Mr Speaker: It would be of great benefit to the House if there were placed in the Library without delay a copy of the just-delivered lecture by the hon. Gentleman.

The Attorney General: Picking up on my hon. Friend's last point first, he is right to highlight that all that went wrong in this case, and there was a great deal, highlighted what is good about the criminal justice system as well as what went wrong. We owe a debt of gratitude to those involved in the system, in whatever capacity, who exercise their judgment in such cases. That applies, of course, to this particular counsel.

On my hon. Friend's wider point, he knows, because I have said it before, that my view is that these were indeed appalling failures of the criminal justice system. We need urgently to understand what went wrong in these particular cases, but we also, as he says, need to look more broadly at the question of disclosure, which has been an issue for some time. It relates to what people know they should be doing and how much information they are prepared to take account of, but it also relates to the challenges we face from a very large amount of electronic material and a very large number of cases. The systems need to be fit for purpose and the review I am undertaking will seek to ensure that they are.

Public Legal Education

3. **Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What steps he has taken to promote public legal education in the last 12 months. [903065]

7. **Jo Churchill** (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): What steps he has taken to promote public legal education in the last 12 months. [903071]

9. **Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): What steps he has taken to promote public legal education in the last 12 months. [903073]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): In July I launched a public legal education panel to support and drive forward legal education initiatives. Bringing together key organisations will mean a more joined-up approach to PLE, and will ensure that more people can reap the benefits of the good work that is being done. The panel is currently combining its resources to map the provision of, and need for, PLE around the country.

Nigel Huddleston: Does the Solicitor General agree that there is a particular need to enhance understanding of the law relating to social media? What is being done to enhance that understanding, especially among young people?

The Solicitor General: I know from my hon. Friend's professional career in this field that he knows more about it than many other Members. He will be glad to know that, through programmes such as the Lawyers in Schools initiative, young people are being taught about the do's and don'ts of social media because of the growing problem of offences being perpetrated through it. I have seen that great work at first hand on many occasions.

Jo Churchill: One third of the population experience civil justice cases, and nearly two thirds are unaware of basic legal rights and concepts. Minor legal challenges are commonplace, but, owing to a gap in public knowledge, many cases go unchallenged. What specific steps is the Crown Prosecution Service taking to reach the “harder to reach”—vulnerable people with physical and mental issues, and also the elderly, who are particularly vulnerable to scams?

The Solicitor General: As the hon. Lady says, there is a wide range of people with vulnerabilities. I am glad to say that the CPS is doing some excellent work, especially in the field of hate crime. The packs that it produces for schools in particular, dealing with disability, race, religion and LGBT issues, are being downloaded and used by schools in regions throughout the country, including the hon. Lady’s region. They are designed to teach students about the nature, effects and consequences of this type of crime, and have a strong anti-bullying focus which encourages young people to become active citizens.

Tom Tugendhat: I welcome the work that my hon. and learned Friend has done on public legal education. I also welcome the work done by Citizens Advice in such places as Edenbridge in Kent. Does my hon. and learned Friend agree, however, that the spread of contract law through every clickable website and every app that is downloaded means that the emphasis must now be on legal education throughout people’s lives, not just in schools but through general services as well?

The Solicitor General: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who, in the last Parliament, chaired the very first all-party parliamentary group on public legal education. He shares my passionate desire to enable young people in particular to understand that when they buy a mobile phone they sign a contract, and thus enter into legal obligations at a very early age. It is our duty to try to educate, encourage and support them in order to prevent some of the legal problems that they might encounter.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): As the Solicitor General knows, this is one area in which ignorance is not bliss. So many of our constituents all over the country suddenly have to know something about the law for a short period of their lives, but the level of knowledge is very poor indeed. Could not our further education colleges provide some help?

The Solicitor General: I can see a role for local practitioners. Lawyers could work with FE colleges as they currently do with many schools. What the hon. Gentleman has described is what I call “just in time” public legal education, which helps people with immediate crises. I am also interested in what I call “just in case” PLE, which is all about early intervention and prevention, but he is absolutely right to identify those issues.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): May I wish you, Mr Speaker, and all Members and staff a very happy Christmas?

Public legal education is also important in giving victims the confidence to come forward. This week the Attorney General published data on the use of

complainants’ sexual history in the most serious sex trials. He also announced the provision of training. When will that training be available?

The Solicitor General: May I add my compliments of the season to those of the hon. Gentleman?

The training is available now, and is ongoing. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the current structure of the law has been in existence for the best part of 20 years, and in my own professional experience it is used rigorously. It must be used rigorously, so that future complainants and victims of this appalling crime can be confident, first, that inappropriate questions will not be asked, and secondly, that they will not be ambushed in court in an inappropriate way.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The data collection exercise has been necessary because we do not systematically collect data in every case. Could we consider doing that, and also recording the reasons why judges grant such applications or not, as the case may be? Would that not increase confidence in the process?

The Solicitor General: I can confirm that that data will be collected. This issue came to my attention when both the Attorney General and I wanted a widespread number of cases to be examined. It will be done in a more thorough way so that we have up to date and accurate data on this important issue.

Returning British Jihadists

4. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): How many British jihadists (a) have been prosecuted and (b) are being considered for prosecution since returning from Syria or Iraq. [903066]

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): There is no specific offence related to returnees from Syria or Iraq as they can be prosecuted for a range of offences, but I can tell my hon. Friend that 97 people were charged with a terrorism-related offence in the year ending September this year, and as of last month 30 have been prosecuted and found guilty and a further 65 are awaiting prosecution.

Mr Hollobone: British jihadists who go abroad to fight Her Majesty’s armed forces are traitors and should be prosecuted for treason. My understanding is that the reason why they are not is that an official declaration of war has not been made against ISIS. Given that, should we not take away the nationality of these people so that they are not allowed back into the country in the first place, and if they are allowed back in, should not all of them be prosecuted and awarded the maximum sentences?

The Attorney General: We do prosecute wherever we can, and, of course, the appropriate place for some of these individuals to be brought to justice is the countries where their crimes are committed. On allowing them back into this country, as my hon. Friend may know, this country, as other countries, has an international law obligation to take back its own citizens. Where people have dual citizenship, it is feasible to take away their citizenship, and the Government do on occasion pursue the opportunity to do so, but we cannot leave people without a state.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): The Secretary of State for Defence has suggested that all terrorists should be killed. Is it not important that the UK is seen as upholding the Geneva convention?

The Attorney General: That certainly is important. What my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary was saying, echoing his predecessor, was that those who choose to fight with Daesh put themselves at risk, but let me make the legal position clear: every country, including this one, is entitled to defend itself from acts of terrorism, and where an attack is either present or imminent, and where it is necessary or proportionate to do so, this country can, and on occasion will, use force, including lethal force, to defend ourselves.

Serious Fraud Office

5. **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): What the Government's plans are for the future of the Serious Fraud Office. [903069]

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): The Serious Fraud Office does vital work in tackling some of the most serious instances of fraud, bribery and corruption. The SFO will continue, as an independent organisation, to conduct its own investigations and prosecutions of some of the most serious and complex economic crime, and a recruitment campaign is now under way for its next director.

Mr Speaker: Sir Desmond Swayne.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: So attentive was I to the words of the Attorney General that I failed to realise that we have not yet heard the supplementary question. Let's hear the fellow: Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi.

Mr Dhesi: Merry Christmas to you as well, Mr Speaker.

I am grateful to the Attorney General for his response about the Government's plans for the future of the SFO. However, following the Home Secretary's written statement last week, will the Attorney General clarify how the SFO will continue to operate free from ministerial interference when tasked to investigate by the National Crime Agency?

Mr Speaker: My apologies to the hon. Gentleman.

The Attorney General: We demonstrate here that no one is overlooked at Christmas.

The hon. Gentleman is right that the Home Secretary's announcement was that on occasion tasking powers will be used by the NCA to ask the SFO to investigate particular matters. I suspect that they will be used very rarely, and they can be used only with the consent both of the Home Secretary and of me; and I do not expect that this will compromise the SFO's independence in any way. Indeed, the Solicitor General and I are assiduous in ensuring that, both in choice of cases to investigate and in decisions to prosecute, the independence of the director of the SFO is preserved, and it still will be.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Can it be forthcoming for the victims who have reported these serious frauds but then hear absolutely nothing?

The Attorney General: That should not happen, but I know that my right hon. Friend will recognise that these are, by their nature, complex investigations and that it can take the SFO a large amount of time to get through all the relevant material in order to make a judgment. If he has a specific case in mind, I am sure that he will let me know so that I can look into it.

8. [903072] **Tony Lloyd** (Rochdale) (Lab): Serious fraud in this country is well investigated, because we have the right frameworks, investigatory bodies and legal processes to do that, but that does not apply to the mass-based fraud that leaves many of our fellow citizens feeling badly let down by the judicial process. Is it not time we began to look at what can be done to improve the definition of volume crime?

The Attorney General: I rather agree with the hon. Gentleman, and his experience as police and crime commissioner will underline what he has just said. We need to do more, and we are. There is a joint fraud taskforce, as he may know, which involves not just the criminal justice agencies but the banks and other organisations. In addition, the Home Secretary has announced the creation of the National Economic Crime Centre, which will do a better job of co-ordinating our activities against economic crime of all kinds.

Knife Crime

6. **Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on tackling knife crime. [903070]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): I am a member of the inter-ministerial group on ending gang violence and exploitation, which meets regularly to discuss the reduction of gang-related crimes such as knife crime. In October, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced that a serious violence strategy would be published in the early new year, and I regularly discuss the Crown Prosecution Service's contributions to that strategy with ministerial colleagues.

Mike Amesbury: The *Guardian* project, "Beyond the blade", states that national data on the number of children and teens killed by knives in any given year is not publicly available. Will the Solicitor General explain why?

The Solicitor General: I would be interested to know more about that, because I am particularly keen to ensure that the reporting and recording of knife crime are improved. We are seeing a rise in the number of reported cases because the police are recording them more accurately, and there is no doubt a problem in certain parts of the country where knife crime is rising, particularly here in London. I would be happy to talk further with the hon. Gentleman to explore a way forward to ensure that we have as much information as possible about this appalling crime.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: A question, perchance, of fewer than 20 words? I call Mr Bob Blackman.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I thank my hon. and learned Friend for his answers, but is it not the truth that if we stop people acquiring and carrying knives in the first place, knife crime will cease?

Mr Speaker: Splendid!

The Solicitor General: I will try to respond with similar brevity. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to talk about prevention, and we are consulting on further restrictions on the online sale of knives to under-18s, and on tightening up the law on the possession of knives in educational institutions other than schools.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I wish a happy Christmas and a good new year to you and your family, Mr Speaker, and to Members and staff across the House.

Knife crime is still a big problem in Scotland, but of the 35 children and teenagers killed as a result of knife crime in the UK so far this year, none was in Scotland. Does the Solicitor General agree that in his and his

Cabinet colleagues' efforts to reduce knife crime, they would do well to look at the work of Police Scotland's violence reduction unit, which has helped to oversee a 69% decline in the incidence of handling an offensive weapon in a decade?

The Solicitor General: We have a long history in the England and Wales jurisdiction of learning lessons from our friends in Scotland, and I would be interested to explore those particular factors further with the hon. Gentleman. I am sure that we can enter into correspondence on that.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Will the Solicitor General explain a little bit more about the steps that the Government are taking to stop children and minors being able to purchase knives and other weapons online?

The Solicitor General: As I said earlier, a consultation into the tightening up of the criminal law on the sale of knives online has just closed, and the Government will respond as urgently as possible to it because it is quite clear that we need to take as many measures as possible to make it as difficult as possible for young people to carry these lethal weapons.

Business of the House

10.39 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for the week commencing 8 January 2018 will include:

MONDAY 8 JANUARY—Second Reading of the Taxation (Cross-border) Trade Bill.

TUESDAY 9 JANUARY—Second Reading of the Trade Bill.

WEDNESDAY 10 JANUARY—Opposition day (7th allotted day): there will be a debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 11 JANUARY—Debate on a motion relating to defence. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 12 JANUARY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 15 January will include:

MONDAY 15 JANUARY—Second Reading of the Space Industry Bill [*Lords*].

TUESDAY 16 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill (day 1).

WEDNESDAY 17 JANUARY—Conclusion of remaining stages of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill.

THURSDAY 18 JANUARY—Debate on a motion on treatment of small and medium-sized enterprises by RBS Global Restructuring Group, followed by general debate on Holocaust Memorial Day 2018. The subjects for those debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 19 JANUARY—Private Members' Bills.

This morning, our thoughts and prayers are with the people of Melbourne as the troubling situation there continues to develop.

I congratulate the city of Birmingham on securing the 2022 Commonwealth games, which is excellent news for the people of the west midlands, and we wish them every success.

Finally, at the end of this busy term, I wish Mr Speaker, colleagues on both sides of the House, all our staff and the staff of the House a very relaxing Christmas and a happy and healthy new year. I am sure that we are all looking forward to hearing Big Ben's chimes once again as it rings in 2018.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the future business. I am also pleased about Birmingham getting the Commonwealth games—I have my running shoes on already.

I note that there was no date for the restoration and renewal debate. I know that the Leader of the House listened to the Members from across the House who felt that a Thursday was not an appropriate day because many people have different things to do. As the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill is moving to the other place, will she say when the R and R debate is likely to occur? We need to act sooner rather than later. The many people

on the Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster worked on the report, but it has taken a long time to get that debate going.

Prime Minister's questions are becoming more like Prime Minister's slogans. We have heard "fit for the future", so, if this is a way to stop her, we say, "Fit for the future with Labour." Someone needs to update the Prime Minister, because she mentioned sustainable and transformational partnerships in relation to an integrated health and social care system, which she says Labour is opposed to, but of course we are because it is another reorganisation, such as the disastrous Health and Social Care Act 2012, which cost the country £3 billion. The Prime Minister did not mention accountable care organisations, but to whom are they accountable? Last week, I asked the Leader of the House when the Government were intending to lay the relevant regulations before the House, but unfortunately she did not give me an answer, so will she confirm that there will be adequate time for a debate and a vote?

Another week means another U-turn or two. On Tuesday, we found out that plans to end the revenue support grant and allow councils to keep 100% of business rates would be put on hold. Not everyone has Oxford Street in their constituency, so we hope the change will end the bizarre policy of councils buying shopping malls. [*Interruption.*] I do not know why the Whip is chuntering when you asked for no chuntering or murmuring, Mr Speaker. If he would just listen, that would be helpful. The Government are consulting on a fair funding review, and the consultation closes on 12 March. Given that the House is in recess for two weeks over Christmas, will the Leader of the House ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government whether the consultation could be extended until the end of March to give people time to respond?

The other U-turn came on Tuesday, when my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) led a Westminster Hall debate on the exclusion of foster carers from being able to claim free childcare for their foster children. Foster carers do a fantastic job for society. I did not understand the policy, but the Minister ended the exclusion and should be congratulated on closing that gap in policy. That is what we would like to see on our Opposition days. We want to work constructively where there are gaps in policy.

I asked the Leader of the House about the sifting committee for statutory instruments, and she indicated that she will propose changes to Standing Orders when the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill has received Royal Assent. If she could do that when the Bill is in the other place, that might be quite helpful. Given the many statutory powers the Government are reserving to themselves, will she confirm through the usual channels, fairly quickly perhaps, that the chair of the committee will be from the Opposition?

May we have a statement on why the Equality and Human Rights Commission is not appointing people because Ministers are vetoing appointments on political grounds? At the moment, the board cannot function. Sarah Veale, the former head of the equality and employment rights department at the TUC, has not been reappointed despite being supported by the chair of the board. She was told that the decision not to reappoint her was taken because a political adviser at No. 10 had noticed a tweet she had sent disapproving of

[Valerie Vaz]

some Government policy. Will the Leader of the House confirm that the Government are not vetoing appointments on grounds of dissent from the Government, and will the Government look again at reappointing Ms Veale? She is highly qualified and supported by the chair.

As the Prime Minister travels to Poland, and given that the EU has just formally advised the other 27 member states that the Polish Government's legislative programme is putting at risk fundamental values expected of a democratic state, including judicial independence, will the Leader of the House confirm that the Prime Minister will be raising the rule of law with the Polish Government? Is this the kind of Government our Government are to do trade deals with? Our country played a vital role in drafting, and was the first to sign up to, the European convention on human rights. We promote the rule of law throughout the world.

The Leader of the House mentioned the events in Melbourne. Looking back on the year—from Westminster to Manchester, from London Bridge to Finsbury Park—I think of the families spending their first Christmas grieving for their lost loved ones, including our own Deputy Speaker. Our prayers are with him and his family at this difficult time. I am pleased that, following the statement by Mayor Burnham, the Government, who initially were only going to put £12 million towards Manchester's public services, will now pay the full £28 million asked for. Yesterday was International Human Solidarity Day. We always see the country come together during disasters and difficult times. We should strive to do that when there are no disasters.

I want to thank the Opposition Chief Whip for all his support and help; my staff and his; the Government Chief Whip, given last week's vote, for his support; the Leader of the House and her family; the Deputy Leader of the House, who has been so loyal throughout the years under different Leaders of the House; your family, Mr Speaker, and your office in particular; the Clerks; Phil and his team of Doorkeepers; the House of Commons Library; the official reporters; catering and cleaning staff; postal workers; security; and all right hon. and hon. Members and their families.

Finally, I have to do this, Mr Speaker—it is a joke from a Christmas cracker, and I am just trying to set the scene for the future: what do reindeer hang on their Christmas trees? Horn-aments! May I wish everyone a very happy Christmas and a peaceful new year?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sure that the hon. Lady's joke will resound around many a Christmas table this year. May I particularly join her in sending all our sympathies to the Deputy Speaker and his family? What a terrible tragedy! We are all so sorry. I also want to echo her remarks about human solidarity. We have seen so many examples of amazing solidarity, and yet also, very sadly, too many examples of people allowing their disagreements to splash into violence, vitriol and hatred. We want in this Parliament to be able to air our disagreements and then go and have a cup of tea together. I am always delighted to share a cup of tea with her, and I certainly wish her and her family a very happy Christmas.

The hon. Lady asks when the R and R debate will be scheduled. As I said last week, I can confirm that, following representations from Members from across

the House not to have the debate on a Thursday, I am working with the Chief Whip and through the usual channels to find a suitable date.

The hon. Lady asks about accountable care organisations. These are intended to provide more joined-up care, more efficient care and greater productivity, and are something the NHS would value having as a tool at its disposal. That is their purpose. There is nothing else but the intention to make the NHS more effective and productive.

The hon. Lady asks whether the consultation on fairer funding could be ended at the end of March, rather than on 12 March, and I am happy to take that up with the Department for Communities and Local Government. I am sure that if there is no good reason why this cannot be done, DCLG will be sympathetic. On childcare for foster children, I think the whole House is delighted with the progress in this area. We should celebrate that access being provided by the Government.

The hon. Lady asks about the sifting committee. Draft changes to Standing Orders are available on the Order Paper for her and colleagues to look at. The decision about who will make up the committee will be made in due course, through the usual channels.

The hon. Lady asks about appointments to the Human Rights Commission. Obviously, these decisions are taken when we are in possession of all the facts about who would provide the right balance in terms of experience, background and so on. I cannot comment on the specifics of what she mentions, but I can assure her that there is scrupulous fairness in the appointments to commissions.

The hon. Lady asks about Poland, and I can tell her that it remains a very strong ally of the UK. Polish fighters in world wars have been enormously supportive to the interests of the United Kingdom, and we should never forget that. However, she rightly points out that the UK upholds international law. We have an absolute commitment to the importance of the rule of law, and the Prime Minister will be making her views on that very clear when she is in Poland.

Finally, I just wish to share the hon. Lady's all-encompassing good wishes to everyone who works for and in this place.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: As per usual, there is extensive interest in the business question, but I simply advise the House that we have two statements to follow and that more than 30 people are seeking to contribute to the two debates to take place under the auspices of the Backbench Business Committee. Therefore, there is a premium on brevity from Back Benchers and Front Benchers alike, now to be inimitably demonstrated by Sir Peter Bottomley.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The House will welcome the statement by DCLG today on the crack-down on unfair leasehold practices. Will it be possible early in the new year for the Government to announce when there will be a Government debate on the timetable, so that we can stamp out the exploitation, crookery and heartlessness of some freeholders, who have been operating untouched in this field for too long?

Andrea Leadsom: I share my hon. Friend's concern about some of the practices that have gone on in this area. I am sure that DCLG Ministers will want to come back to this place to provide updates as soon as they are able to do so.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next year. May I wish you, Mr Speaker, and all the Members of the House a very merry Christmas? I will not repeat the list given by the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), as I am sure she was very extensive in the list of people she wished a happy Christmas to at this time of year.

It is panto season. I suppose every day is like a pantomime in this House, but this year we have our very own version of "Mother Totally Goosed", where our hero, with repeated warnings of "He's behind you," is transported to a magical land where her dream of unfettered trade deals and transitional arrangements are grown from the magic Brexit beans. No longer assisted by the pantomime dame from "Aladdin", our hero climbs bravely into the Brexit unknown.

I am sure we are hoping for a peaceful election in Catalonia today. Last time there was a democratic contest there, ballot boxes were seized and people were assaulted by the state for simply voting. It is almost impossible to believe that political leaders in a modern European democracy are contesting this election from prison or exile simply for desiring a particular political outcome for their country.

May we have a debate about tax, so that we can try to better understand why England is quickly becoming the highest taxed part of the UK? Whereas in Scotland 70% of taxpayers will have their tax reduced, in England, once council tax is factored in, taxpayers in a band D property face a tax increase of more than £100. Perhaps the Scottish Government could give the Government some advice and assistance on how to design a fair tax system based on the best principles of redistribution.

Lastly, at this time of good will and cheer, let us remember that Scottish Tory MPs are not just for Christmas; we are stuck with them, as they plummet in Scottish Westminster opinion polls. Those cute, doe-eyed stoppers of a second independence referendum can grow up to be that unwanted, unloved, forgotten waste of space with nothing better to do than barge about our Government 500 miles away. So remember, people of Scotland: if you are thinking about voting Tory in Scotland, have a look at what they grow up to be when they get down here.

Andrea Leadsom: I am not entirely sure what to make of that, but I shall take the hon. Gentleman's points in the Christmas spirit, which is very important. He clearly feels under threat from my hon. Friends from Scotland because of their excellent work, not only in holding the Scottish Government to account but in representing their constituents in Scotland. It is great for Government Members to see Conservatives at work supporting Scottish constituents.

The hon. Gentleman asked about taxes. He will of course be aware that Government Members, particularly my hon. Friends from Scotland, are disappointed to see

income taxes going up in Scotland, particularly as the Chancellor announced in the Budget an extra £2 billion for Scotland.

The hon. Gentleman asked about Catalonia. I think the whole House will join in hoping that today's election there will be peaceful and respectful. Spain is a key ally to the United Kingdom. As I just said to the shadow Leader of the House, we absolutely uphold the rule of law at all times.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked about Brexit trade deals. The Prime Minister has said on any number of occasions, as has my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, that we are determined to get the best possible deal for the United Kingdom and for our EU friends and neighbours as we leave the EU, which will happen on 29 March 2019.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): There was a Westminster Hall debate on corrosive substance attacks yesterday, but will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on new types of crime such as moped gangs and acid attacks? This depressing trend seems to show that the law and sentencing guidelines are not fit for purpose.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a very worrying issue. We are determined to put a stop to this new type of crime. The Home Office has been working closely with a number of partners, including the motorcycle and insurance industries and the police, to develop an action plan. We will review progress early in the new year.

On acid attacks, the Government are consulting on new legislation that would include the prohibition of the sale of harmful corrosive substances to under-18s, and the Home Secretary intends to put sulphuric acid on the list of regulated substances. It is a big challenge. I am sure that, like me, my hon. Friend is pleased that traditional crimes are decreasing, thanks to the excellent efforts of our law enforcers, but we must and will react quickly and effectively to modern crimes.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement and for advertising the wares of the Backbench Business Committee for the new year, particularly the intention to have a six-hour debate on defence, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), on the first Thursday back after the recess.

It is Christmas, and we should add to the extended list that we heard from the shadow Leader of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz). Christmas is a time for forgiveness, so let us extend a warm and merry Christmas to the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority. IPSA is indeed the founder of our feast, in a strange sort of way, so let us extend a merry Christmas to its staff at this time of good wishes.

May I extend an invitation to you, Mr Speaker, and to the Leader of the House? Next year, between June and September, Gateshead and Newcastle will be hosting the Great Exhibition of the North. I am delighted to invite you both to visit Gateshead and Newcastle during that period.

Andrea Leadsom: I am sure, Mr Speaker, that you and I would be delighted to do that. I have really enjoyed previous trips, particularly to Gateshead. It is

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

a fabulously vibrant place with fabulous views. There are some really tall buildings that offer enormous roofscape views. It is fabulous, so I shall certainly take up the hon. Gentleman's offer.

The hon. Gentleman is right to mention that important defence debate on 11 January. It will give many Members who have wanted to discuss defence the chance to air their views.

I share in the hon. Gentleman's wishing IPSA staff a merry Christmas; may they have a successful and happy 2018.

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): It is increasingly clear that the health and social care needs of rural communities diverge very significantly from those of urban communities. Like me, does the Leader of the House welcome the creation of the National Centre for Rural Health and Care and the appointment of the excellent chairman, Richard Parish, who has vast international and local experience? Can we have a debate in Government time on the unique pressures that rural health and social care providers face in recognition of the changes that we need in funding and structure?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is right to raise that important issue. Rural areas do face unique pressures. Challenges raised are often around barriers to access, including rural transport and urgent and emergency care. She will be aware that dwellers in rural areas often enjoy better health than those in urban areas, but she may wish to apply for an Adjournment debate or a Westminster Hall debate to discuss this very important matter further.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Members across the House will have been horrified to see the amount of plastic in our seas after watching "Blue Planet" this year. Will the Leader of the House and you, Mr Speaker, make it your new year's resolution to make Parliament plastic free in 2018?

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady. I, too, was glued to "Blue Planet" and the issues that it raised. As Environment Secretary, I was delighted to be able to announce the litter strategy, looking at how we can reduce the plastics in our seas. The current Environment Secretary has just now signed the commitment to banning microbeads from face washes and other products. This Government have done more than any other to try to clamp down on waste plastics getting into our marine areas, and we will continue to do everything possible.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): One of the farcical stories of Newark's 2017 is Network Rail's continual failure to man the barriers at Newark Castle station, so it is a good job that Santa will be arriving through the air on a sleigh, because otherwise he may not even be able to get into the town. The latest instalment in this pantomime was that Network Rail's operatives failed to recognise that the barriers should be closed from 10 pm in the evening, overnight, and misread it as 10 am, closing the entire town off for Saturday shopping at Christmas. Will the Leader of the House give us an

early Christmas present and pick up the phone to the chief executive of Network Rail to give him a good telling off?

Andrea Leadsom: As ever, my hon. Friend represents his constituents extremely well. He may wish to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise that particular issue.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Happy St Thomas's day, Mr Speaker—to be precise. I am delighted that the Leader of the House has said that we are moving the date for the debate on restoration and renewal, because it is better that the whole House should be able to come to a proper decision. May I just say to her that I can help her with this as I have found time on 15 January when we can do it? The Second Reading of the Space Industry Bill took less than two hours in the House of Lords, so I do not see why it should take any more time here, and we can use the rest of the day to do R and R and come to a proper decision. Incidentally, IPSA has said that, next year, if Members want staff to be paid before Christmas, they should all say "aye" today, and it will do it properly next year.

Hon. Members: Aye!

Andrea Leadsom: I am very grateful, as I am sure are the Chief Whip and the shadow Chief Whip, for the hon. Gentleman's advice on how to schedule the business, but he will appreciate that the space Bill is an extremely important piece of legislation that will create highly skilled jobs for the future and provide a huge opportunity for the United Kingdom and it needs to be given a proper hearing in this place.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Can we have a debate on Made in Britain? Does the Leader of the House share my concern that the new British passport from 2019, a black passport, not a purple one, could be designed and printed in Germany—made in Berlin rather than made in Britain?

Andrea Leadsom: We all support the UK's stance as a global free-trading nation, but, at the same time, we recognise that Britain has a huge amount to offer in terms of our manufacturing, our food and drink and all manner of services that we provide to the world, and we can compete on a level playing field.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): As we come to the end of Hull's first year as city of culture, may I pay tribute to Rosie Millard and Martin Green, who have led the city of culture organisation and put on so many wonderful events this year? The fact that we have had 3.5 million visitors to Hull speaks for itself. Can we please have a debate about the legacy for Hull coming out of city of culture? Coventry will be city of culture 2021, and we need to make sure that we get the arts funding out to the regions so that it is not concentrated in London.

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate the hon. Lady on her support for Hull's superb time as city of culture, and on her enthusiasm for Coventry's. I recommend that she seeks a Westminster Hall debate to focus on these important points. I am sure that Ministers will be interested to hear her views.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): There is growing concern among residents and business owners in Cleethorpes, particularly in St Peter's Avenue and the High Street, about the growing number of vagrants in the area. That concern spilled over at a public meeting last week. Can the Leader of the House find time for a debate in Government time so that we can discuss the response of the various agencies, how they can deal with the problem and how they can deal with those who are genuinely homeless?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an issue of great concern to us all. The Government are committed to eliminating rough sleeping. We are investing more than £1 billion to 2020 in order to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping. For example, we have a homelessness reduction taskforce and a rough sleeping advisory panel to focus minds right across Government on what more we can do. We have £20 million for schemes that support people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness to get secure tenancies, and £28 million of backing for Housing First pilots. It is vital that local authorities take advantage of the funding available to them, and that we all focus on tackling homelessness and rough sleeping.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I send my best Christmas wishes to all, but Christmas can be a very tough time of year for some people. At the Samaritans reception that was held here this week, a very simple request was made—that all MPs put the Samaritans number on their out-of-office message. As many of our offices will be closed over the Christmas period, at least that number would then be available if anybody did contact us in an emotional crisis. I have already done this. Will the Leader of the House join me in asking the MPs present whether they feel that they could do this too?

Andrea Leadsom: That is a lovely idea. I will certainly be delighted to do that myself. Indeed, I have made a short YouTube clip explaining how people can get hold of me if there is no answer from the office. The hon. Lady is right that the issue of loneliness and people who are desperate for urgent help must be addressed—never more so than at this time of year when that help can really matter a great deal to people. I commend her suggestion.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The London Assembly this week announced the publication of a report that shows that there are 9,000 sheds in London alone that are accommodating people in back gardens and unsavoury areas. That is council tax that is not being collected and landlords who are exploiting people who have nowhere to live. Can we have a debate in Government time on this nationwide problem so that we can crack down on this disgraceful activity?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is right to raise this pretty shocking statistic. He will be aware that the number of statutory homeless people is lower than it was at any time in 2010. Nevertheless, there is a lot more to be done. We must clamp down on rogue landlords and those who seek to abuse people who do not have access to safe rented accommodation or other

accommodation. I share my hon. Friend's view that the Mayor of London should seek to put a stop to this activity.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please press for Government time, during the process of the restoration and renewal debate, in which we can debate how to make both Houses of Parliament truly accessible for people with disabilities, particularly for those one in 100 people on the autistic spectrum?

Andrea Leadsom: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, and I pay tribute to you, Mr Speaker, for all you have done for those with disabilities and to try to make Parliament more accessible. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise the possibility of the House debating easier access once we get into the R and R debate.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): Last week in *The Times* and other papers, there was a very good article by a former special adviser to David Cameron and George Osborne about corruption in local government. I asked for a debate last week; I am asking again. We now have firm evidence that there are problems, and I would like a general debate in this place if possible.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an issue that is of great concern to him, and I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise it specifically with Ministers.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Two young girls from my constituency, Amy and Ella Meek, are coming to Parliament today to meet the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee. They are Kids Against Plastic. These young girls are fantastic campaigners. Given the urgency of this issue—as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) said, we have all been moved by “Blue Planet”—they want us to do even more. Could the Leader of the House arrange for the Environment Secretary to come to Parliament and make a statement so that we can all contribute to trying to do something about this issue?

Andrea Leadsom: May I congratulate the hon. Gentleman's constituents, the Meeks, on taking the great step of coming here to make their views known? It is fantastic when people choose to do that, and it is important for young people to take such an interest in their environment. I can tell the hon. Gentleman's constituents that as a result, for example, of cutting the use of plastic bags by 83%, there are 9 billion fewer plastic bags now being used. We have doubled the maximum litter fines to try and discourage litter on land, which so often ends up in our seas. We have also just finished consulting on our proposals to reduce plastic, metal and glass litter, which included consulting on reward and return schemes for drinks containers. All these things are important, and I absolutely encourage the hon. Gentleman's constituents to keep up their campaigning work.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Can we have a statement to this House on the recent report from Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary in Scotland on the Scottish

[*Douglas Ross*]

National party's plans to merge the British Transport police into Police Scotland? That report highlighted that issues such as terms and conditions and pension arrangements need to be discussed sooner rather than later. Given that we are less than 16 months away from full integration, does the Leader of the House agree that that shows how poorly the SNP has handled this? In fact, it might be better if it abandoned its plans altogether.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a very important matter, and he is right to hold the Scottish Government to account. I encourage him to seek a Westminster Hall or Adjournment debate so that he can raise this with Ministers to see what can be done.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): My Easterhouse constituent Ibrahim al-Kasharfeh submitted an asylum claim over a year and a half ago, and despite service standards of six months, he still has not been given a decision. May we have a debate in Government time on the process and procedures for asylum claims, because we are clearly not getting them right?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a significant constituency issue, which he is absolutely right to raise. I encourage him to take it up with Home Office Ministers, who I am sure will be keen to look at that specific case.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Let us never forget that, in the fight for freedom and justice in the war, Poland lost a quarter of its population.

Closer to home—I am sure the Leader of the House will agree with this—can we please have the debate on restoration and renewal on a substantive amendable motion as soon as possible? The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and I have different points of view, but we do think we should get on with this now. In a building such as this, fire is an ever-present risk, and the House needs to come to a conclusion quickly and to get on with the work, particularly on fire doors.

Andrea Leadsom: As I have explained to Members, we have taken representations that the debate should not be on a Thursday, and we are seeking an alternative date as soon as possible.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Will the Leader of the House make time available for a Cabinet Office debate on the selective application of the ministerial code, so that the Cabinet Office could explain why the Deputy Prime Minister had to go, whereas the Foreign Secretary, who, according to my estimation, has breached sections 1.2a, 7.1 and 8.6, is still with us? Before she responds, however, may I wish her and other Members, as well as you, Mr Speaker, and everyone who helps us here in the House, a merry Christmas and, in the new year, an exit from Brexit?

Andrea Leadsom: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his good wishes, apart from the last bit—clearly, I do not share that sentiment at all. He makes some very specific allegations that he should raise with the Cabinet Office directly.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): May we have an urgent debate on net neutrality in the light of the Federal Communications Commission's recent decision in the United States?

Andrea Leadsom: I am pleased to say to my hon. Friend that I managed to catch the relevant Minister on this point just before coming into the Chamber. They confirmed that the UK remains committed to the existing laws around net neutrality and will be upholding those laws. However, my hon. Friend may well wish to submit a parliamentary question to have that confirmed to him directly.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Merry Christmas, Mr Speaker, to you and your family, and to all who serve in this House.

May I ask the Leader of the House for an urgent debate on the Government's red lines on Brexit? Two days ago, we heard from the EU chief negotiator that passporting financial services is not possible while the Government insist on their red lines. Tens of thousands of jobs in Edinburgh rely on this.

Andrea Leadsom: I think the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that, as has been said many times, this is a negotiation. I am sure that he will be delighted, as we all are, that we have made progress on to the second part, which is to discuss the free trade arrangements that we want between ourselves and the European Union. These negotiations are under way, and the Government will of course update Parliament and take in Parliament's views at every opportunity.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I should gently point out that if each Member could ask a short question of one sentence, we could move on in about 10 minutes, and that would be helpful to subsequent debates. Whether that will have any effect, who knows? We will see.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): This morning, Sergeant Watchman V, the Staffordshire Regimental Association mascot, is being promoted to the rank of colour sergeant. Sergeant Watchman V is a Staffordshire bull terrier. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Watchman, and also his handler, Greg Hedges?

Andrea Leadsom: Of course I am delighted to join in my hon. Friend's enthusiasm. I gather that Watchman also won the public vote in the Westminster dog of the year competition last year.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): On 16 November, I asked the Leader of the House for a statement on when the results of the consultation on penalties for causing death by dangerous driving would come before Parliament and be enshrined in law. I wrote to her, as she asked me to do, but since then I have heard nothing. Will she please advise me on what further action I might take?

Andrea Leadsom: I will absolutely look into this if I have missed something. I am absolutely assiduous about following up on all pledges made in this House, so if I have not followed up in this case, I sincerely apologise and will do so straight after this session.

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): Following the recent experience in my constituency where a planning application for exploratory drilling that will lead to fracking has been declared for non-determination in a highly premature manner, may we have a debate in Government time about whether the planning system is working for these kinds of large applications?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a strong voice for his constituents, and he is right to raise this matter. An applicant for planning permission can exercise powers under section 78 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 for a right of appeal to the Secretary of State against a decision to refuse consent, or non-determination. Whether an applicant wishes to exercise that right of appeal is a matter for them. He will appreciate that major shale gas planning decisions will be the responsibility of the national planning regime, so he could raise this with Department for Communities and Local Government Ministers during questions on 22 January.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): May we have a debate on early-day motion 722?

[That this House believes that the acceptance of a new job with Chinese interests by the previous Prime Minister David Cameron exposes parliamentarians to accusations of promoting their own financial interests in office in order to benefit from them later with lucrative jobs; recalls that David Cameron resisted all pleas to reform the abuses of revolving door that allows former hon. Members to prosper on the basis of insider knowledge unhindered by the impotent watchdog of the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments; and further recalls that the former Prime Minister supported the Chinese-British Hinkley Point project that been condemned as a potential financial calamity by the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee.]

That might help to remove the most corrupt element in this Parliament whereby three Governments have failed to reform the committee that is supposed to prevent past Ministers from profiting financially from their time in office. Is there not a danger that the country will look at recent affairs and ask, as Chaucer did, “If gold doth rust, what will iron do?”

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises what I am sure is a very important point. If he has an EDM, it will be dealt with in the usual manner.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the apprenticeship levy? In my constituency, Blaze Construction is working hard to support this process, but has concerns about how it affects its industry and its efforts.

Andrea Leadsom: I know that my hon. Friend shares the Government’s enthusiasm for apprenticeships, of which there have been more than 3 million since 2010. That is fantastic news for young people’s careers and the development of their skills. If she wishes to promote particular issues around the apprenticeship levy, I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can raise the matter directly.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I send a special Christmas wish to the police who keep us safe in this place? They get overlooked sometimes. Does the Leader of the House agree that it is heartrending

to read about a little girl saying, “Father Christmas forgot to come to my house last Christmas”? That is a terrible thing. The Children’s Commissioner has said that there are half a million vulnerable children in our country. Can we have an early debate about the Children’s Commissioner’s report on vulnerable children?

Andrea Leadsom: I fully share the hon. Gentleman’s concern about vulnerable children. We would all like, particularly at Christmas, everything possible to be done to ensure that children have the chance to be with their families and enjoy Christmas. I encourage him to seek a debate on the matter so that all Members can participate.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking postal service workers over this busy Christmas period? Can we have a statement on future support for post offices, especially those in rural constituencies such as mine?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in thanking all Post Office workers. They do a fabulous job at this time of year. The issue that she raises is very important, especially to rural communities, so I am pleased that the Government announced yesterday that they are committing up to £370 million in new investment in the post office network for the three years from April 2018.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Would the Leader of the House agree to have a debate on a national Sikh war memorial in a prime central location in our capital, to commemorate the extraordinary bravery and sacrifices of Sikh soldiers in the service of Great Britain? That includes both world wars, when more than 83,000 turbaned Sikh soldiers laid down their lives and more than 100,000 were injured. To assist her in that, she may have seen early-day motion 708, which already has the support of more than 150—

Mr Speaker: Well meaning, but far too long.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the amazing sacrifice of Sikh soldiers, and I share his interest in a memorial. He may well wish to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise that directly with Ministers.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating my constituent Marsha Gladstone? She received the Points of Light award for her work with the Yoni Jesner Foundation, which was set up in memory of her son, who was killed by a Tel Aviv bus bomb 15 years ago.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a very sad story. He is right to seek the warmth of this House for his constituent, and I am very happy to give it.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I hope Parliament will join me in congratulating the UN and the World Federation of the Deaf on declaring an International Day of Sign Languages. May we have a debate on its recognition in UK law?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate the hon. Lady on what I am sure was very accurate signing. I am sure that hon. Members would be delighted if she were to seek a Back-Bench debate on this subject.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): As we approach Christmas, our thoughts are often with those whom we have lost during the year. I am sure the thoughts of many of us in the House will therefore be with the family of PC Keith Palmer, who gave up his life while protecting ours. Several months ago, my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) suggested that some kind of commemoration, such as a commemorative plaque, should exist on the parliamentary estate. Can the Leader of the House give us an update on progress?

Andrea Leadsom: Keith Palmer showed huge bravery and courage when he sought to protect our parliamentary community from a terror attack. He was also a father, a husband and a Charlton Athletic fan, and he is now the posthumous recipient of the George medal. The Police Memorial Trust is working with Westminster City Council to erect a memorial stone outside Carriage Gates, and that is something that we will all be pleased to see.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): In terms of the hard work of Scottish Tories, I have submitted written questions asking how many meetings they have had, and when, with police and fire services on the question of VAT. The answer I got was that there are regular policy meetings with hon. Members. I then asked when Scottish Tories last met each one, and I was referred back to the same answer. Will the Leader of the House make a statement explaining how I can actually hold the Government to account and how she will get Ministers to give straight answers?

Andrea Leadsom: I think the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that, in the last few weeks, the Chancellor has seen many hon. Friends every night in the Lobbies. How often the Chancellor comes across his colleagues is really not a matter on which to hold the Government to account.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House commit to arranging an early statement on the astonishing and unacceptable threat by the United States ambassador to the United Nations that note will be taken of countries, like our own, opposing the move of the Israeli capital to Jerusalem and that consequences will follow?

Andrea Leadsom: We are aware of Donald Trump's comments, but the UK's long-standing position on Jerusalem has not changed. The UK's position is that the status of Jerusalem should be determined through a negotiated settlement between the Israelis and the Palestinians, and that it should ultimately be the shared capital of the Israeli and Palestinian states.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in celebrating our community councils, particularly the volunteers who form the foundation of our democracy, and may we have a debate on the role of volunteers in our democracy?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman follows a line of other Members who have sought further discussion on the excellent work of volunteers. I encourage him to seek a Back-Bench debate so that all Members can pay tribute to those who work so hard as volunteers.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): The great northern powerhouse project of course includes the central trans-Pennine corridor. When will the Government facilitate a debate on what they consider a flagship project—in Government time, in this place—so that Members of Parliament can discuss the northern powerhouse?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that the Government are fully committed to the northern powerhouse. Half a trillion pounds of investment has gone into infrastructure since 2010. The national productivity investment fund is looking to improve infrastructure right across the United Kingdom, and the northern powerhouse has been a big recipient. I encourage him to seek a Westminster Hall debate so that he can put forward further ideas to make it a success.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I believe the other customary greeting at this time of year is "May the force be with you".

May we have a debate on the recruitment policy of the Civil Aviation Authority? A constituent of mine approached me to say he was prohibited from obtaining a medical certificate for a commercial pilot's licence simply on the grounds that he was HIV-positive. Does the Leader of the House agree that nobody should face unjustifiable discrimination because of their HIV status? I have written to the Transport Secretary, but I have not yet had an answer. May we have a debate on this issue?

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman. This Government are against discrimination. I encourage him to ask a parliamentary question so that he can get an answer on his specific point.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House ask a Work and Pensions Minister to make a written statement on the remaining months of the roll-out of universal credit in constituencies in the UK? I received an incorrect answer to a written question on Monday, and I still have not had a response to my oral question in Work and Pensions questions on Monday afternoon.

Andrea Leadsom: If the hon. Gentleman wants to write to me on that point, I will take it up with the Department for him.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The publicly owned Royal Bank of Scotland is closing more than one third of its branches in Scotland, including the very busy one in Renfrew in my constituency. May we have a statement on this Government's abdication of their responsibility to the taxpayers of Scotland in leaving 13 towns with zero bank branches?

Mr Speaker: A debate on that matter has already been announced, unless my memory is incorrect, but the Leader of the House will in any case give us her reply.

Andrea Leadsom: Yes, Mr Speaker, there will be a debate on the RBS restructuring group. On the hon. Gentleman's point about closures, this is a commercial matter, as the Prime Minister has made clear. We are certainly very keen to promote the excellent work of the post office network in providing basic bank account services. He will certainly be aware of the protocols on bank closures that every bank must follow, and he may wish to take this up directly with BEIS Ministers.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): On a similar note, 62 bank branches are closing in Scotland, including in Rothesay, Campbeltown and Inveraray in my constituency. Thus far, the Government have steadfastly refused to get involved, saying that these are commercial decisions, but such an answer is unacceptable. May we have an urgent statement on the bank closure programme in Scotland and how it can be stopped?

Andrea Leadsom: As I said to the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), the key point is that decisions about bank closures are commercial ones. Many people are turning away from branch banking to mobile banking. There are protocols for consultations on footfall and so on that must be followed by any bank before it decides to close its doors, but these are ultimately commercial decisions.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Earlier this week, militants attacked a Methodist church in Pakistan, killing nine people and wounding dozens of others. The two suicide bombers were stopped at the entrance to the church, but had they managed to get into it, the number of casualties would have been as high as in the 24 November attack on the mosque in Egypt. This attack is especially poignant at Christmas, so will the Leader of the House agree to a statement or a debate on the escalating violence in Pakistan and the middle east?

Andrea Leadsom: I think all Members would condemn the sort of violence mentioned by the hon. Gentleman, on which I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate.

Independent Complaints and Grievance Policy

11.29 am

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the independent complaints and grievance policy. I apologise that it is a little long, but I want to give a full account to the House of the progress made.

On 6 November, the Prime Minister convened a meeting of all party leaders to address reports of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment in Parliament. All parties agreed to implement robust procedures to try to change the culture in Parliament, recognising that Parliament can and must set a good example. In her letter to you, Mr Speaker, the Prime Minister made clear the need for a new grievance procedure, and a cross-party working group on an independent complaints and grievance policy has been working hard over the past six weeks to consider evidence and draw up recommendations for new procedures. Good progress has been made, and during the recess there will be further discussion and consultation within the parties and among the staff bodies, in order to produce a fuller report in the new year. There are many examples of good employers and professional working practices right across Parliament, and we seek to ensure that that is the case for all.

The working group, chaired by me on behalf of the Prime Minister, has been made up of two colleagues from Labour, and one each from the Scottish National party, the Liberal Democrats, the Democratic Unionists, Plaid Cymru and the Green party, as well as the Leader of the House of Lords and the convener of the Cross-Bench peers from the other place. We also have three staff members on the working party representing the Members and Peers' Staff Association, Unite, and the National Union of Journalists. They have led widespread consultation with staff, to ensure that staff voices have been heard loudly. We have been supported by a secretariat made up of Cabinet Office and parliamentary staff, including the tireless work of Alix Langley, Justine How, and Dr Helen Mott, a leading specialist in sexual assault. They each deserve our enormous thanks for their dedication.

I am also very aware of the active interest that a number of colleagues have taken in this matter, and for them it is a personal campaign to improve the experience of those who work here. I thank them for discussing their thoughts with me, particularly the hon. Members for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) and for Luton South (Mr Shuker), my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), and my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller).

The working group has so far met on 11 occasions, and has heard from a wide range of experienced professionals, both in person and through written submissions. Those include the Speakers of both Houses, Professor Sarah Childs, Rape Crisis, the Clerks of both Houses, ACAS, the Parliamentary Commissioners for Standards and the Chair of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, Unite, legal experts from the business world, and Health Assured. Importantly, the working group also heard from a number of staff about their views of the culture of Parliament. We are grateful to those who spoke to the group about their experiences, or provided anonymous submissions.

[Andrea Leadsom]

The working group identified three guiding principles for this work. First, Parliament requires an independent process that is separate from the political channels. Secondly, much evidence was taken to support the view that claims of sexual harassment must be dealt with separately from claims of bullying and other types of harassment. Thirdly, structures alone will not change the culture in Parliament and other steps are also needed including—crucially—a human resources service for staff employed by Members, and an expansion of training provision.

As a result of the work of the group, and with the support of the Speaker and the commission, a number of immediate measures have been put in place to increase the level of support available to staff across the estate. First, there will be a new, interim provision of HR support and guidance for the staff of Members, beginning after the recess, while consideration is given to the need for a broader HR service. HR support will also be accessible to Members' staff working on the parliamentary estate, in constituency offices, and those who are collectively employed by the parties. In addition, new training will be available, addressing the range of needs identified by the working group. That is in addition to the already announced expanded Health Assured helpline, which will be made available to staff of Members across both Houses, and a number of other pass holders across the estate. As you requested, Mr Speaker, individual political party policies and procedures for dealing with bullying and harassment have been published online and are accessible on the parliamentary website.

A great deal has been achieved, but we also have a programme of work planned into the new year. The working group has clearly identified the need for new policies and procedures to tackle bullying and harassment, including sexual harassment, which should be available to staff and Members across the estate, and must be independent of the political parties. The proposals that follow are the outcome of substantial evidence taken by the working group and there is strong support from its members. However, further work, evidence-gathering and consultation will be required before we can put new processes in place. They must attract the full support and confidence of staff, MPs and peers across Parliament.

One new policy under consideration by the working group is a new behaviour code to be consulted on, which would apply to all those who work in or for Parliament, including Members, peers and staff, wherever they work. This behaviour code could sit alongside the existing parliamentary codes of conduct, which may themselves require amendment. Another is the procurement of a new independent sexual violence advocate specialist service to provide a confidential helpline and counselling support and advice to those wishing to make disclosures. Such a service would also provide support to complainants in cases of sexual assault, including rape. The service would provide support for complainants to pursue a criminal justice route, or, if they did not wish to go to the police, alternative strictly confidential support. The working group has also taken significant evidence on the need for an independent mediation service to provide a helpline, counselling and investigation into incidents of bullying and intimidation.

