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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 31 January 2018

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Cross-border Economic Opportunities

2. **Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What steps he is taking to support cross-border economic opportunities. [903562]

9. **Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con): What steps he is taking to support cross-border economic opportunities. [903570]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): Last week, I hosted the first cross-border Severn growth summit in Newport. More than 350 people attended the event, all looking to strengthen the economic links between south Wales and the south-west. Through our industrial strategy, we want to build on this cross-border collaboration and help create prosperous communities throughout the whole of Wales.

Daniel Kawczynski: Shrewsbury, the county town of Shropshire, relies very heavily on trade with our friends and neighbours across the border in Wales. What discussions has my right hon. Friend had with his counterparts in the Welsh Assembly about dualling the A5, which crosses the border between England and Wales? Will he join me in paying tribute to my neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), who has campaigned assiduously, but who has been very badly injured in a riding accident and is recuperating at home?

Mr Speaker: We wish the right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) a full and speedy recovery, but the fullness of the recovery is more important than its speed.

Alun Cairns: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend and to my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson). Both are assiduous and relentless in their pursuit of the dualling of the A5. I would point them to the second road investment strategy for England. I liaise with the Welsh Government Minister Ken Skates regularly to pursue the issue, because it works for much better co-operation if we bring together investment priorities. My hon. Friend's efforts are paying significant dividends in the negotiations.

Sir David Amess: Every "Gavin and Stacey" fan knows that the journey from Essex to Wales involves the most expensive toll bridge charges in the country, so I am delighted that this Conservative Government have removed the burden of crossing the border for tourists, businesses and commuters generally. Will my right hon. Friend tell the House how he intends to capitalise on that wonderful news?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for reminding us of that iconic "Gavin and Stacey" scene where Smithy is struggling to get into Wales because he has to pay the £6.70 toll charge to cross the bridge. I would point out to my hon. Friend that tolls have been reduced by 20% in the interim, and by the end of the year they will be abolished. That will be one of the biggest stimulus for the Welsh economy in decades. It will provide the opportunity for more and better-paid jobs, and a £100 million boost to the Welsh economy. This is an opportunity for the south-west of England and south Wales to come together as an economic powerhouse to provide better opportunities in the western side of the UK.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): My constituents who work in Bristol and beyond have to put up with chronically overcrowded rail services as fares increase. Will the Secretary of State talk to UK Government Transport Ministers—rail services are not devolved—to sort this out?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Lady makes an important point about public transport in general. The Great Western franchise is out for consultation as we speak, and I encourage her, her constituents and south Wales Members to make representations about the improvements they would like. She talked about overcrowding, but one of the most overcrowded roads in the UK is around the Brynglas tunnels in Newport. I hope the Welsh Government get on with building that road sooner rather than later. After all, the UK Government made money available more than three years ago, and we are frustrated by the lack of response and reaction in building it.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Since assuming office, the Secretary of State has broken a promise to electrify the main line to Swansea; vetoed devolving airport taxes to Wales because he does not want to upset Bristol airport; and not delivered on the Swansea bay tidal lagoon. Is not the reality that his record on the economy is failure, failure, failure?

Alun Cairns: I am disappointed with the hon. Gentleman's tone. I would point to significant wins for Wales over recent years, the most important of which is the fair funding settlement, which provided a 5% uplift—it will be a £67 million uplift in the next financial year and similar sums in subsequent years. Thirteen years of underfunding by the Labour party have been corrected in the first year of a Conservative Administration.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for inviting my district council and my tourism industry to his Severn growth summit. I am also grateful that the tolls will be removed, given that the old Severn bridge is half in my constituency

and the gateway to Gloucestershire, not just Wales. May I urge him, as he continues these cross-border opportunities, fully to involve business and industry in my constituency so that we can take full advantage of growth in the western part of our country?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend's support for the call to abolish the Severn tolls, because that really will be a major boost to his constituency and constituencies across the whole of south Wales. After all, can he imagine a £6.70 charge to do any business between Cardiff and Newport and the impact that that would have? Well, that is really what has been in place between his constituency and the south Wales economy for more than 50 years. Abolishing the tolls is a commitment on which I am pleased to be able to deliver.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the new Under-Secretary of State for Wales, the hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), to his place. They say the first time is always the worst. I understand that he was born on Ynys Môn and that he was a member of the Labour party. We would like to welcome him back, but we might be full.