Finally, we discussed sanctions. These will of course differ according to the severity of the grievance, and for different individuals across the estate. For lower-level complaints, the range of possible sanctions could include training covering harassment and bullying, a full apology, as well as a review, where appropriate, of the parliamentary pass. In serious cases, further work needs to be carried out to ensure sanctions are appropriate, fair and enforceable. The functions of both the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards and the Standards Committee may need to be strengthened and reviewed to ensure fair representation and confidentiality. Considerable further work needs to be carried out before conclusions can be drawn and, of course, any changes to Standing Orders and to the code of conduct would require decisions by the House.

The working group's discussions have been underpinned by a persistent theme: there are many examples of excellent employers and working relationships, but there is a real need to improve the overall workplace culture of Parliament. One of the routes to this is proper independent HR support for Members' staff to minimise the problem of contractual disputes, as identified in one of our core principles. We need to work with the House authorities and staff to consider the best and most appropriate way of delivering this in the long term. We also received a great deal of evidence on the need for voluntary and mandatory training for staff and their employers. This would include proper induction courses for staff employed by Members. While this is not within the terms of reference for the working group, it was made clear to us that enabling better support for employer-employee relationships could significantly improve the working atmosphere and engender a more professional culture. The working group will consider the evidence further.

Mr Speaker, we were grateful for your own contribution to the working group, in which you made it clear that the House of Commons Commission stands ready to do what it needs to do to respond to any proposal from the working group, providing that the proposal combines independence and transparency. We recognise the need both for swift progress and for careful consideration before taking action. Our next steps, therefore, are crucial. The working group will reconvene after the recess to agree on how the work will progress. We will look closely at the policies we have identified as needing further work and consultation, and begin to take further advice and evidence. A number of proposals have been made about how to take our work forward. They range from appointing a special bicameral Select Committee to maintaining a Members and staff cross-party committee. We will consider all ideas carefully, but I want to make it clear that the work of the existing group is ongoing for the time being. We will continue to involve staff, peers and MPs collectively, each step of the way. Excellent progress has been made in a short space of time, Mr Speaker, and I want to express my gratitude for the strong commitment shown by members of the working group, and for the expertise provided by our specialist advisers.

The working group was formed to bring about change. I recognise that change is not always easy, particularly in a place with such long-standing traditions and customs where we live and work in the full glare of the media spotlight, but that cannot be an excuse. We should not rest until everyone working in Parliament can feel safe,

valued and respected. We have a chance now to get this right for everyone on the parliamentary estate, including staff, Members of Parliament and peers. I hope to bring the working group's final proposals to the House in the new year.

11.40 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for her leadership of the working group, and I thank all hon. Members for their hard work. I thank everyone who took time to submit evidence, and everyone who gave oral evidence—including you, Mr Speaker, who gave up your time to attend the hearings—and Lord McFall, who attended on behalf of the Lord Speaker. I am grateful for the commitment of the Speakers of both Houses, and I thank the senior Clerks of both Houses, who were on hand for discussion. I thank those who staffed the secretariat, who responded magnificently, trying to make sense of all our discussions in addition to their other work. They truly represented what is good about the work ethic in the House.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), and the hon. Members for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly), for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) and for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), and, in the other place, Baroness Evans of Bowes Park and Lord Hope of Craighead. I also thank staff representatives Emily Cunningham, Max Freedman and Georgina Kester, who attended in addition to doing all their work for Members.

The working party was set up by the Government and leaders of other parties in the wake of reports of sexual harassment in a variety of situations. I want to make the Opposition's position very clear. I do not think it acceptable that it was misrepresented in the press at the weekend. There is a report, but it is still a draft report, and it should go out to consultation. Normally, the report is agreed and after that the summary can be published.

The group sat for more than four hours on one day, and came up with good, creative solutions, or heads of agreement, which, to some extent, the Leader of the House set out in her statement. Suggestions are still coming in, including some from the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee yesterday. The issue affects both Houses, and I should like my counterpart, Baroness Smith of Basildon, to be fully informed as she pursues it in the other place. The working group does not come from the House by motion. If we are to see real change it must have the confidence of the House. We need to consult and reflect on the proposals and ensure that they are workable, because we do not want to have to unpick them later. It is vital for members of the party hierarchy—and trade unions that represent staff and may not have had a place in the group—to be consulted.

The Leader of the House suggested a number of ways of protecting people now, in the medium term, and in the longer term. The Leader of the Opposition has made it clear to me—and, in a letter, to the Prime Minister—what the Opposition want. First, we want a separate independent sexual harassment adviser and support. We suggest that the sexual adviser should be appointed immediately—they should be independent and qualified to take complainants through the process

until the tender is out, which could be at the end of January—and that a separate helpline should be set up now. In that way, if there are existing cases, people will not feel that they have nowhere to go with their complaints. There must not be a vacuum, and this can easily be done immediately. Will the Leader of the House agree to do it now?

Secondly, we want an independent human resources service for staff. Some Members and staff belong to trade unions, while others say that they do not want to, but joining a union has benefits: unions have expertise and are familiar with employment rights. Given the possible erosion of rights as we leave the EU, there is already concern about the possibility that the working-time directive will be removed, and it is vital for those who are not in a management position to have access to advice and assistance. I know staff representatives have said that they would like such a service, and that they cannot deal with the cases that they currently have. The service should be offered on an equivalent basis to staff of the House.

Thirdly, the current HR support service should be expanded to help Members and senior members of staff understand how to interview and how to ensure good practice in respect of management issues. That would be separate from the service offered to other staff.

There are existing policies, such as the Respect policy, and some of the evidence that we heard suggested that we should build on what we already have. It took the staff of the House 18 months to put the Respect policy together, and we need to use that expertise. There are many other policies and examples of best practice. ACAS says that it is working with a media organisation to produce a policy on sexual harassment. We can use its expertise and adapt it for the House. A working party cannot do that, but it can commission the work.

Mr Speaker, with your swift action Health Assured is now open to all. It has been expanded, so that there is a route in for those who need it and they can be signposted to different areas of expertise. Longer term, there should be mandatory equalities training for all that includes familiarity with the codes of behaviour. The Leader of the House mentions a new behaviour code, but this is where more work needs to be done; there is a code, and, as the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin), said, it could be amended to serve as a reminder of the Nolan principles in public life and what constitutes sexist or racist harassment and behaviour.

This mandatory training for every person in the House need not be long—just two hours, which could include fire safety and even cyber-security. It is necessary for all those who work here, and not only to protect themselves on what is appropriate and inappropriate behaviour—it is the right thing to do. As for sanctions, if it is for Members, there must be a further discussion with the parties. As for the parties, the Labour party is constantly refining its sexual harassment process. Our process on sexual harassment has been looked at by a leading QC. We are in a much better place. Any process needs to be tested through the experience of a complainant. Only that way will we know if it works.

This is too important an issue. There needs to be expert help or consultants. Whether through a Select Committee or a parliamentary forum, it will be set up

[Valerie Vaz]

to monitor outcomes, take forward further work and refine our policies. As you said, Mr Speaker, on Monday when referring to Members, the majority of people working here

“are dedicated, hard-working, committed public servants doing what you believe to be right for this country.”—[*Official Report*, 18 December 2017; Vol. 633, c. 805.]

I hope that the work we have done on the working group will have given power to the powerless and a voice to the voiceless, as we protect those vulnerable people and enable them to work here in this centre of democracy.

Andrea Leadsom: I am very pleased to hear that the hon. Lady feels that the work is progressing well and that some good recommendations have been made. It is very pleasing that she wishes to make urgent progress. I am glad to hear that and look forward to working closely with her on this in the new year.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I thank the Leader of the House and all the colleagues who have worked on this over the last six weeks, and I am glad that there will be updates in the new year. I welcome, too, the grip taken on this matter by the Leader of the House, on behalf of the Prime Minister, to get this right.

I have been committed to making this place a positive place for everyone working here. Sitting on your diversity committee, Mr Speaker, has been an honour, but it has also shown the number of challenges we face. I am chair of the all-party group on women in Parliament, and we hosted a positive parliamentary Christmas event here for staff, aspiring politicians, councillors, business leaders and—

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not wish to be discourteous to the hon. Lady, who is unfailingly courteous to everybody, but we have a lot of business to get on to, and I am waiting to call someone else who has other pressing business: I therefore need a single sentence question, nothing more.

Mims Davies: I will conclude: can we all commit to using every area, including all-party groups, to make this a safe place to work and to aspire to be?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend does a huge amount in this place to support particularly women, but also all equality issues, and I commend her for that and will be delighted to work with her.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for her statement. As a member of the working group, I want first to commend the right hon. Lady for her leadership on this issue and the diligent way that she has gone about trying to build consensus. She is right that we have made solid progress, but it is profoundly disappointing that we have been unable to deliver our report this side of Christmas, as anticipated and as expected by those in this House. This delay has absolutely nothing to do with the Leader of the House, who has personally gone the extra mile to ensure good progress is made. But by failing to deliver the report, we have let everybody in the House down.

We have particularly let down the staff of the House, who were expecting speedy progress, and I am appalled if there is any suggestion that this might be getting punted into the long grass.

We have an excellent report ready to go, which has been agreed by practically all the parties in the House and has been agreed by all staff representatives. The hon. Members for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) and for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) want that point to be stressed. The working group has spent hours agonising over this report, and I join the Leader of the House in thanking the experts on sexual harassment who, with their extensive experience, have helped to design a report that covers all the concerns raised by hon. Members and staff.

I sincerely hope that, if there are parties in this House that may have issues about the process of delivering this report, they are quickly and expeditiously dealt with. This is far too important an issue to be lost in party political machinery. May I therefore ask the Leader of the House to get people around the table as quickly as possible, and make sure this report is delivered so we can start to protect the people in this House?

Andrea Leadsom: I should like to thank the hon. Gentleman for his tireless work. He has been absolutely dedicated to making progress on this, and I commend him for that. I share his enthusiasm for speedy further progress. All colleagues will be aware of the need for careful consultation and consideration, but we need to make fast progress.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, and I thank all members of the working group across the House for the progress that has been made to date. I am particularly keen to hear more on the code of conduct and on what counselling will be made available. As you know, Mr Speaker, I have even raised the matter of the code of conduct with you. This is not just about behaviour; it is also about language. We in this Chamber know the importance of language. It can empower people, but sometimes people use it to subjugate women. Can we ensure that all these matters are included in the report?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a really important point about language, and I encourage her to send in her own written submission to the working group.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I want to say thank you to the Leader of the House for having a very open process, which I have personally felt that I could take part in throughout. Good progress has been made, but what worries me about what has been said today is that there seems to be quite a lot of potential for kicking the can down the road, and that we are not going to hear what is going to happen. I fear that politics is still stopping some of these decisions, and I want assurances that, whatever sanctions regimes and independent regimes the working group has worked towards, they will come to fruition as swiftly as possible.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady has been very helpful and open with her views on this matter, and I absolutely assure her that I am working to get this sorted as soon as possible.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I should like to thank the Leader of the House for all her work on the working group, but she will know, because I have made representations to her, that there are glaring omissions in the work so far. For example, the word “violence” was not uttered from her lips this morning. I suggest that the working group is far too narrowly drawn, and that she should seriously consider setting up a special bicameral Select Committee of both Houses of Parliament, to which all Members of this House could apply to be elected. We want to make sure that this is a modern workplace that is an exemplar for the rest of the world.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I can assure him that one of the proposals the working group is looking at relates to the provision of services by an independent sexual harassment and sexual violence advocate. That particular expertise will be key to this. His proposal for a bicameral Select Committee is an interesting one, and I have mentioned that it is one of the proposals that has been put to us. The working group will look carefully at all the suggestions for taking this work forward, to ensure that we have consulted thoroughly and done our work considerably in the full knowledge of views across this place.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I thank the Leader of the House for her statement and praise her diplomacy. What she has announced is fine as far as it goes, but she knows that we urgently need to make more progress. Many of us on the working group, including some very assiduous members who cannot be here today, are disappointed and frustrated that we are not further forward. She is right to say that change is hard, but would she agree that vested interests, not least Whips Offices that are reluctant to give up their power, must not be allowed to derail parliamentary progress on harassment?

Andrea Leadsom: I thank the hon. Lady for her contribution to the working group. She has worked tirelessly on it. I should also like to mention the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), who was spent a great deal of time and effort on this. I have spoken to the Whips in all the parties, and they are all keen to see the resolution of this matter. There must be careful consideration, but I believe that we will be in a position to make fast progress in the new year.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her leadership and drive on this issue. Of course Parliament is a special and unique place of work, but my constituents would be most reassured if the bespoke scheme that we come up with was a blend of the best examples of independent grievance and complaints procedures from the private sector, from the public sector and from other Parliaments around the world.

Andrea Leadsom: I share my hon. Friend’s aspiration. As I said in my statement, we want to be setting the best example, not just following something else. We want to ensure that the culture in this place is that everybody feels safe, valued and respected.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I join others in commending the Leader of the House for the work that has been done so far, but I recognise that the

journey is not over, because we all have some way to go before we can actually practise what we are preaching in this House. On that point, I ask the Leader of the House to clarify something. She said in her statement that

“further work needs to be carried out to ensure sanctions are appropriate, fair and enforceable”.

Will she confirm that recall is on the table as an option and also that there is clarity on whether Members who may be found to have behaved inappropriately will receive severance payments?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. It is a matter of fact that recall is already set in law, so it is a possibility under certain conditions. The working group has not yet finished its work or its evidence taking on exactly how that can be brought to bear here, but we are clear that there will be ultimate sanctions. Let us also be clear that the issue for Parliament is not one that affects Members only; it affects peers, Members’ staff and other staff around the parliamentary estate, so there is quite a large amount of work. That is why I have been clear that the work on sanctions needs to be considered further to ensure that they are fair both to the person alleged to have committed something bad and to the complainant who deserves justice. There is more work to be done on that.

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for her statement, which contains some welcome measures, particularly the new independent sexual violence advocate service. I also welcome the fact that the system should be completely separate from the normal political channels. As the Leader of the House is aware, the Committee on Standards, alongside the House of Commons Commission, is currently revising the code of conduct. I note that the behaviour code mentioned in the statement will cover a much larger group of people than just Members and that the Leader of the House is consulting further. Who will investigate the other people who may come under that behaviour code?

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman raises a similar point to that of the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), which is that it is important that the sanctions are appropriate and fair in respect of the employment contract or contract with members of the public that is held by the person about whom an accusation is being made. Further work is required to ensure that sanctions are appropriate for the alleged perpetrator.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I thank the GMB union for being the first Labour affiliate to build in detailed questioning of potential candidates’ understanding of sexual harassment and for having the integrity to refuse to nominate people who do not have that understanding. Will the Leader of the House let us know whether women who have previously complained and do not feel that that complaint was actually heard will have recourse to the new system?

Andrea Leadsom: That point was discussed a great deal by the working group, and it was recognised that there would have to be certain limitations. We could otherwise theoretically be listening to allegations that

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

were 40 or 50-years-old and the people against whom such allegations are made may no longer be living, for example. The rules need to be carefully thought through, but it is absolutely our intention that people who have current investigations or allegations should be able to seek access to this independent complaints body, even though the body may have particular reasons for not choosing to take up the allegations.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): There are some awful employment practices in Parliament. I know of MPs shouting at their staff till they cry, never advertising for staff before they appoint, interviewing on their own without anybody else in the room, not going through a proper shortlisting process—all sorts of terrible practices. Would not the best thing be for us to have a proper human resources service available through the House so that all MPs, the moment they arrive here, have a proper opportunity, especially if they have never employed or recruited people before, to learn good practice from the beginning?

Andrea Leadsom: The working group has taken evidence on and considered that point, and the overwhelming evidence is that Members of Parliament need to continue to directly employ their staff. It was very clear from staff evidence, however, that support for good employment practices—the provision of independent advice on employment matters—was needed for Members' staff. It was also clear, as I mentioned in my statement, that training—mandatory and voluntary—should be made available not just to Members but to staff. Many staff, for example, asked for proper inductions so that when they come here they can be taught where the Table Office is and so on without having to ask other people's advice. We have an opportunity to set right some things ranging from the fairly basic all the way up to people understanding thoroughly what constitutes bullying and harassment, including sexual harassment, what constitutes a proper appraisal, and so on. Many Members across the House already have that experience, but not all of them, and we should make it the case that every Member—every employer in this place—has access to that training.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I am pleased that some trade unions have had a voice on the working group, but when is Parliament going to take that further step and formally recognise trade unions?

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to working group members Max Freedman, branch chair of Unite, Georgina Kester, chair of the Members' and Peers' Staff Association, and Emily Cunningham, a representative of the National Union of Journalists, all three of whom work for Members in this place. They have done a great job. They have also consulted widely with staff. There are some specific technical reasons why it would not be possible to require some sort of across-the-board recognition of trade unions, but nevertheless the working group has taken evidence on how valuable some of the support from trade unions can be.

Mr Speaker: I think the right hon. Lady means staff of Members of Parliament, which is a matter that can be further considered, but it is important to put it on

the record, not least for the benefit of those who are attending to our proceedings who are not Members of, or employed by, the House, that the House itself most certainly recognises trade unions and negotiates with the staff of the House. I recognise, however, the other issue at which she was hinting, and that can certainly be further discussed. I am in no way an obstacle to a development on that front, if that is the settled or general will of Members.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): If there is an HR service, surely it could recognise trade unions for Members' staff in the way described. I thank the Leader of the House for her work on this, but it cannot be right that it is easier to sanction a Member for disorderly conduct in the Chamber than to sanction them for disorderly, disreputable and disgraceful conduct outside of it, so can she press ahead on that? I also gently remind her that this issue belongs to the House, and if she cannot find unanimity on the working group, perhaps she should publish a draft report that we can all comment on, because we would welcome more progress and momentum behind what she is doing.

Andrea Leadsom: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the working group is working as fast and carefully as it can, and as I said in my statement, we hope to produce that report in the new year.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), I was branch secretary of Unite the union in Parliament a few years ago, and I was involved in legal conversations about recognition. It is a complex process, but there is not a firm legal barrier in its way, and it is crucial to cleaning up the culture in this place. I am grateful for your support, Mr Speaker, but I beg the Leader of the House to reconsider her statement just now that there will be no recognition of Unite the union here.

Andrea Leadsom: I assure the hon. Lady that that is not what I just said. What I said is that we took evidence on it and that there are some technical challenges. Of course, because Members of Parliament employ their staff directly, there is not necessarily a lever by which to require people to make such decisions for themselves. I am not ruling anything out; I am merely trying to enlighten the House on the evidence taken by the working group.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Leader of the House for her industriousness, hard work, energy and diligence on this matter, which is good to have—there have been some 11 meetings, totalling 30 hours. My hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) sat on the working group and made a substantial contribution.

I share the Leader of the House's disappointment that, as others have said, there should be any unnecessary delay, and I welcome the progress so far. Will she outline the next steps to ensure there is a robust and independent system so that no one is harassed or bullied without action being taken?

Andrea Leadsom: I also thank the hon. Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) for her very strong and diligent contribution to the working group. In

particular, she brought up the specific issues in constituency offices, especially in the context of Northern Ireland, which the working group found very helpful.

As I said in my statement, the working group will continue to meet. We will reconvene in the new year, and we will seek to make progress as swiftly as we can.

Supported Housing

12.6 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): Mr Speaker, I wish you and fellow Members a very merry Christmas. I thank you for the opportunity to update the House on our plans for a new funding model for supported housing. This update follows an earlier debate on this issue on 25 October and responds to the recent resolution of the House.

We all agree that supported housing is an invaluable lifeline for some of the most vulnerable people in our society, which is why this Government are determined to ensure that the funding model that underpins supported housing protects and boosts the supply of such housing and delivers a good quality of life for the people who depend on it. The House will be aware that we set out our plans in a written ministerial statement on 31 October, in which we confirmed that we will not apply the local housing allowance rates to tenants in supported housing or the wider social rented sector, and that we will introduce this new approach from April 2020, rather than April 2019, to ensure that vital support provided to vulnerable people is not interrupted or, indeed, put in doubt.

We said that funding for housing costs for sheltered and extra-care housing will stay in the welfare system and that we will introduce a sheltered rent for sheltered and extra-care housing—a type of social rent that will cap the amount that providers of such housing can charge for gross rent. We will work closely with the sector to set those limits at an appropriate level and, more generally, to protect provision and new supply. We will bring in existing supply at existing levels of rent and service charges.

We also said that long-term supported housing, such as permanent housing for people with learning or physical disabilities, or long-term mental ill health, will remain in the welfare system and that we will look to work with the sector to develop greater cost control. All short-term provision currently funded by the welfare system will continue to be funded at the same level by local authorities in 2020. Housing costs will be funded directly by local authorities through a ring-fenced grant—that ring fence will remain in the long term. The amount of grant funding will continue to take account of the costs of provision and of the required growth in supply.

There are real advantages to this new approach. By retaining funding in the welfare system for longer-term supported housing and sheltered housing, we are giving the sector, in the words of Home Group,

“the certainty we need to get on and build more homes.”

Home Group has not hesitated to act, and it has already given the go-ahead for £50 million of capital investment in three new supported housing schemes. So the sector is feeling optimistic about the future, which can only be good news for supported and sheltered housing tenants. For short-term accommodation, we are proposing a new and separate model to take account of the particular needs it presents. All short-term provision—for example, hostels and women’s refuges—currently funded by the welfare system will continue to be funded at the same level by local authorities in 2020.

[Mr Marcus Jones]

As noted in the recent Budget 2017 documents, there will be a transfer of funds from welfare spending to my Department from 2020-21. The right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) voiced his concerns on 25 October over future funding levels for supported housing after 2020. I would like to reassure him that the amount of grant funding for this part of the sector after 2020 will continue to take account of the costs of provision and the growth of future provision. I recognise that there are also concerns about how new arrangements for local authorities to directly fund short-term accommodation will work. Again, I want to make it clear that our aim, in making these changes, is to allow residents to be able to keep and find work without having to worry about meeting their housing costs at a particularly difficult time in their lives.

The changes will also help people to move on without carrying a legacy of rent arrears and debt, and ease the administrative burden for providers who will no longer need to collect rents and service charges from residents. Councils have a strong interest, too, in sustainable short-term accommodation that meets local needs. The new model gives them a bigger role in commissioning short-term accommodation, as well as in strategic planning for supported housing—the Local Government Association has welcomed that. This strong local focus runs right through our plans, encouraging greater engagement at a local level, with quality, positive outcomes for residents at the forefront.

So we have set out the framework for funding reforms that provides the certainty, stronger oversight, cost control and, most vitally, the focus on good outcomes for tenants that is needed to boost housing supply in this incredibly diverse sector. Having done that, we are now working closely with the sector on the detail. We are formally consulting on “sheltered rent” and on the short-term funding model. The Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage), the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), and I have each also met sector representatives. I am pleased to say that the overall response has been positive, but we acknowledge some of the concerns that have been expressed and will continue to work with local authorities, providers and tenants to get this right. The people who live in supported housing—vulnerable older people, people with learning and physical disabilities, women and children fleeing horrific domestic abuse, and the homeless—deserve no less.

Before I conclude my statement, I would like to thank all those people who are working to deliver sheltered and supported housing across our nation during this festive period. I would like to thank them for their hard work and all that they do to support the most vulnerable people in society. I commend this statement to the House.

12.13 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I join the Minister in paying tribute to all those working on the frontline, particularly those helping the homeless over this Christmas period. I also thank him for the early copy of his statement.

Although I fail to see anything fresh in this oral statement, I nevertheless welcome it, because this House has played a big part over the past two years in getting the Government to reverse their previous plans on supported housing. Individual Members on both sides of the House have spoken strongly, as have charities and housing associations, to warn of the folly and flaws in the funding changes. The Joint Select Committee report has laid a cross-party basis for the Government rethink. Labour has led three Opposition day debates and, as the Minister says, this statement, “responds to the resolution of the House” on the last of those.

In that Labour debate on 25 October, I warned that the devil is always in the detail and in the funding. I am sad to say that today’s statement does nothing to help clear up concerns on both fronts. On funding, the Minister has repeated the same flawed promise, saying, “All short-term provision currently funded by the welfare system will continue to be funded at the same level by local authorities in 2020.” That is only a commitment for 2020; there is no pledge beyond that, even though the Red Book last month showed that the Treasury has inked in cuts of half a billion pounds in 2021-22. Will he clear up this problem today by confirming there will be no cut in funding in the second or subsequent years?

The Minister moved on to say in this statement that, “grant funding for this part of the sector after 2020 will continue to take account of the costs of provision and the growth of future provision”. This is precisely the problem: it will be Ministers who make grant decisions on funding for the future and Ministers who will say they have taken account of costs and growth. Unlike the welcome move to keep other types of supported housing in the welfare system, this will no longer be needs-led and no longer based on the right to help with housing costs for individuals. That is why St Mungo’s and others say that with these plans

“it is unlikely that providers would be able to secure loans to develop new services or be able to reassure regulators that providing short-term supported housing is financially viable in the long term”.

So what changes will he make to the plans to provide reassurance on this?

On detail, the Minister has dispelled none of the confusion about how the new system will work in practice. The plan is to keep a resident’s entitlement to housing benefit, but services with the new grant will not charge rent and will not draw down or cash in that entitlement. So what happens if a service does not receive a grant? Can its residents receive housing benefit? If a service has grant for some but not for all residents, can some still get housing benefit? Will he consider cutting the current two-year definition of “short term” down to 12 weeks, which will deal with some of the big problems in universal credit, and then make people eligible to claim housing benefit? Finally, what will he do to make sure such organisations that do not currently deal with local authorities and do not, for instance, get Supporting People funding, do not fall through the gaps in the new system?

In future years, students will be given this as a case study in disastrous Government decision making. This is the third policy rewrite in the two years since George Osborne made the crude policy decision to give the Treasury big cost savings, and the Government still have not got it right. So will the Minister accept that the Government must work further with Parliament and

the housing sector to meet the terms of the resolution and sort out a good long-term system for the future and funding of supported housing?

Mr Jones: This is the season of good will to all men and women, and the right hon. Gentleman set off in his remarks so well, but then was not too festive in his spirit. He mentioned short-term accommodation and asked what would happen post-2020. If he looks, he will see that there is clearly a transfer from the Department for Work and Pensions to the Department for Communities and Local Government to cover the cost of short-term supported housing going forward. We are absolutely clear, and we will come forward with further plans following the consultation, on how we will assess future provision, how we will deal with that and what we will need to make sure that the providers have a sustainable position going forward to reflect inflation.

The tenants will not lose the ability to get help with housing costs, and we fully expect that when the system comes into effect people will be in a position to have the help and support they need. We do not expect that people will have the opportunity to claim housing benefit for the same service at that point, but there are deficiencies in the current system that the right hon. Gentleman just does not acknowledge, such as on the position of women who go into a refuge in terms of their being able to work—I mentioned that in my original statement. Sometimes these women cannot claim housing benefit in that position and so cannot work.

I reassure the right hon. Gentleman that we are working closely with the sector. He asked about several aspects of how the policy will work with respect to local authorities. We are putting in place a strong statement of expectations and strong conditions for the ring-fenced grant.

With respect to the right hon. Gentleman's point about the two-year definition for short-term supported accommodation, I can tell him that we asked a working group, which included providers from across the sector, to look at the issue. Although it was not absolutely clear, the working group came up with the two-year period as a sort of minority verdict. That is why we have followed the path that we have.

I reassure the House that the Government are absolutely committed to protecting the most vulnerable. We are absolutely confident that by working with the sector we can get this right.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. This is an extremely important matter and I am keen to accommodate colleagues' interest in it. However, I should remind the House of what I said earlier, namely that two heavily subscribed debates are due to take place under the auspices of the Backbench Business Committee when this exchange has been concluded. It would be good if contributions did not expand to fill the time available. What we are looking for here is a short question and a short reply. The former will be brilliantly exemplified, as always, by the author of the textbook on the matter, Sir Desmond Swayne.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Will account be taken of the security measures that are proper for refugees that deal with people fleeing domestic violence?

Mr Jones: Indeed, that is an important consideration and it is certainly part of the housing costs. Housing benefit for refugees is currently higher than general-needs housing benefit to reflect those types of costs.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I welcome the introduction of the sheltered rent principle; it seems the right thing to do. Nevertheless, it is not too difficult to pinpoint why the Government have come in for criticism over the paying of the housing costs of the most disadvantaged members of our society. Will the Minister guarantee that there will be no penny pinching and that the extra-care housing costs will be met in full by central Government, without quibble or caveat? That is just a straight-up-and-down responsibility of a modern Government. The costs of and responsibility for delivery cannot just be passed on to local government, charities or housing providers.

I encourage the Minister to drop the mantra that the provision of housing support is about getting people into work. The provision of housing support is about helping people with their housing. Making sure that people are in decent housing is an honourable aim in itself; it does not need additional aims.

There was an explicit commitment in the October policy paper to additional funding for Scotland and Wales as a result of the implementation of this policy. Will the Minister tell us whether that remains the intention? If so, what is the indicative sum in each case?

Lastly, it is very welcome that there will be some security of supply for support for people to get back into housing and hopefully to move on to managing their own houses, but will the Minister tell us whether the Government intend to provide additional resources for the outreach and street work that helps to find the people in need in the first place?

Mr Jones: On the hon. Lady's last point, we are talking today about the housing costs, rather than the support costs that she mentioned.

Sheltered rent will also cover extra-care housing. I assure the hon. Lady that this policy is not at all about penny pinching.

The hon. Lady asked about work. The point I was making was about women's refugees. Often, women who are being abused and are subject to domestic violence have reasonable jobs, but unless they give up those jobs, they will not qualify for housing benefit. I cannot see how that is right at all. Also, 70% of people in supported housing are older people, so in reality we do not expect them to work. I hope that clarifies that point.

I also wish to clarify that we are working with the devolved Governments in Scotland and Wales on all aspects of the policy and will confirm the funding for Scotland and Wales in due course.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What is being done to highlight and promote the best examples of supported housing and to condemn and call out the worst?

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and that is one of the reasons for reform. There are some appalling examples of supported housing, but because there are no checks and balances in the housing benefit system, people get away with providing that appalling housing and get paid the same as another provider who

[*Mr Marcus Jones*]

provides a good-quality service. We will work with the Local Government Association and the sector to put in place strong conditions to make sure that best practice is followed everywhere.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Will the Minister clarify how funding domestic violence refuge provision at the same level as today will address the shortfall in provision throughout the country? Between 2010 and 2014, 17% of refuges closed, and every day around 90 women and their children are being turned away from refuge provision throughout the country. Without an increase in the funding for refuge provision and the establishment of a national network, the Government will fail to guarantee that every woman and child fleeing domestic abuse can be kept safe in a refuge.

Mr Jones: The hon. Lady makes a good point. Every woman should be protected and have a safe place to go. There are more bed spaces than there were in 2010, but she has a good point, and early next year we will do a full audit to see what provision is like throughout the country. That will allow us to see where the gaps and challenges are, because we want to make sure that women are safe.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I commend the Minister for the great deal of work he has done in this complicated policy area. Will he assure me that he will continue to liaise closely with the sector to address two particular issues: first, short-term emergency accommodation; and secondly, the need to stimulate much-needed new development?

Mr Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words and commend him for the hard work that he has put in on this issue. He asked about short-term emergency accommodation and new supply. On both fronts, we will be working closely with the sector to make sure that there is progress. It is already happening—the Home Group has confirmed that it will spend another £50 million on supported housing—but we want to make sure that the £400 million we have set aside for capital funding goes out to build good-quality supported housing, building on the other 27,000 supported-housing units we have built since 2011.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Will the Minister commit to an annual review of the arrangements to see whether the investment that he says is going to come does in fact come? Will he confirm when the Government will have a long-term, sustainable plan for the sector?

Mr Jones: I reassure the right hon. Gentleman that what we are putting in place is a long-term, sustainable plan for the sector. We are working closely with those in the sector to make sure that they are reassured of that.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Will my hon. Friend meet me, North Staffordshire YMCA and Staffordshire Women's Aid to discuss some of their concerns about the proposals for short-term supported housing?

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend is a strong campaigner for the people of Stafford and Staffordshire. I would certainly be glad to meet him and his local YMCA and Women's Aid to talk about short-term accommodation. I have already had meetings with several Members from all parties to discuss this issue, and I am happy to do so again.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I share the concerns of my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) about moving away from a demand-led system for people in need of short-term supported housing. Will the Minister say what will happen if a local authority has no allocation left to meet the needs of vulnerable individuals? Will central Government underwrite the costs that might be faced in those circumstances?

Mr Jones: This policy is about getting the system right, and we have until 2020 to do that. We need to make sure that our assessment of needs in particular areas is right. Areas will have to set out a clear plan to say what the future need in their area will be. We will work with them on that because we are absolutely clear that we want people to have access to the various types of short-term supported accommodation.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend on the action that he has taken so far. By definition, people in supported housing are vulnerable, but far too often we concentrate on what they cannot do, rather than on what they can do. One problem that people face is the need to fill in complicated forms to ask for the money to which they are entitled. During the transitional phase, will the Minister look into streamlining the process to take away some of the anxiety of people in supported housing, so that they can fulfil the real potential of what they can do in society?

Mr Jones: As usual, my hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. He is absolutely right that, at a time when people are in crisis in their lives, form filling and bureaucracy are not the first things on their minds. He is also right that most of these people have a significant amount of potential. With our new system, we will take that form filling and bureaucracy out of the way, so that we can support people when and where they need it.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Homelessness and housing insecurity have been on the rise in the past two years' muddle. Are we confident now that the Government's statements today will actually put in place the security that is needed to tackle what the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) says are short-term needs and longer-term investment issues?

Mr Jones: I am certainly confident that we can achieve that in short-term supported housing. I am also confident that the other measures that the Government are taking, having supported the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 of my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and the various other programmes including Housing First that we are looking to pilot, will make a significant difference to tackling the difficult problem of homelessness that we all want to see dealt with.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I recently visited supported accommodation in my constituency—Waverley House in Wimborne, a

Bournemouth Churches property—and saw the excellent work that was going on there, supporting the most vulnerable young people. Will the Minister commit to continuing to encourage and support this vital sector?

Mr Jones: I absolutely will. I just want to reassure the short-term providers in my hon. Friend's constituency that we are continuing to work with the sector. We are listening to some of the concerns. It is quite obvious that, when we meet the short-term providers and explain the full extent of what we are looking to do, they are reasonably warm to what we are saying. They also say to us that we have to get it right. We must convince them, for example, of the ring fences for the long term, and we are certainly seeking to do that.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Graham P. Jones to Minister M. Jones.

Graham P. Jones: The Minister claims that he wants to help the young vulnerable homeless, yet in my constituency the Crossroads hostel for homeless young people is funded by the Salvation Army, the local housing allowance and Lancashire County Council. This Government are butchering Lancashire County Council's budgets. How can he reassure me that Crossroads will stay open?

Mr Jones: Earlier this year, we gave councils access to another £9.25 billion for adult social care. I take the point that the hon. Gentleman makes about the organisations in his constituency that run short-term support for homeless people. I commend them for what they are doing. If he wants to bring them to meet me to raise their concerns, he is very welcome to do so.

Point of Order

12.32 pm

Chris Stephens: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have sent you a copy of a letter that I received from the chief executive of Serco two days ago, which caused great concern to me and to constituency office staff. I gently describe it as being an intemperate letter. It gives an interpretation of data protection from the Data Protection Act 1998 and says that Members should seek approval from constituents. Mr Speaker, could you please provide me with an interpretation of data protection as it applies to Members?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for his characteristic courtesy in giving me advance notice of it. I am sighted on the matter both because he alerted me to the thrust and because I have seen the letter, a substantial letter, that he has received from the chief executive of Serco, which has caused him considerable disquiet, not to say consternation. I expect all organisations dealing with hon. Members or their staff to respect the constitutional responsibility of Members of Parliament to pursue issues on behalf of their constituents and to be both helpful and courteous to them in doing so, just as I am sure that we would expect ourselves and our staff to be in our dealings with others.

I can make no comment on the substance of the disagreement between the hon. Gentleman and the chief executive of Serco, but I can confirm that, in the words of the Information Commissioner's guidance, the Data Protection (Processing of Sensitive Personal Data) (Elected Representatives) Order 2002—a matter raised in the House some months ago on which I ruled at the time—provides a basis for the disclosure of sensitive personal data by organisations responding to Members acting on behalf of individual constituents. The order does not place an obligation on organisations to disclose sensitive personal data to Members who raise matters on behalf of constituents. However, it provides a legal basis for doing so, and removes unnecessary bureaucracy and delay. Consequently, in the great majority of cases, organisations will be able to release sensitive personal information about the particular constituent to the Member without advising the constituent of this, provided that the disclosure is reasonable and necessary for the purposes of, or in connection with, responding to a request from the constituent. I hope that that is helpful to the hon. Gentleman and that, when Members beetle across to the relevant office to obtain a copy of the *Official Report* and study my response, they will similarly conclude that it is helpful.

I see the beaming countenance of the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens). I wish him all the best for Christmas and the new year. Indeed, seeing as there have been so many festive greetings this morning, perhaps I should take the opportunity to say now to Members who will not be here much later, that I wish them all a merry Christmas. I thank them for their huge and unstinting efforts over this year and express the confident expectation and hope that they will redouble them next.

Backbench Business

Russian Interference in UK Politics

[Relevant document: Twelfth Report of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee of Session 2016-17, Lessons learned from the EU Referendum, HC496.]

Mr Speaker: A considerable number of Members wish to speak in this debate. There will be three Front-Bench speeches to boot towards the end and therefore I think that I can say with some confidence that the opening speech by the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), a very senior denizen of the House and formerly Deputy Leader of the House, will not exceed 15 minutes.

12.37 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Russian interference in UK politics and society.

I will indeed seek to stay within your limit, Mr Speaker, and hope to gain some credit for it at some point in the near future.

This is a very welcome opportunity to debate this subject, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for making the time available and the colleagues who supported the bid. I am pleased that we have a very good representation of senior Members here who have a long-standing interest in Russia.

The premise of this debate is that the UK is at risk of neglecting the threat that Russia poses. I argue that Russia is a clear and present danger and presents a threat to our democracy. Some may consider that to be an alarmist statement, but I hope to explain why, in my view, it is not. I will not be able to cover, in the 15 minutes available, all areas of concern, such as the impact of dirty Russian money in the UK and the UK Government's apparent unwillingness to hunt it down, in relation to Magnitsky in particular; the extent to which the energy industry is vulnerable to Russian takeovers or leverage; or the appropriateness of the London Stock Exchange floating the EN+ Group. I suspect that other Members will pick up on those issues.

Why do I make this alarmist statement about Russia? First, clearly, there have been attempts by the Russians to influence the outcome of a number of elections. According to the Henry Jackson Society, there is not one smoking gun, but it is a case of joining up the dots, and Russia has a history of interference. The threat is not new; it has been around for a decade, especially, for instance, in the Estonian and Georgian elections in 2008 and 2009. Of course there was the well-publicised Russian interference mainly in the period post the Scottish independence referendum, when they tried to discredit the result of the election.

In the US, we have seen the most famous example of cyber-interference through the activities of the Internet Research Agency, which has spent more than \$2 million on activity in America alone over the past two years, and that funding was directly authorised from the Kremlin. This pattern of behaviour suggests that Russia will also have interfered in the EU referendum.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman referred to this interference as having taken place over the last decade. Has this not been the pattern of behaviour ever since the Bolshevik coup 100 years ago?

Tom Brake: As I said earlier, I only have 15 minutes in which to contribute to the debate. Although I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that we could go back a lot further, perhaps he could do so in his speech, if he makes one. I am focusing only on recent activity.

Information emerged just last month about hundreds of fake Twitter accounts, probably run from St Petersburg. Research at the University of Edinburgh in relation to the EU referendum showed that at least 419 fake accounts tweeted about Brexit a total of just under 3,500 times, although that was mostly after the referendum had taken place, rather than before. Meanwhile, research by City, University of London from October showed that there was a

"13,500-strong Twitter bot army"

present on the social media site around the time of the referendum, and in the four weeks before the vote, those accounts posted no fewer than 65,000 tweets about the referendum, showing a "clear slant" towards the leave campaign. However, there was no mention in that report of any specific Russian involvement.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on leading this debate. Does he agree that part of the reason that most of the hard evidence seems to come only from Twitter is that Facebook does not co-operate as it should in order to get to the root of these problems?

Tom Brake: As the hon. Gentleman probably expects, I will discuss Facebook shortly, including some negative and positive things about its activities.

I should say that I am not attacking the Russians here; I am attacking the Russian Government. Of course, some things that the Russian Government or people associated with them might have been involved with may, indeed, be also activities that other state actors are conducting, so this is not just about Russia, although that is clearly the subject of the debate.

The United States has a gaping vulnerability to disinformation operations carried out by Russia and other malicious actors across the social media environment. In the USA, just one account from the troll factory in St Petersburg managed to amass more than 120,000 followers, interacted with the Trump campaign leaders, and was quoted in newspapers such as the *Washington Post* as a voice of the American right. Is the Minister happy that the UK has adequate defences against such interference here?

The simple truth is that although Arron Banks and Nigel Farage may be Putin fans, President Putin is certainly not a friend of this country. Russia would only have interfered in the EU referendum or any other elections here in order to damage the security of the UK and, indeed, the EU.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is making a brilliant point, but has he noticed that the American national security strategy—published this week—explicitly recognises this threat, whereas our national security strategy does not?

Tom Brake: That is a very good point, which I will come back to. The Minister now has advance notice that he needs to be prepared to answer that question, because it is clearly a source of concern.

There is no soft power in Putin's eyes and, as far as he is concerned, the use of social media to interfere in foreign states is a vital, weaponised tool. The covert interference I referred to is supplemented by more overt attempts to create a media counter-narrative. I am now talking about RT. The RT chief editor, Margarita Simonyan, is on the record comparing RT to the Ministry of Defence, saying in 2008:

"We were fighting the information war against the whole of the Western world".

She referred to "the information weapon", which is used in "critical moments", and said that RT's task in peacetime is to build an audience, so they can fight the information war better next time. Not surprisingly, therefore, Chatham House and the Henry Jackson Society see RT as a tool of destabilisation from the Kremlin.

Members will know that RT was found in breach by Ofcom in September 2015 for stories about Assad and chemical weapons. However, as I understand it, Ofcom has not always enforced sanctions as and when appropriate. According to the Library, Sputnik has never been found in breach by Ofcom. Ofcom imposed 84 sanctions against 57 broadcasters in the 10 years up to March 2017—RT was not the subject of a sanction during that time—and found broadcasters in breach of the broadcasting code more than 2,500 times

I am certainly not advocating shutting down RT, and I do not think anyone else is. I just want to ensure that it abides by the broadcasting rules and that appropriate action is taken by Ofcom every time it does not. Is the Minister happy with Ofcom's actions? Does it consistently pursue RT for breaches in the way he would like? As an aside, I would like Ofcom to be much more active in pursuing a number of other TV channels that are broadcast here, in particular when threats are made to the Ahmadi Muslim community on some of those channels.

No British parliamentarian should be taking money from RT. In fact, I would go one step further and say that, frankly, no British parliamentarian should appear on RT. The only exception to that rule might be if they have complete control and are completely unedited—if they can go on the channel and say what they want, knowing that it will not be chopped, edited and cut by RT. Apart from that, no one here or in the House of Lords should ever appear on that channel. The only time that RT ever contacts me is when I have said something critical about the Government. Well, I am happy to say critical things about the Government on the BBC, but RT is trying to create an agenda that is about attacking the Government at every turn, and I will not facilitate that process.

The next issue is the question of whether the Russians are infiltrating or leaking content from political party systems. Well, we know what they did regarding the Democrats. Incidentally, they also hacked the Republicans, but they only released the information on the Democrats. We also know that they attempted to infiltrate Macron's team by setting up a number of websites with pseudo-official titles that would email Macron's members of staff, trying to get them to click on links and provide back-door

access to their systems. As I understand it, Macron managed to defeat that, mainly by inserting some fake news into the content that the Russians were trying to access so that the story was demolished because of the inconsistencies within it.

As Members will know, Monsieur Macron had a more aggressive and muscular stance towards Russia than any other parties in that French presidential election, and I believe that that is why he was targeted in a way in which the others were not. As I understand it, the other French political parties were targeted, but the Russians were clearly interested in releasing information that related to Macron in particular. Mr Putin has said that these hackers may not be associated with the Government and that they may be "patriotic" hackers. Well, they may be patriotic hackers as far as he is concerned, but one has to suspect that they have the Government's endorsement, because I am sure that the Russian Government could clamp down on these so-called patriotic hackers if they wanted to do so.

I am trying to make my questions very clear because I know that the officials in the Box can then provide a written answer for the Minister to read out and get on the record straightaway, so I have another easy question for him. Will he consider making UK political parties part of the critical national infrastructure, and what are the implications of taking such a step?

To be able to ascertain the level of threat, we have to assess it accurately, otherwise I risk coming across as a conspiracy theorist. I know that I do already in relation to Brexit, but I do not want to become the person known for conspiracy theories in this place. The difficulty we have is that we do not really know the extent of the activity because, frankly, no one has investigated it properly yet. It is only when that has been done that we will know. I regret that it took so long for the Intelligence and Security Committee to be reconstituted, but I welcome the fact that it has stated that Russia will be a topic that it will focus on. Does the Minister think that the Committee should give priority to the subject? Would he also want the ISC to work effectively with the Electoral Commission so that it can go to places that the Electoral Commission cannot? An ISC inquiry would help us to establish accurately the level of threat.

To pick up on an earlier intervention, we know that Facebook was asked by the Electoral Commission to look at examples of paid ads from Russia, but it was not asked to look at the use of bots or trolls, so the picture we are going to get will, at best, be very incomplete. The response the commission has had—that the Russians apparently spent £7.50 on advertising—does not quite sound right to me.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing the debate. We are not talking just about a few Twitter or Facebook accounts with no picture avatar and 10 followers. The David Jones account had more than 100,000 followers and was listed as one of the most influential Twitter accounts during the last general election. It purports to be from Southampton, yet it tweets exclusively in office hours in a Russian time zone. Surely the social media companies have a greater role to play in identifying fake accounts—which are pretending to be something they are not—for the integrity of the debate we should all enjoy online.

Tom Brake: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. I do not know whether she has, but I have engaged in exchanges with David Jones—clearly, I will not continue to do so—because whoever he or she is was a very prolific tweeter during that campaign. So, yes, we need to be aware of those issues.

According to Facebook, neither the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, nor No. 10, nor the intelligence services have given it any advice about what it should be looking for. If that is correct, it concerns me, and I hope the Minister will respond to that point.

Liam Byrne: I think the Americans looked at 47 accounts, which were all provided to the Mueller inquiry by intelligence agencies, but—the right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right—our agencies have offered, I think, only one. The other risk we have to be careful of, though, is that money was transferred onshore—the Electoral Commission is now investigating that—so some of the illicit money may have come from UK onshore accounts.

Tom Brake: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention. That is another aspect of this issue that I am not going to be able to dwell on at great length in the few minutes that remain.

Facebook is doing work on ad transparency, and I welcome that. Personally, I would be comfortable with having the equivalent of a “printed and published” on the political ads that I place on Facebook. Such measures would help people to understand who was actually promoting themselves. I wonder whether the Minister would support that suggestion.

There is also the issue of authentication. I and, I suspect, every Member here have a blue tick on Twitter, so we have been confirmed as being real people. Maybe Facebook should do something similar to authenticate people with Facebook accounts so that we know that everyone is a genuine person, rather than someone sitting in an office block on the outskirts of Moscow preparing fake accounts. I hope the Minister will agree with that point as well.

We need to resource our response appropriately, and I have concerns—I certainly had concerns when I was a Minister and had dealings with it—that the Electoral Commission does not, in fact, have the resources to deal with this issue. Dealing with activity abroad is clearly not within its remit, and it would not have any expertise to do that, so we need to hear how it can access that expertise. The Minister is nodding, so hopefully he will be able to clarify that issue. I hope he is confident that the Electoral Commission has the necessary resources and expertise, or can at least access them.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I agree with the right hon. Gentleman, and I ask him to emphasise the point about the resources that are needed to investigate. There is a danger that we are sidetracked into the social media side of this, when, ultimately, the more important thing is the money. Does he believe that the Electoral Commission is sufficiently equipped, resourced and empowered to properly follow the money and to ascertain where donations come from, whether the original donors really own that money and whether the agencies and the Electoral Commission need more powers to properly track the finance and the politics?

Tom Brake: My short answer is, no, I do not think it is. Clearly, that needs to be acted on. It is not just about political parties; it is also about tracking the money associated with political movements, such as the leave campaign or—this may not be controversial for the right hon. Gentleman—Momentum, so that we actually have some clarity about where the money is coming from and so on. We would all benefit if there was more transparency.

John Spellar: Until we get a change in mindset among these bodies, additional resources will not have the necessary impact. These bodies have to have the will and the necessary policy framework, and action on the resources may follow that if they are not sufficient. That applies not just to the Electoral Commission, but right the way across the agencies of Government.

Tom Brake: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that. Yes, this debate is partly about giving them the will and telling them that they have the backing of Members of Parliament on both sides of the House to take the action that is needed.

I will conclude by reading out the few questions I have left for the Minister—I have been generous in taking interventions. First, as I understand it, the Government have not tasked the intelligence and security services with investigating Russian subversion as a high priority. Russia is a tier 1 threat, but the six-point national security strategy does not mention defence against Russian interference in our political system, so will the Minister press for that to be changed?

On the funding of political movements, does the Minister agree, following the intervention from the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), that financial accountability for political movements must be improved as well? On the Mueller inquiry, will the Minister confirm that the UK Government will proactively seek and supply any relevant information to the inquiry, rather than just sit there and wait to be approached? Finally, social media companies are, on the positive side, keen to work with the Government to try to close some of the loopholes we have referred to today.

We need to make sure that Russia is held publicly to account, whether that is through Ofcom or through Ministers, when they know that this has happened, making it clear that the Russians have been actively hacking some of our systems—as they did in relation to the NHS hacking by North Korea. The ISC also needs to come forward with its report.