With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, I would like to congratulate the Welsh Assembly: there was an announcement by Stonewall this morning that it is the No. 1 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender employer in the UK. I will not mention that Swansea City beat Arsenal 3-1 last night.

Manufacturers across the UK consider the world-leading tidal lagoon industry a lifeline for their businesses. Thousands of skilled jobs in cross-border factories are earmarked to supply the lagoons, and they are at risk because the UK Government cannot make a decision. The Secretary of State has said many times that he would love it to happen. The Welsh Labour Government have pledged millions to the Swansea bay tidal lagoon. Hendry says, "It's a no regrets decision." Has the Secretary of State anything constructive to report? In the words of Gavin and Stacey, "What's occurring?"

Alun Cairns: I join the hon. Lady in recognising the Welsh Assembly for its recognition by Stonewall; that is something to be accepted, underlined and recognised. I also recognise, as a City supporter, the success that Swansea had last night. She raises an important point about the Swansea bay tidal lagoon. As I have said previously, I really would like this to happen, as would the whole of the UK Government. After all, we gave planning permission for it after the 2015 general election. We would like to see progress on it, but, clearly, it must be value for money. The Welsh Government have communicated with the UK Government about something that they call "an offer". Last week, officials from my office, the Welsh Government, and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy met to establish what this offer amounts to. We will continue discussions. I point out to her that she needs to look at the jobs that will be created in the long term, and not those thousands of jobs that she talked about, because the project itself will deliver 40 or more jobs.

Christina Rees: I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman mentioned the jobs, because these cross-border jobs include local government apprenticeships for 16 and

17-year-olds. They are now at risk because of the UK Government's dithering. Now that the Welsh Labour Government are introducing votes for 16 and 17-year-olds in local government elections in Wales, are the UK Government worried that Welsh young people will be able to vote on their future, vote for apprenticeships and vote for tidal lagoons?

Alun Cairns: Apprenticeships are part of the UK Government's manifesto, and we are grateful to the Welsh Government and recognise that they have followed the ambition that we set out for apprenticeships. I also point out and pay tribute to the Welsh Government for their action over changing the voting structures, but remind the hon. Lady about who gave them the power to do that in the first place, after it was refused for 13 years by Labour.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Is the Minister aware that the Welsh Affairs Committee has invited the First Minister of Wales to come before us and spell out exactly what the offer is and that, so far, he has refused to do so? If there is a serious offer from Welsh Labour to support tidal lagoons, does he agree that the Welsh First Minister should reconsider, come before the Committee and tell us exactly what it is that he is offering us?

Alun Cairns: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend as Chair of the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs—a position in which he has been vociferous in pursuing these sorts of issues and the case for value for money. He has invited the First Minister to give evidence to his Committee. I would have thought that the First Minister would want to respond positively to that invitation, if he wants to be seen to be doing everything—and, indeed, to do everything—to make this project come about and to prove the value-for-money case that we seek.

Universal Credit

3. Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on reducing the time taken to make universal credit payments in Wales.

[903563]

6. Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on reducing the time taken to make universal credit payments in Wales.

[903566]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Stuart Andrew): Diolch yn fawr, Mr Llefarydd. Rwy'n ddiolchgar i'm cydweithwyr am y croeso cynnes.

At the Budget, the Chancellor announced that all claimants will be eligible for universal credit from the first day that they claim it, removing the seven waiting days.

Hugh Gaffney: Och aye the noo!

The Opposition welcomed the U-turn by the Chancellor, increasing the waiting time for universal credit from six weeks to five weeks, but this does not go far enough. Household claimants in Wales and across the country are still suffering from rising debts, housing arrears and

evictions. Will the Minister stand up for universal credit claimants in Wales by asking his Cabinet colleagues to reduce the waiting time further?

Stuart Andrew: I loved the hon. Gentleman's introduction.

The need for reform was absolutely clear. Under the old system, people had to go to the Department for Work and Pensions, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, the local housing authority and, potentially, more organisations. We are now simplifying the process so that we have a system that encourages people into work. Surely, we should all welcome that. We are rolling the scheme out slowly to ensure that we are learning lessons, and that is exactly what we have done. The Chancellor made the announcement in the Budget so that we improve the system to ensure that people have the money they need when they apply.

Gerald Jones: The DWP's own analysis shows that half those with rent arrears under universal credit said that they had gone into arrears after making a claim. Is the Minister content with the fact that more Welsh families who were not previously in arrears have begun 2018 in debt following their claim for universal credit?

Stuart Andrew: That is exactly why we made the announcements in the Budget. Now, households who already claim housing benefit will automatically receive an additional two weeks of housing benefit when they claim universal credit. We are responding to the lessons that we are learning, and we will continue to do so as we roll out the project.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): I warmly welcome my hon. Friend to the Dispatch Box. May I urge him, in looking at the administrative changes to universal credit, not to lose sight of the overarching goal, which is to have a simpler welfare system that actually encourages people into work—a far cry from the old system that it is replacing?

Stuart Andrew: I am delighted to take a question from my hon. Friend, and I mean that in the sincerest sense. He is absolutely right. Unemployment in Wales is currently 73,000, which represents a decrease of 52,000 since 2010. People are going back into work because universal credit is encouraging that. Under the old system, people who worked a minute over 16 hours would lose their whole jobseeker's allowance. There was no incentive to get into work, which is why we have introduced this new system.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): I too offer my congratulations to the Minister on his elevation to his new position—llongyfarchiadau.

Waiting times are important to all claimants, but none more so than the terminally ill—those who the DWP expects to live for less than six months. The DWP's own data shows that personal independence payment claimants who are terminally ill have their claims reassessed at the rate of seven in 100 in the south-east and 17 in 100 in Wales, which is the highest rate in the country. Why is there such a huge variance, and will the Minister join me in requesting a meeting with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to discuss these issues?

Stuart Andrew: First, I thank the hon. Gentleman for the warm welcome, which I much appreciate. It is important to recognise that, with PIP, we are bringing in a system to try to help people live with the conditions they have. If we compare the systems, 29% of PIP claimants are receiving the highest possible support, compared with just 15% for disability living allowance. I have only been in this job a few weeks, but I will be taking this up with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and will report back.

Mr Speaker: We need to speed up a bit, because we have a lot of questions to get through. What we need now is pithy questions without excessively demonstrative behaviour.

Broadband: Rural Areas

4. **Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con):** What progress has been made on the roll-out of high-speed broadband in rural Wales; and if he will make a statement. [903564]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Stuart Andrew): Superfast broadband is now available to more than 19 out of 20 UK homes and businesses, including 95% of premises in Wales. That underlines the progress made in recent years thanks to our investment of £69 million in Wales, plus an additional £56 million gainshare to be reinvested.

Michael Fabricant: That investment is working. In Gwynedd, for example, it was previously only possible to get a download speed of 0.9 megabits per second. In Merionethshire, Openreach has now given fibre to the home that delivers at least 75 megabits per second. That is great, but what can the Government do to provide a legal obligation for everyone to have a right to broadband?

Stuart Andrew: My hon. Friend is quite right to highlight the importance of good connectivity through broadband, particularly in our rural areas, if we are to maximise the economic benefits. We have decided that regulation is the best way to ensure that everyone in the UK has a decent broadband connection. A regulatory universal service obligation will give everyone in the UK access to speeds of at least 10 megabits per second by 2020.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): May I genuinely welcome the Anglesey-born Under-Secretary to his place? The last Anglesey-born Tory Minister was Sir Wyn Roberts, so he has very big shoes to fill. The success of the broadband roll-out in Wales is due to the partnership between the European Union, Government here in Westminster and Government in Wales, working with BT. Will the Minister assure us that in 2020 there will not be a cliff edge and that we will have transitional money from Europe, so that we can roll out to 100%?

Stuart Andrew: I am grateful to have such a welcome from someone I have known for many years. I am very grateful. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): You were a young socialist then!