I am pleased to have had the opportunity to raise this issue, and I hope the House will give the Minister the oomph he needs to go away and ensure that the respective Departments—one of the problems is that this is an FCO, Cabinet Office and Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport issue—will grab this bull by the horns and make sure that Russia, because of the threat it presents to the UK, is dealt with with the degree of seriousness that is required.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. As Mr Speaker said, there are a number of colleagues wishing to contribute to this debate and to

the later debate, so I am afraid I am going to have to impose an immediate five-minute time limit. I would urge colleagues to be very aware that, if they take interventions, it is likely that that will reduce the time for others.

12.57 pm

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), and I congratulate him on securing the debate. At the end of his remarks, he rightly raised important issues around the prioritisation of this issue for the intelligence services and the Government's co-operation with the Mueller inquiry, and I will be interested to hear what the Minister has to say about those questions later.

This debate feels very timely. On Tuesday, the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee held our first oral evidence session on fake news and disinformation, looking in particular at Russian activity in Catalonia around the referendum. My staff tweeted a link from my Twitter account to where people could watch the Committee hearing. According to an article in *The Times* today, a Russian-language bot account then responded to my tweet sharing the link to the hearings with the threat that we should be careful because we can all be wiped out in a single stroke—I do not know whether that was just the Select Committee or the entire nation, but, nevertheless, it was interesting.

On a previous occasion, when I happened to share a link to a discussion I had had with Hugo Rifkind, based on the facts of the US Senate investigation into Russian activity during the presidential election, the official Twitter account of the Russian embassy in London compared me to Joseph Goebbels in seeking to spread big lies about what Russia is doing. Let us not be under any illusion that Russia is, not just anecdotally but in a systematic way, using information as a weapon of war and seeking to intervene in the democratic processes of other countries. It is doing that to undermine people's confidence in public institutions and to cause division and hatred, and it is part of its strategy of breaking down multilateralism and co-operation between countries in western Europe. That is what Russia is doing.

In the short time that I have available, I want to focus specifically on the role of the social media companies and the way in which they are responding to the different investigations taking place in the UK. My Select Committee wrote to Facebook asking it not only to give evidence of paid-for advertising through its service during the referendum and the last general election, but to identify activity by fake accounts across the platform. Much of the activity in America was based on pages being set up to promote links to sites where fake news and disinformation were shared and fake events organised. It is important that we understand the breadth of what is being done.

Facebook's response so far—certainly its charge that a tiny amount of money is being spent in this country—is not based on an analysis of what is going on across its platform; it is based simply on looking at the accounts identified as part of the American investigation. Those accounts were given to Facebook by the US intelligence services. Facebook had never proactively looked on its site for evidence of this activity. At the moment, its position in this country is that it is refusing to conduct that research itself. As the hon. Member for

East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) said, it must be possible for it to look at the geographical location of accounts, the characteristics of the accounts from where information is shared—

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): That is how it makes money.

Damian Collins: My hon. Friend is exactly right. It must be able to understand how to target users with information based on what it thinks they are interested in and where that information is coming from. It could conduct its own preliminary research to look for the characteristics of fake accounts and disinformation accounts linked to Russian agencies that are based on its platform. At the moment, it is refusing to do that.

Liam Byrne: Facebook's last quarterly profits were nearly \$4 billion. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it could afford to conduct the research if the will were there to do so?

Damian Collins: I absolutely agree. I noticed on a recent investor call that Mark Zuckerberg warned Facebook investors that dealing with these issues would have a direct impact on the bottom line. I am glad that he said that, but I would like to see him using that money. I do not see any evidence of the company putting resource into trying to tackle this issue.

At the moment, Facebook's position in the UK is that it was only responding to questions put to it by the Electoral Commission. That has a much narrower focus because of the Electoral Commission's exact remit. Facebook is not answering questions put to it by the Select Committee asking for more evidence of Russian-linked activity across the site, including in pages, group accounts and profiles, not just restricted to paid-for advertising. We have a right to receive information from Facebook, and it could conduct such research. It proactively conducted its own research looking at the activity of fake accounts during the French presidential election. That led to the deletion of more than 30,000 accounts, pages and profiles. Facebook did that itself. If it can do it in France, it can do it in the UK too, but currently it will not.

If Facebook's position is that it will respond only to official intelligence directing it towards fake activity, then we need to be working to do that too. Our intelligence services need to be on the lookout, if that is the only trigger open to us to get Facebook to act.

Tom Tugendhat: Sadly, my hon. Friend was not at this week's Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, where the national security adviser said that such activity was not the main priority, and, indeed, just spoke generally about security threats. Does my hon. Friend agree that it should be absolutely one of the top priorities?

Damian Collins: Absolutely. It must be a major priority. We have to realise that Russia is engaged in a multi-layered strategy to cause instability in the west, and that fake news and disinformation is one of the tools it uses.

It was interesting to hear in the Select Committee this week that during the Catalan referendum, Russian news agencies RT and Sputnik were the fourth largest source of information, all of it supporting the separatist cause.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I grew up in cold war Germany. As I have said, these things have been going for decades. When our political group referred to Russia funding German terrorism, we were seen as paranoid fantasists, yet when the wall came down our fears were reconfirmed when the Stasi files were opened. There must be national recognition across the board, and people need to see this as a real threat.

Damian Collins: Absolutely. People must see it as a real threat.

It is not enough for the tech companies just to sit back and say, “We won’t do anything unless you come to us with the evidence. We’re not prepared to conduct our own research on our site about how people are using it and why they are using it.”

I do not believe that individual users of these platforms understand the way in which they can be targeted and the reason they receive the information that they receive. That creates confusing echo chambers, where people are not exposed to a plurality of views but systematically targeted—not just with fake news but with hyper-partisan content. It is being done for propaganda reasons and political reasons by foreign actors. If we do not see that as a threat to the democratic institutions of this country, and a threat to the western way of life, we are deluding ourselves.

The tech companies need to be doing a lot more. I have focused a lot on Facebook, but the same issues apply to Twitter. Twitter has also analysed accounts and information given to it by the US intelligence services. More academic work has been done on analysing those accounts because Twitter is a more open platform and it is possible to do that; in the case of Facebook, which is closed, it is not. The reason much of the interest has been in activity on Twitter is just that it is a more open platform, not because Twitter is being used in such a way and Facebook is not. The tech companies need to do more, and it has to be a higher priority for the intelligence services too.

1.5 pm

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): It gives me enormous pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins). I commend him for the work he is doing. I wrote to his Committee at the beginning of this year suggesting just such an inquiry, and I am absolutely delighted that it is doing one.

When I began asking questions about this issue more than a year ago, it is fair to say that I was treated as a bit of a crank. I am very pleased to say that we now have multiple investigations and inquiries, including that of the hon. Gentleman’s Committee. We have the ISC investigation, multiple investigations by the Electoral Commission, and the Mueller investigations. However, what strikes me, and rather worries me, is that these are all being carried out by independent or parliamentary bodies, not by the Government, who are responsible for maintaining our security and defences, and have the power to get to the truth at the bottom of all this.

I have already put much of the evidence and allegations into the public domain, and time is limited, so I will restrict my remarks to a series of questions for the Minister. I hope that he will begin to address and

explain what seems to be the Government’s insouciance in dealing with this problem. Why are the Government not investigating this threat themselves but leaving it to others such as parliamentary Committees and judicial inquiries—foreign judicial inquiries, at that?

The central question that several hon. Members have already asked is this: have the Government tasked our intelligence and security services with investigating Russian subversion as a high priority? The information I have from my sources is that they have not. If that is the case, why not? Russia is classified as a tier 1 threat, but the six-point national security strategy does not even mention defence against Russian interference in our political system. That is not good enough. I would be grateful if the Minister could listen to these questions, or at least his officials could, so that they can pass him the answers.

What are the Government doing to support the work of the Committee chaired by the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe, who has given an admirably robust response to the completely inadequate response from the big tech companies showing nothing short of contempt for Parliament? He needs the Government and the intelligence services to support the very important work that he is doing. What are the Government themselves doing to get the tech companies to reveal Russian ad purchases and make it easier to identify and block troll, bot and other Russian-backed accounts on social media? What discussions have the Government had with UK media companies about adopting the kind of voluntary agreement that was reached very successfully in France not to report material that had been accessed by illegal hacking?

What co-operation are the Government giving to the Mueller inquiry? When the Foreign Secretary last answered a question from me on this, he said that he had received no request for help from Mueller. However, given that several of the senior figures who have already been indicted by Mueller conducted their central activities here in Britain, it is completely inconceivable to me that there could not have been contacts between the US investigators and authorities and the British authorities. So either our own agencies are not keeping the Foreign Secretary in the loop, or he misspoke in his reply to me. Perhaps the Minister would like to set the record straight.

I have tabled several written questions to various Government Departments about contacts between Ministers and the Legatum Institute, and the replies are still outstanding. I would be grateful if the Minister could chase up those replies.

Will the Minister look into, or ask our intelligence and security services to look into, the roles of Vladimir Antonov, who is subject to an EU arrest warrant, and Roman Dubov, and any relationship they may have had in the past with the former UKIP leader, Nigel Farage? Would he care to comment on reports that broke just before this debate started that a man who has been arrested in Ukraine on suspicion of being a Russian spy was photographed with our Prime Minister in Downing Street back in the summer?

This question is more for our party leaders and Whips than the Minister, but surely it is time for British politicians to stop making useful idiots of themselves by appearing on and taking money from Kremlin propaganda outfits such as Russia Today and Sputnik. A lot of the ties between the Putin regime, the far right

and the alt-right are well documented, but it pains me to say that there are still some useful idiots on the left in British and international politics. My message to them is that Russia is a nasty, nationalistic, ultra-conservative and corrupt kleptocracy. It is racist and homophobic, and it makes no secret of the fact that it wants to undermine our democracy. It this debate does anything to give the Government a bit of oomph in tackling this threat and get some reality into our political discourse, it will have been very worth while indeed.

1.9 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): We are coming up to Christmas, one of the great feasts of the Christian year that marks the birth of Christ and the bringing of hope to all mankind, but we should recall another event, which is much more recent in time but which happened more than a quarter of a century ago: the dissolution of the Soviet Union on 26 December 1991. When I was elected to this House, 270 million people lived under the direct totalitarian rule of the Soviet Union, with no elections of any meaningful value; and a further 137 million lived in the other countries of the eastern bloc in Europe. On 26 December 1991, Gorbachev went on television to announce that the long nightmare was over. As he went to sign into effect the dissolution of the Soviet Union, his communist-manufactured pen did not work, and he had to borrow a working pen from the CNN camera crew who were filming the event.

We should all believe in the sovereignty of nations and the general principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other nations. None the less, I think that we should be proud of the part that this country played in the downfall of the USSR and of communism in Europe. Alongside St John Paul II, President Reagan and our own Margaret Thatcher, we were instrumental in resisting totalitarianism and inspiring the captive peoples of Europe to stand up against their communist overlords. At the same time, the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Home Secretary were going on motorbike tours of East Germany. If we might have been accused of interfering in the internal affairs of the Soviet Union then, I think we can be proud of it.

Let us remember to have a sense of proportion. In those years, there were dozens and dozens of Soviet divisions in East Germany and Poland, posing a direct threat to our freedom and democracy, but today we are talking about alleged Russian interference in UK politics and society. We hear things such as “undermining our democracy”, but can we look at the evidence?

John Spellar: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Edward Leigh: I am about to deal with the evidence, but of course I will give way.

John Spellar: Did not the head of the Federal Security Service say only this week that it sees itself as the spiritual heir of the Cheka and the KGB? Does that not tell us all we need to know?

Sir Edward Leigh: I am not seeking to defend the Putin regime. There is much in Russia that is not perfect. I was a member of the Council of Europe delegation to the presidential elections, and I know it is

not a perfect democracy, but let us keep a sense of proportion. So much progress has been made, and Russia is an infinitely freer and better place than it was under the Soviet Union. It is not perfect, it is not pleasant and it is not our sort of democracy, so I do not defend the Putin regime, but I want to get a sense of proportion in this debate.

Let us look at the evidence from the Oxford Internet Institute, which is part of Oxford University. It investigated more than 100 Russian-linked Twitter accounts and their activity in the run-up to our EU referendum. The results of the investigation are worth noting. It found that

“(1) Russian Twitter accounts shared to the public, contributed relatively little to the overall Brexit conversation, (2) Russian news content was not widely shared among Twitter users, and (3) only a tiny portion of the YouTube content was of a clear Russian origin.”

The fact is that the majority of the UK population—to a significant extent—is not on Twitter.

Damian Collins: I am familiar with the study that my hon. Friend is referring to, but I would just say that it is very narrowly focused. There is also evidence of more than 13,000 bot accounts on Twitter that were believed to be linked to Russia and were deleted very shortly after the referendum. There is a lot that we do not know about this matter, and we need the tech companies to co-operate with us fully so that we understand the scale of it.

Sir Edward Leigh: I am grateful to the Chairman of the Select Committee, and of course we must keep a sense of proportion. I am quoting from a well-established institute and I want to give another point of view in this debate, which I think is fair enough.

I mentioned that the majority of the UK population is not on Twitter. Of the Twitter users, the majority do not even log in daily. Facebook did an investigation into the notorious Russian “troll factory” called the Internet Research Agency and found that its advertisements reached fewer than 200 people in Britain during the referendum campaign. If that is the best Russia can do to overturn our long-established parliamentary democracy, I think we can probably rest at ease.

Wera Hobhouse *rose—*

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD) *rose—*

Sir Edward Leigh: I will not give way; I have got to finish now. The paranoid tendency to see a red under every bed is very much alive, albeit changed, and there is an explanation for such paranoia. Look at Trump’s victory, and look at the success of Brexit in the referendum. Things are not going the way of the liberals’ world view, and they cannot accept that the people—the workers, even—are abandoning their ideology, presuming that they ever agreed with it in the first place. The left knows that the people are never wrong, so when the people are wrong, as with Brexit or Trump, the left has a psychological need to find some excuse for the people’s misbehaviour.

Wera Hobhouse: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Edward Leigh: No, I will not give way to the hon. Lady. Russia is that excuse today. Perhaps the reality is that voters might not agree with the established liberal

[Sir Edward Leigh]

consensus on Brexit. Perhaps voters in Britain, America, Poland, Hungary and elsewhere have legitimate concerns that they feel are not being addressed. Those concerns must be addressed, and we in this House must be the ones to address them. Such was the wisdom shown by Disraeli and others in expanding the electorate. Such is the British constitution that it adapts, evolves and bends instead of breaking.

The fact is that the referendum was a free and fair vote of the British people. If there was foreign interference, it was so ineffective that I doubt it made any difference at all to the final result. It was not the work of foreigners somewhere distant, plugging away at computers and unleashing Twitterbots. Authority comes from above but power comes from below, and it came from the people in our referendum. If we do not accommodate the legitimate concerns of ordinary people, we undermine the very foundations of our parliamentary democracy. We might find ourselves being replaced and irrelevant, as Mr Gorbachev did on 26 December 1991.

1.16 pm

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): There has always been, on the left of British politics, a group of useful idiots for authoritarian communism, and it has included people who have been very sensible on other issues. I refer Members to “Soviet Communism: A New Civilisation?” written by Sidney and Beatrice Webb in the 1930s. There has also always been, on the far right of politics, a group of admirers of the strong leader, the national identity and the patriotic purpose of the Russian, and even the Soviet, regime. They loved Uncle Joe, and many of them today like Vladimir Putin.

Putin has, over recent years, tried to develop a relationship with various groups in Europe to further his own national interest and ideological goals. He has used, in that process, a man—an ideologist—from the far right who has connections with the American alt-right and with people including Nick Griffin, Nigel Farage and Marine Le Pen, who all attended conferences in Russia. That man is Aleksandr Dugin, and Members can google him and read about his vile ideology of trying to create some kind of Eurasian monolith based on authoritarianism and the crushing of religious minorities.

That is the essence of the nature of the Russian state. How is it going to develop? Putin has used that man, who was at one point referred to as “Putin’s Rasputin”. There is some concern in many other European countries about this type of work. On 25 November 2016, the European Parliament carried a resolution, by a very large majority, referring to Russia’s use of

“a wide range of tools...to challenge democratic values”

and to “divide Europe”. Different tools have been used, including the interference in elections, which has already been mentioned, and the attempted coup in Montenegro. The Hungarian regime of Orban has been given financial support via various forms of investment. It acts as an ideological Trojan horse in the European Union against the sanctions on Russia that are the result of the invasion and annexation of Ukraine.

Wera Hobhouse: The hon. Gentleman is being generous in giving way. I really believe it is important to be aware of beginnings. I celebrated the fall of the Berlin wall,

having lived in cold war Germany and I hoped that Russia had changed, but when I went back to Russia only a year ago, people told me that, unfortunately, Russia was facing the same threats and problems that it faced during the cold war, so—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. When the hon. Lady makes an intervention, she needs to be brief, because there is a lot of pressure on time.

Mike Gapes: Yes, absolutely. There is an idea that there was a fantastic, miraculous transformation in 1989-90, but, sadly, that was not the case. There is an authoritarian kleptocracy—that word was used earlier—and a regime under which opposition leaders are locked up, journalists disappear or are killed, and polonium is used to murder people on the streets of London. The Russian system of government is not a democracy in any sense that we would understand. Everybody knows that Vladimir Putin is going to be President until 2024 and that this regime will continue, and that is not democracy.

There are very serious flaws in that society, but even more serious is the attempt to undermine cohesion and to sow discord among Europeans in our societies. In the time I have left, I want to mention the kind of tweets put out by the Russian embassy. It put out a picture of a European Union stockade on fire, with a giant Russian bear, and the flag flying over the EU stockade was the LGBT one. That tells us all we need to know about the ideology of the Russian Government and the Russian state. These are not fringe elements; this is the core of the Government.

I refer hon. Members to the report of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the last Parliament, which was published in March, and the Government response. We must look seriously at these questions. I do a lot of tweets, and I get quite a lot of trolls. Some of them can be identified by the fact that there are eight numbers after the name, because they are produced by algorithms and come at very odd times during the night. I often tweet back, “What’s the weather like in Moscow?” The fact is that we all need to recognise that they are trying to interfere in our politics and to create discord. We need to be vigilant, and the Government must do much more.

1.23 pm

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) on securing this debate.

There are some very serious issues to discuss and to bring into the public domain, but I think we need to keep a sense of proportion. I agree with the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) that Russia has not changed its character fundamentally since the days of the Tsar. It has always been somewhat paranoid about the outside world and aggressively defensive, and we see the same characteristics today. However, to describe, as he put it, “the kind of tweets put out by the Russian embassy” in the same terms as the threat we faced during the cold war is to get things a little out of proportion. There are serious issues to discuss, but we should do so responsibly. I want to explain what I mean.

John Spellar: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Jenkin: I am very reluctant to take up extra time, but I will briefly give way.

John Spellar: The hon. Gentleman clearly does not understand that Russia, all the way through, has a full-spectrum response. During the cold war, it had all the stuff in the cultural areas and hard power. Has he noticed the size of the recent exercises conducted by Russia in the Baltic? Russia does not see this as different. It is part of a full-spectrum approach.

Mr Jenkin: I completely agree with the right hon. Gentleman, but the fact is that today's Russia is a shadow of the power that was the former Soviet Union.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): There is one important difference: although Russia's conventional weaponry has been somewhat hollowed out, significant investment is going into it—there is significant investment in active measures—and it still has the world's largest nuclear arsenal. Its destructive power is no worse than it was, but it has lost some conventional power, which in many ways makes the international situation more unstable.

Mr Jenkin: I absolutely concur with what my hon. Friend says—I do not want to diminish it at all—but we need to keep cyber-warfare, particularly political interference, in perspective.

The Committee I chair, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, produced a report on “Lessons learned from the EU Referendum” in March. It touched on this issue, and if I may say so, it in fact did so well in advance of the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw). PACAC will also, I hope, conduct an inquiry on the 2017 general election, and we will continue to investigate these issues.

I should declare a tangential interest in that I was a director of Vote Leave at the time of the referendum. I can attest that we were aware of a certain amount of odd cyber-activity, and we speculated that the crash of the online voter registration system was the result of a cyber-attack. This was and continues to be disputed by the Government, but whether or not it is true, the Government need to create more resilient systems.

PACAC's report highlighted the need not only to consider the potential for foreign interference in elections or referendums, but to examine the real nature of this potential interference. It found that, while the UK and the US understanding of “cyber” is predominantly technical, Russia and China use what is termed a “cognitive” approach, based on understanding mass psychology and how to exploit the fears of individuals. They are less interested in the apparent intended effect of their activities—whether they alter the balance of the debate or affect peoples' voting intentions is entirely secondary—but are much more interested in being seen to be able to do what they do. They want to be seen tweaking the nose of the west, flaunting their capability, acting illegally and proving what they can do, and to show that we cannot stop them doing so.

These countries want us to react, and this creates something of a dilemma. They want us to hold debates such as this one. President Putin is manipulating this debate: he will be chortling in the Kremlin at the fact that we are discussing these matters and putting Russia centre stage, because this is exactly what he wants. They

see our reacting to this activity as evidence of their ability to control and manipulate us. It is also important for them to be able to report this to their domestic audience as evidence, however incredible it may seem to us, of their power and influence in the world. This has clear implications for what we understand by a cyber-attack, the nature of such cyber-attacks and how we respond both physically and politically. I commend the Prime Minister for adopting a tough stance on this and for the establishment of the national cyber-security centre in 2016, but we need to use this work to gain a better understanding of the real motivations behind it.

The Government published their response to PACAC's report on the EU referendum in a Command Paper yesterday, and I very much welcome it. The Government say they are taking the issue of cyber-security extremely seriously: the centre played an important role in monitoring key systems for unusual activity in the run-up to the 2017 general election, and the Cabinet Office convened a dedicated monitoring and response cell throughout the election period to ensure that any risks emerging in the immediate run-up to and during the election were co-ordinated effectively. In their response to PACAC's report, the Government say they will continue to work closely with the Electoral Commission and the Association of Electoral Administrators in assessing the threat to the UK's democratic process and implementing further measures to mitigate the risks.

Although we can be assured that our paper-based voting system is much more difficult to manipulate than an electronic one, we remain vulnerable to the broader attempt to use social media in elections as a platform for influence. Further consideration should be given to the Electoral Commission's recommendation in 2014 that the law be changed to require online campaign advertising to have the equivalent of an imprint. The control of offshore operators, however, is extremely difficult.

I encourage the Government to ensure that any efforts to assess the threat include an analysis of the motivations and approaches taken by key actors, and the level of threat that they represent. I encourage them to ensure that that work is translated into an effective and co-ordinated response, and further to our report, I call again on the Government to commit to presenting annual reports to Parliament on these matters.

We must avoid the temptation to overreact and start suggesting that massive changes to public opinion have been created by this relatively tiny amount of social media activity. Otherwise, we are playing exactly into what the Russians want—we are questioning the very processes that they want us to question, and asking the questions that they want to generate. We must avoid doing that because it is completely unnecessary.

1.30 pm

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) on securing this important debate. The world is interdependent in a way that it has never been before, and it is understandable that it creates insecurity and uncertainty when once intimate communities now become atomised. People are looking for solace in identity politics, and nationalism becomes the plaything of populists. Facebook and Twitter have become the populists' perfect

[Phil Wilson]

dwelling place, where the woes of the world can be expounded in advert form, and dogma in bite-sized chunks. Today that medium is just as likely to be used as a means of spreading lies, half-truths and quackery of all descriptions. Indeed, Facebook acknowledges that well over 100 million US citizens—a third of the US electorate—had seen Russian-promoted disinformation in the period leading up to the 2016 presidential elections.

In *The Sunday Times* in October, John Lanchester carried out an investigation into Facebook and said that Russia's use of the media

“focused on American fragmentation, and sought to exacerbate the country's social and political divides. It used Facebook's algorithmic targeting to focus on what it already knew people thought, and gave them more of the same. It used falsehoods, knowing that the company had no real interest in weeding them out. It manipulated people's feelings. The people behind that campaign had done a better job of studying Facebook's innate amorality and potential for misuse than anyone in government.”

Russia, it seems, is expert at using social media to twist arguments to feed populists and sow division.

Investigations by journalists such as Carole Cadwalladr in *The Guardian* have revealed links between Russian involvement in the Brexit referendum and UK society in general, and thousands of Twitter accounts based in Russia were active during that referendum. More importantly, Leave.eu is now being investigated by the Electoral Commission about the true origin of its funding. Other speakers can go into great detail about that, but I want to mention one or two things about Putin's intentions.

Putin is a nationalist who will promote nationalist parties in the EU, which could lead to the fracture and fragmentation of European states and institutions. At the same time, he is a leader who is prepared to ignore the sovereignty of other countries such as Ukraine. He will use every device at his disposal to ensure that his opponents are divided and discontent, and that grievances are fed. He knows how to play to the tune of identity politics.

One reason why I was so opposed to Brexit was because I knew that by leaving the EU we would be playing the Russians' game for them. A divided economic union on Russia's doorstep would suit them nicely, and that is where we find ourselves today. With my work on the Defence Committee, I worry about Trump's commitment to NATO and the kind of trade deal that we will get with a USA that puts America first. There is the question of our ability as a nation to defend ourselves adequately as we pursue a more independent defence strategy, because of a belief in some quarters that we can secure an independent trade strategy as a result of Brexit. That approach has consequences for our military defence capacity to ensure that we can secure trade links as a global trading power.

Defence strategists and experts I have talked to have said that we cannot continue to contribute as we do to NATO while pursuing an independent defence strategy. We cannot do both because we cannot afford to, and that is another win for Putin. What Putin wants—perhaps we are starting to see this now—is the great unravelling of old alliances and international institutions to his benefit. We cannot allow that to happen because, I believe, our way of life is at risk.

Liberal democracy is being challenged in a way that I do not think has happened since the 1930s. I do not believe that Putin wants a military conflict, but in the 21st century there is more than one way to confront perceived adversaries, and that includes cyber-attacks and disinformation that enters society under the radar. We must tighten up regulation around political advertising, including social media, and we must look more closely at the potential for foreign powers to fund our politics. We must ask more of social media organisations, because if they do nothing to tighten their regulations, the Government will have to step in. Politicians have a responsibility to take a step back and think afresh about what social media has actually created, and doing that would be to the benefit of our democracies.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Due to the large number of interventions that colleagues have taken, which always has implications for others, after the next speaker I must reduce the time limit to four minutes.

1.35 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): In the light of what you have said, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will not take any interventions.

I wish to ask whether any hon. Member in the Chamber—other than perhaps the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) and the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar)—feels a flicker of recognition when they hear the names of the following organisations: the World Federation of Trade Unions, the International Union of Students, the World Federation of Scientific Workers, the World Federation of Democratic Youth, and—above all—the World Peace Council. Those were part of a magnificent array of Soviet international propaganda front organisations that plied their disreputable trade through half a century from the end of the 1940s right up until the downfall of the Soviet Union. They were well funded, very active and almost wholly—at least as far as the United Kingdom was concerned—ineffective, because they were clunky and did not really understand the way that British people and parliamentarians think and operate.

I have heard something in every speech and intervention made today with which I agreed. We are all on the same page. We all understand that Russia is not a modern constitutional democracy and that it will do everything within its power to promote its messages and undermine the messages of those whom it perceives to be its adversaries. I always hesitate to cite one of the most evil men who ever walked the face of the earth—Dr Joseph Goebbels—but he knew a thing or two about propaganda, and one of his central tenets was that the purpose of propaganda is not to change people's minds; it is to find out what they already believe, and reinforce it.

There is a very good reason for that. Except when dealing with young minds that have not had a chance to form their value systems and opinions—that is a big and important exception—I have come to the conclusion, through working in this field for a long time before I first entered the House, that people are much more resistant to the effect of propaganda than they are given

credit for when it comes to changing their minds. The effect of barrages of propaganda might be to dishearten them, but it will not generally convert them unless they are impressionable, and most people are not.

Mr Seely rose—

Dr Lewis: I said that I would not give way, and I am afraid that I will not out of consideration for others.

Let me follow up the argument that was developed by the hon. Member for Ilford South when he spoke about different stages in society. I think that, apart from failed states, there are three main types of society: totalitarian extremism, ruthless authoritarianism, and constitutional democracy. Sometimes, we have the choice between only the first and the second, because the third takes time to evolve.

The reason why the Russia of today, although dangerous, is not nearly as dangerous as the Soviet Union of yesterday is that it has moved largely from totalitarian extremism to ruthless kleptocratic authoritarianism.

The reason why totalitarian extremism is more dangerous is that it has an ideology that finds resonance in the target societies—for example, the ideology of the workers' paradise. There are no fifth columnists of young British people who are bowled over by the masculinity, alleged or real, of Vladimir Putin, but there were plenty who were fooled by the concept of a workers' paradise.

So by all means be careful and by all means recognise that Twitter can affect young impressionable minds, but remember one thing: to defend ourselves properly we need to defend ourselves in the field of cyber against cyber-attack on our infrastructure, rather than worrying too much about ineffective propaganda measures.

1.40 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I admire the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) and he said some good things, but ultimately I found his speech to be utterly naive and complacent. He cannot just say "Russia is a kleptocracy and there we are; that's fine." It is also a ruthless security state: it prevents elections; it prevents journalists from doing their proper jobs; it murders journalists; and it makes sure that journalists elsewhere in the world are put out of their jobs and are unable to scrutinise Russia properly.

Even the Russian embassy in the UK flouts every single one of the normal rules of an embassy. It wrote to Mr Speaker on a previous occasion to try to prevent a debate on Russia taking place. On other occasions, it has tweeted aggressively against several Members. It even tried to rig the election of the chair of the all-party group on Russia. One would think it had more important things to do. I am the present chair, and the former chair, the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), is in his place on the Government Benches. He departed because he was so fed up with the way the Russian embassy was dealing with us.

The hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) may say something about this later—he is more of an expert than I am—but the Russians are engaged in a form of hybrid warfare. It does not involve military weapons so much, although they are keen to continuously flex those muscles and we know, from Georgia and Ukraine and

what has happened in Crimea, that they are territorially ambitious. I just want to explain one element of this hybrid warfare.

I asked a man called Ben Nimmo, who runs digital forensic research at the Atlantic Council, to look at MPs' Twitter accounts, including those of the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins), the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, me and others and analyse the attacks we had received. I and others—the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington referred to this earlier—believe that some anonymous troll accounts are centrally organised from St Petersburg.

The pattern is that the accounts often pretend to be British, even though they might originally have been tweeting in Russian. They tend to tweet in bad English and at Russian times of day. They infiltrate the hard right to propagate and amplify views held by others—that relates to the point about Goebbels that was made earlier—and they ostentatiously, aggressively and with foul language attack critics of Putin. They support the Kremlin line on Syria, George Soros, the Olympic ban, Ukraine, the M17 flight and Senator McCain.

The accounts tag other factory troll accounts. For instance, @iatetwit attacked Lucy Fisher, the journalist at *The Times* who has written about this, and me. It looks like a normal account, but the profile picture is of a Russian skater. It is not her account at all. It used to tweet in Russian, but now tweets very aggressive anti-immigration stuff in the UK. "I" effing "hate Irish", for instance, was one of the more expressive recent tweets, and @iamjohnsmith called on the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington to resign. [*Interruption.*] Well, that of itself does not prove it is a bad person. But seriously, he was only being attacked because of his political views. This is why it is dangerous for us to be complacent: there is a specific body of work attacking Twitter accounts to intimidate British MPs.

1.45 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I concur with many of the speeches we have heard today. I believe this is a major threat to our democracy, to western democracy and to our way of life. It is probably the biggest threat I have experienced since the fall of the Berlin wall. At that time, there was a book written by an academic called Fukuyama about the end of history and suggesting that liberal democracy was effectively the final form of government. That now looks quite arrogant and hubristic as, over the years, Russia's transformation has crept up on us.

There is, effectively, a type of war going on. It may not involve guns, armies and conventional threats, but it does involve bots and St Petersburg. In Russia, the state means society and society means the state. It feeds through many strata of Russian society. In many respects, Russia has been quite open about this. In 2013 and 2014, there were many public utterances from Russian generals who talked about information and the future being hybrid war. That is precisely what we have seen.

Russia is not the only country involved. As I understand it, about 25 to 28 countries are developing this type of global capability. If we all—even what we consider to be friendly nations—turn on one another and adopt these

[Julian Knight]

sorts of tactics, all could be lost. So we need to think about how we tackle this. The Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee is currently investigating fake news, but perhaps a bigger issue is the use of algorithms, which allow access to target those who will internalise fake news.

During the US elections, swing states were targeted, especially individuals who were particularly susceptible to this type of fake news. There is currently a major debate about whether Facebook and other social media platforms are publishers, but we need to concentrate on the algorithms and on how we can get into those black boxes that tell us precisely how they work. We need to understand them and to introduce regulation with proper oversight. The danger of making Facebook a publisher is that with responsibility can come enormous power. It decides what goes online and it can dictate the discourse. That is too much power to put into its hands.

Social media companies need to co-operate more with the Select Committee and with international bodies. They, too, are invested in our society and our western ways. Unless they come to the party in this respect, there could be some real problems down the line.

On Brexit, I do not think the evidence is quite there at the moment in terms of the level of interference seen in the French elections, but it seeped in almost by osmosis. In Germany, a lot of fake stories appeared in relation to immigration. They affected people's outlook and had an impact.

1.49 pm

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): It is unfortunate that the Chairman of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee has left us. I served on the Committee and I believe that it would have been very helpful if he had informed the House about the organisation, in which he had a leading role during the referendum, that is under investigation by the Electoral Commission. I have served on the Committee for three Parliaments and I am ashamed that we are neglecting the most prominent issue before us.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) need not be shy about being premature in raising the issue. We had a debate on it in the Committee, and produced our report at the end of the last Parliament. We said that the Electoral Commission had told us that it was powerless to control information from abroad.

The role of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee has been taken up by other Committees, and we are grateful to them for what they have done. A House of Lords Committee took it up the other day, when the Electoral Commission's chief executive said that, as a UK-based regulator applying UK-based laws, the commission could do nothing about activity on the internet that was taking place outside the UK.

A year after the threat to us was flagged up, we are told that the Electoral Commission has no powers and that an investigation is taking place. The chief executive told us last year that the only organisation that could act was GCHQ, and nothing seems to have happened there. We are trying to control our elections with the tools of the steam age rather than those of the digital

age. I raised the issue in my final point of order of the last Parliament, and Mr Speaker's reaction was kind as always, but his main problem was that he did not know what an algorithm was.

Having been warned about these matters, we must realise that our elections and referendums are up for sale. People can spend large amounts of money—not just in Russia but in America—to obtain a certain end in our campaigns here. We are in a worse position than we have been at any time since 1880. There has also been the degradation of our political debate. It is possible to put forward a preposterous lie, which, if repeated enough, is believed and allowed with no censure.

The Office for National Statistics is the arbiter on these matters and the keeper of the truth, but it was the chairman of the UK Statistics Authority who complained that the Foreign Secretary and the present Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs had made a claim that was demonstrably untrue, using a gross figure about the money that might be coming to the health service. Those two MPs were not summoned to the Committee to account for themselves, because the Committee refused to summon them, but it did summon David Norgrove, the man who had pointed out the error. As a result of that degradation, big lies have been told in other campaigns as well, such as the campaign for the alternative vote.

We no longer respect objective truths. People can lie with impunity and get away with it. We know that a great many people were interested in distorting the referendum and election issues, and we have no defences against that.

1.53 pm

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I should put on record that I have been doing some academic research on Russian conventional and non-conventional warfare. I lived in the Soviet Union and in post-Soviet states between 1990 and 1994, and I have recently made about seven trips to Ukraine and the Baltic republics for research purposes.

I thank the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) for initiating the debate, and for the spirit in which it is taking place. I think the best way I can help is by giving a few definitions, either Russian or my own, and then making some suggestions to the Minister.

In my view, the most important thing we can achieve is to avoid worsening relations with Russia and do what we can to minimise the chances of conflict, which are small but genuine. At the same time, however, we need to call out Russian malign intent, understand what is happening, and take firm action when it is required. It is clear that the Kremlin opposes liberal democracy and sees it as a threat. Its doctrines imply a conflict of values. We see that in the Russian foreign policy concepts, two of which have emerged in the last 20 years, and in the information security doctrine, the recent national security strategy and the three military doctrines that have also appeared in the past two decades.

My hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) talked about the conceptualisation of active measures and about hybrid war. In contemporary Russian doctrine, the first characteristic of military conflict is

the combining of “people power” with military and non-military tools. It has been described as the

“integrated use of force, political, economic, informational and other measures of a non-military character, implemented with the extensive use of protest potential of the population and Special Operations forces”.

That is my slightly rough translation of the original. It refers to cyber and espionage as well as traditional, physical special forces operations.

Contemporary military conflict involves the integrated use of all tools, and vote-rigging is very much part of that. I have come across more than 50 such tools, too many to list here, but they can be divided into six categories. There is information warfare, of which we are seeing a great deal in this country, and in which I would include the substance of cyber. There is soft power: culture, religion, governance and law. That is more applicable to eastern Europe than to us. There are subversive political tactics. They date from the old Soviet active measures of which my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) will be well aware: assassination, blackmail, kompromat—the stuff that the Russians may or may not have on President Trump; we hope not, but who knows? Those tools were developed by the KGB, and have been re-championed by the FSB and the GRU. There are also diplomacy and public outreach, economic tools, and conventional and non-conventional military tools.

To those six elements we should add another two: command and control. Journalists often miss that out because they do not think it particularly interesting, but for diplomats, soldiers and, one presumes, spooks—people who are trying to understand them—the command and control structures are important. Finally, there is control through “psychological chess”. The Russians call it “reflective control”, and it is a way of leading opponents to their own demise.

I have been filleting my speech, and I have 45 seconds in which to tell the Minister what I think we need to do. I suggest that he should remember what was happening in the United States in the 1980s. It had a House Intelligence Committee which reported twice a year. It was a standing, powerful Committee which used a great many experts from across the range to publicise its results in order to inoculate society against the lies that were told. We need such a Committee. I shall write about that to various Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) and the right hon. Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett), in the new year. We need a powerful Committee that can look at matters holistically. Russian warfare is holistic, and ours needs to be as well.

We also need a standing group of experts. In the United States in the 1980s, the Active Measures Working Group was very successful in bringing to light the warfare activities of the Soviets and presenting the evidence to Mr Gorbachev.

1.57 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) for raising this issue today. I am always interested in what my learned friend, as I would call him, has to say. We agree on many things, although not on everything.

When I sat on the Defence Committee, along with Members who are present today, an issue that was often drawn to our attention was the influence of Russia through cyber-technology, radio stations and other media.

I am a staunch Brexiteer, and I was so pleased that the result of the referendum reflected what I believed was best, and still believe is best, for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I am proud to represent the constituency of Strangford, which is a mixture of rural and urban, of city workers and villages, and which I believe contains a fair representation of the views of the United Kingdom. Strangford voted to leave. The question is, do I believe that that was achieved by Russian interference? Some Members have argued that there was an attempt to influence our vote, and the part of me that enjoys spy films has perked up: I want to see how the conspiracy works.

I am in no way casting aspersions on anyone who has spoken today. Members have their own opinions, and they have a right to those opinions, but they must also accept the ballot-box decision of June 2016. If they accept that, they should work with the rest of us to ensure that Brexit happens. I am simply trying to ascertain whether Russian influence changed the outcome of the referendum, and I have to say that I do not believe it did. I believe that my fishing community in Portavogie and the surrounding villages, who have seen their livelihood and their villages decimated by the structure imposed by the common fisheries policy, decided that enough was enough. They had had enough of Europeans lining their pockets at the expense of our fishermen in our seas catching our fish. They were fed up to the back teeth with bureaucrats sitting in centrally heated offices in Brussels making decisions about how many fish should be caught in Portavogie, along the coasts of County Down and elsewhere. They wanted out.

It is my opinion that the farmers who have been tangled in red tape and regulation for too many years, and who can rely on the Government to support and facilitate them, wanted out. The people on the street who see the money going to Europe with little return—and who want our money to stay here and be handed to those areas of need such as education and health, instead of being used to erect monuments in European cities—wanted out. We made our own minds up.

A balanced argument demands that I also highlight the people in my constituency who wanted to stay in, and who believed, “Better the devil you know than the devil you don’t.” There were those who were concerned about how local business and trade with Europe would continue, and there were those who were concerned about how their business would continue, and they voted to remain, as was their right. I visited those businesses and got their opinions, which I have fed into Government through my hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) and the Brexit Committee, to make sure that they are a part of the strategy the Government are trying to pursue. I must also say that these businesses have since put in place plans to secure their business and to ensure that they survive and thrive. That is what we do in my constituency, and it is what we should do in this House.

Was Russian influence at play? Did the Russians skew the vote? No, I do not believe they did. My constituents are intelligent people with a good understanding. They voted with their heads and hearts, and I do not believe

[Jim Shannon]

for a second that a Twitter or a Facebook campaign affected this in any way. I believe the waiting lists in the hospitals and the problems with education were major issues, alongside the true driver of taking back our sovereignty and independence. That was what the vote was about.

The people have voted to ask us to do this, and we must deliver on that, regardless of any Russian campaign. It is clear to me that the people want out, and they want the Brexiteers, like me, and everybody else in this Chamber to be of the same opinion.

2.1 pm

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): This has been a fascinating debate and this is an opportune time for it; I thank the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) for securing it.

It is also opportune to reflect on the fact that we are not the first to experience this. I had the great fortune a number of years ago, before I was an MP, to work in the former Soviet Union, and to have worked in Tbilisi for several years. As the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) pointed out in his excellent contribution, anybody who has spent time in the former Soviet Union will know that what we have experienced and are experiencing is not new; the tactic has been deployed over decades rather than just the past few months. It is useful for us to reflect on that. It is also illustrates why our engagement with the Ukrainians, the Georgians and others who have experience of this is so important.

As has been said, this debate is not about our relationship with the people of Russia. The people of Russia are wonderful, with their rich culture and rich history; the Russian Federation is the most extraordinary, diverse and wonderful country. The hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) is not in his place at the moment, but he said he did not want this debate to take place. I welcome the fact that it is taking place, however, and I want to use it to highlight the impact Vladimir Putin has had on his own people.

Last year, I spent some time studying the conflict in Chechnya. It is a much-forgotten conflict, but in 2003 the United Nations described Grozny as the most destroyed city on earth. It is easy to forget the devastating impact the current President of the Russian Federation has had on his own people; it is a far more devastating impact than he has had on people elsewhere in the world. It is always worth bearing that in mind.

I recommend a Foreign Affairs Committee report from a couple of years ago, that the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) and I, along with other colleagues, put together. It was—as always, thanks to our officials—a thoughtful and useful piece of work, and I want to reflect on the evidence we took.

Some of the most impactful evidence we took was in St Petersburg. We invited groups from around the Russian Federation to come and give evidence, and learned of the impact of the Russian regime on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender groups who have been threatened and bullied, and lawyers who fight for the rule of law with incredible courage that all of us in this House should reflect on.

The most impactful group I personally met was the Union of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia. These were the women whose young men, and often young women, had been sent into the army, sometimes to fight, and who had sometimes lost family members, and could not get information about them. That is devastating for any family, and we would do well to reflect on the ongoing suffering of the people of Russia, and in particular on the bravery of the women of the Union of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia. I encourage the Minister and all Members to reflect on that.

I have appeared on RT. The report we produced was incredibly critical of RT, and I remember asking its representatives, "Will you give us evidence of where you've been critical of Russian actions in Syria?" They gave us none; it was, I think, the only bit of evidence they did not want to give us. So I thought I should go on RT, because if we are going to criticise an organisation, we should give it the opportunity to answer back.

Mike Gapes: The hon. Gentleman has referred to the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs inquiry. He will also recall that when we took evidence from RT and Sputnik, we were told that they had a charter just like the BBC's. We asked, "Where is it? Is it published?" They said, "We'll send it to you." As far as I am aware, it was never received by the Committee, however.

Stephen Gethins: As always, the hon. Gentleman has a fine recollection of the facts and makes an excellent point.

It is important to state that Russia is one of the most dangerous places on earth to be a journalist. It is worth putting on the record the extraordinary bravery of journalists going right back to those who covered the conflicts in Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia and North Ossetia, as well as over the border in the ongoing conflicts in South Ossetia, Abkhazia and of course Nagorno-Karabakh. Those areas do not often get debated because of everything else that is going on.

What is the solution to this problem? It is clear that our work with the EU has been very important. I hope that, regardless of where Members stand in the debate on leave or remain and where we sit in this Chamber, we will agree that the Minister must commit to continuing with our key partnerships with those organisations. The EU has a huge role to play. In terms of the development of the economy and the rule of law, we have done some extraordinary work with these organisations in Ukraine, the south Caucasus and elsewhere, and I hope the Minister will commit to continuing that.

I also pay tribute to the soft power that can be ongoing. We can do an extraordinary amount of work in cultural diplomacy, and I pay tribute to the British Council and others who are doing some fantastic work, including people who have worked for years in this area, such as Craig Oliphant—formerly of the FCO—Jonathan Cohen and Dennis Sammut. These are extraordinary people who have done extraordinary work in building our relations and understanding.

Finally, I say again that we must continue to work with the EU in stabilising and working with, and giving a carrot to, the countries that are threatened by the Russian Federation. The greatest threat to independence

and sovereignty is not to the UK; it is often to the countries of the western Balkans, the Baltics and the south Caucasus.

2.8 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) on securing this important debate.

The argument I want to make is that, unlike our agencies, the Government have been tragically late in waking up to the new world-view that President Putin set out with such clarity and force after his re-election as President in 2012. I also want to set out the opportunity, the means and the motive which have driven Russia to intervene in our democracy, and then to propose to the Minister a number of areas where I think we can work together on reform over the year to come.

Let me start with the motive, however. We have heard a lot, in particular from my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes), about the history of this, and that motive is important to underline. After Putin returned to the presidency in 2012, he offered a very different view about the possibilities of co-operation with the west from those he harboured during his first term. That world-view was not a secret. He set it out with great clarity in his 2013 state of the nation address, where he gave us the theory to match the fury he offered the world in his Munich security conference speech of 2007. He attacked what he called the “post-Christian” west of “genderless and infertile liberalism”, he attacked the Europeans who he said embraced an “equality of good and evil”, and he attacked what he said was a west trapped in moral relativism, lost in a vague sense of identity. Europeans, argued President Putin, had begun “renouncing their roots, including Christian values, which underlie Western civilization.”

The Kremlin-backed Centre for Strategic Communications had a headline for this story. It described the pitch as “Putin: world conservatism’s new leader”. But of course, this world view has nothing to do with traditional conservatism. It has a great deal to do with the new trends of the alt-right. It has nothing to do with the party of Disraeli.

If Mr Putin were content to confine his philosophy to the limits of his own borders, we would not be having this debate. However, the reality is that he has set out systematically to wreck the vision, the legacy and the record of President Gorbachev, who set out, between 1987 and 1989, a very different view of the way in which Russia and Europe could work together to create what he called “an all-European home”, subject to a common legal space and governed by the European convention on human rights. That is not a view that President Putin shares. There is no all-European home for President Putin. Instead, we see a systematic effort to divide, rule, confound and confuse.

That brings us to the means of Russia’s new strategy. The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) did us a favour by sketching out the history of active measures. They have a long history in Russian warfare techniques. Major Kalugin, who was the KGB’s highest-ranking defector to the west, described the approach as “the heart and soul of Soviet intelligence”.

Since 2012, under General Gerasimov, this doctrine has now been renewed. Some call it a doctrine, and some call it a philosophy, but the idea is that

“the very rules of war have changed”,

and that the role of non-military means of intervention behind an opponent’s lines is now very different.

As Anne Applebaum and Peter Pomerantsev of the London School of Economics have set out, these new tactics are characterised by opportunism and involve an unregulated network of propagandists whose material is distributed online. They point out that Russia is now operating in a post-truth environment, and there is no attempt to win people over to a Russian view of the world. There is simply an attempt to confuse and confound.

The way in which this goes to market in the west, however, is through an unholy alliance with extreme leftist groups and extreme right groups. Its aim is to polarise and divide, and to tear down the words on the coat of arms here in the Chamber, which state that we have “more in common” than sets us apart. If we look at the 45 new parties that have been created in Europe over the past 10 to 20 years, we see a clear majority that have some sympathy with Russia. They include Germany’s AFD, Austria’s FPÖ, the Golden Dawn in Greece, Jobbik in Hungary, the Front National in France, the Northern League in Italy and, indeed, the United Kingdom Independence party.

All those parties have taken a pro-Russia position on matters of huge international interest. The Front National, for example, was given significant loans by Kremlin-backed banks. If we look at the AFD’s relationship with Russia, we see how broadcasters such as Sputnik and Russia-linked accounts systematically intervened to attack Chancellor Merkel and to support the AFD. If we look at the relationship with UKIP, we can see very close links. Nigel Farage famously said that President Putin was the leader that he most admired, back in 2014. In the European Parliament, UKIP has taken consistent positions in favour of the Russian annexation of Crimea. The Atlantic Council has analysed a number of policy positions and concluded that UKIP MEPs

“made similar statements blaming the EU for the Ukraine crisis and asserting Russia’s right to intervene in the ‘near abroad’.”

Looking at all this in the round, the US intelligence community concluded that Russia was intervening systematically abroad in the west, and it would be naive of us to think that Russia was not trying to intervene here in this country.

Mr Seely: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Liam Byrne: I will not give way, because of the lack of time.

That takes us to the heart of the reform agenda that we need to look at. It has now become clear that there is a dark social playbook that is being used to great effect. We have hackers such as Cozy Bear hacking emails, and they work in partnership with useful idiots such as Wikileaks. Alongside them, we have what are politely called alternative news sites. These include Sputnik, Russia Today and, frankly, Leave.EU, Westmonster and Breitbart. They work hard to circulate news that will create a row on Twitter, then the troll farms kick in. The

[Liam Byrne]

material is then sucked into private Facebook groups, at which point dark money is switched behind those ads to circulate them widely.