Stuart Andrew: No, actually I was a member of the Young Conservatives then. We are determined to roll out broadband and to achieve the 2020 target. It will be incumbent on us, as the UK Government, to work with the Welsh Government to ensure that broadband is rolled out to every part.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Ceredigion has among the slowest broadband speeds in the UK. Despite that, Ceredigion, and indeed the whole of Wales, was left out of the UK Government programme to provide full fibre broadband to six areas across England and Scotland. Will the Minister confirm that representations were made to his Government to ensure that Wales was included in that programme? What explanation was he given for its omission?

Stuart Andrew: Let us not forget that the roll-out of broadband is the responsibility of the Welsh Government. As the hon. Gentleman will know, because we have already had a conversation about this, this could form an important part of the mid-Wales growth deal. That will be incredibly important in making a successful growth deal for the area.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): For the households in Pembrokeshire in my constituency that have been told they cannot get broadband, the roll-out coverage is not 95%; it is zero. Will the Minister provide assurance that he will keep working with colleagues in the UK Government and Welsh Government to see that we connect up the whole of Wales?

Stuart Andrew: I absolutely accept that we have to ensure that broadband is rolled out to every part of Wales. Pembrokeshire is equally important, and my right hon. Friend is a big champion of his constituency and area. I am a little bit disappointed in the Welsh Government's roll-out priorities, but we will continue to work to ensure that we deliver the roll-out that we have promised and envisaged.

Cross-border Transport

5. **Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab):** What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Transport on improving cross-border transport links between Wales and England. [903565]

13. **Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab):** What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Transport on improving cross-border transport links between Wales and England. [903574]

14. **Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab):** What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Transport on improving cross-border transport links between Wales and England. [903575]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): I hold regular discussions with Cabinet colleagues and the Welsh Government on modernising cross-border transport connectivity. With 50% of the Welsh population living within 25 miles of the border, improving connectivity is central to delivering economic growth on both sides.

Mike Amesbury: If providing funding to remove the tolls from the Severn bridge is good enough for the people of Wales, why not extend such a generous Government offer to the people of Cheshire and Merseyside and do away with the tolls on the Mersey Gateway?

Alun Cairns: The tolls on the Severn crossing have been there for more than 50 years, and the Mersey Gateway bridge has very different levels of tolls from those that were levied on the Severn crossing. Locals will not have to pay on the Mersey Gateway bridge, other than the £10 administration fee; locals around the Severn tolls have had to pay the full charge for 50 years.

Justin Madders: My constituents were pleased to see a commitment to fund a business case to improve the Wrexham to Bidston line in the autumn Budget, but we have not actually had any progress since then. We would really like to see some improvements in both efficiency and frequency on that line, so can the Secretary of State update us on what progress has been made with respect to that?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman and to the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas), who has highlighted the importance of the Wrexham to Bidston line. It forms part of our cross-border growth strategy and is reflected in the UK's industrial strategy. I spoke with the Welsh Government's Transport Minister on Monday to discuss the project and we will be updating the hon. Gentlemen and the House in due course.

Christian Matheson: The industrial areas around my constituency, which include Airbus in Broughton and Deeside Industrial Park, absolutely depend on the M56 running smoothly. Has the Secretary of State had any conversations with Highways England, or his counterparts in the Transport Department, about when we shall get that motorway unclogged and running smoothly?

Alun Cairns: Again, the hon. Gentleman highlights the importance of cross-border connectivity. I would point him to the second road investment strategy for England, which will provide an opportunity to highlight the priority. A million people a week cross that border between north Wales and the north-west of England; 2,000 go to Airbus alone.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that the UK Government's investment in the Halton curve significantly improves rail services between my constituency and north Wales, and that there was a missed opportunity with the Welsh Labour Government in the failure to include that train line in the TEN-T network in the last round of European funding?

Alun Cairns: The Halton curve, which is approaching £18 million in terms of the spending cap, is an exciting project because it is a relatively simple, straightforward investment that will bring direct services to Liverpool again, improving cross-border connectivity, and releasing new opportunities for economic growth and development. We want to integrate it into both the north-west of England and the Wales and borders franchises.