The study that I have commissioned for today's debate from the data science firm Signify will be of interest to Conservative Members. It looked at the terrible front page in *The Daily Telegraph* attacking Conservative Members for being "Brexit mutineers". Leave.EU and Westmonster probably picked up that story. Westmonster published the original content. Leave.EU then amplified the story on Twitter and Facebook channels, calling Conservative Members "a cancer" and "Tory Traitors". Standard social listening tools show that the Twitter account attracted about 1,300 interactions. On the original post, there were only 44 interactions, yet the post on Facebook secured more than 23,000 interactions. The difference is explained by the fact that money, run in this case by Voter Consultancy Ltd, was being switched behind the story in order to attack, influence and attempt to suborn Conservative Members in the debates that we have had over the past week or two. Interestingly, Voter Consultancy Ltd is a dormant company, so we do not know quite where the money was coming from. It has, however, just set up an interesting subsidiary called Disruptive Communications, together with a man called John Douglas Wilson Carswell, formerly of this parish.

My point is that we now have a well-established playbook involving a method of creating rows on Twitter and sucking their content into Facebook using dark money. The ads are not going to everybody. Firms such as Cambridge Analytica or Aggregate IQ are very effectively targeting the ads at a particular demographic.

Mr Jenkin rose—

Liam Byrne: I will not give way.

There is now a motive, a means and a method for Russia to intervene in democracy that we must be aware of. The challenge that we face is that our legislation is completely out of date. The chairman of the Electoral Commission, Sir John Holmes, has openly warned that a perfect storm is putting

"our democratic processes in peril"

and called for urgent steps to deliver transparency in political advertising. We have regulation for social media firms under the European e-commerce directive of 2000, but that was written before social media firms grew to their present size and scale. Because they are treated as platforms, rather than publishers, Ofcom will not regulate them as broadcasters.

The Electoral Commission has confirmed to me that it cannot use civil sanctioning power on non-UK based individuals, or on conduct that takes place outside the UK. That is significant because—as my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), who is not in his place, said—there is a risk that money came in from abroad to support campaigns. The Advertising Standards Authority has expressed to me its grave disquiet that it can ban broadcast political advertising but it cannot ban political advertising in targeted social media platforms.

There are five key steps that we need to take. First, it is ludicrous that the national security strategy does not include a specific objective to defend the integrity of

our democracy. Secondly, we need to review the e-commerce directive, as Lord Bew has recommended, and if the Government do not bring forward consultation on such a change, we on this side of the House will do so. Thirdly, it is time to look again at the Communications Act 2003. In particular, we want to know why the Electoral Commission is not using its power to investigate collusion between Aggregate IQ and Cambridge Analytica. Fourthly, the Electoral Commission obviously needs new powers. Fifthly, we need to pick up on what the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) said about a different generation of responses, like the active measures working group. I shall finish with a line from Abraham Lincoln, who said that

"the price of freedom is constant vigilance."

We cannot let a new cyber-curtain disguise what our opponents are up to. It is time that this Government opened their eyes and started acting.

2.18 pm

The Minister for Digital (Matt Hancock): I am grateful for this opportunity to speak today, and I thank the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) for bringing forward this topic for debate.

It is of course the first role of Government to protect the nation and its people and to safeguard our democracy, and we recognise and acknowledge the concern expressed by the House today about the threat posed to our politics and society by the exploitation of digital technology and platforms. We are happy to work with Members across the House on this. Of course, digital technology brings huge benefits and we celebrate the freedom that they bestow, but they also allow malign actors new means by which to communicate. We are committed to defending the UK from all forms of malign state interference, whether from Russia or anywhere else. When there is any suggestion that the Kremlin has sought to interfere in the political process, we treat such allegations seriously and carefully. The position is that, to date, we have not yet seen evidence of successful interference in UK democratic processes by a foreign Government.

Chris Bryant: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, because there is an interesting divergence between the three Ministers who have spoken on this topic. The first response was, "I have seen no evidence that the Russians were trying to do anything", and then the version that we have heard today is, "I have not seen any successful interventions." What would success be? How is he defining success? I presume he means that there have been attempts.

Matt Hancock: We have seen no evidence of interference that has successfully affected democratic outcomes in the UK by a foreign Government. That has been the UK Government position for some time.

Chris Bryant: What would success be?

Matt Hancock: In a political process, success would potentially involve changing the result of that political process, and we have not seen evidence of successful attempts.

Julian Knight: Part of the reason we are finding it so difficult to establish the impact is the lack of information coming from the social media companies. Will my right

hon. Friend therefore join me in calling on Facebook in particular to co-operate thoroughly with the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee inquiry?

Matt Hancock: Absolutely, and I will come on to express that in some pretty firm terms later in my speech. The point is that we have not yet seen evidence of successful attempts, but we remain vigilant none the less. I can assure the House that the whole of Government are alert to the threat and that we are working across Government on it.

Damian Collins: Aside from the evidence that has been published out of the American inquiry, do the Government have evidence of intent, whether or not that activity was successful as they define it?

Matt Hancock: As several Members pointed out in the debate, there is already evidence of activity in the public domain. The question is about the scale of that activity and whether it is significant or not significant. As I say, there is not yet evidence of successful interference in UK democratic processes.

Mr Jenkin: I, too, question the criteria for success, because there is evidence of success in that it is provoking consternation at and the questioning of democratic results and policies in our country. Those are the criteria for success. We want to hear that GCHQ will aggressively target the generation of such material, do its best to block it and be much more proactive, but perhaps the Minister is coming to that point.

Matt Hancock: I will come on to that important point in relation to the cyber-attacks.

As the Prime Minister made clear in her speech at the Guildhall in November, we want to build a more productive relationship with Russia, but we also want to see Russia play its full and proper role in the rules-based international order. We will therefore not hesitate in calling out behaviour that undermines that order or threatens our interests at home and overseas.

Liam Byrne: If there was no evidence of successful intervention, was there evidence of unsuccessful intervention? If so, what was it?

Matt Hancock: Some evidence has already been declared, such as Facebook's declaration that there had been some paid-for advertising by organisations that were also involved in US democratic processes. However, as we know, the scale of the activity that has been declared by Facebook is extremely small, amounting to \$0.97. I will get on to the point about the transparency of information, because we do not think that that amount credibly represents the whole gamut of activity.

We have identified Russia as responsible for a sustained campaign of cyber-espionage and disruption around the world. When we have seen the Kremlin deploy disinformation in an attempt to sow division and meddle in overseas elections, and to deflect attention away from international incidents, such as the downing of MH17 or the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime, we have rightly raised those concerns on the international stage. However challenging our relationship might sometimes be, it is also essential that we keep the channels of communication open to the Kremlin and the Russian people. To that end, my right hon. Friend the Secretary

of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs will be in Moscow tomorrow. While there, he will firmly and clearly raise our concerns over the use of disinformation and cyber, and he will reaffirm the Prime Minister's message, given at the Guildhall, about wanting to see a more productive relationship, built on mutual trust.

Stephen Gethins: I thank the Minister for his generosity in giving way. On that productive relationship and cultural exchanges—he may not be able to answer this question just now, but he can write to me or ask the Foreign Secretary to write to me—will he guarantee funding for organisations such as the British Council, which is doing remarkable work in places such as Russia?

Matt Hancock: Of course we support the British Council. The hon. Gentleman made a good speech, but I felt slightly sorry for him, because the former leader of the SNP is on RT, taking RT's shilling. I can confirm that Alex Salmond's show is already under investigation by Ofcom. It is rather difficult for the SNP spokesman to say anything on this matter when he is completely contradicted in his attitude and tone by his former leader.

Stephen Gethins: I did not want to intervene again, but I feel obliged to do so. The Minister refers to a former Member of Parliament, but current Conservative Members are getting paid for appearances on RT. Does he think that that should be cracked down on?

Matt Hancock: It is wholly inappropriate to appear on RT, and I certainly would not do so myself, but the SNP needs to take a cold, hard look at itself and its relationship in that regard, because I do feel sorry for the hon. Gentleman, who made quite a good speech and lots of good points.

I want to respond to some of the points raised in the debate. The right hon. Members for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) and for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) and the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) asked that this matter be a top priority for our national security strategy, and I can tell them that we take all allegations seriously and reassure them that the Russian threat, in all its forms, is a tier 1 national security issue.

Turning to the points made by the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, he asked whether there had been discussions with Facebook and others. The answer is that there have, and they have been led by DCMS, because we lead the overall relationship with the platforms. He also asked for political parties to be treated as critical national infrastructure, but we think they should be regulated differently. For instance, the National Cyber Security Centre offers political parties access to the best cyber-security guidance, and we will continue to strengthen that guidance. Political parties are different from CNI, and it is vital that we do not surrender our own values of liberal democracy in our response to this threat.

We welcome any ISC work in this area, including with the Electoral Commission, which has the resources and the powers to follow the money. Any international money that funds British political activity—political parties or regulated activity—is not appropriate. The question of whether the Electoral Commission can then go further and deeper is not relevant. The point is that if

[*Matt Hancock*]

the money is international, it is not right. The right hon. Gentleman also mentioned imprints on online adverts, and I can confirm that the Electoral Commission is looking at that. He referred to RT, and a robust regulatory framework is in place for broadcasting, as has been discussed, and Ofcom has found RT to be in breach of the regulator's broadcasting code on 13 separate occasions.

The right hon. Member for Exeter and the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) spoke passionately about their views on Russia. My hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) both made the point that the question is not about whether there have been Russian attempts at interference, but to what degree. I agree with them, however, that there is no evidence of successful interference.

My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) has long experience in this battle for minds, and I strongly agree that it is crucial that online users are able critically to analyse and properly question sources of information and news, especially when they relate to political or polling activity. He is right that our best defence fundamentally is our critical faculty as a society, and long-term work to ensure that that is strong is important.

This has been a very informed debate. In recognition of the new threats posed by cyber, the National Cyber Security Centre, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin), who is the Chairman of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, has stepped up support for political parties and parliamentarians to encourage them to protect the data they hold. There is a distinction, however, between cyber-security—attacks to break down data-holding systems, which the NCSC is built to defend and GCHQ is involved in—and the open publication of misleading disinformation. Of course there is an overlap, but they are two separable issues. In government, it is for the NCSC to deal with cyber-attacks, but not to make judgments about disinformation, because it is a security agency. That is a matter for the Government to take a view on, not the NCSC.

The UK electoral system is one of the most robust in the world, and our manual counting system is difficult, if not downright impossible, to manipulate through direct cyber-attack, but cyber is just one of the issues. The Electoral Commission was mentioned many times. It has opened investigations into several aspects of campaign financing, including around the EU referendum, and although I cannot comment on these ongoing investigations, it is right that we consider whether the Electoral Commission is equipped with the right powers to carry out its critical function.

There have been suggestions for how the rules might be tightened up, including ideas from the commission itself, and we will continue to consider what the right

balance of tools and powers should be, with particular recognition of the increased role of social media and online platforms. This needs to be done in the context of fake news, as set out so clearly by my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight). We share the House's concern about the rise of fake news, and we fully expect social media companies, including but not limited to Twitter, Facebook, Google and Microsoft, to comply in full with the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee's request for information.

That brings us to one of the most important things that has come up in this debate. The Committee is due to examine top brass from Facebook, Google and Twitter at a hearing in February. These platforms recognise the problem, and we recognise the progress they have made, but there is far more for them to do on transparency and co-operation. This is a work in progress and there is much more to do. Frankly, we do not think that the Select Committee, on this issue, has been given the straight answers we would expect. So far the published information is entirely partial and wholly inadequate. It took the platforms a year to get up to speed with what to do in the US context, and this time they must do much better. We do not rule out taking further action if necessary. They need to be part of the solution, not part of the problem. The Chair of the Select Committee is an extremely reasonable man, and his reasonable demands must be met in letter and spirit. We welcome the inquiry and look forward to studying its findings closely.

Finally, as my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull said, the threats to our democracy are different from those in the past. They are vested no longer in tanks in the heart of Europe, but in the ether, in cyber-space, on the screens of our smartphones. We must have the confidence that the robust and free challenge of ideas is the best way to decide the future of our country, but political discourse must be based on objective reality, not malicious disinformation from abroad. Let us not fall into the trap of feeble relativism. Let us send the message clear and loud from this debate: true parliamentary democracy is better than autocracy, more free and more just. Once again, in a new generation, we are called to protect our freedom, justice and way of life. We must not fail.

2.33 pm

Tom Brake: I thank the Minister for his tough words about the social media companies, but we also need to ensure that the security services provide them with information they may have so that they can follow the leads already obtained by the intelligence services. I hope that the Minister will take it from this debate that the House demands that the UK Government prioritise defending our democracy from Russian interference.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Russian interference in UK politics and society.

Christmas Adjournment

2.34 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

Unfortunately, the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), had to return to his constituency earlier and has asked me to lead off in the debate.

I kick off by sending the sympathies of the whole House to the Chairman of Ways and Means and his family at this time of terrible tragedy. We hope that he has as peaceful a Christmas and new year as is possible under these dreadful circumstances.

I wish to begin with the matter of homelessness. I make no apologies for pointing out to the House that my Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, almost the last Act given Royal Assent before we broke up for the general election, is yet to enter fully and finally into law. It becomes law on 1 April 2018. The Government have just concluded a detailed consultation on a 180-page document on the advice given to local authorities on the implementation of the Act and how homeless people are to be treated in this country. The Select Committee on Communities and Local Government is making representations to that consultation, and I look forward in the new year to the Government coming forward with recommendations to amend the consultation document slightly to make it far more user friendly for the people who need help—the people who are homeless.

The Act was the longest private Member's Bill in history and the most expensive. It is quite clear, therefore, that this will be a revolution in how homeless people are treated in this country. The secondary legislation required to bring the Act into full force will come before the House in February, I believe, so clearly there is still work to be done to get this in place as required.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I commend the hon. Gentleman's amazing work on this important legislation. I was with an amazing group of people at the Shelter office in Birmingham yesterday and, in particular, spoke to peer workers, who had been through the experience of street homelessness and could provide incredible and important support. They raised the issue of how sanctions in the benefits system are applied to street homeless people, many of whom suffer from mental ill health and have addiction issues, and who, with the best will in the world, have no way to ensure they attend a benefits meeting a week or fortnight hence. They miss the meetings and then have no money for a month or longer. This, surely, is something we have to address in terms of the civilised treatment of these people.

Bob Blackman: Clearly, people who are street homeless—actually sleeping on the streets rough—have chaotic lives and do not work to the same sort of timetables as everyone else. It is clearly wrong in principle, therefore, that they be penalised when, through no fault of their own, they fail to attend such meetings and have their benefits taken away. We have to do far more. We know, above all else, that every single person who is homeless is a unique case and therefore should be treated as such and sympathetically.

This is the 50th anniversary of the founding of Crisis. One of my political heroes was the late Iain Macleod, who helped to fund and start Crisis. It started off as Crisis at Christmas, but has gone on to provide services throughout the year. All Members have an opportunity to make a difference. The Crisis Christmas single, a re-recording of "Streets of London" by Ralph McTell, commemorates its 50th anniversary. It features the Crisis choir and Annie Lennox as guest vocalist. All Members and members of staff can download the single, for 99p, and we can aim to make it the Christmas No. 1.

If I cannot convince Members to buy "Streets of London", they could download Phil Ryan's Christmas single. He has worked with Lord Bird, the founder of the "The Big Issue", for 26 years, and has launched a self-penned single, "Walking Down this Lonely Street". Homelessness and loneliness are two things that go hand in hand. It would be great for all Members to download and support those singles.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the great many churches that do a huge amount to provide night shelters at this time of year. My own church, Christ Church in Collier's Wood, is part of a group of churches that provides a hostel from November through to January. As a person of faith, it is great to see that action, but it is also a desperate thing to be happening.

Bob Blackman: At this time of year we should commend all those volunteers who give up their time at Christmas, and throughout the year, to help homeless people. FirmFoundation does a brilliant job in my constituency, and I am sure every constituency has such groups of people who come together to help others, and particularly the street homeless.

We had two successes in the Budget that we should celebrate. The help to rent proposals will help upwards of 20,000 families to get together a deposit for a rental property, and the funding of three Housing First pilots is a good start, although we need to see it rolled out right across the country.

Equally, in the Budget we had a huge win on the staircase tax, which was going to affect 90,000 businesses across the UK, following the Supreme Court's decision to allow the Valuation Office Agency to levy rates individually on offices that are on separate floors or corridors. One campaigner in my constituency came to see me about it. I lobbied the Chancellor—I am pleased that many Members on both sides of the House did so, too—and he listened to what we had to say.

There is some unfinished business that needs to be concluded in Parliament. First, the Government conducted a long-awaited consultation on removing caste as a protected characteristic in equality law. There were thousands of responses from the British Hindu community, and we now await the Government introducing legislation to remove this ill thought out, divisive and unnecessary legislation from our statute book.

Equally, we have the plight of Equitable Life policyholders. I am the co-chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on justice for Equitable Life policyholders. An outstanding debt of £2.6 billion is still owed to those people who invested their money after listening to advice and were victims of a terrible scam.

[*Bob Blackman*]

We recently had the 99th anniversary of the great union of Romania, with Romanians gathering to celebrate the joining of Transylvania to Romania. As the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on Romania, I had the privilege of attending the national celebration at the embassy, and I wished some 10,000 of my constituents a happy national day.

This time of year would not be complete without raising some local issues. There is what I can only describe as the north face of the Eiger at Stanmore station. As one arrives at the terminal after travelling on the Jubilee line, one is met by 49 steps to reach street level. There is no lift—the lift was taken out of the plan by a previous Mayor of London—but the Department for Transport has held a consultation. Hundreds of my constituents have campaigned for lifts at Stanmore and Canons Park stations, and I look forward to the Department coming forward with the necessary funding to make that happen.

We have also had the scandal of the Hive sports ground, which Harrow Council sold to Barnet football club for a relatively small sum of money. I led an Adjournment debate on the subject. Barnet football club, having acquired the whole land, has now submitted planning applications to overdevelop the site in a way which residents are objecting to in huge numbers. I trust we will see those planning applications duly rejected, as they should be.

People often think of rural areas as having problems with broadband, but I suggest they come to Stanmore in my constituency, where the various providers refuse, point blank, to provide high-speed broadband to residents, even though many of them desperately need it. We look forward to the providers being forced to provide high-speed broadband in the way they should.

I have continued to work to encourage the opening and development of free schools in my constituency. The proposed Mariposa and Hujjat free schools are both strongly supported by local residents but objected to by Harrow Council. I trust that those objections will be removed so that we can see first-rate schools being set up for the constituents I have the honour of representing.

There are three other important local issues. I attended the opening of the DiscoG coding academy, a new facility in Belmont in my constituency that supports young people to learn to write code. They learn how to write computer code from the age of five, which is an excellent way of ensuring that our young people are getting the type of education they need to complement what they learn in school.

At this time of year, although we are celebrating Christmas, it is of course the festival of Hanukkah, too. I had the honour last week of attending the lighting of the menorah at Stanmore Broadway, as we brought together members of the public from all faiths and none to ensure we all recognise the multiculturalism of London, and particularly of Harrow.

Harrow Mencap is doing brilliant work, and it has now formulated a function that can only be called “connecting communities.” I said earlier that we should concentrate not on people’s handicaps but on the things they can do, and Harrow Mencap is a prime example of that. Although the organisation works with people who

have profound disabilities, it gets the best out of them and ensures they have the opportunity to live a full and active life, getting a job where appropriate. Harrow Mencap brings people together from across the communities, many of whom are very isolated indeed.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish you, Mr Speaker, your fellow Deputy Speakers and the whole House—all Members and all members of staff—a happy Christmas and a restful break. We look forward to 2018 being a happy, peaceful, prosperous and, above all else, healthy new year.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): On behalf of the whole House, I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for his kind words. It is a great pleasure to wish everybody a happy and peaceful Christmas.

I am afraid that my first consideration has had to be to put a time limit on speeches because, as the House knows, we are quite limited this afternoon. We begin with a time limit of seven minutes.

2.48 pm

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the wide-ranging speech of the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). He mentioned the Christmas No. 1, among other things, and I just want to mention three things that all have a Christmas link.

The first is the near-complete absence of trains on Boxing day in the United Kingdom outside Scotland. This situation does not exist in the rest of Europe, where a comprehensive train service is provided throughout the Christmas holiday period. In the UK, outside Scotland, if anything, the situation is worse this year than in previous years.

The great airports of Heathrow and Gatwick are served by buses this year, rather than trains, although Stansted does have some trains. The only other line in England that has a train service is Marylebone to Oxford on the Chiltern service, aside from in the enlightened area of Merseyside, where Merseyrail for the past three years has run a service—not to all stations but to selected stations. Each year that is going from strength to strength. For example, this year, Liverpool football club are at home at Anfield in the early evening on Boxing day, and a service will run well into the evening to allow fans of Liverpool football club not only to get to the game, but to get home. They are almost unique among English football fans in being able to do that.

The House of Commons Library tells me that it was not always like this in Christmases past. Until 1975, a Sunday service was provided on most of the rail network, but that was gradually run down until it all but disappeared in 1980. Members may well ask why this is a particular problem. It is because it means that some people cannot go home for Christmas; people who have to be at work first thing on 27 December would have to travel back on 26 December and they just cannot do that.

I have already mentioned sporting events. On Boxing day, I will be at my beloved Valley Parade watching Bradford City take on Peterborough, but in my charity bet in my constituency I have gone for an accumulator of Bradford City, Leeds and Burnley all winning that

day, in order to cover all my bases in the constituency. As well as the sport, the sales are taking place, as are all sorts of events—at theatres and so on. We also often talk in this House about loneliness, so we can see that closing down this network for nearly 60 hours is just too long—that is to leave aside what this does for the environment.

There is, however, some hope in the north of England. In its rail franchise, Northern will have to provide 60 services on Boxing day 2018. We hope that those will be the first trains in Yorkshire on this day—I suggest they be on the Airedale and Wharfedale line—since 1980. TransPennine Express is also obliged to make suggestions to the Government on Boxing day services, which it has done. I hope that the Government will discuss funding those with TransPennine Express, and that with the necessary funding in place Manchester airport will be served for the first time ever on Boxing day. That is its busiest day of the year and there should be trains running. If it is good enough for Stansted, it is certainly good enough for Manchester.

We need to stop the blame game between the two Front-Bench teams on this issue. When the Conservatives were in opposition, they drew attention to it, and now my beloved Labour party draws attention to it around 26 December each year. Whether the railways are in public or private hands, the House must unite in insisting that a basic service is provided on Boxing day.

Let me quickly move on to discuss food. I am looking forward to my Christmas dinner, but can we trust the food on the table? We have seen a report by *The Guardian* and ITN about chicken processing plants, particularly those of the 2 Sisters Food Group, which initially came out in September. It suggested that standards were well below what we should expect at the group's West Bromwich plant. There was chicken on the floor and production was suspended. But the situation has got even worse in recent days, with ITN and *The Guardian* having now revealed that Tesco gave a red warning to 2 Sisters Food Group about another of its 12 plants, the one at Coupar Angus, in Scotland, at about the same time—this was in September or October. In that case, the labelling was almost non-existent in some cases. Some chicken had been condemned as unfit for human consumption; it was not clear what had happened to it. It is extremely worrying that Tesco knew this, yet its chief executive, David Lewis, no less, did a press conference in October and, when he was asked whether he had any knowledge that the problems extended beyond the West Bromwich plant, he said that Tesco

“didn't find anything that would indicate that what was seen in West Bromwich was present in any of the other factory sites”.

Yet Tesco had just given a red warning to the Coupar Angus plant. Mr Lewis has some explaining to do. Why did Tesco not provide this information to the public or to the Food Standards Agency? All supermarkets should definitely do that in future. There should be CCTV in all cutting plants, as there is in abattoirs, so that at Christmas time and throughout the year we can trust the food on our table.

We have already heard a couple of references to the importance of churches at Christmas. In Yorkshire, we are particularly proud that the live midnight mass on BBC 1 this year comes from the Catholic cathedral in Leeds, which has a magnificent choir. In recent years, Members from different parties have occasionally been

critical of the BBC's commitment to religious broadcasting. In the past few days, the BBC has responded with a rather good report. I commend it to the House. I think it is recognised that the BBC alone of the public service broadcasters now has a responsibility to bring religious broadcasting to the country. Among other things, the BBC has committed to having a religious affairs editor backed by a religious team. I commend that report to the House.

All that remains is for me to wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and the House a merry Christmas and, having mentioned my football bet, to reveal that I placed my accompanying charity bet at Ladbrokes in Keighley on Thistlecrack in the King George VI chase, the big horse race on Boxing day and another part of sporting Christmas.

2.55 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I cannot follow the hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan) on anything except, of course, wishing everyone a merry Christmas. The trouble is that his sporting interest has a round ball, whereas I prefer the one that is slightly tweaked at the ends, and most of the teams I support wear black only.

I wish to raise just one issue, which is, unfashionably, a men's issue. It is well known to the House—and to *The Sunday Telegraph*—that I am a very part-time dentist. I am also chair of the all-party group on dentistry and oral health. As one can anticipate, the profession pushes me on various causes. This is one that I wish to raise: I would like the Government to extend the human papillomavirus vaccination to boys as well as girls. I raise this issue because it might be timely, as I understand that the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation is about to report on this issue to the Secretary of State for Health.

There are a number of HPV viruses, two of which are very nasty. Girls are vaccinated against the virus to stop cervical cancer. HPV viruses also cause penial cancer and genital warts. Slowly but surely, because of the vaccination programme for girls, there will be a reasonable herd immunity. I say reasonable because the vaccination reaches far from 100% of girls; many start the course but do not complete it, while many others do not even start it.

My specific interest is in the fact that these nasty viruses cause between 35% and 70% of head and neck cancers, depending on the anatomical site. For example, 70% of oropharyngeal cancers are caused by HPV. Treatment of head and neck cancers is often debilitating, disfiguring and destructive of the patients and their self-esteem. Frequently, radiology and/or surgery is required, involving the face, the jaw and teeth, the neck, the tongue, the pharynx, the larynx, the oesophagus or combinations of them. Physical disfigurement is common, and speech and eating can be significantly impaired.

In the global ranking of cancer deaths, head and neck cancers rank fifth. Furthermore, the prevalence of head and neck cancer is markedly higher in males than it is in females, with a ratio of 2:1. It is a men's problem. In the UK, the frequency of head and neck cancer is increasing at one of the fastest rates of all cancers. The cost of treatment to the NHS is astronomical.

[Sir Paul Beresford]

Vaccination programmes can eliminate, or virtually eliminate, certain diseases by producing herd immunity—the polio campaign is an example. The HPV vaccination programme for adolescent girls in the United Kingdom has had considerable success, but it is not producing full herd immunity.

We recently had a Westminster Hall debate on HPV vaccination for men who have sex with men. With HPV vaccination, I do not think that who is having sex with whom is relevant. I contend that heterosexual men—there is still a proportion of us left in this community—are very vulnerable. The estimate is that 10% of young UK girls do not get the full vaccination cover. Research suggests that 20% of 16 to 24-year-old men have had 10 or more sexual partners. Statistically, one of those partners has not been vaccinated.

Vaccination programmes for girls and boys would stand a reasonable chance of producing effective herd immunity. I understand that the cost would be another £22 million a year, but set that against the £58 million for treating genital warts and way over £300 million for head and neck cancer. What is important is not who is having sex with whom, but the need for that herd immunity. If Australia, Austria, Canada, Israel, Switzerland, the United States and even New Zealand can manage this, then we can, too. To put it simply, it is not fair, ethical, or socially responsible to have a public health policy that leaves 50% of the population vulnerable to HPV and head and neck cancer.

3 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I will be brief. I believe that one of the best uses of time in the future in this Parliament would be a thoughtful consideration of how the devolved Administrations and the UK Parliament can work best together to benefit constituents, particularly constituents in my vast and far-flung part of Scotland.

I shall touch on three subjects this afternoon. I apologise to Members because they have heard me mention them before, but I do feel duty bound to bring them up. The first is broadband. The hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) was quite correct to raise the issues in his own constituency, but, clearly, when someone is dealing with distances as vast as mine, the matter presents particular challenges. In the past, not so very long ago, we saw a bit of backwards and forwards between hon. Members on both sides of this Chamber about whose fault this is. I do not want to get into that, but it does seem to me that, if one could have a get together, a meeting of minds between both levels of government, perhaps we could work together to tackle the issue.

As everyone in this Chamber knows, I am a remainder. Whatever form Brexit Britain takes, we will absolutely need connectivity in the future if we are to compete in a world market. I hope that we can all accept that. Equally, I have mentioned universal credit many times in this Chamber, but the problem that universal credit presents to my constituents is that many of them cannot go online to access it. That is enough said on broadband.

In the north of my constituency is the former nuclear power station, Dounreay, which is being decommissioned. We have a skills base there which is second to none. The challenge for me and for everyone who cares about

employment in the far north of Scotland is to see how to utilise those skills in the future in that area. At the Scottish Government level, we have the Highlands and Islands Enterprise trying to encourage development, but we also have the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority, which is very much a function of Westminster. The more joined up—I know that it is a clichéd phrase—that we can be, the more I can say to the working people of Caithness that we are doing our very best to look to their future to see what we can do.

The temptation for me here in this Chamber is to go down the health route. I am sure that Members of the Scottish National party would yawn if I did that, but I will not do so because I have already covered the subject in some detail. However, what I do want to mention is energy and the production of energy. Today, I have received a letter from a constituent, Mr Murray Threipland, who owns and runs a business in Caithness, Dunbeath Engineering. He has recently got planning permission to build a turbine, which will cost him just short of half a million pounds. That is great; he has got the go-ahead. However, due to problems with the local electricity grid, he cannot export the surplus energy that he is going to make. He is faced with buying a large number of electric heaters and, at night time when he does not need the surplus energy, heating up the night air of Caithness. A nice idea, people may think—it might help get rid of the midges or keep the odd poacher warm, but it does not achieve much else.

We need energy in this country. We need to make as much energy as we can and to do it as efficiently as we can. Again, a joined-up view of government both north and south of the border would be hugely helpful. I take the view—perhaps in slight contradiction to other colleagues here—that the UK is here to stay. Things such as broadband and energy do not respect national boundaries; they are for the good of the UK. The same goes for how we decommission nuclear sites, how we use the skills and how we approach the future.

That is really all I have to say, except, like others, I should like to thank people for all that has been done in this place. I am no longer a new Member—I have been here for six months—and want to say something that is personal to me. I have been touched by the kindness, support and advice that I have received from all parts and all parties of this Chamber. How this place works strikes me as being very, very special, and I am deeply grateful for it.

Madam Deputy Speaker, may I wish the merriest Christmas to Mr Speaker, you and all the other Deputy Speakers, every Member in this House and in the other place as well—not that I frequent it very often—and everyone who works here? Thank you.

3.4 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Happy Christmas everyone, especially to my friend the hon. and brave Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), who sometimes speaks in such debates on the subject of hysteroscopy procedures, which far too many women have had to undergo without pain relief. I wish to put on record my full support for her campaign to sort that out.

Personally, I would like today to raise the matter of central Government funding on behalf of my constituency, Beckenham. We live in the London Borough of Bromley, which is represented in this place by three Tories and

one Labour MP. In 2017-18, Bromley had the fifth smallest settlement funding of the 32 London boroughs, but it has the seventh highest population. Actually, Bromley is the largest London borough by geographical size. It also has one of the highest proportions of older people and, most certainly, the most extensive road network. Yet the associated cost implications of these factors are not reflected in our settlement funding, which is the second lowest per head in London, despite which Bromley has dealt with its finances extremely efficiently. Our council tax remains relatively low considering the local services provided and our low central Government funding settlement. But it has not been easy.

Bromley Council has been hugely innovative in tackling its tasks: it has created as low a cost base as possible, pioneering many measures to balance cost, value and outcomes; it has outsourced whenever that makes sense and, within reason, where it gets most efficiency at a low cost; and it has created leisure trusts that work. It does all this by maintaining relentless cost control measures on all its activities. However, most of the cost-saving measures that many other boroughs have yet to take have already been implemented in Bromley. The obvious implication is that there is little scope to achieve many more savings. Our flexibility on further cuts is hugely constrained without reducing our statutory requirements.

Bromley's core funding has been cut more than the London and England average continuously since 2010. This will have been reduced by 75% in real terms over the decade. By 2020, Bromley's central Government funding will have been reduced in real terms to a quarter of what it was in 2010, although I accept that it has new methods of raising money. Bromley has managed to generate savings of £90 million since 2010, but, as is obvious, the mid and low-hanging fruit cuts have now been taken. Bromley Council, with reluctance, has no choice but to put its statutory requirements in the firing line.

By 2030, Bromley's population is expected to increase by considerably more than the national average, but future funding is unfortunately not currently assessed on population growth. Using Greater London Authority central estimates, the population of over-65s in Bromley is expected to increase by about 44% between 2017 and 2037, and the population of over-90s is expected to increase by 123%, with an overall population increase in Bromley of 18% during that period. Surely that must be considered when looking at central Government funding.

It is now widely recognised that, in all areas of England, there is an urgent need for a fairer system of central Government funding. It seems that decisions on this issue may be delayed until 2020 or 2021. In the meantime, Bromley could be punished for being an ultra-efficient council. That is not only unfair but wrong.

For their part, councillors in Bromley feel that our efforts at keeping costs down and making efficiencies are largely unrecognised by the Government. The efficient running of local government should be encouraged, not penalised, so I ask the Government to reconsider the situation in Bromley, recognise what has been achieved and ensure that the borough is properly supported in the interim with another transitional grant of the kind the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government has previously provided to help us out.

I repeat: happy Christmas to everyone—in this Chamber and throughout the land.

3.10 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): As is customary, I wish everyone in the House a happy Christmas.

I want to raise an unseasonal tale of big infrastructure and small business, which affects the Park Royal chunk of my constituency. Park Royal was once Europe's largest industrial estate. They built things such as planes for both world wars and munitions; the Heinz factory was there, and Guinness emanated from Park Royal, but now Park Royal finds itself on the receiving end of the heavy-handed High Speed 2—that is the big infrastructure. In Ealing Central and Acton, we are blessed: we have a lot of these big infrastructure projects. The planes going to Heathrow fly over us—we are on the flight path. Crossrail is coming to link east and west to our part of the world, and there is also HS2.

However, in this season of good will and good faith—I voted in good faith for the HS2 project, and I like the idea of high-speed rail, connectivity and all those things—a bunch of small businesses in the Park Royal industrial estate feel that they have been shafted. Sorry, that is perhaps unparliamentary language; these businesses have been ill treated by HS2—at this time of year—and they wanted me to raise their plight.

I am doing that in this forum because, talking of good will, Robert Goodwill—sorry, I cannot remember his constituency.

Hon. Members: Scarborough.

Dr Huq: That's it. He's a good Yorkshireman, isn't he?

I remember raising HS2 issues with the hon. Gentleman in the House, and it worked for a time, so I want to see whether it will work again. In 2016, when he was the Minister for rail—he is now the children's Minister—he came to Park Royal. I asked him to see for himself what was going on.

Park Royal used to be a place of big businesses; now, the businesses are much smaller. We have Mediterranean food manufacturers, prop hire, laundries and all sorts of small family businesses, so families, livelihoods and that sort of thing depend on the area. Park Royal has been named in *The Independent* as a sort of mini-Beirut, which sounds quite scary, but a lot of middle eastern food manufacturers come from the area. If Members have baklava in a west end restaurant, it is likely to have been made in my constituency.

A number of these small companies were initially told that when the HS2 project happened, they would be given six months to relocate. There was no assurance about when that would happen, and these companies are having compulsory purchase orders put on them. So the Minister came with me, and we saw that assurances were received that people would have a relocation grant and be given good time in which to get their businesses up and running again. One of the companies is a prop hire business—probably no one in this House has ever been to one of those. It covers acres and acres, and has vintage telephones, whalebone corsets, '70s cereal packets and all sorts of things, and it is not easy to relocate those things. Superhire props is the business I am thinking of.

The Minister said there would be a £250,000 disturbance payment, which is a strange phrase describing what happens when someone is forcibly moved elsewhere.

[*Dr Huq*]

However, these payments have not been forthcoming. The thing is that HS2 is very clever: it can operate within the letter of the law, and we are talking about assurances, not legally binding guarantees.

Three hundred employees and their families have written to me. They are facing Christmas with a very uncertain future, because they are about to be CPO'd on 10 January. Some of them have two premises now, so they are paying for two lots of rent, leases and staff. One of them was on BBC London recently. The workers have downed tools and gone because they are not being paid since the advance payment from HS2 has not been forthcoming. When the ghost of Christmas past—the Minister—came to visit and saw what was happening, he gave those promises in good faith, I believe.

Something has gone wrong with HS2. It seems to be haemorrhaging CEOs, and the project has run over time and over budget. Hon. Friends whose constituencies are further into London—my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) and my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq)—opposed it. I did not, but I am losing patience with HS2.

There is also what HS2 does to residents. Three roads in my constituency—Shaftesbury Gardens, Midland Terrace and Wells House Road—face 10 years of works 24/7. Imagine a child born now getting to its 10th birthday and only knowing living on a building site! The only assurance that these residents have been given is for secondary glazing on one side of one of those roads. That is just not good enough.

When I raised this with the Secretary of State for Transport, he said, “My door is always open.” I have written letters and submitted written questions, but I feel a bit like I am banging my head against a brick wall. When we had the initial chink of light after I raised this with the Minister, I saw that it worked to raise these matters in this House, so that is why I am trying again.

It seems as though people are negotiating a Kafkaesque web of bureaucracy in order to get these payments. For a big business with a turnover in the millions, £250,000 is a drop in the ocean. The relocation costs will be much more than that. They feel that the number of hoops they have had to jump through is insupportable.

Old Oak, which Park Royal feeds into, has been identified by the Mayor of London as a super-development opportunity area. There will be 26,000 new dwellings and two tube stations, as well as Crossrail and HS2. There is a lot of promise there. The marketing spiel says that it will be an incubator for new business, but the old businesses that have been built up over years—family businesses—are facing a very bleak Christmas this year.

HS2's mission statement says that it will give

“sufficient liquidity...to be able to make satisfactory arrangements for relocation”.

That is not the approach that is being taken. This is undermining public confidence in the project. I have been voting for it and trying to defend it, but my local residents and businesses have had enough of HS2.

It is very disappointing that this has come at this time of year. As I say, assurances are only assurances—they are not legally enforceable. They are not worth the paper they are written on, quite frankly. As for Christmas

future, I hope that in the new year, which is only next week, we will have better news for the businesses and residents who feel that they have been done over by HS2.

3.18 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Before the House adjourns for the Christmas recess, there are a number of points that I wish to raise.

A constituent of mine, a former model, Carla Cressy, suffers from endometriosis. The condition was diagnosed in January 2016. She is doing everything she can to launch a campaign to make 14 to 18-year-old girls aware of this disease. I am going to do everything I possibly can to help her to raise awareness.

We have debated the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign and the WASPI women time after time in this House. I am still getting many letters from constituents who claim that they were not made aware of the changes. I know that this will be a difficult one for the Government, but I really do think that we will have to look at this situation again.

In November, I met the Institute of Fundraising. We have many wonderful charities in Southend West, and they brought to my attention the potential difficulties posed to them by the Data Protection Bill and the General Data Protection Regulation. This is good law, but it creates a number of difficulties for charities.

In the new year, my party will launch Diversity2Win. I am very honoured to be a patron—together with Baroness Jenkin, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), and the Prime Minister—of this initiative to make our party even more diverse than it is at the moment.

In October, I was very privileged to be present at the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service, which was received by two magnificent local charities that help people with mental health issues and those in other very difficult situations. I pay tribute to Crossing Boundaries and Growing Together. The voluntary sector thrives in all our constituencies, but particularly in Southend. Southend Association of Voluntary Services is delivering a National Lottery-funded project called Volunteering-on-Sea. It is an exhibition curated by people aged between 10 and 20, and it helps those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Of course, we again had our centenarians' tea party. It was an absolute privilege to welcome the wonderful gentlemen and ladies who celebrated reaching the age of 100 or more. The Hive enterprise centre is a wonderful project in the centre of the constituency, and it offers state-of-the-art business opportunities.

I raised phone scams recently in the House. I am sick to death of getting calls from people telling me that I have been involved in an accident, and all that nonsense. It really has to be dealt with by the Government.

In 2000, I was very successful in getting on to the statute book a fuel poverty Act. The matter has to be looked at again, so next year I will introduce a new Bill, which I hope will get the House's support. That aims to bring fuel-poor homes up to Energy Performance Certificate band C by 2030, and to ensure that all homes meet that standard by 2035.

I see that the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) is present, and I congratulate Hull on being the city of culture this year. Southend-on-Sea was the alternative city of culture, and it has been an absolutely triumphant year for the town that I am honoured to represent. Our wonderful charity, the Music Man Project, performed at the London Palladium, and in 2019 it will perform at the Royal Albert Hall.

The marvellous British Legion, which celebrates its 80th anniversary, organised a wonderful collection of ceramic poppies that was displayed along the cliffs of Southend. It has been a wonderful year, and the best Christmas present that Southend residents could receive would be for us to be declared a city. I am in discussions with the Minister for the constitution, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore), about organising a contest, if there has to be a contest, for city status next year. I think we could have it around the occasion of the royal wedding.

I am very close to the organisation that wants people in Iran to enjoy democracy; that is not the case at the moment. I have lobbied the United Nations and the Nobel peace prize committee, and I also addressed a conference on the issue earlier in this Parliament.

The Southend citizens advice bureau has recently brought to my attention further issues regarding universal credit. These include difficulty in submitting online applications, inaccurate calculations and delays in both the claiming process and payments to constituents.

It has to be explained why petrol prices are going up as quickly as they are at the moment. Something is wrong there.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you were chairing proceedings when we had a debate on stroke. Mechanical thrombectomy is a treatment that I hope will be rolled out throughout the UK. On diabetes, a constituent told me that there is not enough provision in schools to help children who have diabetes.

The University of Essex, which has a campus in Southend, received its highest ever ranking in *The Times* university guide. Anglia Ruskin University has a wonderful medical centre, which is being developed.

This year, I was privileged to enjoy the very successful event held by Essex Boys and Girls Clubs in Hadleigh Park. I absolutely support the efforts of Project 49, an award-winning service in Southend for adults with learning disabilities. I also support the efforts of those involved in the active ageing community event organised by Southend Older People's Assembly earlier this year.

This has been a difficult and challenging year for parliamentarians in all sorts of ways, and there has been much sadness. I hope that everyone will focus on something good and positive that has happened in their life. We thank all the staff of this place, who support us. I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, as well as Mr Speaker and the other Deputy Speakers, a very happy Christmas and a wonderful and joyous new year.

3.24 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): As the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) said, I often use this debate to talk about women's health matters in a way that can make grown men wince. I have to say that he and other hon. Members on both sides of the House have been very generous in their support for the hysteroscopy campaign. I am very happy to report that, following a

meeting this week with the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price)—it was a very good meeting—I really hope some progress can be made. I thank him and others for their support.

Bob Stewart: Is the progress that the hon. Lady mentions pain-free for ladies who have to undergo this treatment?

Lyn Brown: The woman Health Minister I met has read the women's testimonies I presented to her, and she was horrified by them, as the House has been when I have read them out on previous occasions. She and I are very clear that this is about choice—informed choice—and about making sure that women get what they need, rather than what is cheapest. I do not want to put words in her mouth, but I think we are both on the same page, and it was a very happy meeting. I therefore have only three, not four, issues that I want to raise today.

First, NewVic—Newham Sixth Form College—is a great further education institution that regularly sends more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to university, including to Russell Group universities and Oxbridge, than any other sixth-form college in England. Newham is a massively deprived area, and research tells us that 13 out of 20 children in Newham live in poverty, and that it is currently second worst of all local authorities in England for social mobility. The fact that our young people are doing massively well at our FE institution is therefore testimony to them, their teachers and their parents. However, NewVic's budget has been cut by £770 per student, and that includes £200 per student from the deprivation allocation. How on earth can that be justified?

I would be very grateful to the Minister if he liaised with the Department for Education on my behalf to secure a meeting about this with NewVic and me so that we can help NewVic to continue to be a much-needed engine of social mobility in my community and that of my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms).

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Michael Ellis) *indicated assent.*

Lyn Brown: I have had a nod.

My second issue concerns a mental health condition called depersonalisation disorder. At least one of my constituents is a sufferer, and she has asked me to share her story with the House. Since she was 18, my constituent has lived for years in a continuous state of detachment. The world and her own life do not feel real. She lives in a dream, performing actions on autopilot, and she sometimes does not even recognise herself in the mirror. It is terrifying.

The disorder is under-researched and very poorly understood, and it can take eight to 12 years to get the right diagnosis. The consequences of a misdiagnosis can be dreadful, because anti-psychotic, anti-anxiety or antidepressant medications do not help and can make the condition markedly worse. As one sufferer, Sarah, has explained:

"Relationships...lose their essential quality... You know you love your family, but you know it academically—rather than feeling it in the normal way."

I would genuinely find it very difficult to live if I had this disorder; I know I could not do so.

[Lyn Brown]

With swift diagnosis and specialist treatment, patients can have a real hope of remission, but existing NHS provision is woefully inadequate. There is only one specialist unit, based at the Maudsley Hospital, and many patients wait years for funding to attend it, while others are refused funding. The service is anyway only for adults, even though the condition typically begins in a person's early teens. May I ask the Minister for a meeting with the Department of Health to discuss this further? Again, I would be very grateful to him if he helped that request on its way.

Finally, I wish to mention fixed odds betting terminals. As we have established in this debate, without any contradiction, Newham is a borough with high levels of deprivation, yet it also has one of the highest numbers of betting shops in any borough, with 81 in operation, and 12 on one street alone. Newham Council estimates that £20 million of residents' money was lost to fixed odds betting terminals in just one year. I and my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) have called for a reduction of the maximum stake to £2, and I welcome the Government's consultation on that issue, which rightly suggests that a £2 limit will help to stop problem gambling. Such a limit would be a great, if belated, Christmas present to the children of Newham.

In conclusion, I thank the staff of the House for their unfailing kindness, professionalism, and service to us all. I know I will not be the only person in the Chamber today who is thinking of our Deputy Speaker and sending him our love and prayers. I am also thinking of the family of Jo Cox, Brendan and the children, and about the family of our own PC Keith Palmer, as they face their first Christmas without him. We all know that that will be massively hard.

I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and all hon. Members, the happiest of Christmases, and the very best of new years.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Following what the hon. Lady has just said, the Chairman of Ways and Means is very grateful for all the messages that he has received. Hundreds of Members have sent him very kind messages, and he has found that a great support at this sad and tragic time. I will pass on to him, once again, the good wishes of the whole House.

3.31 pm

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): May I associate myself with your comments, Madam Deputy Speaker, and those of the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown)?

What a fantastic opportunity and innovation these debates are—seven minutes to talk about pretty much anything we would like. I am surprised that the Benches are not overflowing with colleagues, but that leaves more time for the rest of us, so I am pleased. I wish to say two or three things by way of a thank you, then express a concern, and hopefully end on a positive point.

Lyn Brown: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words, but it is sad that not many people are here today. The information we had was that this debate was massively over-subscribed. I would like to go back to the old tradition where we had a proper Adjournment debate in which we could properly explore the issues that are

important to our constituents, without having to contain that within a four, six or seven-minute speech. I thank the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to say that.

Nigel Huddleston: The hon. Lady makes a valid point that I am sure others were listening to.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, and I heard the representation from the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown)—she is also an hon. Friend. The Backbench Business Committee allocates the time and there were supposed to be three hours for this debate, but unfortunately because of statements our time was compressed. However, I will take that as a representation from the House, so that when the Committee considers the next recess Adjournment debate we can look for a full day's debate.

Nigel Huddleston: I am happy to have facilitated that discussion.

I wish to thank you, Mr Speaker, and your entire team, and indeed everyone who looks after us—and I do mean looks after us—in this place. From security, the cleaners, and those in hospitality, everybody does a very good job and they do not always receive the praise that they deserve. I also wish to thank my family who go through quite an ordeal living with me, particularly given the lifestyle that we all lead, and I thank my constituents for re-electing me this year, for which I am grateful. I am sure I speak on behalf of all hon. Members when I say that although we are grateful to those who voted for us, we also represent those who did not. All Members across the House take that very seriously, and we do our best to represent the breadth of opinion, although that is sometimes overlooked.

I would like to say a special thank you to three people who have inspired me this year. I am very proud to have got to know them very well. Tracey Hemming runs the Freedom Day Centre and the Freedom Disco in my home village of Badsey. What an inspiration she is. She had an idea about 18 months ago to set up an event for disabled children and those with mental health challenges, and she has done the most fantastic job. I have managed to visit her several times. She is an amazing lady and deserves credit. Diane Bennett runs Caring Hands in the Vale, in Evesham, and runs the local food bank. She is an inspirational lady who I have got to know very well. Up in Droitwich, in the northern part of my constituency, a fantastic gentleman called Patrick Davis is doing a great job of reinvigorating salt production in Droitwich. I am very honoured to live in an area where volunteering and community engagement and involvement is at the heart of people's day-to-day activities. They are very busy with their jobs and families, but the volunteering is incredible. I have never known anywhere—I have lived and worked abroad for many years—with that degree of dedication. It is an honour to be associated with so many of them.

The issue I would like to raise is something we are not seeing in the Chamber today: intolerance. I am increasingly concerned about the intolerance, abuse and intimidation happening at the extreme ends of both the far right and the far left of British politics. It is not representative or reflective of the day-to-day activity in this place, where we generally get along. We have a lot of banter. We disagree, sometimes vehemently, but I think we all know

that having strongly held opinions does not necessarily mean that we are right. We have the self-awareness to realise that we can sometimes be persuaded and that the opposition can be right. We know it is perfectly valid and fair to look at the same data points and have different views and opinions on policies that may come out of them. We have those debates in this place all the time.

Unfortunately, the public do not always see that. At the moment, particularly online, we are seeing an era of really disheartening abuse, vitriol and hatred that does not exist in this place. It is, however, the responsibility of us in this place to say loudly and clearly that that is not acceptable in British politics. If it is associated with any of us in any way shape or form, if somebody uses our name, hashtag or Twitter account to make really vile comments, we must stand up and say, “No, not in my name. I distance myself from those comments. I do not want to be associated with them.” We must be active. Yes the social media companies have a lot to answer for and, yes, we do as Members of Parliament as well, as do those making the vile comments in the first place, but we must stand up and be counted.

Jamie Stone: The hon. Gentleman should not lose hope. He is right and I absolutely endorse what he says. What we have seen in recent days and weeks has been extremely unpleasant, but three years ago north of the border—I think we can agree on this—it was very bad on both sides of the Scottish independence referendum debate. Since then, however, things have improved and we have worked at it. Progress can be made.

Nigel Huddleston: I do indeed have hope, but we have a responsibility to try to lead. It is very unfortunate, but I think we all get people making insinuations about our motivations when we disagree on policy. Very occasionally in this place, it is very disheartening, as well as downright rude, to hear people insinuate that because I am a Tory I must therefore wake up in the morning wanting to hurt poor and disabled people. That is so far from the reality that it is downright offensive and wrong. If anybody believes that, I feel really sorry for them. What kind of mentality must one have to believe the absolute worst of the people one deals with on a day-to-day basis in one’s workplace? That needs to be called out, too. My main concern is not what happens in this place, but what happens online. We really need to work closely to focus on that and I know there is a cross-party consensus.

I said I would end positively. I am very pleased and proud that I am a Member of Parliament for the Conservative party. We do not get everything right, but we listen and we make changes where necessary. I am proud that, for example, we recognised that mistakes had been made with universal credit. We looked at the data, we listened to people—to our constituents, and to other Members of Parliament—and we amended policy. I think that that was right, and I am glad that we did it.

However, we have also got many things right in the first place. I am glad that, as we go into the Christmas period, we are seeing the highest spending ever on the NHS, and more operations than ever are being carried out in the NHS. We are also seeing the highest spending ever on pensions and pensioners, more children in good or outstanding schools than ever before in the nation’s history, and more people than ever before going home

with a pay cheque every week and with the decency and honour that comes with earning money. Moreover, unemployment is at a record 45-year low. This has been a difficult and challenging year, but it is not all bad. Let us look at some of the positive developments.

I will play my part in continued cross-party co-operation on all the issues that we care about and our constituents care about, and I look forward to doing that over the next year. In the meantime, I wish a happy Christmas and a happy new year to everyone.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: The House will now be treated to a second dose of Gapes.

3.40 pm

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker. A merry Christmas to you, to all the Deputy Speakers, to your panel of Chairs and to all the staff of the House. May I also send special best wishes to my friend the Chairman of Ways and Means? I know how hard it is for him at this time.

I am going to concentrate on one issue, and in doing so, I wish a merry Christmas to all the British people living in this country and the 5 million British people who are living in other countries, including 1.2 million in the European Union, because in the last few years we have not given the views and representativeness of those people the weight that they deserve.

In September 2014, the then chairman of the Conservative party pledged to end the 15-year rule applying to the eligibility of British people living overseas to vote in our elections. That commitment was made very firmly. He said:

“Being a British citizen is for life. It gives you the lifelong right to be protected by our military and Foreign Office, and to travel on a British passport. We believe it should also give you the lifelong right to vote.”

The manifesto on which David Cameron and the Conservative party won the 2015 election included that pledge. Subsequently, the Government issued a consultative document, and a commitment to introduce a “votes for life” Bill was announced in the Queen’s Speech on 27 May 2015. The Bill did not materialise, but in October 2016 a policy statement was published, setting out how the removal of the 15-year rule would come about. British citizens who had lived in Spain, Italy, France, Germany, Portugal, Estonia, Lithuania or elsewhere in the European Union for more than 15 years were not eligible to vote in the EU referendum. As a result, although their rights had been more affected than those of any other British citizens by the decision made in 2016, they had no say in it.

It is a notable feature of the EU negotiations in which the Government are involved at this moment that, although the rights of EU citizens in this country now seem to be protected, British citizens living in other EU countries will have inferior rights because those rights will exist only in the countries where they are currently resident; the rights will not be passportable because those people will lose the right to freedom of movement between other EU countries. That is a very important point: whereas EU citizens in the UK can move back and go to any other EU country, as things stand, British citizens

[Mike Gapes]

in the EU will only be able to reside in that particular country and will not have the rights of free movement elsewhere in the EU. That needs to be looked at.

I wish to declare that I am the honorary president of Labour International—at least until Momentum gets rid of me. *[Interruption.]* I am not joking; it has been suggested. I am speaking because I am aware of the concerns of so many—not just people in the Labour party but Conservatives internationally. Clearly, there was an excuse: we had a general election this year, so the Bill that might have come through from the 2015 election has not been produced. Therefore, I have been pursuing the matter with some questions.

I tabled questions in November asking the Minister for the Cabinet Office

“what plans the Government has to extend the voting rights of UK citizens who are resident overseas in UK elections and referendums”,

and

“if he will bring forward legislative proposals to guarantee votes for life in UK elections and referendums for all UK citizens living abroad.”

The answers referred me

“to the reply given to the Member for Halifax (Ms Lynch) on Thursday 7 September 2017”.

The answer that my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax received, to a question asked on 4 September, was:

“As outlined in our manifesto, the Government is committed to legislating to scrap the 15-year rule and will do so in time for the next scheduled parliamentary general election in 2022.”

That is not good enough. They were working on a schedule for 2020 and an early general election meant that people could not have a vote in that election. There is absolutely no guarantee in the current political climate that the next general election will be in 2022; it could be before then.

This is not a partisan point; there will be those across the parties who disagree with extending that democratic right to all British people living overseas. But in the modern age, with digital systems of voting, checking or registration, we need to modernise and extend democracy to all those British people, particularly given that we are bringing about significant change not just in this country, but all over the world.

3.47 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes), and I will come on to the point he made a little later in my remarks.

I also extend to all those working on our behalf over Christmas and the new year, whether in the private sector or public services, my grateful thanks. They give up their family time on our behalf. In my constituency of Stafford, I particularly think of the workers at General Electric, some of whom are facing an uncertain future, with a consultation going on over the loss of 500 jobs. I assure them of my commitment to see that, if there are other opportunities locally or regionally, they are made aware of them and that all support possible is given to them.

I want to tackle three subjects, the first of which is health and social care. I have spoken often on this subject, particularly in respect of Stafford Hospital,

now County Hospital. It is great to be able to say that the care at County Hospital, formerly the Stafford Hospital, has improved tremendously over the past few years. I pay tribute to the workers there, who have gone through a very difficult period, both at the time of the Francis public inquiry and then at the time of the trust special administration—the only trust special administration under the Health and Social Care Act 2012.

Bob Stewart: I should like to pay tribute to my hon. Friend. He has worked tirelessly to sort out that hospital, and he has been a great advocate of getting it fixed.

Jeremy Lefroy: I am most grateful, but I think my hon. Friend perhaps exaggerates my own part in this. It is really the workforce at the hospital who have done it, but I accept his thanks on behalf of all those at the County hospital and in Stafford who have fought for it.

I want to talk about the forthcoming Green Paper on social care, and my remarks will include both health and social care. It will provide a really important opportunity for us to change things in health and social care for the better and for the long term, but it will need cross-party working. The area of social care and health has been blighted too often by infighting between the parties. We also need to take an integrated approach.

We score highly, internationally, in regard to people's opinion of their access to good healthcare. In a survey carried out not so long ago, 35% of people in the USA said that they did not have good access to good quality healthcare. In France, the figure was 18%, in Germany it was 15%, and in the UK it was only 4%. That is the glory of our national health service: by and large, it gives people access to high-quality healthcare, whatever their income and wherever they live in the United Kingdom. However, it is also generally accepted that more money is required. I do not have time to go into the detailed figures, but something between 1% and 2% more GDP needs to be spent on health and social care. The question that needs to be asked in our contributions to the Green Paper next year is: how is that money to be raised?

I have always said that we need a ring-fenced health and social care levy, on top of our present budgeted expenditure on health and social care. It needs to be a broad-based levy, and it needs to be income based, so that it is fair across the country and the population. Such a levy would not provide for everything that we need to do, but it would help to ensure that the £10 billion to £20 billion of additional resources that we need to put into the health and social care system as a minimum in the coming years, on top of what we already spend, was available. What is more, I think that it would be accepted by the general population. If the money were ring-fenced for health and social care, they would know that it would be spent on things that they really cared about and needed. Let us not forget that the national health service is one of the biggest sources of cohesion in our country; it is something that we all rely on.

I want briefly to touch on the European Union negotiations, which are incredibly important to all of us. The Prime Minister has said that she wants the best possible deal, and I absolutely support her in that. We need a unique, long-term deal that is the best possible for our jobs and tax revenues, and also for bringing back control to this country in certain areas. The deal must include goods and services—not just goods—and

it must be frictionless. It must fully respect the Belfast agreement. It must also respect the people of Gibraltar. It must cover security, aviation, data and many other areas, including agreements with other countries, of which there are dozens.

There has been discussion over whether we should be closer to Norway or Canada—mention has been made of “Canada plus-plus-plus”—but I simply make the observation that geographically, and probably in spirit, we are closer to Norway than to Canada when it comes to this type of agreement. I urge the Government to look closely at that matter. I also suggest that we look at the European Free Trade Association. It is not perfect, and it might not be something for the near term, but I believe that in the medium term we cannot stand on our own. We need to work together with other like-minded nations, which might include Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, Liechtenstein and perhaps others. When it comes to negotiating agreements and working together on trade, it is better to work with a number of countries rather than just on our own.

We also need to consider the idea of associate European citizenship, on a voluntary basis, for all those United Kingdom citizens who want to retain strong, close allegiances with our friends and neighbours in the European Union. It has been raised as a possibility by Guy Verhofstadt in the European Parliament and by others. Let us take it into consideration in the negotiations.

Finally, but in some ways most importantly of all, I want to touch on humanitarian work. There are possibly more refugees across the world now than at any other time since the end of the second world war. Whether from Syria, Yemen, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, Burma or Burundi, there are possibly up to 50 million refugees, not including the people who are suffering within their own countries.

I welcome the recent news about Hodeidah in Yemen, and the fact that the port has been opened up for a minimum of 30 days for humanitarian and relief supplies. I pay tribute to Her Majesty's Government for their work on that, but we must keep an eagle eye on the situation over this Christmas and new year recess. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 1.7 million have had to flee their homes this year—more than in any other country in the world—yet it sadly receives hardly a mention in the news and even in this place. Four million people have been displaced, and 7 million people are struggling to feed themselves. In 2018, it is absolutely vital that the UK maintains the work that it is doing all over the world on humanitarian affairs, in which we lead in so many cases. With that, Mr Speaker, I wish you a very happy Christmas.

3.56 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I am going to start by sounding a bit “Bah, humbug”—I will save my felicitations for the end—but I want to raise an important subject. It relates to the Delegated Legislation Committee that I was in on Tuesday, which was considering both the new date for disclosures about donations to the Northern Ireland parties and treating such donations in the same way as donations to other parties. It is a long-running issue that was first suggested a decade ago, but successive Ministers have kicked the issue down the road over the years.

The revelations about the large donation to the Democratic Unionist party for Brexit campaigning, made from Scotland through Northern Ireland, presumably to avoid the usual reporting restrictions, forced the hand of the current Government, and the secondary legislation that we were considering on Tuesday was presented. That donation was £435,000 from the Constitutional Research Council. The organisation is based in Scotland, but none of us in Scottish politics had heard of it before. However, I note that it has links to the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), who I believe received some thousands of pounds on behalf of the European Research Group—the Conservatives' extreme Brexit wing.

During the proceedings on Tuesday, the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), told the Committee that she had consulted the Electoral Commission in Northern Ireland, as she was obliged to do, and she gave the impression that the commission was in agreement with the Government on the date of commencement. She said:

“I hope that the Committee has found that summary of the provisions helpful. As hon. Members know, the Electoral Commission will be responsible for implementing the arrangements set out in the draft order. The Government have fulfilled our statutory obligation to consult the commission about the draft order; I place on the record my thanks to the commission and its staff for their close co-operation and constructive input into the drafting process.”—[*Official Report, Third Delegated Legislation Committee*, 19 December 2017; c. 5.]

My office contacted the commission yesterday and was told that it remains of the opinion that the start date for open reporting should be 1 January 2014, rather than the new date of 1 July this year. That is important because the commission still wants the appropriate date to be the one that is in legislation passed by this Parliament. That legislation was intended to normalise the reporting of donations and loans to Northern Irish parties and to make it difficult to channel money secretly into politics.

We are all well aware of the need for transparency in politics and of the need to avoid corruption and to be seen to be avoiding corruption, and we trust the Electoral Commission to do its job and ensure that the rules are followed. Its staff are the experts in this field, and while I am aware that experts are not in favour in some parts of this House, we can surely agree that we should take the advice of the Electoral Commission on matters pertaining to donations and loans to political parties.

It is unfortunate that the Minister gave the impression on Tuesday that she had the commission's agreement, when it is clear that she did not and does not. I hope that she will take the opportunity to clarify the situation to the House and for the record. Meanwhile, since it is clear that the commission remains opposed to the new date presented in secondary legislation and since the regulations have not yet been presented on the Floor of the House for approval, I wonder whether the Minister might reconsider her position and defer the introduction of these regulations until the Government have had sufficient time to consult properly on the most appropriate date for the proper and full reporting of donations and loans in Northern Ireland to start.

Reporting was originally supposed to start from 2007, and a Government consultation in 2010 showed that more than three quarters of respondents in Northern Ireland wanted it to go ahead, but I am afraid that it

[Deidre Brock]

was fudged. It was deferred and put back on the shelf, and eventually new legislation, the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2014, set a new date of 1 January 2014. We should see that date honoured.

I hope that the Minister intends to address the wrongful impression given to the Committee that the commission agreed with the new date and that she will withdraw the regulations presented and take time to undertake a proper and full consultation on them, so that we get a date that satisfies the intent behind the legislation. We must avoid corruption and any danger of leaving the impression that there might be something to hide. It is vital that a debate on this issue be scheduled in the House in the new year.

On that rather sombre note, I would like to wish everyone in the House, all the officers, you, Mr Speaker, and the Deputy Speakers, who have been so helpful to us all throughout the year, “Nollaig chridheil agus bliadhna mhath ùr”, which is Scottish Gaelic for, “Merry Christmas and happy new year.” I particularly want to send my thoughts and best wishes to the Chairman of Ways and Means. I am fond of the gentleman and was very sad to hear of his difficulties. I wish him and his family all the best.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much.

4.1 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): A very experienced Member of Parliament said to me recently that the “MP” at the end of our names does not just mean “Member of Parliament”; it also means “must persevere”. I want to speak in this debate because I want to tell the House again about the contaminated blood scandal, and I will persevere in my view that justice delayed is justice denied.

It was great news on 11 July when the Government announced an inquiry into the contaminated blood scandal, the biggest treatment disaster in the history of the NHS. We know that at least 2,400 people have died and that others still live with the effects of HIV, hepatitis C and other viruses they got through contaminated blood products. I put on the record again my personal thanks and the thanks of the all-party group on haemophilia and contaminated blood for the Prime Minister’s decision to hold that public inquiry, as announced on 11 July, but it is now 21 December and sadly we have not seen the public inquiry established, we do not have the name of a chair and we do not even have draft terms of reference for people to be consulted on.

We are in this pickle because, unfortunately, despite the good intentions behind the announcement in July, the Government held on for far too long to the idea that the Department of Health had to lead on the establishment of the inquiry. Despite near unanimity in the community of those affected that the Department, as a party implicated in the scandal, should have nothing to do with the public inquiry, it took until 3 November for the Government to say it would be moved to the Cabinet Office. We welcome that—it is a positive development—but it took far too long. It took the involvement of the former Bishop of Liverpool, James Jones, to help get the message across to the Government that the Department was not the appropriate body to lead on this.

Many people did not want to get involved with the consultation because the Department of Health was at its centre. The Cabinet Office took control of the inquiry on 3 November, which we welcome, and it said there would be an update before Christmas on what will happen next. We were hopeful that a chair would be announced by today. I find it a little galling that this is the last day before we rise for Christmas and, although a written ministerial statement was on the Order Paper when I looked at 8.30 am, it took until 2.13 pm for us to see exactly what the Government propose.

The Government have now said that they will have a judge-led inquiry, which I understand from the people who engaged with the consultation earlier this year was the wish of the overwhelming number of people. That is positive, but today’s statement gives no indication of when we will get the judge’s name. What concerns me, as I started off by saying, is that people are living today with HIV, hepatitis C and other conditions, and people are dying today because of what happened to them. We are now five and a half months on from that initial positive announcement, but we still cannot see the start of the public inquiry. Can the Minister enlighten us on when in the new year the name might be announced?

In the light of what recently happened with Grenfell—where a judge was appointed and the community raised concerns about not feeling part of the inquiry—whoever leads the inquiry on contaminated blood has to ensure that the families and those affected are at its very heart, feel included and are able to contribute as fully as possible. My only reason for raising that is that the judge-led Penrose inquiry in Scotland did not deliver in the way we wanted for the people of Scotland who have been affected by this scandal. Part of the problem was the judge who was appointed. We need to make sure that whichever judge is appointed has not only the requisite legal and forensic skills to do a good job, but the ability to understand what has happened to the people who have been so badly damaged by the contaminated blood scandal.

We are grateful for the involvement of the former Bishop of Liverpool, Bishop James Jones, in interceding with the Government in the summer on the involvement of the Department of Health. His skill, wisdom, knowledge and ability would be well used in some capacity in the inquiry that we hope will start next year. I hope that the Government will take that on board.

The Government could also take steps now to try to alleviate some of the suffering that this group of people is experiencing. First, the Government have introduced a new financial scheme—not compensation but limited financial support—but the scheme in Scotland is more generous in some regards. I ask the Minister to take it to his colleagues to see whether we can agree to have a scheme in England that is no less generous than the scheme in Scotland, with the anomalies in the English scheme being ironed out.

Secondly, the Government could also take action now so that people affected by the contaminated blood scandal are passported through the benefits system, so that they do not have to have constant assessments for personal independence payment and employment and support allowance, and everything else.

Thirdly, as in the Irish settlement, priority for NHS treatment should be given to people affected by contaminated blood. Again, the Government could introduce that positive measure now.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: There are three remaining would-be Back-Bench contributors. The Front-Bench winding-up speeches must begin no later than 4.27 pm. Members can do the arithmetic for themselves.

4.9 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I commend the perseverance of my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) in pursuing this contaminated blood scandal. Like others, Mr Speaker, I wish you and everyone a very happy Christmas, but the topic I wish to raise is a bit less merry.

Jobcentres are evaluated on the basis of benefit off-flow. Plaistow jobcentre, which was, until its closure in October, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), who is in her place, had a poor record. A new manager, Tony Sutton, appointed in May 2013, and a new deputy, Nazia Goci, were determined to raise benefit off-flow. A very troubled employee at the jobcentre, a constituent of mine, came to see me in September 2013. She described “awful working conditions”, and “unfair benefit sanctions” harassing people off benefits. I alerted the Department, and a senior official visited the jobcentre in October. I was grateful for that, but I understand that staff were banned from expressing concerns to him. He reported that everything was fine.

I was told that it was common to ask people to sign on for their benefit claim at irregular dates, in the hope they would forget to do so one week and their claim would then be closed; and that advisers were told to sanction a claimant if they called them on their mobile twice and they did not answer. In June 2014, I met for the first time my constituent Nasima Noorani, a personal adviser at Plaistow jobcentre, and Jannat Mirza, a team leader. They had been sacked from Plaistow the month before. A number of former staff there, not those I have mentioned, told me of a practice introduced by the new management. It was designed, in particular, to avoid people reaching 52 weeks in their jobseeker’s allowance claim, because at that point they would have had to be referred to the Work programme. There was immense pressure on staff to stop this happening and to stop referrals taking place. The procedure, which I am told was used repeatedly from mid-2013, was that as people approached a deadline they would be taken off benefit and paid instead the same amount of cash from the flexible support fund for a couple of weeks, on a pretext—for example, to pay for a travelcard to get to a non-existent job—and then signed back on to JSA again a short time afterwards. Claimants got the same amount of cash and benefit off-flow went up by one.

However, claimants’ housing benefit was affected. One of the people on the receiving end of this, whom I know, complained about it. As a result, Naseema Noorani and Jannat Mirza were sacked. The claimant who complained, and all the staff I have discussed this with, are quite clear that those two employees were not the guilty parties. Naseema Noorani was the adviser who initiated the flexible support fund payment, but she only saw that claimant that morning because a colleague was late. It was made clear by managers that this was what she should do; the FSF payment was specified in a post-it note already on the claimant’s file. Jannat Mirza had no involvement at all. She merely authorised the

use of a form for a slightly different purpose from usual. No action was taken against other staff who specified how much should be paid and who authorised the claim; nor against the managers. Naseema Noorani and Jannat Mirza were clearly scapegoats to cover up malpractice by more senior colleagues.

Jannat Mirza, unable to afford representation, lost an unfair dismissal claim. The tribunal seems to have done a cut-and-paste job on the Department for Work and Pensions’ submission, and made no serious attempt to address what had really happened. Naseema Noorani did not even try to claim. Since 2014, nobody has been able to tell me any possible gain from the fraud to the staff who were sacked. Others, however, had a clear career incentive to boost benefit off-flow. I have pursued this for three and a half years. Unable to remedy the injustice—and one of the two women is still out of work after more than three years—I simply want to place on the public record an account of what really happened.

Poorly designed numerical targets gave big incentives to managers, and in this case, as has perhaps occurred in others, they succumbed to temptation to bend the rules for their own advancement. As well as holding the managers to account, Ministers need to reflect on what went wrong and on the very high price paid by wholly blameless employees and large numbers of benefit claimants.

4.14 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): This time last year, my single, a Band Aid cover named “National Living Rage”, rocketed up the Christmas charts, highlighting the plight of workers and the national scandal of low and unfair pay in Britain. There are many matters of sincere importance to be discussed before the forthcoming Adjournment, but this Christmas there are perhaps few as critical, heartbreaking and lamentable as the fact that 128,000 children will wake up homeless on Christmas morning. I cannot help but wonder how closely my two recent Christmas campaigns are linked, because more than half the homeless households in London are in work.

It would take a heart of stone to consider childhood homelessness on any scale to be acceptable. I was simply astonished to hear the Prime Minister seem to justify this crisis in Prime Minister’s questions yesterday by remarking that these children are not rough sleepers. Maybe not, but these children will wake up on Christmas morning in B&Bs, in hostels, or in the heart of a working industrial estate in my own constituency of Mitcham and Morden.

Lyn Brown: I have not seen children sleeping rough, but I have certainly seen children under the age of 12 in hostels that churches run to keep people off the street. For me, that is the lowest level “roof over head” that there is. It is not a big step away from sleeping on the street.

Siobhain McDonagh: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Consider Sarah’s family, who live in temporary accommodation in Mitcham. They will not have a Christmas dinner because they have no facilities to be able to cook one. They will not have a Christmas tree because their room does not fit anything other than the bed that the four of them share. They will not have any presents because every penny possible is being put aside

[Siobhain McDonagh]

so that one day they will have enough for the extortionate deposit that is the golden ticket needed to enter the private rented sector. In fact, I will be amazed if Father Christmas is even able to find Sarah's family, because hers is one of the 22,000 families that have been moved out of their home borough, often without the receiving local authority being made aware of their arrival. When that happens, I am in no doubt that their safety cannot be guaranteed.

Recent freedom of information requests by the Children's Rights Alliance for England have astonishingly discovered that almost a quarter of temporary accommodation is inspected by local authorities only once tenants have left. Worryingly, nearly two thirds of local authorities said that they did not even seek advice from their safeguarding service when they placed families in B&Bs or temporary accommodation. These are the realities faced by the 79,190 families in temporary accommodation in England today. Of course, those figures do not even account for the 9,000 rough sleepers on the streets of our constituencies, or for the 56% of 16 to 25-year-olds in the UK who say that they have family or friends who have sofa-surfed.

There can be no doubt about the responsibility for the country's deplorable housing crisis. The report published yesterday by the Public Accounts Committee stated explicitly that the Department for Communities and Local Government has had an "unacceptably complacent" attitude to the reduction of homelessness. The Department's current plans to tackle the issue were said to address only the tip of the iceberg, and there is an unacceptable shortage of realistic housing options for the homeless. Of course, most of us knew that already.

The last time that the Government target of building 300,000 new homes in one year in England was achieved was almost half a century ago, in 1969. The difference back then was that councils and housing associations were building new homes. But a solution is right here, in our hands: we must give councils the right to build as well as the right to buy. The private sector has never reached, and does not have the inclination to reach, the Government's targets. For example, last year, only 121,000 permanent dwellings were completed by private companies; meanwhile, just 1,840 were completed by local authorities.

If the Government target of building 300,000 new homes is to be achieved, councils simply have to play their part, which is why I am calling on the Government to grant local authorities the right to build and the right to buy so that housing can be let to families on low incomes at social housing rents. A home to live in should appear on no child's Christmas wish list. Father Christmas is simply not in a position to influence the budgets of local authorities, but the Government are, and on behalf of the 128,000 homeless children across the country, I sincerely hope that this will be their last Christmas morning without a place to call home.

4.19 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As always, it is a pleasure to be called to speak. Just as an introduction, let me quickly focus on the real meaning of Christmas. It is about not the actual date, but the remembrance. The very word "Christmas" means a Christ celebration. This is a time that has been set aside for people around

the world to remember the fact that Christ gave up his divinity to come to earth in human frailty as a baby, to grow up tempted and tested, as each and every one of us has been, and ultimately to be the key part in God's plan of salvation for every person on this planet through his death and resurrection. There is no point in Christmas if we do not have an Easter, and I am very pleased to celebrate them both.

This is a time when people of every nation, tribe and tongue have time to recognise not a date, but a promise fulfilled; not a time of birth, but an offer of a new birth to all who believe and accept Christ; not a birth certificate, but a plan from a loving God to a most beloved people. That is what Christmas is really all about. I love Christmas as a time to remember what the Lord did for us. I know that Christians throughout the world are joining me and others to thank God for the real meaning of Christmas.

At this time of year, we must also remember those across the world who, due to persecution and deliberate verbal and physical abuse, cannot go to their church and worship God as we can. I urge people inside and outside this House to pray for those people and to keep them very much in their thoughts.

In the short time that I have, I will mention a scripture text that I received, "Labour for the night cometh". I thought very much about what I wanted to say. I know others have talked about this, but I very quickly want to focus on the volunteers and say a most sincere thank you to the people in our communities who work day and night, week day and weekend, sacrificing themselves nine-to-five, indeed a lot more, to provide help and assistance to people throughout the UK. They will not be able to spend the whole day at Christmas with their family, as they will be taking care of other people's families. I am also thinking of NHS staff, healthcare staff, auxiliaries, porters, cleaning staff, GP services, lab technicians, and members of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the police services, and the intelligence agencies. They do not sleep in their beds so that we can sleep in ours. I am also thinking of the fire service, the prison officers and all the staff in the road services. There are also those in uniform, whether in the Royal Navy, the Army or the Air Force. People posted in other parts of the world will not be close to their families. We should take a moment to think of all of them.

I also wanted to take this time to highlight the fact that our nation would not work the way that it does without the help and support of the literal army of volunteers who daily give their time and energy to make a difference and help people throughout this land. We simply could not live our life without them.

We live in a nation of givers: people who give charitably and generously throughout the whole year. It always makes me feel very, very proud to be British when I think about our giving mentality. I know that people in Northern Ireland perhaps give above the national average, but everybody, in all regions of the United Kingdom, gives and we should keep that in mind.

I am also very conscious of the fact that I should mention a few charities. I do not have time to go through them all, but let me mention very quickly the food banks and the people who work for them. There are 1,235 Trussell Trust food banks and 700 independent food banks. Staggeringly, volunteers do almost 3 million hours of unpaid work each year. That is equivalent to a basic wage of some £22 million. That is what the volunteers

in the food banks do for us. We should consider that, as well as having this mainly volunteer-based support, this one sector has thousands who donate to food banks to help people in their communities. We all make a contribution to that.

At this Christmas time, I want to express my sincere thanks to all those who, throughout the year, have volunteered and helped out in churches and community groups in my constituency of Strangford and in the rest of our great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Our society simply would not work without people going out of their way to help others. That selflessness is so clear at Christmas as we hear of people donating to the food banks, of churches providing gifts, of people carol singing to the elderly and of people inviting neighbours and relatives to eat with them.

Christmas is very much about families. Mr Speaker, you will have your family with you at Christmas time, and I wish you every enjoyment with that. All of us will hopefully have our families around us as well, but there are those who do not have families, and we should be ever mindful of them.

I offer my most sincere thanks to everyone who has played a part in making someone's life better this year—whether that is the Salvation Army helping individuals or the homelessness organisations that hon. Members have mentioned. We all have a focus on people, because we all try to work on behalf of our constituents.

I thank you, Mr Speaker, for your patience with us all in this House. It is quite something. I know that I have said this many times, but I do say it with sincerity. In fact, you probably show more patience to me than to anybody else. Next year, I am really going to try not to use the word “you”. I will endeavour to make that happen; it has only taken me seven years to remember and I will try to remember it in the year to come, if we are spared.

As other hon. Members have said, the right hon. Member for Chorley (Mr Hoyle) is very much in our thoughts. We keep his family very much in our minds and our prayers at this time.

I thank the other Deputy Speakers, who—like you, Mr Speaker—treat us very fairly, with so much patience and kindness. Mr Speaker, you are very much a champion of the Back Bencher. As a Back Bencher who has no aspirations to be anything other than a Back Bencher, I particularly enjoy the opportunity to participate in the debates in this House.

I thank the *Hansard* staff, who have been able to understand my accent and my Ulster-Scotsisms, which have actually been quite challenging for me at times, so they must be much more challenging for anybody else. I also thank all the staff, including security, who look after us in the House.

I hope that all hon. and right hon. Members in this House, Her Majesty, the Prime Minister, Her Majesty's Government and Her Majesty's Opposition have a very merry Christmas and a happy new year. I also publicly wish my constituents in Strangford, who I have the privilege to represent, a merry Christmas, and a happy and blessed new year.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has spoken in the spirit that we have come to expect from him, and it is hugely appreciated.

4.26 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): What a pleasure it is to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who has been a real source of encouragement in his fellowship to me since I joined the House; I pay tribute to him.

I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate before the Christmas adjournment. Before doing so, I would like to express my best wishes to the whole House, particularly the staff of the House, who have been incredibly welcoming to new Members. I hope they have a very happy and peaceful Christmas.

When I volunteered to sum up this debate for the Scottish National party, I was not quite aware of what I was letting myself in for. We have heard 16 Back-Bench contributions, from my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), and the hon. Members for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), for Keighley (John Grogan), for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq), for Southend West (Sir David Amess), for West Ham (Lyn Brown), for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), for Ilford South (Mike Gapes), for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) and, of course, for Strangford (Jim Shannon). This has been the most wide-ranging debate that I have ever seen in this House. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Southend West, who managed to get 25 or 26 different topics into six and a half minutes, which will be a real challenge for me next year.

I also place on the record my sincere thanks to my constituency staff—Derec, Carolann, Emily, Ross, Laura, David and Michelle—for all their hard work since my election in June. Their support has been invaluable and I am truly indebted to them.

Mr Speaker, the turn of the year is normally an opportunity for us to reflect on the year just past. However, with your indulgence, I want to look forward to 2018, particularly to some of the major challenges coming down the track for my city of Glasgow. On Friday last week, I had a meeting with Easterhouse Housing and Regeneration Alliance, which is a coalition of eight independent, community-based social housing providers in Greater Easterhouse. Before going any further, I pay tribute to the staff and directors of those eight housing associations, because our housing associations in the east end of Glasgow are more than just that: they are the backbone of the community, and go well above and beyond the role of a registered social landlord. It is important that that point is placed on the record and that our sincere thanks are expressed to all housing associations, which are so often the glue that holds our community together.

When I met EHRA staff last week, they expressed some serious concerns about changes emanating from the Department for Work and Pensions next year that will, quite frankly, be a hammer blow to the city of Glasgow—and a double blow at that. Ministers have already signalled their intention to close half of Glasgow's jobcentres, with three out of the four jobcentres in Glasgow's east end due for the axe. As it stands, jobcentres in Easterhouse and Parkhead, as well as in Bridgeton, in the constituency

[David Linden]

of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), will all be closed and relocated to Shettleston. Nowhere in the UK is being as disproportionately impacted by jobcentre closures as Glasgow's east end—an area that has an unemployment rate double the UK national average.

I am afraid that, despite countless written questions, correspondence and a face-to-face meeting at Caxton House, the Employment Minister has repeatedly failed to take account of the profound concerns expressed by myself and the whole community in Glasgow's east end. That includes our three east end Tory councillors, who also oppose these closures.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): As my hon. Friend says, the jobcentre closures are affecting the whole city of Glasgow. Is he particularly concerned, as I am, that Ministers have not been very reassuring on whether this will be the last round of closures, and that there is a real risk that, further down the road, the city could lose even more of its jobcentre provision?

David Linden: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. He is absolutely right. The fact that Ministers have not clarified that point should be sounding alarm bells in our city, and I very much join him in expressing that concern.

However, it is not too late for the Government to drop these plans. They should conduct a full equality impact assessment. When they do, they will see for themselves the profound challenges posed by sanctions, poor transport connections and the deep-rooted issues of territorialism and gang violence that still exist in our city.

The second issue of concern expressed to me by the EHRA relates to universal credit. The social destruction that is universal credit is due to be unleashed on Glasgow next year, and it is crystal clear from the debates we have had in the House that it is simply not working. More than that, it is fundamentally flawed, and the tweaking around the edges that we saw during the Budget simply is not enough. Major concerns still exist—among not just politicians on both sides of the House but housing associations in the third sector—as to how universal credit is due to be rolled out, particularly in Glasgow.

Every day, evidence is mounting that universal credit is creating social destruction as it continues to roll out across these islands. The reduction from six weeks to five weeks, although welcome, is not enough. The wait for the first payment of universal credit is pushing people into rent arrears, debt and crisis, and we know that 25% of claimants are even waiting longer than six weeks—and that is according to the Department for Work and Pensions.

I am afraid that the manner in which the Tories have rolled out universal credit is completely opposed to their stated intention of making it mirror a salary. The refusal to halt the roll-out is nothing more than arrogance, and we see that the Conservative party is wedded to this ideological flagship welfare cut, despite the misery it is causing in our local communities.

Citizens Advice Scotland has said that evidence from five bureaux in areas where universal credit has been fully rolled out has shown an average 15% rise in rent

arrears issues, compared with a national decrease of 2%, and an 87% increase in crisis grant issues, compared with a national increase of 9%. Citizens Advice Scotland has also analysed over 52,000 cases it has seen and has concluded that those on universal credit would, on average, appear to have less than £4 per month left to pay all their creditors after they have paid essential living costs—that is not something we should be condoning in the House.

Finally, the Trussell Trust has reported seeing a 17% increase in food bank usage in areas of full universal credit roll-out—more than double the national average. My own local food bank—Glasgow NE Foodbank, run by Tara Maguire—is already at breaking point. The full universal credit roll-out in Glasgow could well be the straw that breaks the camel's back. That is why I am very much calling today for the roll-out of universal credit to be halted and abandoned entirely in Glasgow.

If there is one thing I have learned in my time in this House, it is that the Government have difficulty listening. We see that with Opposition day debates and with the power grab they are trying with the Brexit Bill. So if I may, I would, in the spirit of Christmas, urge Ministers to come back to the House with a new year's resolution to listen and to act in the interests of our communities. They can start doing that by abandoning the proposed closure of Glasgow's jobcentres and halting the universal credit roll-out in Glasgow.

4.33 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I did promise the House brevity, as I am aware that colleagues will want to return to their constituencies and families for Christmas and, indeed, to start some Christmas shopping—those of us who have not managed it. I spotted some Ministers in the House of Commons shop this morning, so I know we are all a little behind.

With the Prime Minister, the Defence Secretary, the Foreign Secretary, the Trade Secretary and the Business Secretary all in Poland, and with the First Secretary resigning, I wonder whether my opposite number, the Deputy Leader of the House, feels that he is here starring in the remake of "Home Alone" this Christmas. I enjoy working opposite him; he has been very supportive. I wish him well in his endeavours. I think the Government are in safe hands with him in the coming weeks.

Brexit is the biggest issue of our time, and it is right that we have concentrated so much of our time in this place on that subject. We have had over 64 hours of debate on the EU (Withdrawal) Bill. Over 300 amendments have been tabled and there have been 14 reports by 10 different Committees. There have been 43 votes in total, and we have won one—but a very important one. As many colleagues have said previously—you have endorsed this, Mr Speaker—it is crucial to the functioning of our parliamentary democracy that all Members vote according to their judgment of the best interests of their constituents. The outcome on amendment 7 has therefore been reassuring for all democrats.

I would never have thought that I would be pleased to be surrounded by so many eminent lawyers and scholars of "Erskine May" in the past few weeks, but it has been very interesting. I have found it quite a treat to witness colleagues pursue so ingeniously every legislative avenue to take back control to this place. I have learned a lot.

I have learned about Humble Addresses, and I am now almost clear on the difference between a sectoral analysis and an impact assessment.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): You could make a lot of money out of that.

Karin Smyth: I could have done if I had chosen a different career.

We owe many right hon. and hon. Members who have pored over every detail of the Bill, their advisers, and, indeed, the Clerks of this House a huge debt of gratitude. I sincerely hope that they have some lighter reading over the Christmas period.

While we have been talking a lot about Brexit, Members have participated in debates on other really important subjects here and in Westminster Hall. We have heard from colleagues, particularly here, about the roll-out of universal credit, which has been discussed again this afternoon. This policy is having a huge impact on families struggling to make ends meet, whom we particularly think about over this Christmas period. All of us, regardless of party, have a huge number of constituents who are affected. I know that my colleagues will share a commitment to do all we can to help mitigate the impact of this when the House returns in the new year.

During this interesting debate, many hon. Members have raised issues close to their own hearts and their own constituencies. It has been a fairly sombre debate with so many important issues being raised. It has illustrated the fact that regardless of which side of the House we sit on, our constituents often face the same issues, and we do share work and support each other across the House to make things better for people.

We have heard from the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (John Grogan), the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq), the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes), the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and finally—well volunteered—the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden); they should have told you what you were letting yourself in for.

We have heard about a huge range of subjects. I did not know that it is the 50th anniversary of Crisis, which the hon. Member for Harrow East talked about. The theme of transport occupied my hon. Friends the Members for Keighley and for Ealing Central and Acton. My hon. Friend the Member for Keighley made an excellent point on behalf of sports fans, workers, shoppers and theatre-goers travelling on Boxing day. Like me, my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton is well advised on transport matters by a son who is very keen on these subjects. She made a good point about the

impact of welcome infrastructure projects on her constituency with regard to HS2, and the importance of small businesses.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham again demonstrated the range of passionate campaigns that she has pursued in this place. She is held in huge respect across the House for that work. We heard about three of the campaigns that she will be pursuing. She has already managed to elicit some response from the Government Front Bench on that work.

I first heard my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South speak at a Labour party event when I was a young child in the late 1980s—he talked about defence and international affairs and was hugely impressive. He is hugely knowledgeable on these subjects. Today he spoke, again with great passion, about British citizens here and abroad. Long may he continue to do so, on behalf of the people of Ilford South.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North is the embodiment of the phrase “must persevere”. I remember being here to hear the good news that she shared about the campaign in July, and I am shocked to hear that she has had to pursue the work down every single avenue. As she said eloquently, she will persist on behalf of those families.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham—he is very knowledgeable, and I always listen attentively when he talks about these matters—raised some terrible accounts of activities that are going on in Plaistow jobcentre. I know that he will pursue the matter with Ministers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden reminded us of the production last year of her record, which we all very much enjoyed. She is pursuing relentlessly another Christmas campaign on behalf of homeless children, for whom she has been working so hard. She is another dedicated campaigner, who has been a constant source of good advice and support to me and to many other hon. Members.

I am sure everyone will join me in thanking all those across the country who, despite enormous pressure on local services, continue to work so hard over this period to provide the vital services that our communities need. To our servicemen and women, to those who keep our public places clean and to all public servants I express heartfelt thanks for all that they do. If I may, I would like to touch on my own constituency, Bristol South, and pay tribute to all the GP surgeries and to the staff at South Bristol Community Hospital, who will be providing vital care to people over this period.

In keeping with the Christmas tradition, let me say that the red, red robin keeps bob, bob, bobbing along, and I take this opportunity to say well done to Bristol City on their 2-1 win last night against Manchester United at Ashton Gate. Never have I met so many fans of not wanting Manchester United to win as I did in the Lobbies last night. I am not a regular football fan, although I enjoy going to the occasional game and watching. But I work very closely with the club, which is based in my constituency and which makes a huge contribution to the local community. We have heard about how many other football clubs across the country do similar work. Well done to Bristol City, and I hope that they have some rest over the period before the next game with Manchester City. It is a shame that the draw

[Karin Smyth]

did not turn out differently, Mr Speaker, because I would have enjoyed welcoming you back to Bristol South to watch the game if Arsenal had been drawn.

I am looking forward to spending some family time in Bristol, and I am sure that my family will be pleased to see me. As the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire said, this job is not easy, and our families support us very well. I hope that many hon. Members will have time with their families. I will be catching up with “The Crown”. I am a huge fan of the series, and I am hoping that I might be able to polish my accent a little bit by the end of it. I am hoping to catch up with “The Last Jedi”, which I have not seen yet. If any hon. Members have not seen “Paddington 2”, I would thoroughly recommend it. It carries some heart-warming messages about the importance of being an inclusive and caring society that we could all take away with us.

Bristolians will have the opportunity to visit my constituency to watch “Beauty and the Beast”, which is being performed in the Tobacco Factory theatre. It is a reminder that in the often cruel times in which we live, beauty and, indeed, beastliness are only skin deep. On that note, I wish all my colleagues, and colleagues from across the House, a safe, happy and peaceful Christmas. I look forward to continuing to work with them all in the new year and, of course, welcoming in a new Labour Government.

4.43 pm

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Michael Ellis): The hon. Lady’s speech was going so well until that last point; I really do not think that that is likely to happen.

I welcome the hon. Lady’s comments. She started by mentioning how many Ministers from Her Majesty’s Government were abroad in Poland at the moment. May I assure the House—and you, Mr Speaker—that I am not the only one left, as you can see from the Front Bench? I think the stock markets may still be open, so I do not want to alarm them. I am not in charge.

Bob Blackman: Shame!

Michael Ellis: I hear shouts of “Shame” from behind me. They will no doubt be kindly noted.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) spoke as passionately as ever about his constituency. Before doing so, he made reference to the right hon. Member for Chorley (Mr Hoyle), who is the Chairman of Ways and Means and Deputy Speaker of this House, and the tragedy that has befallen him. Our hearts go out to the right hon. Gentleman—our friend—at this time of tragedy.

My hon. Friend referred to his work on the Homelessness Reduction Act, which is soon to come into force; it will do so on, I think, 1 April next year. He mentioned that it is the longest and most expensive private Member’s Bill ever, which is impressive, but what is important is what he has achieved, and that wonderful achievement recognises that we all have an interest in reducing homelessness.

My hon. Friend also spoke about events in his constituency and organisations such as Mencap, the body encouraging children and young people to work

on computer code and the charity Crisis. I know that he is referred to by the Hindu community in his constituency as Bobbhai, a term of affection, and he is recognised throughout his constituency of Harrow East as a representative of all his constituents.

The hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan) spoke about the train service, or the lack thereof, on Boxing day. He also spoke about his sports teams; he wished them well, and we join him in doing so. A number of constituency Members will no doubt recognise the issue of the absence of train services on Boxing day, and I am sure he will pursue it. He finished by mentioning a horse race in his constituency, the King George VI chase, which takes place on that day. He will no doubt be there to enjoy that race; at least, I am making such an assumption.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) made a passionate speech about the HPV vaccination for boys as well as for girls. He clearly speaks with considerable expertise, given his dental background, and he made a powerful case. I have no doubt that he will want to raise this matter with the Health Secretary. What he said was clearly well informed. I can say that, since 2010, survival rates for cancer have increased year on year, and it is true that the statisticians have calculated that some 7,000 people are alive today who would not have been alive without those year-on-year increases. There is, however, much more work still to do.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) spoke about the importance of broadband in his constituency in Scotland. I have to say that, since 2014, the Scottish Government have had the funding, but have not started on this important matter and Scotland has fallen behind England, Wales and Northern Ireland. As a consequence, the next generation of broadband funding will not be going through the Scottish Government. On the local full-fibre networks programme and the 5G programme, the United Kingdom Government will work directly with local councils, because it is very important for broadband to be provided to his constituents and those throughout Scotland.

My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) spoke about settlement funding. He spoke very passionately about the efficiency of Bromley Council, which clearly has a powerful advocate in him. Other organisations, such as our armed forces, also have a very powerful advocate in my hon. and gallant Friend. He is a powerful advocate for his constituency, and he spoke about the efficient running of his local authority. I have no doubt that the Department for Communities and Local Government will have heard what he said.

The hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) spoke about HS2 and the Park Royal area in her constituency. She was clear about the value of small businesses, so I know she will want to congratulate the Government on the fact that the United Kingdom has, for the first time, been ranked first in Forbes’s annual survey of the best countries for business. I have looked into the matter she raised about the compensation for small businesses in her area, and I understand that the first date under law for such compensation is 10 January 2018—I have been told that it is on time—and that there are discretionary payments of up to £250,000 to help with cash flow. I have also been told that the Minister for Rail, the Under-Secretary of State for

Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), has written to her. The letter has been posted today, so I hope she will receive it soon.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) spoke, as he has done previously, about the painful condition of endometriosis. I know that he will continue to highlight that painful condition that affects hundreds of thousands of people around the world, including many in the United Kingdom. He also spoke about Volunteering-on-Sea, an organisation in his constituency that looks after 10 to 20-year-old disadvantaged young people. He said that he had attended an event with a number of centenarians. He still has a long way to go before he becomes a member of that particular club, but I know how well he looks after people of all ages in his constituency. I know he is still keen to see Southend declared a city. He mentioned the pending royal wedding, and it would be remiss of me not to offer congratulations to His Royal Highness Prince Harry, and wish him well. As to whether Southend will be a city by that date—well, my hon. Friend will have to consult people other than myself.

I was pleased to hear that the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) had a productive meeting with the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), about the painful condition on which she has been passionately campaigning for so long. She has support from across the House on that subject, and I am pleased that the meeting with the Under-Secretary of State went well. She also spoke about the fixed odds betting terminals and machines that are a feature of this day and age, and she will no doubt be pleased that a consultation has been launched by the Government on that issue.

The hon. Lady also focused on depersonalisation disorder, and she knows an individual in her constituency who suffers from that. There will no doubt be many others, and sometimes diagnosis is very slow for that condition. She wishes to meet a Minister from the Department for Health. I am sure that we can help to arrange such a meeting, and if she writes to me we will certainly help in any way we can.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) spoke about volunteering in his constituency. He said that we have seen a prevalence of intolerance in British politics that he thinks is not acceptable—I think we would all agree. As he said, and as I can confirm, most Members across the House are able to chat and disagree professionally, while still getting on well and socialising, and all Members will agree that abuse, threatening behaviour, insulting conduct, leaving coffins outside the offices of MPs, and the like, is to be deprecated in the strongest possible terms. My hon. Friend said that he is proud of the Conservative party. May I just say that the party is proud of him?

The hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) spoke about people in the European Union, and elsewhere around the world, who lose their power to vote once they have lived outside the United Kingdom for 15 years. I am pleased that he is in favour of reforming that, but I think it was a previous Labour Government who reduced the level from 20 years to 15 years. I am pleased that he is speaking about the rights of UK citizens living in EU countries, and I have certainly heard Conservative Members

speak about that subject repeatedly. As has been agreed, the intention is to scrap that rule before the next scheduled general election in 2022.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) can claim a personal success in his campaign on the hospital in his area, which I know he worked on a great deal. He spoke about the NHS, and like all of us he is so proud of the national health service. According to the Commonwealth Fund, the NHS has been rated the best health service among the 11 developed countries, and that is something of which the NHS, and all its staff, can be very proud. My hon. Friend wants—as do we all—the best possible Brexit deal for this country, and no doubt he and many others will join me in expressing great confidence that the Prime Minister will deliver just that. He also spoke, as he often does and will continue to do, on humanitarian work and the 4 million displaced people in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) made allegations that she will no doubt want to raise in the proper place. Members are open to considerable scrutiny and I invite her to declare any information she may have on that subject to the appropriate authorities.

The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) has been a passionate campaigner on the contaminated blood issue. She is to be commended and congratulated on her work. She said that she was grateful to Her Majesty's Government because in the summer the Prime Minister agreed to hold a public inquiry. There is more to be done. I understand that today's written ministerial statement indicated that it would be a judge-led inquiry, and that there would be a further statement in the new year regarding the name of the judge and the fuller composition of the inquiry.

The right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) spoke about a particular jobcentre issue in his constituency, which was concerning to hear about. I suggest that, if he has not already done so—I suspect he has—he should raise it with the relevant Minister at the Department for Work and Pensions. He made a powerful case, as he often does.

On the issue raised by the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), Her Majesty's Government are dedicating over £1 billion to 2020 to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping, and to support the Homelessness Reduction Act. I am running out of time, but if I may I will just say that 1.1 million additional homes have been delivered since 2010—over 357,000 affordable homes, with 217,000 last year. That is the highest for all but one of the last 30 years. There is more work to do—there always is—but housebuilding starts have increased by more than three quarters since 2009. Over 432,000 households have been helped into home ownership through Government schemes such as Help to Buy and right to buy.

We finished with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who spoke of the true meaning of Christmas. I remember him doing so last year at this time. I thank him for and congratulate him on his work. He spoke passionately about volunteers and the giving mentality, which I know he himself has. He spoke of the wonderful people of Northern Ireland and his constituency. I can absolutely agree with him about that, not least—I should declare an interest—because my mother was

[Michael Ellis]

born in Northern Ireland. He is a doughty champion in this place for the disadvantaged and dispossessed around the world at this time of year. He is a powerful advocate for those good causes. He spoke of Mr Speaker as the champion of the Back Benchers and I know Back Benchers would certainly agree with that.

May I take this opportunity to thank you, Mr Speaker, the Deputy Speakers and the staff of this House for the work they do all year round? I thank not only those who protect the security of this House and serve it in myriad ways, but those who protect the country here in the United Kingdom and around the world. Her Majesty's armed forces serve around the world, so many will not be with their families over the festive period. I take this opportunity to thank them from the Dispatch Box for their service to this country. I thank everyone here and wish them all a very merry Christmas.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Deputy Leader of the House, the shadow Deputy Leader and all colleagues for their speeches this afternoon and, in particular, for their expressions of gratitude to my colleagues who sit in the Chair and, above all, to all those who serve us in various capacities with great ability and commitment in this House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

Cycling Fatalities: Ian Winterburn

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Andrew Stephenson.)