Welsh EU Continuity Bill

7. **David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on proposals for a Welsh EU continuity Bill. [903567]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Stuart Andrew): We continue to have constructive discussions with the Welsh Government on the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, with a view to securing the National Assembly's support for the legislation. The Welsh Government have not discussed with us their proposals for an EU continuity Bill, but we do believe that such legislation will be unnecessary.

David Linden: So bad has the Westminster power grab become that on 17 January the National Assembly unanimously, including the Conservatives, supported a motion on Plaid Cymru's continuity Bill. Both sitting devolved Administrations have now rejected this constitutional embezzlement. Can the Minister confirm that Ministers will not meddle any further in respect of devolved Administrations?

Stuart Andrew: First, I do not believe that the continuity Bill is actually needed. We are engaging heavily, at every level of government, with the devolved Administrations to ensure that we go through the EU (Withdrawal) Bill to ensure that the clauses that we want to amend in the other place will be effective. Then will get the support of those Assemblies.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are very short of time. I will call the hon. Gentleman if it is a single short sentence; otherwise, we won't bother. Blurt it out, man.

Stephen Kerr: When will the Government publish their framework analysis and their proposed wording for the amendment to clause 11 of the EU (Withdrawal) Bill?

Stuart Andrew: We are continually engaging. My right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for Wales and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster are going to Wales tomorrow to meet the First Minister of the Welsh Assembly, so that we can get the further detail of those discussions and bring forward the amendments as soon as possible.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Hoffwn gymryd y cyfle i groesawu'r Gweinidog i'w barchus, arswydus swydd. The Minister will recall the Scottish Secretary claiming there to be a Scotland-specific economic impact assessment, only to contradict himself a week later. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady should not be disquieted in any way. I think the robin is keenly attending to her words.

Liz Saville Roberts: It appears now that regional assessments do exist. Which road will the Minister take? Will he confirm that a Welsh assessment has been produced, or will he concede that the Government are so heedless of Wales's future that there is no such assessment?

Stuart Andrew: I know that Bristol City's emblem is a robin, so maybe it is trying to interfere with Welsh questions.

We have many assessments as we go through this process. We will look at all of them in great detail and ensure that we come up with an effective resolution that suits every single part of the United Kingdom, because having a statute book that is fit for purpose is incredibly important once we leave the European Union.

Liz Saville Roberts: Will the Minister in that case ensure that he shares those assessments, not by Twitter, but also with all Members and all members of the Welsh public?

Stuart Andrew: Obviously, we will make things available at the appropriate time, but I can assure the hon. Lady that I will not be sharing things like that on Twitter.

Mr Speaker: I am going to allow a little injury time, because I do not want the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) to feel left out.

Leaving the EU: Welsh Economy

8. **Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the effect on the Welsh economy of the UK leaving the EU. [903569]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): I have regular discussions with Cabinet colleagues on new opportunities that leaving the European Union brings to Wales and the UK. Wales was the fastest-growing nation in the UK in 2016 and is well placed to seize the opportunities presented.

Bambos Charalambous: Will the Minister reassure the House and businesses across Wales by confirming that arrangements will be put in place to ensure that new trade deals negotiated after leaving the European Union do not undermine devolved policies?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman points to the opportunities for new trade deals, which are exciting for every part of the United Kingdom. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Trade has re-established the UK's Board of Trade. We have the privilege of having Lord Rowe-Beedoe, a former chairman of the Welsh Development Agency, as well as Heather Stevens, a very successful business lady, who is part of the Board of Trade and will be looking after Welsh interests on all occasions.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): How will the Secretary of State guarantee that integrated supply chains with the EU will be preserved when Britain leaves the European Union?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman knows that we are working to deliver a trade agreement that leads to frictionless trade between the UK and the European Union, but I would also point out that, as 80% of Welsh exports go to the rest of the UK, maintaining the integrity of the UK market should be our first priority.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [903646] **Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 31 January.

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Mr David Lidington): I have been asked to reply. Mr right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is in China, building on the existing strong ties between our two countries, and she is accompanied by the largest business delegation that this Government have yet led.