5 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): This debate is the last parliamentary business before the recess and, indeed, the last business of the year, but it nevertheless deals with an issue that is of great seriousness and grave concern to my constituents and to many others, given the number of people who have been injured or killed when cycling on our roads.

On 12 December last year, 58-year-old Ian Winterburn was cycling to work at 7.30 am, as he did every day. Ian was a keen and regular cyclist. As usual, he was wearing his cyclist's high-visibility jacket, and all his bike lights were on. He always wore a cycling helmet. As he was passing the junction of Whitkirk Lane on the A6120 ring road in Halton, Leeds, a silver Skoda Fabia was signalling to turn right, but instead of waiting for Ian to cycle past, the driver went straight into him, knocking him off his bike and fatally injuring him. She claimed that she had not seen him. After 10 days in a coma, Ian died from his injuries on 22 December.

Cyclist Charlie Alliston was famously sentenced to 18 months in prison recently for fatally injuring pedestrian Mrs Briggs in one of two such fatal accidents last year, yet any more cyclists have been killed or badly injured by cars during the same period. Alliston's case justifiably received plenty of media coverage, but shocking deaths such as that of Ian Winterburn scarcely receive any, and public anger towards cyclists is now at an all-time high.

The 51-year-old driver of the Skoda that killed Ian was sentenced on 20 October by Leeds magistrates court for causing death by careless driving.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on initiating the debate. I co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on cycling, and I commend to him one of the recommendations of our report on justice for cyclists. We asked the Government to address

"Confusion and overlap between 'careless' and 'dangerous' driving" in such cases.

Fabian Hamilton: I shall deal with the issue of careless versus dangerous driving and the different penalties involved. Indeed, I shall refer to the all-party parliamentary group that my hon. Friend so ably chairs, and of which I am currently the treasurer.

The driver of the Skoda was given a four-month prison sentence suspended for two years, a £200 fine, 200 hours of community service and a two-year driving ban. Her licence had been suspended previously for 14 months for drink-driving.

One of the most shocking aspects of this tragic case—apart from the loss of a much-loved husband, father and teacher—is the way that the family have been treated by the various authorities involved in dealing with the terrible and totally avoidable loss of such a valuable life. Ian Winterburn was hit at 7.30 am that day, but the West Yorkshire police crash investigation team did not arrive at the scene for more than an hour.

The police and the Crown Prosecution Service believed that the driver did not adequately defrost her car windscreen before setting off from her home nearby. There was

circumstantial evidence to support that, as her windscreen wipers and car heating were on full power although it was a dry day. However, because the crash investigation team took so long to arrive, they could not confirm the state of the windscreen at the time of the accident. Of course, had they arrived sooner, there could have been proof that the windscreen was not properly de-iced. The driver would then have faced a charge of causing death by dangerous driving, which carries a considerably higher sentence on conviction than the lesser charge of death by careless driving.

There is only one crash team for the whole of West Yorkshire, an area with a population of 2.3 million. The family have asked a number of pertinent questions about that issue alone. They asked, for example, why there was only one crash team for such a large area, how many people were in that team, how many crash investigations they investigated each week and where the team was based.

It took more than three hours for the police to contact Mrs Winterburn that day to inform her about the collision. When she asked why it had taken so long, the answer was that the crash team was too busy securing the crash site and collecting evidence, which was its main priority, and that there were not enough staff to contact Mrs Winterburn earlier. As Members may imagine, this was extremely traumatic for Mrs Winterburn and her family and greatly added to the trauma they experienced upon hearing such terrible news.

But it gets worse. When the family arrived at the hospital, they spent a number of hours in the resuscitation unit, where no staff were available to keep them updated. Ian Winterburn was still wearing his cycling clothes, and it was to be another 16 hours before any member of staff gave the family information about the extent of Ian's injuries, the prognosis or, indeed, the next steps in his treatment.

Let me move on now to the role of the coroner service. Although Ian died on 22 December, just one year ago tomorrow, it took until 10 January to obtain a death certificate. That was apparently because of a backlog over the Christmas and new year holidays, but it meant that Ian's body had to be kept at the Leeds General Infirmary mortuary for two weeks before a funeral could take place. As Members may imagine, this added considerably to the stress and trauma suffered by the family. Presumably, people still die from unknown causes or accidents over holiday periods, and although everyone deserves holidays and time off, especially public servants, surely it is important that the coroner service does not close, except perhaps on Christmas day itself.

The Crown Prosecution Service told the family that the case against the driver who killed Ian was so serious that it would be heard in the Crown court and that they should not even attend the magistrates court hearing, which would be merely a formality and would only last for a few minutes. However, in the event, the driver was convicted, after two one-hour sessions, by the magistrates court, and no support whatsoever was given to the family.

No help was even offered to the family in the preparation of their victim statements, which of course they had little knowledge of how to prepare and no previous experience of writing. This further added to the anxiety felt by Ian's close family, and made them lose faith in the whole criminal justice system. One of the pertinent

questions asked by Ian's daughter, my constituent Alex Wilks, who is here today, when she came to see me about her father's death and her family's treatment by the various authorities was, "Why is the most senior CPS lawyer in West Yorkshire only employed for two days a week?"

After the shock of the brief court case and what the family feels is the inadequate sentence for a driver who had previously been given a 14-month driving ban after a conviction for drink-driving, the family was told by the police that the coroner would now close the inquest because there had been a criminal conviction. A short while later, the coroner phoned Georgina, Ian's widow, to tell her that there would still be an inquest and that a number of witnesses would attend it.

As we can imagine, this came as a huge shock to the family, and Alex, Ian's daughter, rang West Yorkshire Victim Support to ask what the family should expect from the hearing, only to be told that it knew nothing about the hearing. The next day the coroner's office rang Georgina to tell her that there had been a "mix-up" and that there would not be an inquest after all. No apology has ever been offered for the further upset caused to the family by this so-called "mix-up".

Many Members will know that I am a keen cyclist, because I pester them every summer to donate to my annual charity bike ride, and I can often be seen arriving at the Palace of Westminster in my hideous, brightly coloured lycra on my carbon racing bike; indeed you, Mr Speaker, have generously seen me off on some of my cycling jaunts.

I am also an officer of the all-party group on cycling, which last July published a report on cycling and the justice system. We took a huge amount of evidence from cycling groups, lawyers, the police, the CPS, Transport for London, local authorities and many others. Among our conclusions were the following recommendations. The police must ensure that a higher standard of investigation is maintained in all cases where serious injury has resulted. That includes eyesight testing, mobile phone records and assessments of speed, drink and drug driving. We received many examples of the police failing to investigate properly, or even to interview witnesses or victims. Too often, weak investigations have undermined subsequent cases. I hope that the Minister will want to comment on this.

We also recommended that all police forces should ensure that evidence of common offences submitted by cyclists or other witnesses using bike-mounted or person-mounted cameras or smart phones should be put to use and not ignored. Too often, these bits of evidence are ignored. The confidence of cyclists that their safety is a priority for the police will be undermined if such evidence is dismissed and no action is taken. In some cases, just a written warning could be enough to change bad behaviour.

The length of time required by the police to serve a notice of intended prosecution for a road traffic offence is currently just 14 days, and that must be extended. That was one of our strong recommendations. We believe that that period is too short to enable cases to be adequately processed. In some cases, it could enable offenders to escape justice altogether.

We also said that there was confusion and overlap between careless and dangerous driving, a point echoed by my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and

[*Fabian Hamilton*]

Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), so bad driving often does not receive the level of punishment that the public feel it should. New offences introduced over the past few years have started to plug some of the gaps in the legislation, but many problems remain, particularly when cyclists are the victims. We believe that the Ministry of Justice should examine in more detail how these offences are being used, including the penalties available for offences of careless and dangerous driving.

The police and the CPS should ensure that victims and bereaved families are always kept adequately informed throughout the process of deciding charges. This is done in many cases, but we have heard of victims being ignored and informed only at a much later date that cases have been dropped or that guilty pleas for lesser offences have been accepted.

Ruth Cadbury: I am a member of the Justice Committee, and one of the issues that we have heard about—which applies not only to cases such as this one—is that the cutbacks in the Courts Service and the Ministry of Justice mean that there are fewer people to carry out these important administrative tasks. In too many cases, administrative failures mean that justice is not being served, either for the victims or for their families, because there are not enough people to make the kind of contact that is, as my hon. Friend says, so important at times like these.

Fabian Hamilton: Again, I thank my hon. Friend for her helpful intervention. I think that the first part of my speech clearly showed that the family of Ian Winterburn are just such a family. They had appallingly bad service from the CPS; they were not kept informed at all. They were given no assistance; there was no family support whatever. I do not know whether that was the result of cutbacks or of bad organisation and training. I think my hon. Friend probably knows more than I do about that, because she is a member of the Justice Committee, but I will leave it to the Minister to respond to that point.

The final recommendation in our report involves the fact that the number and length of driving bans appears to have declined, with a 62% fall in driver disqualifications over the past 10 years. That is double the fall in convictions for driving offences. Furthermore, very large numbers of drivers are escaping disqualification on reaching 12 points or more on their licence. The Ministry of Justice should examine the reasons behind the decline in the use of the penalty of disqualification and in particular the effect of the so-called exceptional hardship scheme.

I know that our report, which was published seven months after Ian Winterburn was killed, will ring many bells in the minds of his family, who still grieve for him every day. The family would like answers to a number of more specific questions, notwithstanding the recommendations I have just read out, so will the Minister answer the following questions? What is the current status of the review of guidelines for causing death by careless driving? Is a review even being carried out? Why do drivers who have caused death not face mandatory custodial sentences? How many complaints does the Ministry of Justice receive about the coroner service

every year? What training is given to the coroner service staff? Who holds the coroner service to account? Is it the Ministry of Justice or is there any form of local accountability? When was the last review of the coroner service, and what were its findings? Finally, when will the coroner service website be improved to offer more and better information to grieving and unsupported families, which seems a simple, straightforward reform?

In conclusion, if we truly care about our environment and about the growing public health crisis, surely we must do far more to encourage cycling, both as a healthy activity and as a way to reduce carbon emissions and congestion, but tragedies such as the death of cyclist Ian Winterburn do nothing but discourage the public from cycling. We need to make cycling far easier and much, much safer, and part of that task is about ensuring that when terrible fatal accidents do occur, the appropriate administration of justice can be relied upon. We all need the assurance that cycling is a safe activity and a good way to move around our towns and cities for everyone who is capable of using a bike. Meaningful answers to and action from the Winterburn family's pertinent questions, born out of tragedy and grief, would be a good start.

5.16 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Dominic Raab): I begin by thanking you for your stewardship of these debates over the past year, Mr Speaker, and I wish you a restful Christmas with your family.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) on securing today's debate. It is fitting that we finish by debating such an important issue and fitting that the debate is being led by the hon. Gentleman in his doughty way. He is passionately defending and championing his constituents, who have raised an issue not just of local concern and concern to him, but of national importance. Colleagues who have dealt with tragic cases in their constituencies know that careless or dangerous driving can ruin lives and devastate families. Numerous colleagues from across the House have raised their cases with me, as the hon. Gentleman has done passionately and tenaciously, and with my predecessors who held this portfolio at the Ministry of Justice.

By way of context, road deaths in Britain have been falling over the past 30 years as a result of a whole range of factors, including safer infrastructure, new vehicle technologies, tougher law enforcement and shifting social attitudes—there has been a ground shift in how people think about drink-driving. We should also pay tribute to our precious NHS, which provides far better trauma care than was the case when I was first learning The Highway Code. As a result, casualty figures show a 5% fall from last year alone. However, more than 27,000 people died or were seriously injured on our roads last year. While many of those were tragic accidents, too many of them involve criminal behaviour, whether classified as dangerous or careless driving, or people failing to stop at the scene so that there is proper accountability. Of course, behind each and every collision statistic, each of those 27,000 cases represents an individual story of a life or a family devastated, personal suffering or family trauma.

The hon. Member for Leeds North East is raising one of those tragic cases: the death of cyclist Ian Winterburn, the father of his constituent, Alexandra Wilks. I believe

that some of the family are here today, so I extend my personal condolences and deepest sympathies to them, particularly at this delicate time as we approach Christmas. Mr Winterburn was involved in a road traffic incident just over a year ago and, as the hon. Gentleman said, tragically died of his injuries. As the hon. Gentleman will know, as a Justice Minister, I cannot comment on the judicial treatment of the individual case, the decision on prosecution, or the charges brought by the CPS. Those matters are dealt with independently, which is of course right as politicians should not interfere with either prosecutorial or judicial matters. He will know that some of the operational police matters are for his local constabulary or police and crime commissioner.

The hon. Gentleman has raised many questions, and I want to focus on as many of them as I can in the time available. I can talk, as he knows, in general terms about what the Government are doing to ensure the courts have adequate powers to deal with the most serious offences committed on our roads that result in either death or injury. As I think he and the APPG will know, on 16 October the Government published their response to the consultation on driving offences and penalties relating to causing death and serious injury. It concentrated on the most serious driving offences—those that result in death or serious injury—and considered a range of concerns raised in recent years by victims of these crimes and their families, by members of the public, whether individually or as signatories to petitions, and by parliamentarians, both in debates and on behalf of their constituents.

The consultation closed earlier this year and we received 9,000 responses, which I think is close to, if not, a record, showing how widespread is the public interest and concern in this pertinent area of law. It is not one of those esoteric areas of law; it affects people's daily lives. We considered all the submissions in detail before publishing our response, and in that response we distilled and considered the views and came forward with three specific changes to the law, all of which received overwhelming support in the consultation. I hope the hon. Gentleman will welcome them too. I am always careful about such matters, given the suffering and the fact that justice can go only a small part of the way, but I hope that victims and families find some solace in these measures and that the public see in them a stronger sense of justice.

We propose to give courts additional powers to deal with the most serious cases where life is lost, by increasing the maximum penalty for causing death by dangerous driving from the current 14 years to life imprisonment. That means that in the most serious cases—for example, where an offender has previous convictions for serious crimes, where their behaviour was particularly dangerous or culpable, or where there are multiple victims—offenders could face, depending on the judicial determination, a maximum life sentence.

We also propose to raise the maximum penalty for causing death by careless driving while under the influence of drink or drugs from 14 years to life imprisonment. Although the standard of driving in that category of cases may not amount to dangerous driving per se, we consider that, if combined with a decision to get behind the wheel while under the influence of drink or drugs, the overall seriousness of the offence should be considered the same as for dangerous driving and that the penalty should be the same.

We also propose to close a gap in the law. Currently, the maximum penalty for careless driving is a fine. Not least given some of the anguish the hon. Gentleman reflected in his powerful speech, it is time to consider whether that really is good enough. A fine is the maximum penalty in all cases of careless driving that do not result in death. Even if the driver injures another road user, cyclist or passenger, and even if the incident results in the victim being left with a serious, debilitating or permanent injury, the court can only impose a fine. It seems clear that the law needs to provide a stronger response to careless driving that results in serious injury. We propose, therefore, to create a new offence of causing serious injury by careless driving. This will carry a custodial penalty and sit alongside the existing offence of causing serious injury by dangerous driving. Again, this was supported by those who responded to our consultation earlier this year.

We intend to bring forward these proposals for reform as soon as parliamentary time allows. The Government are determined to clamp down on all dangerous, careless and reckless criminal behaviour on our roads, and it is right that any changes to legislation take account of the Government's wider proposals for safer roads. We want to make sure that we have a consistent sentencing framework for those who kill or cause serious injury on our roads, and we intend to incorporate the changes I just outlined, along with those that emerge from the review of cycling safety that the Transport Secretary announced back in September and which I am sure the APPG would commend and welcome.

In the time available, I want to touch on some of the wider points the hon. Gentleman raised. He asked about the Sentencing Council, which is obviously independent and is responsible for issuing the guidelines and keeping them under review. A review of the guidelines for motoring offences involving death is on the council's work plan and has been postponed pending the Government's consultation and any changes to the law that flow from it. It is, of course, sensible that the guidelines should reflect changes to the law—there is no point reviewing the guidelines if the law is about to change—and new draft guidelines will be subject to full public consultation in due course.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about the distinction between careless driving and dangerous driving, which the APPG also considered. The law, as it currently stands, sets out an objective test designed to compare the driving of a defendant in the specific circumstances of a case with what would be expected of a notionally careful and competent driver.

What amounts to dangerous driving is determined not, as is more normal in criminal law, by considering the driver's state of mind or intentions, which in the context of driving is often quite difficult to gauge or ascertain, but by examining the nature of the driving itself. In general terms, if the court considers that the driving falls far below the expected standard, and if it would be obvious to a competent and careful driver that the manner of driving was dangerous, the court will find it to have been dangerous driving.

The consultation examined the option of a single bad driving offence, to which the hon. Gentleman referred, and we set out in detail why we are not persuaded of the case for change. Those who propose a single test tend to say it will lead to more convictions and longer sentences—I

[Dominic Raab]

totally understand the impetus and drive behind that—but, as we explained in the consultation, we do not think that will necessarily be the case, because the maximum penalty for a single offence would have to be broad enough to cover the most serious offences. We have proposed that causing death could result in a life sentence but, in the least serious cases, a driver's culpability for the death could be much lower. The challenge is to reconcile or unite those two offences.

If the offences do not make a distinction between the seriousness of the offending, it is possible that the conviction rate could actually fall because juries might be reluctant to convict a driver in some less serious cases—ones where they could imagine themselves in the same position—for an offence with a very serious maximum penalty. Of course, sentences also may not increase, because a judge would still consider the culpability of the offender in deciding the appropriate sentence. I would not want to mislead victims or families that a broader offence might result in higher sentences. I am

also not sure that a single offence would mean the Crown Prosecution Service is unable to accept a lesser plea in circumstances where that is inappropriate.

I hope I have addressed at least some of the wide-ranging concerns raised by the hon. Gentleman in this important debate. This is our last debate before we rise for Christmas. I cannot think of anything more tragic than the loss of a life, especially where that loss is avoidable—we are all trying to prevent such deaths.

Again, I extend my deepest condolences to the Winterburn family, especially as we approach Christmas time. No punishment will make up for the loss of a loved one—we all know that—but we can and should make sure that justice is properly done. That is the least the victims and the families deserve, and it is precisely what the public expect.

Question put and agreed to.

5.28 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 21 December 2017

[SIR DAVID AMESS *in the Chair*]

Leasehold and Commonhold Reform

1.30 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered leasehold and commonhold reform and leasehold abuses.

May I first say that we are grateful for your chairing the debate, Sir David? We hope that the next time we debate this issue, it will be on the Floor of the House. The all-party parliamentary group on leasehold and commonhold reform, which now has more than 130 members from both Houses, is probably one of the largest and most active all-party parliamentary groups that there is. One reason for that is that leasehold abuse is a desperate problem, which I am grateful to the Minister for recognising through his presence in the Chamber.

We have been able to be so active because of the work of two people in particular, Martin Boyd and Sebastian O'Kelly, from the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership—LKP. They also help run the good cause campaign, Better Retirement Housing, which was once known as Carlex—the Campaign Against Retirement Leasehold Exploitation. The debate will not focus primarily on the elderly, although it could, as their exploitation is a big problem. It will also not focus primarily on park homes, another form of tenure through which people can be exploited by scoundrels, crooks, rogues and those who exploit the law by making those who are badly off even worse off; through some legal stratagems, they can manage to take away the last assets that some people have.

Leasehold is a form of residential tenure that has been abolished in most places around the world and should be ended in this country. When I say this country, I basically mean England, or England and Wales; the situations in Northern Ireland and Scotland are different, and it needs to change here. That was recognised by Martin Boyd and Sebastian O'Kelly when they started asking Parliament about the plans to bring in commonhold ownership, which should have taken away half the opportunities for exploitation. It should have eliminated the problem; it would not be a question of a small fix—it would be solved.

As it happens, since Parliament passed the Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Act 2002, things have gone wrong. We have not had the growth of commonhold, which in Australia might be called strata title. The reason for that is that the responsibility for it was left with the Ministry of Justice, and of all its concerns, the condition of people living in leasehold homes was not one.

In the years since Parliament last gave serious attention to this issue, we have had a succession of Governments from both parties, and a coalition Government, and we have had Housing Ministers who I think have not been properly advised, because their officials did not actually understand the scale of the problem. At one stage, people thought there were about 2.5 million residential leasehold premises in the country. It is quite clear from

the work Martin Boyd and Sebastian O'Kelly have done—with the help of Sir Nigel Shadbolt, Sir Tim Berners-Lee and the Open Data Institute, to whom I pay credit—in getting information that is publicly available and putting it together that the actual number of residential leasehold premises is between 5 and 6 million.

I do not want to get myself too involved in some figures in the Department's announcement at one minute past midnight today. I do not think they have the number of new leasehold houses right, but that is immaterial to the debate. What matters is that what was an anomaly in the north-west—selling houses as leaseholds when they could be sold as freeholds—began to spread. To those who say that the leasehold house was sold at a lower price than the freehold house, LKP's work shows that that is not correct. It was just a way of exploiting leaseholders, who thought that it was a normal way of taking on a home.

Of course, when the ground rent on a leasehold was a peppercorn, there was no problem at all. When it is £10 a year and doubles every 20 years, from £10, to £20, and to £40, people cannot see the problem. However, when it starts at more than £200 and doubles every 10 years, that is a 7% increase per year.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): I praise the hon. Gentleman for all the work he has done on this; I think we have moved a long way from where we started. He is absolutely right that this is a scam, and it has spread. It is not only about the ground rent issue but all the other onerous requirements. If people want to change the flooring, they have to apply and are charged a ridiculous fee. It has also spread to the management costs of looking after the ground around the premises. It is a scam, and it needs to be treated as such.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I think people will accept that. I ought to say that we are not trying to solve all the problems with all forms of housing in one short debate. I will try to limit my remarks and leave space for others to bring up issues, although we do not expect the Minister to answer every point today. The Government's announcement was welcomed by most people in the field as a step forward that is less than is needed but is dramatically more than anyone had expected.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I join my hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) in congratulating the hon. Gentleman on the work he has done on this and on securing the debate. While the legislation the Government have announced to ban the practice in the future is, of course, very welcome, many people have already been caught by the scam, including constituents of mine who purchased leasehold homes from Miller Homes in my constituency, in Hunslet. They have found that the company that the freehold has been sold on to is now asking for unreasonable charges in order to buy out the freehold, which they cannot afford. Does he agree that, as well as the original housebuilders being asked to set up compensation schemes, as the Government propose, they should be required to do so? Otherwise, people can find themselves in a home that they cannot actually sell.

Sir Peter Bottomley: That matches the problems of some park home owners. If I had the time, I would get into the activities of Barry Weir, the Smart family and various others who have ruined people's lives.

[*Sir Peter Bottomley*]

On solving the doubling of ground rents for residential properties, whether houses or flats, it is quite clear that there are three approaches that will work. The first is trying to deal with the problem with the first buyers. I congratulate Taylor Wimpey and Countryside on trying that, and pay tribute to them and their shareholders for making that decision. The Minister will write to the other companies to ask what they will be doing. I am grateful for that. However, that does not solve the problems for the second-hand buyers.

The second is changing the unfair terms, which are in either leasehold or some freehold contracts, where people cannot make changes without getting permission, which can be expensive. That is added to by the problem that, when a leaseholder or interested resident tries to challenge something, the property tribunals have not always worked properly.

The cost of a leasehold valuation tribunal was supposed to be limited to £500. However, as Mr Dennis Jackson discovered, he was about to lose £600,000 of equity after he and another elderly leaseholder challenged some costs. They were awarded three quarters of their claim, but then the costs went out of control. His home was going to have to be forfeited, and the surplus after the costs were paid would not go to him or his mortgage company—it would have gone into the hands of the freeholder. That cannot be right, and it has to change. The law on forfeiture is another thing I hope the Minister will be able to tell us about, either today or next year.

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): Will the Minister consider the particular problem of leasehold in shared ownership? There, when you want to extend, you do not even have recourse to the courts, as there is no reference to it in the Leasehold Reform, Housing and Urban Development Act 1993. It is very serious that, with co-owners, you can effectively be treated as a tenant, with few rights and little opportunity to sell on. Even if you think you own 50% of the property, you will pay the full charge—including all the maintenance costs and any valuation fee if you purchase any more. It is a dreadful position to be in, yet it has been seen as a way of encouraging those with very little to start on the housing ladder.

Sir Peter Bottomley: My hon. Friend makes a point that shows the truth of what I said at the beginning: the Government's announcement today has gone further than people expected, but it does not cover everything. There needs to be a forum in which the Government can actually listen to the voices of those who represent the unfortunate ones who are caught in a trap and find ways of solving that.

By the way, that if someone is to talk about me and uses "you", may I ask them please use it in the plural sense? The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) and others have given help over the years as well. We have to make this a "we" thing that is cross party and effective.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): May I congratulate everyone who has been involved in this campaign so far? I am acutely aware that every time the hon. Gentleman gives way, he has to get up and down from his chair with

his dodgy leg, so I apologise for that. I want to draw attention to another group: long leaseholders of the National Trust. I have a number of constituents who are in that situation. Even though the period of the lease goes well into the future—2043, in one case—they almost certainly cannot sell their homes because they have no idea what the modern ground rent will be at that date. They are trapped completely. It is really important for the National Trust to behave responsibly.

Sir Peter Bottomley: That is a point that the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) might raise if she speaks. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) sadly cannot be here because he has a Secretary of State visiting his constituency, but he asked that the question of National Trust leaseholders be raised. I also want to pass on the strong encouragement from my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), who has a constituency engagement and cannot be here but wishes to be associated with all that we are saying.

How is it that past Ministers failed to get a grip or an understanding? One reason—I make this direct accusation—is that the present and past chairmen of LEASE, the Leasehold Advisory Service, were not up to the job. They were supposed to be the ones providing impartial advice to leaseholders and others. In practice—perhaps, they can argue, because they not properly or fully funded—they had to raise money commercially. Their idea of raising money commercially was to run a conference where lawyers, accountants, surveyors and freeholders came together to swap ideas on how to put one over on the leaseholders. Only when the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership charity started pushing did some of the leaseholders get invited to a little bunfight afterwards. The trustees of LKP were not invited to the conferences, but some of them decided to go anyway. That is a crazy way of dealing with things. When I raised that with Deep Sagar and similar issues with Roger Southam—the present LEASE chairman, who I doubt will be chairman for very long—they did not respond in a way that I regard as proper.

My biggest condemnation is this. Who knew most about the problems of leaseholders? The advisory service that leaseholders would ring up. Who should pass on to Ministers that there are problems? The Leasehold Advisory Service, LEASE. Did it? No. Because it is pre-Christmas, I will not use the sort of language I would be tempted to use if I were in a coffee shop. We then had the problem that staffing on this side of the housing department in the Department for Communities and Local Government was not strong enough. I am glad that there are now more people there who have more of a commitment to more engagement.

The Minister needs to have a quiet word. When embargoed notices of what was going to come out at midnight were sent out, every single journalist was obviously going to ring up Martin Boyd, Sebastian O'Kelly and one or two MPs who were involved, who had not had a copy of the embargoed press notice. It would be far more sensible to look on the major charity in this field as partners, not as people who need to be approached third hand for comments. As it happens, their comments were good and supportive, and I am glad they did that. However, I think the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse will agree that LKP should be regarded as trusted friends.

LKP is the secretariat for the all-party group. On behalf of all of us, I would like to pay tribute to it for all that it does, together with Katherine O’Riordan, who does so much work in preparing our meetings and roundtables, which has helped to raise the general level of understanding. While talking of praise, I thank the lawyers who have given advice to both us and Government on how to make changes that will work.

I had a whole series of other issues in my prepared notes. If the debate dies out towards the end, perhaps I will speak again after the Minister, but if my colleagues on both sides of the Chamber fill up most of the time, I do not mind. We can deal with the issues that I have not raised in detail either by correspondence or if, as I asked at business questions today, the Government hold a debate in their own time on their proposals. That will get a widespread welcome, and we can then work out the timetable, the modalities of making the change and how we can get the Law Commission recommendations to come forward as fast as possible.

We can then re-gather here in 10 years’ time and say that, since Christmas 2017, substantial progress has been made for new leaseholders, who will not be exposed to all these horrors, and on the ways forward for existing owners of leases, who will be messed up unless we make a change on extending leases and the costs of getting permission to do all sorts of simple things. Sir David, I think that this debate will be remembered not just for your chairmanship, but also because it has brought us all together to make change for the better.

1.44 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): Sir David, it is a pleasure to serve under the chairmanship of a fellow West Ham United supporter; I know that you will show no favour. Your experience is very welcome here.

I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), and I pay tribute to him for his leadership on this issue over many years. I am proud to be his co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on leasehold reform. I am pleased to see my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), the shadow Secretary of State for Housing, in his place, demonstrating how seriously the Opposition take this issue. I am very pleased to see the Minister, who is highly regarded and who will take this issue forward. We are cheering from all sides of the House to give him a fair wind.

As co-chair of the all-party group, I wish to place on record my thanks to Katherine O’Riordan for her hard work for the group and for her professionalism, and to Martin Boyd and Sebastian O’Kelly of the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership, who act as our secretariat and have given us sterling support over the years, working with organisations such as the National Leasehold Campaign, which has been pushing on this issue for a long time.

I want to start by welcoming the Government’s efforts, including today’s announcement. Together with the housing White Paper, the consultation in September that led to today’s announcement, the call for evidence that the Government issued, the extra staff for the leasehold section of DCLG, more money for LEASE—despite our criticisms of the way it has operated previously—and today’s announcement all signal that the Government

know there are problems. This will be the third time in recent decades that a Government will try to fix the abuses of leasehold tenure. The last two failed in 1993 and 2002. Hopefully this one will not.

However, today’s announcement must only be a start. Commonhold should be the real objective of our campaign. Although many people are clearly content with their leasehold properties, there are abuses for tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of leaseholders across England and Wales, and there are poor redress arrangements available.

Mark Tami: I praise my hon. Friend for all the work he has done. I very much welcome what the Government have announced, but a great number of people who already have leaseholds are affected, and it will obviously be very difficult for them to sell those properties. I know it is not easy, but we really need to get redress for those people as quickly as possible.

Jim Fitzpatrick: My hon. Friend puts his finger on the key point. We will be looking to the Minister for reassurance on the 5 million leaseholders who will not be covered by future regulation and legislation and many of whom are disadvantaged and are looking to the Government to address those concerns. I will come back to that later in my contribution.

According to House of Commons Library figures, my constituency has the second highest number of leasehold properties in the country. In 2016, it had the highest proportion of leasehold sales, at 97%. Only a couple of years ago, DCLG figures calculated that there were 2.3 million leasehold properties in England and Wales. Under pressure from the LKP and others, the Department adjusted that figure to 4.1 million, which is quoted often, even by the Library, as being a more accurate figure.

However, as the hon. Member for Worthing West mentioned, the LKP now estimates that there are 6.2 million homes provided with leasehold services. That means millions of homes and homeowners are vulnerable to inflated service charges, exorbitant insurance costs, a lack of tender transparency and poor standards of work—original or repairs—as well as refusal to recognise properly constituted resident or tenant associations, mismanagement of funds and other fundamental problems. I hope that the Minister will elaborate on how today’s announcement will help to address many of those concerns.

I want briefly to focus on the post-Grenfell fire safety costs being inflicted on many leaseholders. On Monday, I asked the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government when he made his statement on Grenfell Tower and building safety whether he could tell us how many applications for the costs of cladding replacement and fire precautions, including fire marshals, have been registered with the first-tier tribunal by landlords and freeholders. In relation to meeting the costs of building safety, he said:

“I have made it clear that I expect private sector landlords to take the lead that has been shown by housing associations and local authorities.”—[*Official Report*, 18 December 2017; Vol. 633, c. 784.]

That is, that leaseholders will not be charged for the costs. David Orr, the chief executive of the National Housing Association, said in correspondence today:

“As freeholders of leasehold properties, our members”—

[*Jim Fitzpatrick*]

housing associations—

“have legal responsibilities as part of their leases and are therefore legally entitled to recoup the reasonable costs through service-charges”.

That is hardly a ringing endorsement of what the Secretary of State said.

Equally, information from the first-tier tribunal shows that 17 applications have been made to it. I would be grateful if the Minister confirmed whether those were to dispense with the full section 20 consultation process or to gain prior approval, under section 27A, of the amount the landlord proposes to spend on cladding and pass on to leaseholders. Ministers have been positive in asserting that costs for removal and replacement, and so on, should be borne by the owners, freeholders and agents, but the experience on the ground may be different.

In my constituency, for the New Festival Quarter development, HomeGround, Bellway, Pinnacle, Adriatic Land 6 and Family Mosaic have informed me—after many calls and emails—that they have secured confirmation that the works costs will be met, but the cost of fire marshals, originally set at £32,000 a week plus VAT, will be met by leaseholders. That figure, after much examination and pressure, is now down to just under £20,000 a week plus VAT, but will run from October to at least February 2018, and I suspect probably longer. My question to the Minister is this: does he think it is fair that residents should pick up the tab? It is obvious from previous statements that he does not, so what further steps can they take to protect themselves? To be fair, the housing association Family Mosaic is opposed to leaseholders footing the bill, but managing agents Pinnacle are not so inclined—certainly not so far.

Can the Minister tell us how many other blocks are affected across the country? Page 74 of Dame Judith Hackitt’s interim report, published this week, says:

“In a significant proportion of buildings visited, fire and rescue services had to issue notices”.

As I understand it, these notices are known as NODs—notice of deficiencies, not alterations, enforcement or prohibition notices. Can the Minister tell us—or perhaps write to us afterwards—how many NODs there have been, and how many developments have confirmed no costs to leaseholders?

Returning to the Government announcement today, the Minister will know that Lord Justice Bean, chair of the Law Commission, issued a statement last week, saying:

“We are delighted to be able to confirm that Commissioners agreed that a project on residential leasehold and commonhold should form part of the 13th Programme and this has been approved by the Lord Chancellor.”

He goes on:

“Our project will commence with a review of leasehold enfranchisement, commonhold and managing agent regulation.”

He concludes:

“On the basis of receiving funding from the sponsoring Government Department, we expect to start work immediately.”

The question for the Government is: have they confirmed that they have the funds to carry out that fundamental job?

In conclusion, leasehold is not only well past its “sell by” date or its “best before” date; it is clearly at its “time to do something now” date. The media have woken up

to the abuses. We have had more coverage of leasehold abuse in the past three to six months than we have had for the past decade. House buyers and mortgage lenders have woken up, by not buying where possible and declining to lend on many properties. The Government have reached a point where they need to be seen to be doing something, and they are. However, it is only a start. There are more than 5 million home owners now exposed and vulnerable, with more joining them in almost every new development. Urgent and fundamental reform is required. The Minister is just the chap to deliver. He has allies across the House; many he can see here today and others mentioned by the hon. Member for Worthing West. The fact that we have 130-plus members of the all-party group for leasehold and commonhold reform across both Houses demonstrates that this is a huge issue for millions of people across the country. They are looking to the Government to deliver for them. I look forward to the Minister’s response and other contributions in this debate.

1.54 pm

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David, on this, our last day of term. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing this debate. As I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) will agree, it was a worthy application when it came before the Backbench Business Committee, of which I am a member.

We all agree that there is a need to promote fairness and transparency for the growing number of leaseholders. Historically, leasehold arrangements have been used primarily to manage properties that share a single space and have shared facilities. Where leasehold is used in properties such as flats, it often makes sense, so that there is a collective responsibility for the upkeep of roofs, lifts and entrance areas, and so on. However, as we all know, an increasing number of new build homes are now being sold on leasehold terms when there appears to be no obvious reason why the freehold is not also sold at the point of sale, other than to create an additional revenue stream for developers.

The number of leaseholds, as we have heard, is growing rapidly. While leaseholds may be presented as a cheaper option than buying the freehold, it is not always clear to the leaseholder what additional medium and long-term costs they may face. There are terms of some leases that are becoming increasingly onerous to those purchasing the leasehold for a flat or a house, and they can often expose home buyers to unreasonable and long-term financial abuse.

Mark Tami: I have also been made aware that when a number of people bought these properties, they were encouraged by the house builders to use a certain firm of lawyers that, shall we say, may not have fully pointed out some of the potential problems when purchasing a leasehold property.

Mr Wragg: Indeed, the lack of transparency and information for those purchasing the leasehold is a problematic area. The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight that.

The issues that people face include: paying for ongoing and increasing ground rent, often at unjustifiable and unaffordable levels; paying arbitrary fees to the freeholder for permission to make even the most minor of alterations to a property; and the financial impact of extending the lease or buying the freehold from the developer after moving in.

Leaseholders in England will normally pay an annual ground rent to their freeholder or landlord for renting the land that the leasehold property is on. However, developers are increasingly selling leasehold properties with short ground rent review periods, often every 10 years, which allow for above-inflation rises. Indeed, there have been reports, as was mentioned earlier, that some of those rises have been doubling every decade, well above inflation. Worryingly, these terms are not always made explicit to potential home owners at the time of purchase, leaving buyers open to finding themselves in vulnerable and unforeseen positions years down the line. Even when full diligence was conducted at the time, the freehold can still be sold on later to a third party, even after residents have moved in, by legally out-manoeuvring leaseholders' right to refuse.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I can quote an example where, if the people had managed to buy the freehold from the developer at the beginning, it would have cost them between £2,000 and £4,000. A year later, when they applied to the so-called long-term freehold interest—often using pension money for purchasing—they were quoted £40,000. When they objected, that came down to £30,000, but they were still left being completely shafted.

Mr Wragg: There was certainly an iniquity there, which needs to be resolved.

Like many right hon. and hon. Members present, I am dealing with a number of cases and complaints on behalf of my constituents. I am pleased to be able to put some of them on the record in this debate. A resident of the new build estate at Strines in my constituency informs me that he is entering the fifth year of his lease, and the prospect of his ground rent increasing is causing him a great deal of trepidation. He is paying £250 plus a £300 service charge. Along with the worry about the additional strain on his finances, he is rightly concerned at the possibility of his property becoming less attractive for sale.

Several residents of the new build Offerton Park estate tell me that property developer Bellway recently transferred the freeholds to a financial management company called Adriatic Land 6, so they are now subject to above-inflation ground rent increases every 10 years. They were not offered a chance to buy the freehold themselves at a reasonable cost.

The residents of Davies Court in Romiley, with whom I had a very enjoyable meeting last month, and who are predominantly retired, face annual ground rents of £450. That is £450 being demanded from pensioners for the ground their houses stand on. The managing agency for the building, FirstPort Retirement Property Services Ltd, also charges residents spurious administration fees when homeowners carry out improvement works, such as installing fitted wardrobes or new bathrooms, at their own expense. The company even attempted to charge one retired lady an £80 administration fee when she bought a cat. She refused to pay.

These are just a few examples from my post bag that highlight the unfair and, in places, absurd situation.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): A similar practice was highlighted just last week by one of my constituents in Winnington in Northwich. One householder tried to sell their property and put up a “For sale” sign, but because of various caveats that applied to the lease, she was told that she had to remove the sign. She could not post a “For sale” sign; does the hon. Gentleman not think that is scandalous?

Mr Wragg: I am surprised that the agency did not charge a ground rent for the “For sale” sign—that would have been more appropriate—but the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to highlight that example from his constituency.

I am pleased that the Government are taking action through the recent White Paper to tackle the unfair practices that we see. Future homebuyers may be protected by limiting the sale of new build leasehold houses to exceptional circumstances. I also welcome the Government's moves to tackle the scourge of escalating ground rents, with the intention to limit ground rents in new leases to start and remain at the peppercorn level.

While I welcome those measures, they really are just the first steps in achieving transparency and fairness for the growing number of leaseholders. They may make the situation easier going forward, but are far more difficult to apply retrospectively. The far more intractable problem—and the one facing my constituents whom I referred to earlier—is what to do about current homeowners on existing leases altering the terms of a lease part-way through. Ministers ought to consider what steps could be taken to help those already facing onerous ground rents or unreasonable and spurious administration fees. That could include, for example, steps to tackle unreasonable ground rent rises within existing leases at their next review period, or to strengthen the rights of homeowners for redress for unfair lease terms.

In conclusion, I welcome the Government's plans to limit leaseholds on future new build homes and to cap ground rents, but I am concerned about whether any new legislation will retrospectively benefit homeowners already in this invidious situation. There must be more support for existing leaseholders, including making buying a freehold or extending a lease easier, faster, fairer and cheaper. Leasehold property law is a complex area, and not being lawyer myself, I cannot profess to be an expert. So I look forward to what the Minister, who no doubt has the excellent support of the legal team in his Department, has to say in response to the points raised. May I take this opportunity to wish you, Sir David, and one and all a very merry Christmas?

2.3 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David.

It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg). Like him, I welcome today's timely announcement, but there is still a huge amount of work to be done in helping those who are caught in the leasehold trap like many of my constituents.

I first became aware of this issue around Christmas last year, when I was contacted by my constituent, Linda Barnes. She told me that her house, which she had

[Liz McInnes]

bought new from Taylor Wimpey in 2011 for £147,000, had a ground rent that doubles every 10 years and that had been sold on by Taylor Wimpey to E & J Estates. She had been quoted a price of £35,000 to buy the lease before it doubled.

Very soon after that, I heard from another constituent, Jonathan, who had bought a house from Countryside Properties in 2010 using the Government's HomeBuy Direct initiative, which was later renamed Help to Buy. Jonathan said that he had been made aware that the development was to be leasehold and that an annual ground rent of £200 was payable to the owner of the land, Countryside Properties. Six months after he moved in, Jonathan received a letter informing him that the freehold had been sold on to a company called Tuscola Ltd, based in the British Virgin Islands. He was quoted over £6,000 to buy the freehold. He also discovered a doubling clause in his lease that meant that by 2055 the ground rent would be £1,600 per year. This is causing him a great deal of concern, because by the time he reaches retirement age his ground rent will be unaffordable and will make his home unsellable. As Jonathan said:

"Considering the significant cost of new homes one would have thought that the last thing one should worry about is the land the house sits on and that it can seemingly be sold on from underneath you."

Mark Tami: Although the property companies may not have done anything illegal, what they have done is morally wrong. They knew full well what those products were. They were making an extra buck on a financial product and they did not give a damn about what happened to the people they sold those properties to.

Liz McInnes: I totally agree with my hon. Friend and will expand on that point later in my speech.

I have been contacted by many of Linda and Jonathan's neighbours, and they all tell the same story: that they were encouraged to use the developer's choice of solicitor when they bought their homes, that they were not informed of the doubling clause and that the prices they are being quoted to buy the freehold are simply unaffordable. Many residents are rightly angry that the developers sold off the freehold to a property investment company without first consulting the homeowners and offering them the first chance of purchase. Many pointed out that the lease on their home is for 250 years, and if the ground rent doubles every 15 years, it will be £13 million by the end of the lease. If the Government do just one thing, they must ban this exponential growth in ground rent.

I am sure that some hon. Members will be familiar with the concept of grains of rice on a chessboard, with the number of grains doubling on each successive square. By the time the 64th and last square is reached, the of grains of rice are a staggering 20-digit number: more than 18 quintillion, or 2 to the power of 64 minus 1. Clearly, any further attempts by developers to use this deceptive piece of mathematical trickery must be made illegal.

One couple wrote to me to complain that when they bought their property from the developers they actually posed for photographs and recommended the company to other prospective buyers, and that was posted on the developer's website. The couple now say:

"We would very much welcome being able now to express our very different views and to tell the truth about you as developers on your website. We doubt very much you will give us that opportunity. You have turned what should be our happy home into a very expensive prison."

Research from the House of Commons Library highlights the fact that leaseholders may be required to seek the freeholder's consent before carrying out alterations, as many hon. Members have already said. I think that the publicity surrounding this leasehold scandal may have actually emboldened some unscrupulous landlords to make unreasonable demands on homeowners, and I have an example of that from my constituency.

Recently, I and my staff have been dealing with issues raised by residents who have received letters from a company named the Dean and Whipp Ltd Group, asking for money for retrospective ground rents and for payments for alterations such as dormer windows and extensions. These homeowners bought their properties after those alterations had been made. In one case, the homeowner actually discovered that the previous owner had in fact paid the landlord for the alterations to the home when they were carried out in 1978. The current landlord, Dean and Whipp, which had either bought or inherited the freehold, had obviously not checked whether payment had been received in respect of the alterations, and had just sent out the letters demanding payment regardless. That is something that looked to me very much like a fishing expedition.

The behaviour of this company, Dean and Whipp of Dukinfield, Cheshire, is outrageous. It has told me that it will deal only with either me or a solicitor but not both, seemingly missing the point that I can act on behalf of any of my constituents regardless of whether they are using a solicitor. I have written to the Housing Minister about this case, and so far I have not received a reply. As the Housing Minister is here, I would be grateful if, in his concluding remarks, he would say what action he will take to prevent those landlords from acting in such an arbitrary manner. Their actions are causing a great deal of distress to my constituents, many of whom are elderly and worried by the prospect of having to pay such large bills.

I hope that in addition to addressing the issues raised in this debate, the Minister will be able to give my constituents some reassurance that action will be taken against the sharp practice of companies such as Dean and Whipp, so that my constituents might enjoy a peaceful, relaxed and happy Christmas in their own homes.

2.10 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I join the chorus of well-deserved congratulations and thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) for securing this debate, and for all their work with the all-party parliamentary group. I entirely echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg); this was a very worthy application. I also sit on the Backbench Business Committee, and from my perspective, the issue needs to be raised.

I first came across the concept of leasehold while studying for my law degree in Sheffield. As is often the case in university towns, lots of the law students lived in streets surrounding the department. I was studying for

my exams late one night when there came a knock on the door. There was a man there, on that dark, cold, wet winter's night, demanding £2 for ground rent. When we went in the following day, it turned out that the same thing had happened to everybody on the same street; it had obviously been the annual whip-round. It became something of a curio—a legal curiosity that formed part of our studies as much as anything else—but in the years since then, it has become clear that the issue of leasehold on flats and houses is anything but a curiosity. It is absolutely iniquitous, and reform is needed urgently.

Let us assume for a moment that someone works hard at their job—perhaps they and their partner work all the hours that God sends—scrimping, saving and going without to put aside money for a deposit, and then goes to buy a house. In the flush of excitement at having successfully saved a deposit and secured a loan from a company, they agree to a ground rent of £200 or £300 a year. They might take that on, but as the years go past, they realise that it is simply another income stream for developers. In fact, it is a lot of money—more money than they can afford. Worse, as we have heard, the terms and conditions attached mean that their liabilities grow year by year. That flush of success soon turns sour.

Let us assume that someone buys a flat on a long leasehold term—99 years, for example. They may find after 15 years that they must renegotiate and ask for an extension of the lease. They may be granted one, at a cost of £5,000, £6,000, £7,000, £8,000 or more. They could enter into the process for leasehold enfranchisement, of which I also have experience; to earn money while I was waiting to go to Bar school, I worked for a while as a paralegal in the leasehold enfranchisement department of a law firm. I can inform hon. Members—although, of course, this audience needs no such information—that the law is fiendishly complicated and devilishly expensive. That is the situation in which leaseholders of houses and flats on long leasehold terms all over the country find themselves. It is iniquitous, and, as an hon. Member opposite said, it is a trap.

I suggest that reform is needed urgently. I will not speak for long, because I know that many others want to speak and add their practical experiences and those of the constituents who have written to them, but there is a great deal that the Government can do. I am delighted to see today's announcement, but as other hon. Members have said, it is the beginning, and there is much more to be done.

I am glad that legislation will be introduced to prohibit the sale of new build leasehold houses and to restrict ground rents, but as we can see, and as Members have said, the real issue is legacy leaseholds and the people who are already in the trap, and I would like to press the Government on that in particular. What do the Government plan to do to support existing leaseholders by making it easier to buy a freehold or extend a lease? I have referred to both those points. They are extremely difficult and expensive at present, and I would like to know how they will be made easier, faster, fairer and cheaper. What role of the Upper Tribunal (Lands Chamber) might be extended in such circumstances? How can the law of commonhold, which was introduced but has not really taken off, be strengthened and extended?

This is not the time for me to go into the issue in any detail, but I would like the Government to consider that all of this grows from an historical anomaly. My example

in Sheffield arose, as I understand it, from the fact that factories bought land and built houses on it, and that over time, different houses have been built but the land has been kept. The whole mess arises from historical legal points involving covenant law, and it all needs deep reform, root and branch. I ask the Minister to consider that. He might not be able to give me an answer now, but I would like to hear from him on that in due course.

I welcome the announcements made this morning about addressing the sale of new build leasehold homes, ground rents and loopholes in the law, but such law has no place in modern England. It does not exist in other parts of the world, as we have heard. Although I welcome what the Government are doing, I ask them to consider moving towards the long-term abolition of long leasehold tenancies in this country. They have already promised to do a lot, but much more can be done to help those who need help—those for whom affordability is a massive issue, and who find themselves in a trap that is complicated, expensive and not of their making.

2.17 pm

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Thank you, Sir David, and merry Christmas. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts); it was interesting to hear his experience as a law student. A ground rent of £2 was probably a bit of a bargain compared with the problems faced by many of our constituents.

The House of Commons Library notes on the subject point out that there was a spike in leasehold sales in the north-west of England; 69% of all new properties in the north-west were subject to leasehold arrangements in which the developer retained the freehold. Several hundred of those properties are in Knowsley. For those who do not know my stance, I am one of those people who is not quite sure what the north-west is, but whatever it is, we in Knowsley are getting the phenomenon on a large scale.

I 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 raising this issue for a long time, whereas many of us have come to it more recently through the experiences of our constituents. I will highlight a couple of points, and then say a few words about the measures announced by the Secretary of State last night.

First, others have made the point about the use of conveyancing solicitors recommended by the developer who also work for the developer. The best that can be said is that that creates the impression of a conflict of interest. From what constituents have said to me, there was a conflict of interest in some cases. The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) was right to mention a need for more transparency. There is also something inherently wrong about the same legal practice dealing with both the developer's interest and the purchaser's interest.

Buyers were not informed that they could purchase the freehold. I have ample evidence from many constituents, which I will quote, that that did not arise in conversations with sales staff. Even if they were vaguely made aware, they were certainly discouraged from exercising the option to purchase the freehold. To achieve that, they

[Mr George Howarth]

needed a great deal of persistence, because it was part of the business model that the developer retained that interest, either to have continued income or to sell the freehold to another managing agent.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend accept that many of the purchasers in my constituency—and no doubt in his—were first-time buyers using Help to Buy, who were not clear about the house-buying process as a whole? In the circumstances that he has mentioned, they find it even more confusing.

Mr Howarth: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right; that is another complicating factor. I will quote what some of my constituents have said about this—I will not name them because I have not asked their permission. The first said:

“Why were we not given the full facts of exactly what it was we were buying into? We haven’t bought a home, we’ve bought a license to live in the house until the lease expires. Please tell me, where is the security in that?”

Another constituent said that:

“we bought a Bellway home in Huyton unaware that Bellway were going to sell on the freehold to a private company without giving us the chance to buy. The increase is immoral and totally unfair”.

The third constituent said:

“I was never told I could purchase the leasehold although I now know some people on the estate purchased the leasehold at the time they were buying. I thought Bellway would manage the property for many years to come, not be sold off to the highest bidder who would raise their fees whenever they want to. I feel ripped off by Bellway”.

That is what some of my constituents say.

Most of the properties in Knowsley that I am talking about are houses—starter homes, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn called them. On some estates, some flats are mixed in. One constituent asked my office to contact the developer of his flat, Redrow, to find out what would be involved in purchasing the freehold. Eventually, somebody called Steve at Redrow replied—“kind regards, Steve.” We got a reply; the company conceded that the residents in the flats could purchase the freehold, which, of course, is their statutory right. The end of the reply, from December, states:

“As you will appreciate the 2 month notice period is only a first step, and should give residents time to decide whether it would be something they would wish to pursue.”

A group of residents makes the effort to look at a freehold arrangement, but they only have until the end of January to find out where they would get the money from, and to find out whether a majority of them want to go down that route. I would think that that is almost impossible. Anyone who has ever been involved in a house purchase knows that these things take a lot longer than that. There is a lot going on.

I welcome the announcement by the Secretary of State. The hon. Member for Hazel Grove said, “So far, so good”. We hope that the work that the Law Commission will be asked to do will provide a way forward for my constituents who have bought new homes, although there is no guarantee. It worries me that a lot of those developers will see some kind of control or legislation that will curtail their activities looming ahead of them and will hurry to sell those homes so that they are not

left with a liability. I realise that with potential legislation pending, that might not be the most attractive sale ever, but nevertheless it is a worry.

Mike Amesbury: In my constituency of Weaver Vale, Morris homes is selling houses in a development in expectation of the new arrangements, and literally on the other side of the street, people are caught in the scandal we are talking about. Their homes are simply unsellable.

Mr Howarth: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Was someone else trying to intervene?

Hilary Benn: If my right hon. Friend is offering, I will.

Mr Howarth: I did not have my right hon. Friend in mind, but I can never resist giving way to him.

Hilary Benn: My right hon. Friend is most kind. Listening to the powerful testimony on all sides of this Chamber, peeling the layers of an onion to see the full nature of this scandal, does he agree that it is impossible to reach any other conclusion than that the developers are responsible for this? They must have known what they were doing and what they hoped to gain by selling the freehold on to others who then engaged in the sharp practice that we have heard about. They bear the responsibility. The law will stop them from doing it anymore, but they also need to compensate people. Bearing in mind what has happened to developers’ profits—Miller Homes, which I mentioned earlier, announced earlier this year a 44% increase in their pre-tax profits—they can afford it, and they have a moral responsibility to compensate people they have put in an untenable position.

Mr Howarth: I am glad that I gave way to my right hon. Friend; the point he makes is right. People should be compensated for what has happened to them. It is disgraceful and it should never have happened.

I conclude by asking the Minister—I realise that it is quite a delicate thing to do—to consider whether the Government can discourage developers from disposing of freeholds to management companies until it is clearer exactly how this problem will be tackled? That would be very helpful. I realise that it is a tricky area legally speaking, as we heard from the hon. Member for Witney. Nevertheless, I would certainly welcome whatever could be done to discourage or freeze any further transactions for the time being, and I know that all my constituents who have been affected would welcome that, too.

2.28 pm

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is an honour to speak under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing this debate. Notwithstanding the announcement that was made today, like other hon. Members I have a number of constituents who have been adversely affected by the vexed issue of leasehold versus freehold ownerships.

Many people in north Tyneside have purchased homes where freeholds have subsequently been sold to a third party that puts extortionate prices on the purchase of leases. One couple who bought their new home five years

ago were told that they could buy the freehold for about £4,000, but the sales rep discouraged them, saying that they would not have to worry about it for a couple of years. It was already an expensive time for them so they decided to take just the leasehold option. Since then, they have been informed that their freehold has been sold on twice. They contacted a specialist solicitor, but could not afford the fee to ascertain the cost of enfranchisement. They fear that they may never be able to buy the freehold and that they will be left with an unsaleable property.

Another constituent is caught in what is known as the “fleecehold” situation. She is a freehold owner of a new build house but has received an invoice for service charges from the estate management company on behalf of the developer. She was a first-time buyer and vaguely remembers something being mentioned about a rentcharge. When she queried it, she was told that she was buying the freehold and that that was an estate management charge towards the upkeep of the estate. She paid the amount via her solicitor for the first year and heard nothing about it after that, until she received an invoice a couple of months ago.

Subsequently, she looked at her responsibilities regarding the fixed rentcharge. She found that it had now doubled, with 43% of fees to be paid to the management company. What concerns her most is a statement in her transfer document that says that the rentcharge is associated with rights of re-entry and that if it falls into arrears, the rentcharge owner can repossess her property and enjoy the same rights as if the transfer had never been made. That was never made clear to my constituent. If she had known, she would not have bought her so-called freehold property.

My constituents are right to be concerned about finding themselves in such a position in relation to the biggest and probably most important purchase they will make in their lives. I am glad that 20 hon. Members, some of whom are here, supported my recent early-day motion on fleecehold, which asks the Government

“to investigate this practice as a matter of urgency and with a view to first clarifying the law and then outlawing this practice.”

I hope the Minister will make reference to that.

Sir Peter Bottomley: The hon. Lady’s early-day motion is very important. The Government should consult on whether it is possible to refer the matter to the Competition and Markets Authority and have that kind of clause struck out as unfair, unreasonable and unenforceable.

Mary Glendon: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s straightforward statement.

It cannot be right that sales reps quote prices for the freehold but do not deliver, or that a freehold can be sold to a third party without telling residents. Nor can it be right that solicitors do not inform home buyers of the pitfalls, or that residents find themselves with charges and restrictions far beyond the original agreement.

The list goes on, but in the end, like my constituents, current home buyers are left worrying about what that means for reselling their houses. Although the Government’s announcement is welcome for future home buyers, I hope they take note of one of the country’s leading building societies, Nationwide—of which I must declare that I am a customer—which has changed its lending

policy to protect people who buy new build leaseholds. It wants the Government to take action by preventing the Help to Buy equity loan being available for sites where new houses are being sold on a leasehold basis.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend surprised to hear that Nationwide’s pension scheme has purchased the freeholds of an estate of properties in my constituency, which will be managed by a company that charges similar rates and fees to those mentioned by my neighbour, the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg)—around £100—to get any sort of pet? Should a company take that sort of action with one hand while asking for action with the other?

Mary Glendon: I hope that Nationwide is duly embarrassed by what my hon. Friend has said.

Unscrupulous developers and agents are profiteering on the backs of thousands of ordinary people, who struggled and worked hard to buy their homes. The Government have to go beyond what they announced and act now to end what nearly amounts to extortion.

2.34 pm

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) for securing this debate. I shall say straight away that I welcome the Government’s action last night, which will be helpful for the future.

My concern, which relates to that of other right hon. and hon. Members, is about what happens between now and the point at which any legislation is implemented, and what happens for all our constituents who have faced difficulties and challenges in the past. Those challenges have been so difficult for some of my constituents that they do not want the estates and houses that they have been involved in to be publicly identified because they fear a further loss of income on any future sale of their property.

Before I ask the Minister some specific questions, I will touch on a number of key areas of concern—similar to those outlined by other hon. Members—that have been raised with me: first, the lack of information at the time of purchase, which has been mentioned already; secondly, the concerns and information around the onward sale of freeholds to third parties; thirdly, the issue of what happens on split sites, which my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) mentioned in his intervention; and fourthly, the element of devolution.

On the lack of information, I feel like I am in an echo chamber. The points that have been raised with me have also been raised throughout the debate, but are worth repeating. My constituents, of whom many were first-time buyers purchasing with Help to Buy and who were grateful to the Welsh Assembly and the UK Government for helping them, were forced to use solicitors recommended by the building company; did not get an explanation about what freehold or leasehold mean; did not get an explanation about potential future charges; never had it explained that those freeholds could be sold on to a third party, which might impact on their finances at a future date; and were offered different prices by the same company for the same freehold.

[David Hanson]

For the same house and the same freehold companies offered £1,500, £5,000 and £7,500 at the same time at purchase. People said, “Well, I cannot afford that now because I am on a Help to Buy scheme. I’ll undertake whatever you think is best for me,” and the advice was to have the leasehold, so people have found themselves on that. We need to revisit that for the future and get some clarity from the Minister about what that means now for people who have undertaken that scheme recently.

Onward sale is important. I know that the Minister will deal with that for the future and will consider completely banning the sale of leaseholds as a matter of principle, but I have a situation now where my constituents bought a property and the leasehold from what they thought was a reputable company, but found that the freehold has been sold on to a third party. Shockingly, my constituents did not even know and were not offered the chance to buy it at that time. In one example, one person happened to see the sales director of the company on site and asked to buy the freehold, which was sold to them, but the freeholds of the other 21 properties were sold to a third party. Only later did my constituents find out that that sale had taken place. They were not offered the chance to purchase as a first port of call, even if they had wanted to.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I think I am right in saying that the law is that if they had been in a residential flat, the freehold could not have been sold without it being offered to them. That should have been the law for the houses, but I suppose it was not because no one imagined that anyone would ever sell a leasehold house again.

David Hanson: I am grateful for that clarification.

This is not about the future; I am sure that the Minister is already receiving representations on a cross-party basis about what should happen in future. It is about how we deal with the past. For example, my constituents who wished to purchase the freehold from the company that had bought it—as they found out only at a late stage—not only have to pay an initial investigatory charge of several hundred pounds, but a premium of £1,000 on the purchase price. Many of the people in that position are either first-time buyers or retired. One of them, a former constituent of the shadow Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), who moved to my area to retire, has raised the issue with both of us. What is the situation with buy-back at a fair price and with fair charges? How will the Minister deal with those issues?

I mentioned split sites. There is a very big development site in my constituency, and when this scandal broke halfway through the development, the company in question decided, “Let’s get out of this quick—let’s forget this and try to limit our liabilities. We’ll sell the freeholds to the customers buying the houses.” Half the massive estate of 400 or 500 houses now has a leasehold with the company, and the other half is being developed without leasehold. How will somebody who has bought one of the houses with a leasehold ever be able to sell it, when—as my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale pointed out—owners of houses on the other side of the street have a different situation as regards the leasehold

and potentially different liabilities? Nobody will buy a house from the half of the estate with leaseholds if they can buy one from the half without.

I approached the company, which I will name; it is Persimmon, whose chief executive’s bonus this year was £118 million. When I asked whether it would sell or give the freehold to my constituents on the same basis as to the others, the answer was no. It said that it would sell it for £3,750—at a time when it is giving £118 million to the chief executive alone. My constituents, who have stretched themselves to buy their house in the first place, cannot afford to pay that. I then asked the company whether it would ensure that it did not sell the ground rent on in the meantime. Very gratefully, I am sure—that was sarcasm, for *Hansard’s* purposes—its reply said that

“we will not sell the ground rent to any third party until at least two years following the purchase of their leaseholds. In the circumstances we are prepared to confirm a minimum date of 14 July 2019, being two years from the date of our meeting.”

So Persimmon has said that it will not sell that on for the next two years, but there is no guarantee beyond that. My constituents cannot sell their houses, because over the road similar houses are being sold as freehold, but they are finding it difficult to pay the £3,750 because they are already stretched. That is particularly important for the Government, because many of these people are on Help to Buy. When the value falls, not only do the constituents struggle, but the Government lose out on any potential sale.

My last point relates to my personal circumstances. My constituency is as near to England as the south side of the river Thames to the House of Commons; we are literally two or three miles across the border. My hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami), who was present earlier, is in a similar situation. The majority of houses in my constituency are built by companies based in Manchester, in the north-west of England. What discussions has the Minister had with the National Assembly for Wales, which has devolved responsibility for housing issues, about his proposals and plans for the future? If he introduces a ban in England, will it cover companies based in England on sites based in Wales? If he introduces regulations, what will the parallel consequence be for the National Assembly for Wales? My constituents are using these schemes, but the materials have been made in England, the profit is going to England and the policy was developed in England. That needs to be clarified, so will the Minister tell us what is happening with the Welsh Assembly?

I have three solutions for the Minister. First, he could work with the National Assembly for Wales, as well as in England, to give a definitive right to buy to constituents who have a leasehold with a third party or a particular company. There is even an argument that he should exert real pressure for a right to be given the freehold as part of the price. In my constituency, houses are being sold at the same price freehold as they are leasehold. That is simply not tenable. It is an extra piece of profit for a company that is already paying its chief executive £110 million.

If the Minister cannot get freeholds given freely, he needs to consider a price cap—and if he cannot solve that problem, he should at least consider a price cap on the charges that may accrue for future generations. The continued rise of the price as regards leaseholds is

not acceptable. If he cannot find a mechanism to compensate people, he could legislate to freeze the price at its current level.

The Minister should also consider helping people who have bought a house on the Help to Buy scheme, but who now wish to actually buy what they thought they were buying in the first place: the land on which the house was built. Introducing a mechanism to give financial support to them to buy the freehold would be an extremely good contribution.

I welcome what the Minister has done so far. I know that we are in a pickle and a mess, although in a way I am relieved to hear that the problem affects not just people in Delyn and north Wales, but many others. There are real challenges for the people who are in this mess, and the Government and the Welsh Assembly have a duty and a responsibility to try to resolve it.

2.46 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I thank the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) for introducing the debate. I also thank our colleagues in the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership, who have been a great help to me, both as a constituency Member and in my former housing role on the Opposition Front Bench. Frankly, they have been doing the work that LEASE should have been doing, but they have not been funded to do it by the Government. They have done a sterling job representing leaseholders and supporting the Members, local authorities and others who have supported leaseholders in recent years. I was on the Front Bench when we debated leasehold and commonhold reform on 20 December 2016—a year and a day ago—but I will not repeat the arguments of my speech in that debate, which can be easily found.

There are many leaseholders in my constituency who live in the blocks of flats that have been built there in recent years, particularly in Brentford, my home town. Things have moved on in the past year, and many of us are grateful for the new tone from the Department, which can be seen from the release that it issued last night at midnight. Relatively recently, however, we have seen a racket growing, particularly from developers.

Ground rents for houses mean that people who had thought they owned their home actually own a depreciating asset. The racketeers are withholding the right to own and the right to manage. Freeholds are being sold on without notice. Links between freeholders, conveyancing solicitors and managing agents are far too close. People are having fees demanded of them on conveyancing that the solicitors did not originally tell them about, as well as fees for changes to homes, building extensions, sub-letting and so on. I was perturbed to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) of people being charged again down the line.

That is absolutely shocking. The examples we have heard already in this excellent debate show that elements of the private sector, instead of doing their job as developers and in some cases managing agents, are frankly taking homeowners for a ride, and that has to stop. We have heard about a series of things that are symptomatic of how freehold ownership has become an

asset class in itself. Money is being made not on buying and selling, but on owning and ripping people off, and that has to stop. The extent of the problem is illustrated by the fall in the share price of McCarthy & Stone and other developers on the back of the Government's announcement this week. That shows how much of their asset value is based not on what we should think of as their core business, but on these appalling practices that we have been hearing about.

I am grateful to the Government for the movement they have made on new build leasehold houses, ground rents and protecting leaseholders from possession orders. I also welcome the additional staffing in DCLG, and I hope that those things are an indication of a new-found commitment to serious change. Will DCLG fund the work recommended in both parts of the Law Commission's report? The first part recommended a simplification of the law and improved fairness and transparency for leaseholders. The second part of its release earlier this week looked at the assignment of leases under new contracts, ground rents, which the Government mentioned, high fixed service charges and fees on assignment.

The single biggest opportunity for the Government is the introduction of a commonhold law that works. England is perhaps unique in that we have a lack of true rights for the owners of flats. We should learn from similar jurisdictions, such as Australia, and nearby jurisdictions such as Scotland. Previous Tory and Labour Governments have tried introducing commonhold law that works, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) tried to do that. I am sure he will refer to that later this afternoon. Let us have another go at ensuring we get a commonhold law that works, because it would put a permanent end to the racketeering practices we have heard about today. The Minister can be assured that if the legislation he proposes is good, he will have support from many Opposition Members.

Among other things, the Government need to end the false departmental divide between the Ministry of Justice and DCLG and bring all the issues into one place. Like other Members, I ask the Minister to address the situation of the hundreds of thousands of victims of the current law who seek recompense for the failures so far. We cannot let them be left high and dry. We also need to address the challenge for residents' groups in leasehold blocks of flat. Let us not forget that residents' groups work as volunteers. Many have gone through or are going through the ever-twisting hoops to set up a resident management company. Some are trying to seek ownership. Even when they do not have the kind of freeholder that we have heard about today, that is a lot of work in their own time, and they need recognition and support for that. I hope the Government will take that into account.

Finally, I want to talk about post-Grenfell fire cladding. In my constituency, we have more than 300 leaseholders in the Blenheim Centre in Hounslow. The freeholder, Legal & General, has agreed to pay the full cost of the recladding that will need to be done and the back pay of the fire marshals, who were costing the leaseholders an awful lot of money. The total bill could be £10 million. I am also pleased that Notting Hill Housing has agreed to fund the recladding in the modular housing at the Paragon development in Brentford. That is not because of inflammable cladding, but because of the lack of fire breaks. My understanding is that those two cases are exceptions to the rule. There are an awful lot of leaseholders

[*Ruth Cadbury*]

in flats across England where the freeholders are not prepared to pay the cost of recladding. There is an awful lot of uncertainty, and we have not seen a response of any substance from the Minister. We look forward to hearing that today.

Sir Peter Bottomley: The hon. Lady has raised a point that the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse also raised. LEASE has been given extra responsibility for trying to help people living in blocks that may be affected by post-Grenfell issues, but what is presently on the LEASE website is totally inadequate. It may be a start, but it is not good enough. LEASE should get together with the LKP to use the LKP information. That information has already been of advantage to a number of residents, and it could be of advantage to more. It will not solve all the problems, but why not try to put all the information together, rather than staying away from some of the people who have been helpful and putting responsibility on those who have not?

Ruth Cadbury: I concur with the hon. Gentleman's comments. He is absolutely right. Mere words of comfort and a promise of mediation are not what leaseholders are looking for. Many leaseholders are working people or retired. All of their wealth and quite a lot of debt is tied up with their homes, and there is an awful lot of stress and worry across the country on the issue. I hope we will get something from the Minister today.

All that is left for me to do is to wish merry Christmas to you, Sir David, to fellow Members and to the many parliamentary staff who make our jobs possible in this place.

2.57 pm

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for calling me in this debate, Sir David, to add my voice to the pertinent points that have already been raised. I also thank the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick)—they lead the all-party group—for securing this debate and all the work they have done to date.

[*MR PETER BONE in the Chair*]

This problem is very big in the north-west of England, but based on the contributions today it is clearly a nationwide problem. The Library has provided information on the constituencies with the highest proportion of leasehold sales of houses. Seventeen of the top 20 constituencies in the country are in the north-west, and 14 of them are in Greater Manchester, so the problem is at epidemic levels in my part of the world. We sometimes hear the argument that there is somehow a market with varying costs between freehold and leasehold properties, but that does not apply to us when the majority of tenures sold for houses or flats are leasehold.

I am genuinely shocked by the stories I hear in my constituency and that we have heard in this debate. I am not a man prone to hyperbole, but I would go so far as to say that the only fair description of some of the practices we have heard about in this debate is legalised extortion. There is simply no relationship between the services being rendered and the costs charged for them.

I will be as brief as I can because so many colleagues wish to speak, but I want to give a number of examples from constituents, all of whom were only too happy to be mentioned in the debate to illustrate the point about the costs being extorted in relation to the services offered. Gemma Hornbuckle lives in Ashby Gardens in Hattersley in Hyde. She says that the charges she is facing are “only getting worse to the point where we are unable to keep up with the payments. They are making the properties worthless and causing that much upset and stress that we need something to be done urgently.”

Gemma is paying £2,000 per year, and her costs, when she receives them, are not itemised. She says that the bills that are sent are confusing, and the penalty charges if she does not pay are outrageous. Let me tell hon. Members about the latest development, which is hard to believe. She says that the latest bill includes a quote for the 18 apartments in her block to be decorated. Of course, by that I do not mean the apartments themselves, but the communal areas—just the hallways. The quote for that work is a staggering £32,000. I do not see how anyone could stand up and defend that.

Mr Stuart Ryan, another constituent, lives in the same area. He says he did not know about the costs, but was told by the management agent that they are simply part of the terms of sale and are in the deeds. Colleagues who know a little bit about Greater Manchester might know that Hattersley is one of the most successful urban regeneration housing schemes in the country. It took a huge amount of resources under the last Labour Government, and was originally one of the overspill estates from Manchester City Council. It is a fabulous story of urban regeneration and success, and activities such as this are frankly blighting that very successful legacy, which is extremely distressing to hear.

Another issue is what happens when constituents try to solve the problems using the apparatus currently available. Another constituent, Simone Potter, says that she inquired what the charge would be for the purchase of her freehold. She was told by her management company that there was a charge of £180 to make any inquiry—£180, just to ask them a question. When she made the inquiry, they came back to say the freehold was not for sale in any case.

Alison Hinchcliffe also inquired what the cost would be to purchase her freehold. After a number of attempts to negotiate a fair price, she was told that her only recourse was to go to a tribunal. Of course, that will instigate a whole series of court costs. She is waiting to see whether the Government will take decisive action to give her a more obvious and satisfactory remedy.

I could go on, and I imagine many colleagues have a range of stories like this. I will share just one more story, from someone whom I know. She is not from my constituency and did not want to be named, but I can say that she is a key worker—a police officer. She bought her property this year. She was told that the service charge would be nearly £2,000, but that it would be split into two payments during the year. Last Monday, she received a bill for the whole £2,000—seven days before Christmas, which would not be easy for anyone. She says that the request for payment does not contain any of the basic information she would have expected. It does not say when the amount is due, nor whether she has to pay before or after Christmas. It does not explain why they are charging for service works that pre-date this company taking charge of the development.

That cannot be a reasonable cost for her to pay. It does not say how the costs have been calculated, which is crucial because there is a term in her contract that says that any underspend will be credited back to tenants. It does not give any information on how they have reconciled the accounts to comply with the terms to which people have already signed up. She says:

“The whole world is murky and as it currently stands as with most housing issues it relies on tenants organising themselves and individuals dedicating enormous effort legally and financially to fighting these companies who are failing to deliver services for the money charged.”

I think that is an entirely fair description of the status quo, which is clearly unacceptable. It is superb to see so many colleagues from across the House, and the Government, saying that they are willing to take action, as this issue is clearly damaging a great many lives.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) talked about first-time buyers. We have all been in that position of moving into a newly-built property, perhaps with a spouse or partner, for the first time and thinking about the carpets, flooring, fixtures, and furnishings. Purchase of the freehold, even if it is offered, will always be a more abstract and less tangible thing to think about purchasing. It is easy to see how so many people have found themselves locked into this trap. Clearly, this issue will also cause severe damage to the housing market. As my right hon. Friend said, if somebody has an option about whether to be put into this trap, perhaps in a similar development on the same piece of land in the same area, it is pretty clear that they would not voluntarily get themselves into that position.

In terms of remedies, it is clear from today's debate that no more properties should be sold with this form of tenure, but clearly there must be a straightforward right-to-buy formula that is standardised and national, in order to avoid the kind of regulatory arbitrage that we have heard about today. I think a price cap on not only the overall cost but the charges that can be levied for inquiries and questions would be entirely fair. I also do not think it is too strong to propose that some consideration be given to whether some of the terms of these leaseholds should be rendered void as unfair contractual terms—particularly those provisions about doubling the costs, which my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) described, with the overall cost, when considered in aggregate, an absurd amount of money. The closures on forfeiture are, to my mind, entirely unjust, and should form no part of such a leasehold contract.

If solicitors have been recommended by the developer and that has led to a substandard service, clearly the Law Society should look at that, but there have been several examples in British legal history of courts finding that contracts should never have been entered into because people signed up to unfair terms, because the advice was not sufficient, or because quite simply the contract should not operate in that way. I am thinking, for instance, of local authorities and interest swaps in the 1980s. Those contracts were rendered void. That needs to be considered. I am really distressed to hear that some pension funds may have entered into this as an asset class, particularly because I cannot believe that with their expertise they would not know what they were entering into. Anyone with any sense of political risk would understand that this issue might be something the Government would look at, no matter who was in charge.

Sir Peter Bottomley: It goes a stage further than that. There is a case going to appeal—the Stanley v. Mundy case—where the Wellcome Trust, which bought freeholds from the Henry Smith Charity, has managed to persuade a property tribunal that the rate at which people pay for extending leases should be much higher than at present. In fact, most of the evidence is that it should be lower. Governments should get involved in that and produce a chart that gives fair prices. If freeholders want to challenge that, they should guarantee to pay the costs of the leaseholders—not the other way round.

Jonathan Reynolds: I absolutely agree. My distress is even greater after hearing about that situation; action like that will cause great distress across the country. As I say, I cannot believe that any organisation to whom leases have been sold on, these leaseholders, asset classes, or any pension fund that has got involved in investing in them, would not have made a reasonable assessment of the political risk involved. It is clearly unjust. I cannot imagine any colleague from any party standing up to defend the kind of constituency examples that have been shared in today's debate.

The time is clearly ripe for action, and there is clearly a consensus for strong action. My only plea to the Minister would be this: for many constituents, this matter is urgent. It is blighting their lives and affecting their quality of life. It is clearly affecting the liquidity of the housing market, and whether people can make reasonable decisions about their households going forward. We need the action to be as swift as possible. Clearly, it is not straightforward and there are issues to resolve, but I cannot believe that anyone who has listened to today's debate, or others that have taken place, would not agree that there is consensus for political action. Please, Minister—let us get on with that as soon as possible.

3.08 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) on securing the debate, on the way he has, alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), campaigned on the many abuses in this sector, and on the way they have both led from the front with their joint chairing of the all-party parliamentary group on leasehold and commonhold reform. I am proud to be the group's vice-chair. They have been superbly assisted by the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership, about which we have heard today. Collectively, they have all done a great job in bringing this issue to the attention of parliamentarians and members of the public.

I first spoke on this subject in the Chamber almost a year ago, at which point I described the scandal as the “the payment protection insurance of the house building industry.”—[*Official Report*, 20 December 2016; Vol. 618, c. 1342.]

However, as more serial failures, incompetence and greed have emerged, I do not believe that such a description does it justice—and it is justice that millions of householders up and down the country now seek.

Where do we start with all this? We know that leasehold has been around for a very long time and has always had problems, particularly in relation to flats and buildings with common parts. However, in recent years it has become a cash cow for developers—household names,

[Justin Madders]

whose reputations have rightly been damaged because of their avaricious approach to the very people who now find themselves unable to sell their homes, long after the developer has fled the scene. I am still waiting for someone from the house building industry to come up with a credible explanation as to how doubling ground rents provides any benefits to the leaseholder. I have heard countless tales about what salespeople say in the show home, how the nature of the tenure is not raised until very late in the day when commitments have been made, and how advisers have failed to inform purchasers about what they are being asked to sign up to.

It is also disappointing to see a certain smugness in some quarters regarding those who purchased leasehold houses, with suggestions that they should have known better. That ignores several factors, including the fact that many purchasers seem to have been let down by the advice that they received. One example that recently emerged was a property ombudsman case in June, where a long-term leasehold had been described as “virtually freehold” to purchasers, which is on a par with being a little bit pregnant. Ultimately, the ombudsman found in the purchaser’s favour that there was no such thing as a property being virtually freehold, and directed the sales agent to return £1,100 in legal and survey fees, as well as an additional award of £200. The fact that such a paltry penalty has been applied shows the desperate need to reform the market. Just over £1,000 refunded for a blatant mis-description of the biggest purchase anyone is likely to make is hardly a deterrent to those wanting to make a fast buck.

If so many people say that they feel they were not fully informed about what they were being asked to sign up to, I can only conclude that the problem does not lie with them. A survey of my constituents found that 92% who had used a recommended solicitor said that they felt they were not fully informed about the ground rent terms ahead of purchasing their home. That goes down to 71% for those who had chosen their own solicitor. Almost two thirds of those who responded said they had used a solicitor recommended to them by the developer, a figure that increased to 77% among those who had purchased their property using the Government’s help to buy scheme.

We have heard anecdotally that purchasers have felt pressured to use a solicitor recommended by the developer, and in some cases they felt they were required to use a recommended solicitor. In other cases they were told that only a recommended solicitor who was familiar with the development could meet the short amount of time imposed by the developer to complete the purchase. Again, why developers were insisting on time limits as short as four weeks to complete purchases is something I have never had an adequate explanation for. We wrote to all the main developers and a number of recommended law firms to ask them questions about this practice. They all denied that they required or pressured customers to use recommended solicitors, but some admitted advising purchasers that panel solicitors would be able to deal with conveyancing more quickly because they had experience of the sites and processes.

Ruth George: I thank my hon. Friend for all the work he has done on this matter. Some of the practices involve offering incentives to people such as a kitchen

upgrade or curtains and carpets being included in the purchase, but such incentives would be forfeited if they did not complete the sale within the prescribed amount of time, thus making people feel they have to go ahead and complete quickly.

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As we heard earlier, when people purchase their home they are focused on the tangible things, not the intangible concept of leasehold and freehold, which in the long run is the most important thing, which is why we are debating it today.

It is fair to say that some solicitors have more familiarity with practices, but the suggestion that there was no actual requirement to use particular solicitors has been exposed. We asked developers a simple question:

“Do you make offers that are subject to the use of a nominated solicitor?”

Barratt Homes told us:

“Our policy is not to make offers contingent on the use of any particular solicitor.”

However, its old terms and conditions state:

“All Barratt offers are subject to the use of a Barratt nominated Independent Mortgage Advisor and Solicitor.”

Persimmon told us:

“It is not company policy to do so.”

Its old terms and conditions state:

“NewBuy scheme is available subject to status, terms and conditions and using a Persimmon-nominated solicitor and/or financial adviser as necessary.”

Taylor Wimpey simply told us no, but its old terms and conditions state:

“Applicants will need to use a Mortgage Broker and Solicitor from Taylor Wimpey’s panel.”

Despite leaseholders paying for legal advice from solicitors who had a duty to act in their best interests at all times, the recommended solicitor model put the relationship between client and solicitor in danger of being a secondary concern.

Bannister Preston is one of the larger firms representing clients caught up in the leasehold scandal, including many from my constituency. However, at the same time as it was doing this, according to its Twitter feed it would often visit developments and make comments about the homes such as:

“quite unbelievable properties, spec and finish.”

Although that description might be true, it was also asked to speak at numerous meetings and training events held for developers, and seems to have enjoyed their hospitality on various occasions. I will not go through all the tweets now, but one from December 2013 sticks in my mind. Staff were invited to a cocktail-making event with the team from Taylor Wimpey and joked about having a hangover. When they woke up the next morning, full of regret for what they had done, wishing they could go back and change it, they had a minor glimpse into what life is now like for many of my constituents stuck with unsellable homes. This might all be innocent, but the perception, at least, is such that the developers need to come before a Select Committee to explain the precise relationship they had with solicitors.

We are pleased that the Government have responded so positively to the consultation on ending unfair leasehold practices. It seems they will address many of the concerns

raised, but I hope that when the Minister replies he will address some of my outstanding questions. Many concerns relate to the ongoing situation that leaseholders find themselves in. The proposal for ground rents to be zero in new long leases is welcome, but there appears to be nothing to tackle the existing leases with onerous ground rent clauses in them. Many are now at the tenth anniversary date, when the ground rent doubles, but it appears from the Government's response that we cannot expect anything to outlaw that particular scam. There also appears to be nothing to deal with the many hidden clauses and charges in leases that come to light only when someone wants to build an extension or even ask a question of their freeholder. Does the Minister agree that charging £108 to ask a freeholder a question is indefensible? What is he going to do to bring relief to those lumbered with such fees?

I hope the Minister will be able to tell us more about the likely timescale for discussions with the Law Commission on making the purchase of freeholds easier, faster and cheaper. He will know from the private Member's Bill that I presented only last month that that is exactly the system we want to see introduced. I hope he will meet with me and other Members of the all-party group to discuss how we can bring the matter to a swift conclusion. As we have heard from Members today, people desperately want a solution. There is a constant stream of cases, bringing different arguments to the property tribunal about the fees and costs for lease extensions and purchases. Wealthy landlords are refining their arguments in every single case to maximise their income, and they inflict further pain on the leaseholder by making them pay for the privilege of having their case tested in the courts. Action cannot come soon enough to end that racket upon a racket.

Only this week I have had two examples from my own constituency of how the current system is not fit for purpose. The first involves Redrow, which is building a lot of properties in my constituency at the moment, mainly three and four-bedroom detached properties, which, for reasons I have never understood, are sold on a leasehold basis. As the Prime Minister has said, there is no good reason for such houses to be sold on that basis, and it appears that even in this case the developers cannot come up with one either. Possibly in anticipation of today's announcement, Redrow has said that future stages of the development will be sold on a freehold basis, which is good news, but of course leaves the question of what to do with the existing properties. As we have heard from other Members today, that creates concern about the future saleability of those properties. I understand that Redrow has agreed to sell the freeholds directly to the leaseholders at a cost of 26 times the ground rent. No explanation has been put forward as to why that figure has been arrived at, but it works out at around £6,000 per property, which is money that not everyone can easily lay their hands on. If everyone does purchase the freehold, it will lead to Redrow pocketing a cool half a million pounds for doing absolutely nothing at all, which highlights perfectly the parasitic nature of leasehold.

Another example highlights a scandal that we need to return to in the future: the practice of spurious service charges. I was contacted the other day by a constituent who received a bill from a management company in charge of a block of four flats in Ellesmere Port. There are no significant common parts, so the service charge

has usually been around £50 a year. All of a sudden, with three weeks' notice, the leaseholders have been asked to find £911 by the managing agents, Compton property management. We have a breakdown of charges, although that raises more questions than answers.

One of my constituents tells me that the only common part is a stairwell that is not cleaned and there are no communal electricity charges, but those are being levied on him, along with grounds maintenance and repairs fees, which again appear to relate to services that are not delivered. As a final insult, there is a separate invoice for landlord building insurance, which is described as a service charge and insurance contribution, and it is payable to a company called Compton Insurance Services Ltd. It appears it has not heard of compare the market; more like corner the market.

Some developers, in recognition of the toxic nature of some of the terms attached to their leases, have introduced a scheme whereby the doubling of ground rents can be converted to the retail prices index at the developer's expense. Taylor Wimpey has led the way in that, but has not been quite as gallant as would at first appear. Not only do other onerous covenants and charges remain in the leases after conversion to RPI, but the leaseholders are required to sign an agreement saying that the arrangement is in full and final settlement of any claims they may have arising from the lease. Why is that insisted on, if nothing has been done wrong in the first place?

Serious questions need to be asked about how the freeholds are passed around from one company to another, sometimes outside this country in tax havens, with secrecy about the ultimate recipients of the substantial income coming from the leases. It cannot be right that in the 21st century the biggest purchase that most people will make in their lives is in the hands of unaccountable, uncontactable modern day lords of the manor who just see people's homes as an entry on a spreadsheet.

It is clear to me from talking to the many people affected by the scandal that when they bought their houses they thought they were doing just that: buying their home. They never contemplated for a moment the possibility that the true owner of their home would be someone whose identity they might never know, who could sell on their interest in the property to someone else, without their knowledge or consent, and that they would be lumbered with fees and charges that would make the likes of Arthur Daley blush. Let us reform the rotten system without further delay, but let us also get answers. Developers need to explain before a Select Committee how the duping of their customers was allowed to start in the first place, how much profit they have made out of this scam, who conceived of leases that now nobody will sign up to, how many properties were made leasehold needlessly, what role lenders and solicitors had in getting leases passed that nobody would touch with a bargepole now, and who exactly are the beneficiaries of the leases now. Until we know the answers to all these questions, we cannot be sure that another abomination of this nature will not happen again.

3.21 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I pay tribute to hon. Members who are present for the debate, and in particular the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and my hon. Friends the Members for Poplar and

[*Ruth George*]

Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) and for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders). Those longer-standing Members have done much groundwork on the issue.

I come to the matter we are debating as a new MP, elected in June; it was one of the first issues that I encountered in my surgeries. It was the one on which the most people expressed concern. They were people who had recently bought new-build properties; having been told that they would be able to buy the freehold in two years and that that would not be a problem, they had since been informed that it would cost at least twice, and sometimes three times, what they were first told. They felt, as many Members have said in the debate, ripped off. Many are first-time buyers, who had been renting a home for years and saved up every last scrap so that they could afford a deposit to buy a house and feel that they were not being ripped off any more; however, when they purchase a leasehold home they still feel that they are under the cosh and do not have control of their home or the fees charged on it.

I welcome the response to the consultation, which the Government issued today. I thank the Ministers concerned. I am particularly pleased about what it says about ending the sale of houses on leasehold as soon as possible. That is important in areas such as mine, where there is a range of homes for sale, either on leasehold or freehold, and people who want to buy a home are confused about what they should do. Often they find, on approaching a sales team, that the team will try their best to sell the property on leasehold, and that only if they persistently refuse will buyers, in some cases, be offered the freehold. However, hundreds of people have already purchased homes without being aware of that, and others were not allowed to buy the freehold even if they pushed to do so. They now feel that their situation is difficult.

I am concerned that the consultation response says that, where land is currently under a leasehold that is being developed, the sale of leasehold homes will still be permitted. I hope that the Government will look at that, because there are many instances in which developers buy rights to develop on certain land, and that can be deemed a leasehold in kind. There are not many estates in my area where that has not happened; so I hope that the Government will look seriously at what constitutes a lease and make sure that that is not a loophole for developers to get round, although I recognise that they say they will make sure that no new leasehold is occurring on land.

My major concern is the existing leaseholders, who are in a poor predicament having saved up and put all their savings, and now their income, into their mortgages. They face charges that they were not aware of, as well as a disproportionate escalation in fees for buying the freehold. I echo what my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston said about sharp selling practices and thank him for the work that he has done to expose what happens when, if solicitors are not quite being forced on buyers, certainly, in my constituency, buyers have been told that the solicitor recommended by the developer is the only one who can manage the Help to Buy system in the east midlands and manage a sale quickly enough for buyers to keep the incentives of carpets and kitchens. People really feel they have been led up the garden path. I hope that the Government will make proposals on that as soon as possible.

I welcome the consultation response about making sure that there is a set formula for buying freeholds by summer 2018, with legislation as soon as can be arranged. However, there are people now in the predicament that they bought a leasehold home and, for various reasons, need to sell it. Some may need to move to assist elderly relatives who need care, or to follow career prospects. Will the Minister consider the possibility mentioned by the hon. Member for Worthing West of reforming the system by which at the first tier tribunal the leaseholder must meet their own legal costs and those of the freeholder? That is used to rip off leaseholders; freeholders instruct Queen's counsel and rack up the legal charges. I hope that such a reform might be a short, quick-fix solution that would help people who are now in a predicament.

I welcome what has been said in the debate and the response to the consultation, and hope that Members on both sides can work together to make it a happier new year for leaseholders in all our constituencies.

3.27 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I want to add to the praise that has been heaped on the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), Leasehold Knowledge Partnership and everyone involved in the all-party group. As we have seen, the debate encompasses an extremely wide range of issues—not least the scandal that so many of my hon. Friends have spoken so passionately about. There are many issues that affect my constituents, from the need for greater transparency about service charges to the huge problems many leaseholders face when trying to rectify damage caused by accidents such as flooding—which might be thought a relatively simple thing.

Today I want to focus on just one pressing issue that is of great concern to hundreds of my constituents—and, in doing so, build on the comments of my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse, and my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury). The issue is liability for the costs associated with interim safety measures and remedial fire safety works on private freehold developments. In the wake of June's horrific Grenfell Tower inferno, three private freehold developments in my constituency failed cladding tests arranged through the Department—the Babbage Point development on Norman Road and two blocks on the New Capital Quay development, all in west Greenwich. I shall run through the latter case in a little detail, to show a wider problem.

New Capital Quay is a new-build development that was completed in 2013-14. It comprises a total of 980 mixed-tenure homes, 658 of which are private. The freeholder is Roamquest Ltd, but the immediate parent company is Galliard Holdings Ltd, and the ultimate holding company is Galliard Group Ltd, so despite the somewhat opaque nature of the ownership structure it is a Galliard development, as both the company structures and all the publicity around it indicate.

In the immediate aftermath of Grenfell, a 24/7 waking watch fire marshal patrol was instituted across the whole development on the basis of consultation with and guidance from the London fire brigade, and in

September a notice of deficiency was issued. Although I have no accurate figures for the total cost associated with both measures, I estimate that it is likely to run into the hundreds of thousands, if not ultimately millions, of pounds.

Residential leaseholders and shared owners on the development, scores of whom have contacted me over recent months, are extremely concerned that Galliard will simply pass those costs on to them, and they have good reason to be worried. With a normal leasehold flat or house, leaseholders are required to pay for the repairs that the lease says they are responsible for, and the freeholder is responsible for structural repairs, but the ACM cladding is not actually in need of repair; it is just incredibly dangerous. There is therefore every reason to believe that its replacement on private freehold developments will be categorised not as a repair but as an improvement or a renewal. That is the position that Galliard has adopted. By happy coincidence, it replied yesterday through its legal representatives to my representations on behalf of residents, which I submitted some time ago.

I am not a lawyer, but I think it is plain as day that, given the unique circumstances post-Grenfell, there is going to be legal complexity surrounding the recovery of costs associated with the interim safety measures and any long-term remedial works on those developments. In each case, it will clearly depend on the lease in question. I think that, in many cases, freeholders will simply attempt to recover the costs from leaseholders. Where they cannot, they will find ways of avoiding paying the costs entirely—for example, by creating a dormant company with no assets and then simply throwing up their hands, as happened in Slough.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth mentioned, some freeholders, to their credit, are shouldering the costs of the post-Grenfell remedial fire safety works themselves as a gesture of goodwill, but as she rightly said, that is the exception, not the rule. I suspect that most will not follow Legal & General's lead, despite the Government's urging that they do so. Although that is disappointing, it is entirely unsurprising, because Legal & General's action is voluntary. Why would any developer or private landlord voluntarily give leaseholders a gift—from their point of view—or cover their costs if they are in a position to evade that responsibility? In the case of New Capital Quay, Galliard maintains that it was fully compliant with the building regulations at the time the development was completed, that the construction was signed off by an approved inspector, and that, as such, it should not be liable for the fact that it is now not compliant. The whole situation is a complete and utter mess.

The important point at a human level is that the cost of the works resulting from what has emerged in the wake of Grenfell, which could run into tens of thousands of pounds for each individual leaseholder, cannot justifiably be recovered from them. The 658 leaseholders and scores of shared owners on New Capital Quay bought their properties in good faith and bear no responsibility whatever for failures in the building regulations regime, but as things stand they are going to be absolutely clobbered. Some are no doubt affluent enough to afford the costs that might come down the line, but many are not and will suffer real hardship as a result. In either case, it is neither fair nor reasonable. From what I have seen, there are no effective means of redress, either

through claims to the National House Building Council or through the advice and support that LEASE is offering. This is a serious problem, and the Government have not yet grasped the extent of it. Ministers need to give it more consideration and thoughtful attention than they have given it so far. I look forward to hearing the Minister's advice to my constituents who are affected and are extremely worried about what the future holds for them.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Does Mr Amesbury want to speak?

Mike Amesbury: No, I withdraw.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): For the benefit of the House, I have called all the Members who have given me notification that they want to speak. I will continue to call other Members, but it would be nice if we could start the winding-up speeches at 4 o'clock or earlier.

3.34 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) and the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) for their work and leadership on this important issue.

Leaseholder reform is often overlooked when it comes to the housing crisis. The reality is that we must view leaseholder reform as part of, not separately from, how we address the injustices of that housing crisis. Leaseholders face a number of exploitative conditions that relate to the way in which housing is seen as an economic investment, not as about homes. That is particularly acute in London, where we have the highest number of leaseholder sales. In my constituency of Battersea, which has become something of a developers' playground in recent years, 83% of all property sales in 2016 were leasehold. As more and more high-rise developments go up, it is crucial that we ensure leaseholders have rights and protections, and that legislation is implemented to stop such exploitation.

One key issue that hon. Members raised, which my constituents have written to me about, is ground rent. With more and more developers selling flats on a leasehold basis, there is an incentive to set ground rent at a higher level and to build hidden charges into leaseholds. Developers have admitted that the returns from selling on ground rents can be up to 35 times the annual ground rent value, and can be more than the amount normally charged to the purchaser of a new build house for the freehold interest at the point of sale.

There is no duty on the freeholder of a house to inform the leaseholder of a change in ownership. Nor does the leaseholder have a "right of first refusal" to buy the freehold interest at that point. One of my constituents' is subject to ground rent that will double every 15 years, which means that her property will become more and more expensive, and will be unsellable if she cannot afford the charges. Over time, the ground rent will rise to hundreds of thousands of pounds for a one-bedroom flat. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) rightly described

[Marsha De Cordova]

this as legalised extortion in some of the worst cases. The Government must act to end this practice, and commit to help those already trapped in unfair and exploitative ground rent schemes. Nobody should be made homeless because of ground rent or trapped in a contract that means that they are unable to move on or afford to maintain the cost of their home.

Mike Amesbury: Does my hon. Friend agree that the evidence presented today and presented to us by constituents points to the fact that people have been mis-sold products? As my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) rightly said, this is the new PPI scandal.

Marsha De Cordova: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. I agree.

It is important that we regulate the new lease models that developers are creating. Shared ownership tenants in the new blocks along the river in my constituency find that the service charges do not seem to match up with the proportion of the housing estate they occupy.

We cannot forget leaseholders on council estates. Any so-called regeneration scheme must give owner-occupier leaseholders the same value and agreement on their flats or a like-for-like buy-in. Council estate residents must not be forced out of their communities when demolitions take place. Another major fear that many council estate leaseholders in Battersea have is the cost of the retrofitting of sprinklers. After the tragedy of Grenfell, councils have rightly sought to ensure that old tower blocks that are more than 10 storeys high have the same safety regulations as new builds. However, the Government are refusing to fund those crucial safety measures. Councils such as Wandsworth are planning to charge leaseholders for the work, which means charges of up to £4,000. Leaseholders on one of my estates—the Surrey Lanes estate—already face charges of £9,500 for recent window works, and they will now be hit with an additional £4,000. There is often an assumption that leaseholders can afford that, but that is totally untrue and misunderstands the circumstances of many owner-occupiers on our council estates.

Cladding is another issue in Battersea. Castlemaine Tower was found to have the dangerous cladding similar to that on Grenfell, and the council are paying to have it removed. In private blocks with that cladding, however, the private freeholder and/or landlord is likely to pass on the huge sums in charges to the leaseholders. I ask the Minister, what plans are the Government making with regards to safety works in the private-rented sector, in particular post-Grenfell, to ensure that leaseholders are not held to ransom by freeholders?

Finally, it is great to see that leaseholder reform is getting a higher profile, and that the work of the APPG is starting to have an effect on Government. As we become a more urban nation, more and more people will be living in apartments and high-rises, so it is crucial that we get things right.

My final, final point, Mr Bone, is to thank you and all hon. Members present, as well as all the parliamentary staff. I wish everyone a very merry Christmas.

3.40 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Last but—least as well! It is a pleasure to serve last under your chairmanship, Mr Bone.

The hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) asked not to be thanked, but I do thank him for securing the debate, and I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick). I have always found the all-party parliamentary group to be a great help when I have tried to pursue the various leasehold issues that my constituents have raised with me.

Many of those issues have already been raised by colleagues. The advantage of speaking late in the debate is that I will not need to rehearse them further. Unforeseen service charges, ground rents increased and even doubled, leaseholders unable to make modifications or sell their homes—the common factor in such problems is the state of confusion, chaos and inconsistency in which the law leaves leaseholders.

In my constituency, residents at The Rise, a development in the west end of Newcastle, have struggled to receive firm or consistent information about how they may purchase the freeholds of their homes. The cost, timeframe and process for doing so is not standardised and is left entirely at the whim of the freeholder. As in similar stories we have already heard, that has caused considerable anxiety, which I am sure everyone in the Chamber recognises.

The area on which I wish to focus has not been mentioned, though it was alluded to by the hon. Member for Worthing West—it is what we should call the charity loophole. I have raised the subject in an Adjournment debate, but the situation is so grotesque that I feel it is incumbent on me to set it out again in this debate. The charity loophole under the 1967 housing legislation is causing huge financial and emotional distress for many of my constituents who own leasehold property in the St Thomas area of Newcastle. They have worked all their lives, invested in property, as they have been encouraged to do, and now face their greatest asset becoming their greatest liability.

I should declare an interest. The landlord of my constituency home in Newcastle, which is funded by the taxpayer, is potentially affected by the situation I am about to outline. Howard Philips and Phyll Buchanan purchased their leasehold house on the open market in 1998. No caveats were raised by the conveyancing solicitors at the time or by the solicitors who handled their remortgage in 2003. They are now in their late 70s and feel that the time has come to move on:

“The house is not suitable for our old age. The cost of maintaining these Victorian Grade II listed houses is substantial and will be a burden for the remaining years on the lease. We cannot easily manage the six flights of stairs or afford to maintain the property”. I should add that the houses are beautiful and in one of the most desirable areas of Newcastle. They cannot downsize, however, because they cannot sell their property. Their lease has less than 70 years remaining and no mortgage company would advance a loan unless the lease was extended. They cannot extend their lease because the charity that owns the freehold, the St Mary Magdalene and Holy Jesus Trust, refuses to do so.

The trust was formed for the benefit of the freemen of Newcastle, their wives and children, and is now a considerable property owner in Newcastle. It owns the

freehold of the St Thomas area of Newcastle as well as numerous properties in that and other areas of the city. There is also an intermediate lessee and managing agent, Home Group, which is a housing association. In refusing to extend the leasehold, the trust is causing misery to leaseholders and forcing some into financial distress. For example, Michael Armstrong said:

“We are a low income family with three children and had planned to pay off our mortgage by selling the house and downsizing once our children had grown up and left the family home.

Due to the fact that we cannot extend our leasehold, or buy the freehold from MMT, we are basically trapped in a very worrying and insecure situation and face the real possibility of losing our family home.”

As time is short, I will not discuss all the many different examples, but I will touch on the complex combination of circumstances that has caused the situation. The specific legal issues relate to the 1967 legislation as modified by section 172 of the Housing Act 1985, which states that if a charity owns a freehold, it is not obliged to sell or extend the lease of houses on its land.

My constituents cannot extend their lease and they cannot buy the freehold. In Mr Philips’s words,

“we are devastated to find that our house is unsalable and our nest-egg is worthless because the charity”—

this is a charity, a benevolent charity—

“that owns the freehold is refusing to extend our lease.”

As we know, under this Government social housing tenants have a right to buy after only two years, but my constituents are not even allowed to extend their lease. How can that be acceptable? As Mr Philips says:

“Every day we have to face this nightmare and it is taking a toll on our health.”

Some might argue that the houses should never have been sold to their tenants, given the complexities of the charitable leasehold system and the need for social housing in Newcastle and elsewhere, but the houses were sold and bought—what faces us now is an issue of social justice. The life’s work of those people is tied up in their property, and control of it is being withheld from them by impersonal, bureaucratic forces beyond their control.

Since the Adjournment debate there has been some progress. The Minister has offered to meet me and, as we have heard, today the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government announced measures to curb abuse of leasehold. That is welcome and a relief to my constituents. Phyll told me today that her first reaction to the Government’s proposals was

“relief that an end to our nightmare might be in sight”.

She also requests that the Minister

“finds solutions to help those of us currently trapped in unsellable homes”,

including

“a transparent and affordable way of buying our freeholds”.

That is a wish that many in the Chamber would echo.

Listening to the debate, I found it hard to believe that we are in the United Kingdom in 2017 and yet have such confusion about property rights in property. This morning during Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions I raised the issue of property rights in data, such as the data Facebook shares, uses and takes from us. That is confusing, but property rights in property—in a property-owning democracy with a well-established legal system—should not be. One would hope that property rights in

property were clear for my constituents at least, so that they did not have to spend their time worrying about how or whether they will be able to remain in their home.

I look forward to the Minister’s response. I would be grateful if he reaffirmed that the charity loophole is in the scope of the Government’s reforms and will not be left for the Law Commission’s review of leasehold law. I wish him, everyone else present and everyone in the House a very merry Christmas. Can he offer my constituents some Christmas relief so that they can enjoy their turkey or whatever in their homes, content that they will be able to realise the benefits of their property?

3.50 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I was delighted that Sir David was in the Chair at the start of the debate—he has a particular personal interest in many of these issues because he chairs the all-party fire safety rescue group—but I was even more pleased to see him hand on the baton for the final lap to you, Mr Bone. We are all grateful to you.

This may be one of the final events this parliamentary term, but I have found it one of the most encouraging. The Government’s announcement is certainly welcome as far as it goes, but as the Minister has heard from every contribution, they need to go further. In many ways, I see the debate as a reflection of Parliament and Ministers coming to terms with the first minority Government for 38 years. I see it as a reflection of the Government recognising that they do not have a domestic policy programme, because it is not covered by their deal with the Democratic Unionist party. I also see it as a reflection of the Prime Minister admitting that policy and market failures in housing over the past seven years were a big part of why her party did so badly at the last election.

Importantly, the debate has shown that Parliament now has a bigger influence on Government decisions and policy than it did at the beginning of 1997—sorry, 1917. *[Interruption.]* Sorry—it really is getting too close to Christmas to make much sense. Parliament now has much greater influence over Government decisions and policy than it did at the beginning of this year, especially when there is cross-party concern or agreement about what needs to be done.

There are three factors behind the strength of the speeches we have heard and the strong momentum for substantial leasehold reform. The first is the all-party group on leasehold and commonhold reform. I cannot pay strong enough tribute to the combined work of the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick). They were pursuing these issues when they were not popular issues and when the all-party group did not have 130 members, as it does now. It is one of the largest and most active groups in Parliament, as the hon. Gentleman said, and it is reinforced by outstanding individual campaigns, not least by my hon. Friends the Members for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) and for High Peak (Ruth George).

I like to think that Labour Front Benchers have done their bit, too, in the past couple of years. We went into the election in June with a commitment to legislate for a cap on the ground rent that leaseholders pay, to ban the use of leasehold for new homes as a matter of course,

[John Healey]

and to carry out an urgent review to try to ensure that we could deal with many of the problems for existing leaseholders that we have heard about. I say to my hon. Friends that, to some extent, this is unfinished business for Labour. We introduced the Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Act 2002 because we wanted to end leasehold for good and provide commonhold as an alternative. That did not work in that decade; we must ensure that it works in this decade.

The second factor is the fact that the industry has stepped up its use of leasehold for newly built homes. The Secretary of State says in his written statement that the proportion of new homes built on a leasehold basis has more than doubled in the past 20 years. He puts the figure at around one in six, although many experts—not least the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership—put it a great deal higher, and Members suggested that that is particularly the case in the north-west. In any event, the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership confirms that at least 260,000 new homes have been built on a leasehold basis since 2010.

The third factor is that greed has clearly got the better of many of the people involved in these arrangements. My right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) said that he sometimes feels that this debate takes place in an echo chamber. We all have constituents who have been ripped off—fleeced—by such leasehold arrangements. In my area, there are regular reports about people who bought their homes on new developments using the solicitor that the builders put great pressure on them to use, who claim and feel that they never realised that they were buying on a leasehold basis, who were not made aware when the freehold was sold on, and who do not know who their ultimate landlord is or how to contact them. A change in the freeholder's management company often leads to price hikes. People have been billed four times a year instead of twice, charged £9 for every letter, and charged an administration fee when they have rung up to ask for information or an analysis of the cost of purchasing the freehold.

Jim Fitzpatrick: Developers have rightly got a hammering this afternoon, but notwithstanding that, does my right hon. Friend accept that there are abuses in the social sector too? Some councils and housing associations used service charges and refurbishment charges as a blank cheque. The Government had to bring in a cap because that was getting out of control. It is not just the private sector that needs to be reformed; the social sector does too.

John Healey: That certainly applies in some cases and it is a good point, but it remains the case that the worst examples that have been cited in the debate resulted from big developers' greed. For some developers, leasehold has become a golden cash cow. For many freeholders, it has become a licence to print money. We have found that freeholders have often moved offshore, beyond the reach of any tax system that the UK can bring to bear.

The sale of homes on a leasehold basis may well have started in the north-west, as the hon. Member for Worthing West indicated, but it is clear that the practice has spread widely across the country. Members from the north-west are strongly represented in the Chamber, but we have also heard from Members from the south-east,

the south-west, Yorkshire, London, the north-east, the east midlands and even north Wales. [Interruption.] North Wales rather than the north-west, despite the proximity of the national boundary.

As I said, the Secretary of State's statement is welcome as far as it goes, but I would like to tempt the Minister to go a little further. The Secretary of State published a summary of consultation responses alongside his press release and written statement, but we have not yet had the Government's policy response to the consultation. When can we expect that? He plans to introduce "legislation to prohibit the development of new build leasehold houses".

When will we get that? He plans to restrict the

"ground rents in newly established leases of houses and flats to a peppercorn"

level. How will he do that, and when? He talks about

"addressing loopholes in the law to improve transparency and fairness".

What loopholes, and when?

The Secretary of State is also asking big developers to stop using Help to Buy to purchase leasehold homes and encouraging them

"to take early steps to limit ground rents"

and to provide a redress scheme for people who are badly affected. What commitment has he got from the big developers to taking those steps, and when will other big developers follow the lead that Taylor Wimpey took on many of these fronts in the summer? As my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse said, the key point is that 5 million current leaseholders will not be covered by future legislation, so what specifically does the Minister plan to do to help those who are trapped in legal leasehold terms, which range from unfair to a total rip-off?

It is a rotten system, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston said. The written ministerial statement says that the Government will be working with the Law Commission on existing leaseholders. Although I welcome last week's announcement by the Law Commission that the unfair terms of residential leasehold will be one of its areas of review, it is one among 14, in what is the 13th programme of law reform. To quote what the commission said in announcing it:

"This is a substantial body of law reform work on which the Commission hopes to start work over the next three years...As such, inclusion in the 13th Programme is not a guarantee that the Commission will be able to take forward work immediately across all areas."

Will the Government help to fund the work that the Law Commission needs to do? Will they, with the Law Commission, be early in setting a firm timetable for the work to be completed? My fear is that we will not see legislation via this route this side of a general election.

I cannot let the debate pass without making some observations on the remarks of my hon. Friends the Members for Poplar and Limehouse, for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) and for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) about concerns in this area post the terrible tragedy of Grenfell Tower. The consequences of Grenfell for residents and owners in other high-rise residential tower blocks are becoming clearer, and the wider weaknesses in the leasehold system are thrown into sharp and urgent relief by the challenges that come from Grenfell:

the immediate fire safety measures that need to be put in place, the substantial remedial work required in many cases, and the question of who really is responsible and who really should be paying for that.

There is also the question of whether some freeholders will abuse or misuse the first-tier tribunal system to try to prove themselves against any challenge for passing on these very heavy costs to leaseholders. There is a concern among some social landlords that such practices will be followed and certainly a concern about privately-owned residential blocks.

The Grenfell Tower fire was a national disaster. People expect national leadership and a national response from Government. It exposed—we had only really had warnings from coroners' reports on earlier fatal fires—the complete collapse of the national system of building control and regulation. Therefore, the national Government must take some responsibility by putting in place measures immediately to ensure that it does not happen again.

If the Government were willing, for instance, to reconsider their point-blank refusal to help fund some of the costs that social landlords face in completing essential remedial fire safety work, they could make it a condition of any funding help they give that leaseholders are protected from bearing any of that cost. They could consider, for instance, a Government-backed loans scheme for private landlords who genuinely struggle to cover the costs themselves. The Government could also consider a similar condition that might help to address the concerns the Minister has heard from some of my hon. Friends about the position of leaseholders in private high-rise blocks. In any case, I ask the Minister to reflect carefully on the points that have emerged in the debate, linked to the work required after Grenfell Tower, and early in the new year to make a clear statement on what the Government will do to try to deal with the concerns for leaseholders with both private landlords and social landlords.

I end where the hon. Member for Worthing West ended. He rightly said that, together, the Government, Parliament and outside experts can at this point make some really important changes for the good, for the future. He made a particular proposal to the Minister, which I think has backing from everyone in the Chamber. Will the Minister undertake to consider having a debate on these concerns in Government time in the Chamber in the new year? As the hon. Gentleman said, that would be a very useful next step, especially if it were not left until the last day of the parliamentary term, just before Easter.

4.5 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Alok Sharma):

It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) on securing this incredibly important debate on leasehold. As Members have made clear, he—along with the hon. Members for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) and Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) and other members of the all-party parliamentary group on leasehold and commonhold reform—has demonstrated real dedication to championing leasehold reform.

We have had incredibly thoughtful contributions today. This is Parliament at its best, where we all come together and speak with one voice. We have had humour in the

debate, but it has underlined a serious issue that colleagues care deeply about, and we know that our constituents care about it as well.

To respond to the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), in terms of the broken housing market, I hope we all acknowledge that the reason we are where we are is because successive Governments over many decades have not presided over the building of enough homes. In terms of leasehold, successive Governments have left the business unfinished. I absolutely get that what the House wants from this Government is to finish that piece of business.

I have attended and spoken to a packed meeting of the all-party group and heard at first hand the anguish of some of those affected by the leasehold issues we are discussing. Indeed, many Members have highlighted individual cases from their constituencies. I am also grateful for the welcome from right hon. and hon. Members for this morning's written ministerial statement to the House from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. As has been said, today we have also responded to the consultation on leasehold held earlier this year. My remarks will very much echo the Secretary of State's statement.

A number of colleagues noted this, but in February the Government's housing White Paper, "Fixing our broken housing market," set out our commitment to promoting fairness and transparency for the growing number of leaseholders. I do not want to rehearse the whole issue around leaseholders and the number of people affected—we know that a lot of people have leasehold homes.

Of course, ground rents on many such properties have risen from historically small sums to hundreds of pounds a year. As colleagues have pointed out, in some cases ground rents have spiralled into significant sums. That is why the Government acted and published a consultation over the summer. I am grateful to everyone who participated and provided evidence—particularly Members of the House and of course the all-party group. The consultation received an overwhelming response: there were more than 6,000 replies, and the vast majority were in favour of widespread leasehold reform.

I repeat the point made by the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson) about being in an echo chamber when we have talked about the issues affecting constituents. It is clear that many purchasers did not make an informed choice to buy a leasehold house. Far too many reported being surprised to find that their home had been sold on to a third-party investor, and the cost of buying the freehold had risen considerably—as we have heard, sometimes running into tens of thousands of pounds.

David Hanson: Is that not a *prima facie* case of mis-selling?

Alok Sharma: I will come on to talk about the work that the Government will be doing with the Law Commission.

We have also heard of consumers with very onerous ground rent terms who are effectively trapped in their own homes, unable to find a buyer. Some of those people have not been able to get redress and do not know where to turn for support. It is clear that the leasehold system as it stands is not working in many consumers'

[Alok Sharma]

best interests. Even most developers accept that use of leasehold for new build houses, unless in exceptional circumstances, is entirely unjustified. This has got to stop. That is what we all want.

The Secretary of State's statement noted that, alongside publishing a response to the consultation, the Government have set out a package of measures to crack down on unfair practices, which includes introducing legislation to prohibit the development of new build leasehold houses, other than in exceptional circumstances. The Government intend to ensure that future legislation to ban the sale of leasehold houses applies to land that is not subject to an existing lease from today's date. We will continue to work with the sector and other partners to consider the case for exemptions to the policy and its retrospective application, in particular to mitigate any undue unfairness.

We are restricting ground rents in new leases of houses and flats to a peppercorn, and we are addressing loopholes in the law—for example, to ensure that freeholders have a right to challenge unfair service charges. We are also working with the Law Commission to support existing leaseholders, including by making the purchase of a freehold or extension of a lease easier, faster, fairer and cheaper and, of course, by reinvigorating commonhold.

The right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne and the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) raised the issue of the Law Commission. I can confirm that the Government will be funding the work. We will be funding five lawyers and five research assistants, a proportion of the managers' and the commissioners' time and some peer review and external consultancy. That work will start in January.

John Healey: I am grateful to the Minister for giving us that answer. I think everyone will be encouraged and will welcome that. He indicates that work will begin in January 2018. Can he indicate when that work is scheduled to be completed?

Alok Sharma: If the right hon. Gentleman bears with me, I will come on to that.

As I said, we will be working with the Law Commission. A number of Members raised the issue of freeholds being sold on to investment companies. Our view is very clear: where houses are sold on unfair terms, we have asked developers to be proactive and arrange for the leasehold contract to be put on a fair footing. The right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth), who is not in his place, asked whether there should be a requirement for developers not to sell on the freehold at this point. I am sure that developers will be listening intently to the tone of this debate and understanding precisely how Parliament feels about this matter.

We will, of course, want to ensure that there is appropriate support for existing leaseholders with onerous ground rents, and we will work with the ombudsman and trading standards to provide comprehensive information on the various routes to redress. However, that is not enough. We also want to see developers and investors going further with their compensation schemes. I want to see that support extended to all those with onerous ground rents, including second-hand buyers.

A number of Members, including the hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glendon), mentioned Help to Buy. Given the Government's position on leasehold, we do not think it is appropriate for the Help to Buy equity loan scheme to support the sale of leasehold houses. We cannot impose a new requirement on developers under existing contracts, but we expect them to work with us to take forward that change ahead of legislation. The Secretary of State has today written to all developers to ask them to stop using Help to Buy equity loans for the purchase of leasehold houses, to encourage them to take early steps to limit ground rents and to ask those that have customers with onerous ground rents to provide the necessary redress as soon as possible. Both the Secretary of State and I will be keeping a very close eye on progress in that area.

I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston for proposing a Bill on leasehold reform, and for the considerable efforts that he and other colleagues have made to put it on the agenda. This is a highly complex area, covering multiple Acts of Parliament, which is why we will be working closely with the Law Commission as part of its 13th programme of law reform, announced last week. We want to ensure that we prioritise making the process of buying a freehold easier, and to support existing leasehold house owners, and we will seek to bring forward solutions by the summer recess of 2018.

Chi Onwurah: Will the Minister to clarify whether the proposals that will be brought forward by the summer will address the charity loophole?

Alok Sharma: As the hon. Lady knows, we are meeting in the new year to discuss the issue of the charity loophole and specifically her case. My officials are in touch with the charity, and I would be very happy at that point to discuss the details. Of course, if she wants to feed some suggestions into the work that we are doing more widely with the Law Commission, I would be very happy to receive them from her.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I suggest that either the Minister or his officials should have a round table with the charities, the National Trust and the Charity Commission, and spell out to those people that, although the law at present may give them the right to say no, they ought to ask whether it fits with their charitable purposes to do so. Perhaps they ought to say yes, because charities are supposed to do good for people.

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend makes an interesting suggestion. I will take that away and come back to him.

Certainly, in bringing forward legislation we will continue to work with stakeholders, including the APPG, to ensure the best outcomes for consumers. We have heard many ideas in this debate. We want to ensure that our plans do not have an adverse impact on supply, and we will work with the sector to consider the case for exemptions.

It is important that we get the detail right. We are committed to ensuring that our reforms deliver a fairer and more transparent system for both existing and future leaseholders, and to stamping out the leasehold abuses that have existed to date. I have written formally today to the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston to confirm that I welcome the opportunity to

meet him early in the new year to discuss further his thoughts for a Bill. I am open to a dialogue with the APPG about our thoughts as we move forward.

A number of colleagues have talked about building regulations. As we know, on Monday Dame Judith Hackitt published her interim independent review of building regulations and fire safety. It is important that leaseholders have access to specialist advice to understand their rights. The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse, the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth and my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West mentioned LEASE; we can confirm that the Secretary of State announced on 4 December that the Department for Communities and Local Government is providing additional funding to the Leasehold Advisory Service over 2017-18 and 2018-19 to provide a dedicated advice and dispute resolution service for those leaseholders affected. I can also confirm that we will conduct an internal review of the wider landscape of support and advice to leaseholders, to ensure it is fit for purpose in the new legislative and regulatory environment.

To cover a few other points that were raised, the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse, the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth and, of course, the shadow Minister raised the issue of costs related to cladding. The Secretary of State has said that local authorities and housing associations with which we are engaging are not passing on the costs of essential works. He has also encouraged private sector freeholders to follow suit, and some have. I spoke to L&G, the company mentioned by the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth, and I am delighted with the approach it is taking. I realise there are some instances where costs are being passed on. That is why we are providing additional funding to LEASE, as I have just mentioned, to provide leaseholders with the advice and support they need.

Colleagues have raised a number of issues. The right hon. Member for Delyn asked about homes built in Wales by companies that are not from Wales. Of course, whether Wales abolishes leasehold is a devolved matter. However, I can confirm that my officials have been working with the Welsh Assembly to inform them of our plans on leasehold, and we will continue to liaise with them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West talked about forfeiture. I can confirm that that is being considered by the Ministry of Justice. There are protections in place, but I agree that reform is needed. We will continue to work with the Ministry of Justice to take this matter forward. I also noted his point about the National Trust, but as he knows, National Trust properties are exempt from enfranchisement under the Leasehold Reform Act 1967.

If I understood him correctly, my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) asked whether we were looking to abolish leasehold. Leasehold needs reform, and although in certain cases it is an established structure that can work well, we want to make sure that there is fairness in the way that the system operates.

Liz McInnes: The Minister has not addressed the point that I raised. I wrote to him several weeks ago about my constituents receiving unreasonable demands

from the landlord for payments for historical alterations. I would appreciate it if he would commit to answering that letter.

Alok Sharma: Let me apologise to the hon. Lady if we have not been answering our letters in a timely fashion. I will make sure that that letter is answered as a matter of urgency. She is absolutely right. She raised the issue about limited ground rents and the impact on leaseholders. As I said earlier, we have asked developers to contact homeowners regarding unfair terms. We will keep a close eye on that, and I will respond more fully to her.

I hope colleagues feel that we are making progress, and that we understand there is more to do on this. We said earlier this year that we would act, and I believe that we have done that so far. We are resolved to reforming leasehold, and ultimately to promoting fairness in the system.

4.22 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley: I am grateful to you for chairing the debate, Mr Bone. We all thank the Minister, not only because he has responded to many of the points made today, but because he has been one of the people responsible for carrying forward the work and initiative of his predecessor, Gavin Barwell. When Gavin Barwell spoke at the LEASE conference a year ago, he shocked people by telling the truth: LEASE should be there for leaseholders and nobody else; that we should be unequivocally on the side of the ordinary person; and that those looking for good, fast-buck investments in the leasehold field better start thinking of something different.

On the Minister's point about the National Trust, although it may have an exemption, as our right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) has said, why should it choose to use it? Is that right, fair or necessary? The same applies to charities in the north-east, too.

The debate was essentially about two points, and one was whether we can get commonhold to work. I have in my hand a paper from the 11 September meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on leasehold and commonhold reform by Philip Rainey QC, who talks about the necessary reforms needed to launch a commonhold mark 2. He talks of how to level the playing field by eliminating the comparative benefits of long leasehold and how the playing field can be tilted towards commonhold. He suggests some very simple incentives—one of which might be a change to the stamp duty land tax on development land, which would give a simple signal and would probably get people moving quite fast.

He also says there should be some kind of compulsion or sunset clause, some way of dealing with conversion and then a relaunch. I will not go into the rest of his paper, but it is available to the Department and it should be taken forward. Again, perhaps a roundtable on that, with experts brought in, would be useful.

A lot of professionals are involved in the leasehold field, and the regulatory system has failed. I apologise if I confused the wrongs of Dudley Joiner with the wrongs of Benjamin Mire in a previous debate, but Benjamin Mire was in the trade and held judicial office in the property tribunal. He was investigated by the Judicial Conduct Investigations Office, which was about to throw

[*Sir Peter Bottomley*]

him out of that office, but he resigned just before it could. He had clearly committed an offence under the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors' terms, yet clever lawyers, who delayed the case beyond the time limits, allowed him to get away scot-free.

Dudley Joiner, with this Right to Manage Federation, has, through various degrees of insolvency and poor advice to a number of leaseholders, managed to get leaseholders to lose lots of money. He is the sort of person who could resign from one of the regulatory bodies—it is not compulsory to be in them—and apply to join another. The same thing applied when the Tchenguiz interest owned Peverel, which was involved in several of the biggest leasehold scandals over the past 20 years. Peverel and its subsidiary, Cirrus, abused their position in blocks of leasehold flats, but they could actually apply not to be struck off by the Association of Retirement Housing Managers.

The same applies to Sally Keeble, who was formerly a Member of Parliament, and who resigned as regulator of the Association of Residential Managing Agents and gave five good reasons why voluntary regulation was not working—some were to do with clients' funds and others to do with the powers that people should be carrying forward. We then come to the person we were told was appointed under the terms of the Nolan principles, Roger Southam, the present chairman of LEASE. I can send to the Minister privately the list of points, which I am sure his Department has already, of how Roger Southam used to advertise how he could help to get more money out of leaseholders. How can that sort of person, under the Nolan principles, be appointed to chair LEASE?

When people were appointing other members of LEASE, did they consult explicitly with the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership and its trustees—people who would not actually want to run LEASE themselves, although they provide equivalent services in some ways—on who they think would be a suitable appointment? It seems to me that one always needs to ask people in the field what their views are. That is only consultation, not necessarily giving them the power of decision, although some of the things they knew should certainly have been used as a veto against those making the appointments.

I could go further, but before we come to the end of the debate and the year let me list some points. We have heard a whole series of examples of leasehold abuses. On leasehold enfranchisement and the extension of leases, which brings us to the James Wyatt point through Parthenia and the issue of hedonic regression, I think

the Government really have to get involved in that case. We should not let it be possible for the law to be set by judges, just because expensive barristers are clashing heads like a couple of bulls pushing against each other. We should actually ask what the public purpose, the public policy and the public interest of the law is and get directly involved.

I referred to commonhold and the ground rent issue, and we can certainly learn from the ground rent redemption issue in Northern Ireland, which I hope Ministers have looked at; from today's announcement, it looks as though they have. I would spend more time on park homes if I could. However, it is worth mentioning, in case the Devon and Cornwall police is watching. Has it yet managed to find the 40-foot-long trailer stolen from Sonia McColl's yard? She took up the issue of park home residents and, like Tony Turner, with his residents' alliance, has been subject to incredible abuse. Of course, the biggest abuse is to have one's home stolen, and hers has been.

I spoke about the regulation of managing agents. We have not fully dealt with the right to manage, but essentially, if any group of leaseholders asks for the right to manage, the presumption should be that they get it. They should not have to go through legal hoops and try to find every other leasehold owner to try to get permission. The presumption should be that, if they ask for it, they should have it. I am glad that the Law Commission programme has been referred to. Cladding has been covered by the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse.

This debate is only a stepping stone, but it is an important one. The people who deserve the credit are our constituents who raise the issues with us. We are only here to be the functionaries. We should be the people who turn their cases of injustice into a system in which it does not happen to more people in the future, and in which those who are already stuck in these terrible conditions have the chance of an easier life. Someone who has a home—whether a park home, a leasehold home or a freehold home, or if they are a tenant—deserves a fair life and to not spend time worrying about their money or their lives. I finish by wishing everyone a merry Christmas.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered leasehold and commonhold reform and leasehold abuses.

4.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 21 December 2017

PRIME MINISTER

Infected Blood Inquiry

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): As the Government announced last month, a full statutory inquiry into the infected blood scandal will be established under the Inquiries Act 2005, and sponsored by the Cabinet Office. The inquiry will have full powers, including the power to compel the production of documents, and to summon witnesses to give evidence on oath.

We are today setting out the next steps.

The Cabinet Office has now completed its analysis of the responses to the consultation on the format of the statutory inquiry into infected blood announced in July. In addition a series of roundtable meetings were held earlier this month with individuals and groups representing those affected.

The Government committed to making an announcement regarding the chair of the inquiry before Christmas, taking into account the views we have received. We are therefore announcing today our intention to appoint a judge to chair the inquiry. We will make a further statement on who that judge will be in the new year and we will be discussing with them the composition of the inquiry panel.

We would like to thank each and every person who took the time to respond to the consultation, and to share their views and experiences. We understand how difficult these issues must have been to describe and we are grateful for the frankness and honesty with which people have shared their experiences. The responses to the consultation have been carefully considered by Cabinet Office officials. We can assure the House and everyone who contributed that the findings will be passed to the proposed chair to help inform the discussions regarding the draft terms of reference, on which we expect there will be further consultation.

In accordance with the Inquiries Act 2005, colleagues in the devolved Administrations will be consulted as the terms of reference are finalised.

A further statement will be made in the new year.

[HCWS388]

CABINET OFFICE

Prosperity Fund Annual Report 2016-17

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): I wish to update the House on how the Government have been supporting poverty reduction and global and UK prosperity using the cross-Government Prosperity Fund (PF).

Details of the Prosperity Fund, its set-up, strategy, country and sector focus, and projects funded in 2016-17 are set out in the first annual report. A copy has been placed in the Library of the House and has been published on gov.uk The publication of this first report reflects the Government's commitment to transparency in the delivery of official development assistance.

The cross-Government Prosperity Fund replaced the FCO's Prosperity Fund in April 2016, as part of a new, more strategic approach to promoting prosperity globally in line with National Security Council objectives. The Prime Minister announced the creation of the £1.3 billion cross-Government Prosperity Fund in the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR). This has since been revised to £1.2 billion following revisions to aid allocations.

The Prosperity Fund is a key element of the UK Aid Strategy 2015. Using primarily official development assistance (ODA) resources, the fund promotes economic reforms in developing countries which will contribute to a reduction in poverty. The fund supports global and UK prosperity by removing barriers to trade, building prosperity partnerships, and creating opportunities for business, including UK business. It enables the UK to deepen relationships in countries across the globe.

Parliamentary accountability for taxpayers' money spent via the Prosperity Fund is provided primarily through the International Development Committee (IDC) Select Committee. The IDC Sub-Committee on ICAI (Independent Commission for Aid Impact) is planning to take evidence from ICAI and Prosperity Fund officials in December.

The Prosperity Fund spent £63 million, of which £5 million was non-ODA, in its first year across targeted project interventions, capability and capacity building, research and analysis and knowledge transfer. Projects focused on countries with stubborn development challenges and were designed to help inform an effective strategy for running larger multiyear programmes from 2017-18 onwards.

Projects are helping partner countries develop the business environment, infrastructure, healthcare, urban planning, financial services and low carbon energy they need to achieve inclusive and sustainable growth. Projects also consider opportunities for promoting gender equality and inclusion. The Fund is monitoring and evaluating progress against Sustainable Development Goal 5, to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls".

[HCWS385]

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Leasehold and Commonhold Reform

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): The Government's housing White Paper, "Fixing our broken housing market" set out our commitment to promoting fairness and transparency for the growing number of leaseholders.

Leasehold has been part of the UK's housing landscape for generations, usually put to sensible use in buildings with shared spaces and infrastructure, such as blocks of flats. But far too many new houses are being built and

sold in this way. The proportion of new build houses that are leasehold has doubled over the past 20 years, accounting for 15% of all new build house sales today. In some parts of the country, it is increasingly difficult to purchase a new build home on any other basis.

Ground rents on many of these types of properties have also risen from historically small sums to hundreds of pounds per year. In some cases ground rent terms can spiral into very significant sums—literally thousands of pounds. Leasehold should not be a means of extracting ever more cash from the pockets of already overstretched house buyers.

The Government published a consultation over the summer, “Tackling unfair practices in the leasehold market”, which ran for eight weeks from 25 July to 19 September. I am very grateful to all those who have participated in this consultation and have provided evidence, including Members of this House and the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Leasehold and Commonhold.

The consultation received an overwhelming response with over 6,000 replies, and the vast majority in favour of widespread reform. It is telling that people with experience of buying and living in a leasehold property are the keenest proponents for change.

It is clear from the responses that many purchasers did not make an active or informed choice to buy a leasehold house, and were not always aware of the medium and long-term costs associated with this. Far too many reported being surprised to find that their home had been sold on to a third-party investor, with the cost of buying the freehold having risen considerably—sometimes running into tens of thousands of pounds.

We also heard of consumers with very onerous ground rent terms who are effectively trapped in their own homes, unable to find a buyer. Some of these people have not been able to access redress, and do not know where to turn for support.

It is clear that the system as it stands is not working in consumers’ best interests. Even most developers and institutional investors on freehold accept that, in the majority of cases, use of leasehold for new build houses is entirely unjustified.

This has got to stop. As I have previously stated, as a Government committed to building a fairer society, I do not see how we can look the other way while these practically feudal practices persist.

Therefore, today I can announce that alongside publishing a summary of responses to the summer consultation, this Government are setting out a package of measures to crack down on unfair leasehold practices. This includes:

- introducing legislation to prohibit the development of new build leasehold houses, other than in exceptional circumstances; restricting ground rents in newly established leases of houses and flats to a peppercorn (zero financial value);

- addressing loopholes in the law to improve transparency and fairness for leaseholders and freeholders; and

- working with the Law Commission to support existing leaseholders—including making buying a freehold or extending a lease easier, faster, fairer and cheaper; reinvigorating commonhold to provide greater choice for consumers; and to take forward the work in our recent call for evidence on regulating managing agents (“Protecting consumers in the letting and managing agent market: a call for evidence”).

I also want to ensure there is appropriate support for existing leaseholders with onerous ground rent terms. We will work with the ombudsmen and trading standards to provide leaseholders with comprehensive information on the various routes to redress. But I also want to see developers and investors going further with their compensation schemes. I want to see this support extended to all those with onerous ground rents, including second-hand buyers, and for customers to be proactively contacted.

Given the Government’s position, we do not think it is appropriate for the help to buy equity loan scheme to support the sale of leasehold houses. It is not possible to impose new requirements on developers under existing contracts, but we expect them to work with us to take forward this change ahead of legislation.

I can announce that today I have written to all developers to ask them to stop using help to buy equity loans for the purchase of leasehold houses; to encourage them to take early steps to limit ground rents; and to ask that those who have customers with onerous ground rent terms provide the necessary redress as soon as possible. I will be keeping a close eye on progress and will explore measures that could be pursued to take action if necessary.

This is a highly complex area covering hundreds of pages of legislation and multiple Acts of Parliament. That is why we will work closely with the Law Commission as part of their 13th programme of law reform. We will prioritise making the process of buying a freehold easier, to support existing leasehold house owners, and will seek to bring forward solutions by summer recess 2018. This will be followed by bringing forward new legislation when parliamentary time allows.

In bringing forward legislation we will continue to work with stakeholders to ensure the best outcome for consumers. We want to ensure that our plans do not have an adverse impact on supply and will work with the sector to consider the case for exemptions. Where land is currently subject to a lease, developers will continue to be able to build and sell leasehold houses on that land. However, the Government will ensure that future legislation to ban the sale of leasehold houses applies to land that is not subject to an existing lease at the date of publication of this statement. We will consider the case for exemptions to the policy and its retrospective application, in particular to mitigate any undue unfairness. We will also make sure that where leasehold is necessary it is delivered on terms that are favourable to the homeowner.

It is important that we get the detail right. We are committed to ensuring that our reforms deliver a fairer and more transparent system for both existing and future homeowners, and to stamping out the abuses of the leasehold system which have existed to date.

[HCWS384]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Bovine TB

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): Today I am updating the House on the implementation of the Government’s strategy to eradicate bovine TB in England by 2038.

The strategy continues to deliver results. Earlier this year, England applied to the European Commission for officially TB-free (OTF) status for half the country and

a recent peer-reviewed scientific study showed a significant reduction in TB breakdowns after two years of badger control in the first two cull areas.

Bovine TB remains the greatest animal health threat to the UK. Dealing with the disease is costing the taxpayer over £100 million each year. In 2016 alone over 29,000 cattle had to be slaughtered in England to control the disease, causing devastation and distress for hard-working farmers and rural communities.

The Government are continuing to take strong action to eradicate the disease and protect the future of our dairy and beef industries. Today I am announcing plans to enhance and strengthen our disease surveillance programme, calling for applications to our badger vaccination grant scheme and introducing enhanced compensation arrangements for compulsorily slaughtered pigs, sheep, goats, South American camelids and captive deer.

The new plans will see the introduction of six-monthly routine testing for bovine TB for most herds in the high-risk area of England. The timing and communication of this increase in testing frequency will be discussed with the farming industry and in implementing it we will learn lessons from changes in the edge area of the country, where more herds will transition to six-monthly testing from January 2018. The changes will help vets identify and tackle infection in herds more quickly, helping to stop the spread of disease to new areas.

Although it does not provide complete protection or cure infected animals—which continue to spread TB—badger vaccination has a role to play. Therefore, applications for the “badger edge vaccination scheme” are now open, with over £700,000 of grant funding available to private groups wishing to carry out badger vaccination in the edge area of England. Groups will receive at least 50% funding towards their eligible costs and the scheme aims to create a protected badger population between the high-risk and low-risk areas of England, and prevent further spread of the disease.

New compensation arrangements for pigs, sheep, goats, deer and camelids which have to be slaughtered as a result of bTB will come into force on 2 January 2018. These will bring statutory compensation for non-bovine farmed animals in line with Scotland and Wales.

There is broad scientific consensus that badgers are implicated in the spread of TB to cattle. This year, effective, licensed badger control operations were completed by local farmers and landowners in 11 new areas and eight existing areas. This shows that badger control can be delivered successfully on a much wider scale than before. Alongside our robust cattle movement and testing regime, this will allow us to achieve and maintain long-term reductions in the level of TB in cattle across the south-west and midlands, where the disease is widespread.

The Government are also supporting farmers to take practical action to reduce the risk of infection on their farms, notably by awarding a contract to the Origin Group in September to deliver a new bTB advisory service. The easily accessible service offers clear, practical advice to help farmers in high-risk and edge areas to protect their herds from the disease and manage the impacts of a TB breakdown on their farm. This service is supported by the TB hub, which brings advice from farming experts, vets and government together in one place.

To ensure we have a successful and resilient industry as the UK enters a new trading relationship with the world, we are determined to implement all available measures necessary to eradicate this devastating disease as quickly as possible.

Copies of the cattle measures summary of consultation responses and way forward have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS383]

December Agriculture and Fisheries Council

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): On 11 and 12 December in Brussels, I represented the United Kingdom at the Agriculture and Fisheries Council alongside representatives from the devolved Administrations.

On fisheries, the focus of the Council was EU quota negotiations, involving decisions on fishing opportunities for the next year for quota stocks in the North Sea, Atlantic, the English Channel, Irish and Celtic Seas. Fishing opportunities are set under the rules of the reformed Common Fisheries Policy, which aims to have all stocks fished at sustainable levels by 2020 at the latest.

Prior to the Council, a number of negotiations take place with third countries, such as EU-Norway, which set fishing opportunities for certain stocks. The EU share of these opportunities are endorsed at the Council in December.

In setting out our objectives for the negotiation, the UK Government strongly supported the overall objective of fishing sustainably, based on the principle of maximum sustainable yield (MSY). We supported the aim to set exploitation rates consistent with MSY and to increase the number of stocks set at MSY compared to last year's result. We also supported the introduction of a package of measures to further protect European eels. This package reflected a general concern that urgent action is needed to support recovery of this critically endangered species across its natural range.

As a result of the improving condition of many species, we were able to agree to increase the total allowable catch (TAC) for stocks of importance to the UK. I was, for example, able to secure additional quota for:

North Sea: cod +10%, haddock +23% and anglerfish +20%
Irish Sea: cod +376% and haddock +23%
Eastern Channel: sole +25% and skates and rays +20%
Bristol Channel: plaice +49% and sole +9%

Total fishing opportunities from this year's annual negotiations for 2018 are worth around £754 million, which is nearly £50 million more than for 2017. This includes the value of agreements reached in negotiations between the EU and certain third countries such as Norway which were endorsed at Council. The EU-Norway negotiations included agreement on TACs for cod, haddock, saithe, whiting, plaice and herring in the North Sea.

The agreement means that for 2018, 30 stocks of interest to the UK will be fished at or below MSY. This is out of 44 stocks of interest to the UK for which MSY assessments have been made, and is an increase on 2017 at the EU level, the agreement means that 39 of 66 assessed stocks were exploited within MSY.

Where the latest scientific evidence supports it, the UK argued against unnecessary quota cuts proposed by the European Commission. As a result, this secured the same quota as in 2017 for many species, including anglerfish and pollack in the Celtic Sea and saithe in waters to the west of Scotland.

Challenges remain in areas like the Celtic Sea and on important species such as bass and megrim in the south-west, where action is necessary to cut fishing mortality in order to allow these stocks to recover. I was disappointed that we were unable to mitigate a reduction in TAC for nephrops in the west of Scotland which will concern small vessels working on the west coast. Where necessary, I argued against setting a total allowable catch (TAC) to zero because it would not reduce fishing mortality and would set an unworkable precedent for when such stocks come under the landing obligation. Instead I secured bycatch quotas for whiting in the Irish Sea and west of Scotland, and plaice in the Celtic Sea. The UK worked hard to secure an agreement that strikes the right balance for both our marine environment and coastal communities.

Further restrictions on commercial and recreational bass fishing were agreed. The UK specifically pressed for and secured the removal of a proposed ban on bass angling “catch and release” activity. We also helped ensure the agreement includes a specific undertaking for a review that would consider the scope to allow landings of bass in recreational fisheries in 2018, once the scientific evaluation method for the stock is updated by the end of March.

Finally, proportionate quota uplifts were agreed for demersal stocks subject to the landing obligation in 2018.

The agricultural focus of the Council was a Commission communiqué entitled the “Future of Food and Farming”, which prompted the first Council discussion on the Common Agricultural Policy post 2020. The communiqué highlighted the importance of improving the contribution of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) towards environmental and sustainability goals, and proposed greater member state subsidiarity. In response, I outlined that whilst the future CAP would not apply to the UK, I hoped that the UK and EU could continue to share and learn from each other in meeting what will inevitably be shared challenges. In particular, I noted the potential benefits in terms of simplification as a result of moving to a more outcome-based approach with increased subsidiarity.

Seven further items were discussed under “any other business”:

the European Commission informed Council of the outcomes of the “Modern biotechnologies in agriculture” conference held in Brussels on 28 September 2017

the Czech delegation informed Council of the outcome of the high-level conference on African Swine Fever held in Prague on 8-9 November 2017

the Danish delegation suggested measures to tackle African Swine Fever to the Council

the Slovak delegation presented to Council on Tackling Unfair Trading Practices with a view to achieving a more balanced Food Supply Chain and strengthening farmers’ position

the European Commission informed Council about the stakeholder conference on the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and its future: “Beyond 2020: Supporting Europe’s coastal states communities”

the Spanish delegation informed Council about implementation of the landing obligation, choke species risk in January 2019 the European Commission presented the outcome of the “Our Ocean 2017” conference held in Malta on 5-6 October 2017.

[HCWS386]

HEALTH

Public Health Grants: Local Authorities

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): Today I am publishing the public health allocations to local authorities in England for 2018-19 along with indicative allocations for 2019-20.

Through the public health grant and the pilot of 100% retained business rate funding for local authorities in Greater Manchester, we are investing £3.215 billion for public health in 2018-19. We will be investing over £16 billion for public health over the five years of the 2015 Spending Review until 2020, in addition to what the NHS spends on preventative interventions such as immunisation and screening.

The indicative allocation for 2019-20 will help local authorities to develop and extend their planning, including initiatives better delivered across more than one year. The grant in both 2018-19 and 2019-20 continue to be subject to conditions, including a ring-fence requiring local authorities to use the grant exclusively for public health activity.

Full details of the public health grants to local authorities can be found on gov.uk.

This information will be communicated to local authorities in a Local Authority Circular.

Public health allocations 2018-19,

Public health indicative allocations 2019-20.

The above allocations can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-12-21/HCWS387/>.

[HCWS387]

JUSTICE

International Commercial Settlement Agreements: Enforcement

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lidington): The Government decided in August to opt in to this Council decision which involves the agreement of EU member states to an EU negotiating mandate which sets out the position of the EU in discussions in UNCITRAL on possible instruments on the enforcement of international commercial settlement agreements resulting from conciliation.

In July 2015, UNCITRAL agreed that work should commence to identify issues arising from the enforcement of international settlement agreements and to develop possible solutions. Negotiations to date have decided

that there should be both a draft model law complementing the existing UNCITRAL model law on international commercial conciliation and a draft convention that should have similar provisions, adapted only to the extent necessary for their specific form.

In May 2017, the European Commission decided that the negotiations had reached a stage where there should be a formal EU negotiating mandate. This was adopted in September 2017 when the EU agreed to participate actively in the ongoing work, and authorised the Commission to negotiate the convention at UNCITRAL on behalf of the EU to the extent that the convention may affect or alter EU rules. The next session of negotiations is scheduled for February in New York.

Opting in to the EU negotiating mandate does not commit the UK Government to apply any agreed model law nor to accede to any future convention.

[HCWS390]

Cremation Regulations

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee): I am today announcing that new regulations regarding cremation in England and Wales have been laid before Parliament. The Cremation (England and Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 2017 will come into effect on 6 April 2018.

We are making these changes following our response to our consultation on cremation, published on 7 July 2016, in which we committed to make a number of changes to infant cremation regulations and practice.

The regulations laid today introduce new forms for use in applying for a cremation. They include a section for the applicant to confirm their wishes regarding the

return of ashes following the cremation. The applicant will be able to amend their wishes in writing at any time after they apply for the cremation, including specifying what should happen to the ashes if they did not originally do so when they applied for the cremation. The forms also provide a new section to make applicants aware that in some rare circumstances, such as in the cremation of a stillborn or very small baby, no ashes may be recovered. These changes will provide clarity for bereaved parents at a difficult and stressful time.

There have been very rare occasions when the applicant for a cremation has later been implicated in the death of the person cremated, or has been convicted of a violent offence against the bereaved, such as the parent of a deceased child, and from their prison cell has refused the return of the ashes to the family of the deceased. To address this, the regulations provide a discretion for the cremation authority in exceptional circumstances to release cremation ashes to someone other than the applicant. We will provide guidance to cremation authorities on the exercise of this power.

These regulations allow for the first time for cremation forms to be issued in Welsh, supporting our commitment made in the 2015 St David's Day agreement to ensure that forms relating to important life events and civic duties can be completed in Welsh. They also provide for the electronic signing of cremation forms, enabling the submission of cremation forms by electronic means. Finally, these regulations correct a cross reference to the Environmental Permitting (England and Wales) Regulations 2016.

I would like to thank the national cremation working group who have been working with the Ministry of Justice as we have progressed this work.

[HCWS389]

Petition

Thursday 21 December 2017

OBSERVATIONS

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Civilian protection in Syria

The petition of residents of Heysham, Morecambe and surrounding areas

Declares that civilians should be protected from hostile forces in the war-torn nation of Syria.

The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to pressure the government to take all action necessary in providing humanitarian assistance to those in need and to work with other nations to impose a no-fly zone over civilian territory, promoting peace that contributes to the stability of the country.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Official Report*, 20 November 2017; Vol. 631, c. 5P.]

[P002082]

Observations from the Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt):

The UK Government have pledged £2.46 billion in humanitarian aid in response to the Syria Crisis, and are working with international partners to achieve a political settlement that ends the suffering.

The UK Government are deeply concerned about the appalling humanitarian tragedy that is unfolding in Syria. Over half the pre-war population have been displaced from their homes and the UN assesses that 13.1 million inside Syria are in need of humanitarian assistance. We are particularly concerned by the ongoing besiegement of around 400,000 people in Eastern Ghouta, and outraged by the continued attacks on civilians, on healthcare facilities and schools. The UK has called on all parties to adhere to agreed ceasefires and cessations of hostilities in Syria, to allow unhindered and sustained humanitarian access, and to respect international humanitarian law.

Across Syria and the region, since February 2012, we have delivered over 26 million food rations, over 10 million medical consultations, over 9 million relief packages and over 8 million vaccines. In April, the UK co-hosted the Brussels Conference on “Supporting the Future of

Syria and the Region”, which built on the outcomes of the February 2016 London conference. The Conference resulted in pledges of \$6 billion for 2017 and \$3.7 billion for 2018-20. The money pledged at the conferences will save lives, give hope and people a chance for the future.

Securing unfettered humanitarian access across Syria is paramount. The UK plays a full role, as part of the International Syria Support Group’s Humanitarian Aid Task Force, supporting the UN and its partners to step up deliveries of food, water and medicine. We continue doing all we can, through diplomatic means, to exert pressure on the regime to enable access as required by UN Security Council Resolutions, and end its deliberate obstruction of humanitarian aid. The regime’s backers, especially Russia, must use their influence to enable humanitarian access. We are also working to secure the renewal of the UN resolution, which authorises cross-border aid deliveries.

The UK supports all genuine efforts to reduce the level of violence in Syria, to protect civilians and create the right conditions for a successful political process. We hope that recent proposals for de-escalation of the conflict through the creation of a number of de-escalation zones will result in a sustained reduction in violence and full and unfettered humanitarian access. Unfortunately, although there has been some reduction in violence in some of the de-escalation areas, there continues to be heavy fighting in others. We will continue to work with international partners to support the reduction of violence.

The practicalities of any form of no-fly zone are complex. History shows that establishing and policing no-fly zones are not simple tasks, especially in intense conflict. Any party seeking to establish a no-fly zone would need to ensure it could be kept safe. Maintaining no-fly zones is therefore likely to require military backing and there are big challenges with any military option that would need to be considered very carefully and in consultation with our partners. However, the UK will continue to prioritise the protection of civilians in Syria and to discuss with our partners the most effective ways of doing so.

Ultimately, the only real solution for peace and stability in Syria is an enduring political solution based on transition away from the Asad regime to a Government representative of all Syrians. We support fully the efforts of the UN Special Envoy, Staffan de Mistura, to resume the political process through negotiations. We call on all parties to support and engage constructively in these negotiations to achieve a political settlement to end this terrible conflict.

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 21 December 2017

JUSTICE

Topical Questions

The following is an extract from Topical Questions to the Secretary of State for Justice on 5 December 2017.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I thought that we had signed up to the all-singing, all-dancing EU prisoner transfer directive, so why, still, are 42% of the 10,000 foreign nationals in our prisons from EU countries? Why do we not send them back to where they came from?

Mr Gyimah: I thank my hon. Friend for that question—again. I think he asked the same question at the previous justice Question Time. As he is aware, even with prisoner transfer agreements, it is down to the receiving country to take those prisoners. We cannot

force them to do so even when we have an agreement in place. The majority of prisoners who we send back to their home countries are sent under the early removal scheme, and 40,000 prisoners have been sent back home since 2010.

[Official Report, 5 December 2017, Vol. 632, c. 891.]

Letter of correction from Mr Gyimah:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) during Topical Questions to the Secretary of State for Justice.

The correct response should have been:

Mr Gyimah: I thank my hon. Friend for that question—again. I think he asked the same question at the previous justice Question Time. As he is aware, even with prisoner transfer agreements, it is down to the receiving country to take those prisoners. We cannot force them to do so even when we have an agreement in place. The majority of prisoners who we send back to their home countries are sent under the early removal scheme, and 40,000 **foreign national offenders** have been sent back home since 2010.

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