Ian Mearns: A number of Carillion employees and former employees live in my constituency; indeed, the company has an apprenticeship training centre in Gateshead. They all still face an uncertain future. Will the Government act now to prevent similar corporate theft, whereby pirate directors have syphoned off what should have been hundreds of millions of pounds in pension contributions to pay bogus dividends and unearned corporate bonuses to themselves? Exactly what action do the Government propose to take?

Mr Lidington: I completely understand the anxiety that must be affecting the apprentices and their families in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. He probably heard me say during last week's debates that the Construction Industry Training Board has taken responsibility for finding alternative employers to enable all those apprentices who were with Carillion to continue and complete their qualifications. It is making good progress in that work, but I shall ensure that the particular concern that he has expressed about Gateshead is brought to its attention.

On the broader question, the House will understand that it would be wrong for me to pre-empt findings by an independent inquiry by the official receiver, but we have already made it clear that we will be publishing proposals later this year to stop directors being able to siphon off pension funds in the way the hon. Gentleman described.

Q2. [903647] **Mr Mark Harper** (Forest of Dean) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that the country faces significant cyber-threats from other countries and from non-state actors. He will also be aware that we are protected from those by our security and intelligence services, including the men and women at GCHQ in my county of Gloucestershire. When the Government publish the results of the security review, will he confirm that we will continue, as we have since 2010, to invest in those capabilities to keep our country safe?

Mr Lidington: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct and I am happy to give him that assurance on behalf of the Government. The sad truth is that, in this country, we face a growing threat of cyber-attacks from states, from serious crime gangs and from hacking groups. We do have a robust national cyber-security strategy to protect critical services, including our democratic processes, and that is underpinned by nearly £2 billion of Government investment.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Let me start by welcoming the Minister back to his role deputising for the Prime Minister. The last time he did so was in December 2016, when the Conservative party was 17 points ahead in the polls, and he told the House that the Labour party was "quarrelling like" in the film

"'Mutiny on the Bounty' as re-shot by the 'Carry On' team."—*[Official Report, 7 December 2016; Vol. 618, c. 208.]*

Well, what a difference a year makes.

But I am not going to intrude further on the Government's public grief, because I genuinely hope that we can reach consensus across this House today on a very important issue. Next Tuesday will be the centenary of women gaining the right to vote in Britain; that was followed later in 1918 by a second right, to stand for Parliament. I am sure that the Minister will agree that we have a long way to go with regard to the second right; after all, I am the only Emily elected since 1918, and he is one of 155 Davids. The women behind me on the Labour Benches represent one quarter of all the women elected in the last 100 years, but it is still not good enough. Will the Minister tell us how we can best increase female representation in this House?

Mr Lidington: May I first thank the right hon. Lady for her words of welcome? Clearly, my previous remarks struck a chord with her, to have been treasured in the way that they have. It is a delight to me to see the right hon. Lady still in her place, when no fewer than 97 members of her Front Bench have either been sacked or have resigned since the Leader of the Opposition took office. I pay credit to her sticking power, although she must sometimes whisper to herself, "Surely, I'm a celebrity. Please get me out of here!"

The point that the right hon. Lady raised is a serious one. I think that all political parties represented here—she is right to seek to make this consensual—want to encourage more women candidates to come forward. I am pleased that the Conservative party, since I was first elected 25 years ago, has made very considerable progress, but I also accept that there is more to be done. I hope that she, for her part, will accept that we have now had two women leaders and Prime Ministers, so the Labour party has a bit of catching up to do.

Emily Thornberry: If the Conservative party is so proud of having a female leader, why are so many of them trying to get rid of her and why has she had to run away to China to get away from them? However, I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that answer and I totally agree with his sentiments. Let me ask him about the first right that I mentioned, a right that millions of women received 100 years ago this week: the basic right to vote. It was originally restricted to women with property over the age of 30. Then 90 years ago, it was extended to all women over 21. Almost 50 years ago, it was extended to all men and women over the age of 18. I ask the right hon. Gentleman a simple question: how many more years do we have to wait until the vote is extended to everyone over 16?

Mr Lidington: The age of 18, rather than 16, is widely recognised as the age at which one becomes an adult and that is when full citizenship rights are attained. Only a handful of countries have a nationwide voting

age below 18 and we believe that it is right that the age of majority—18—should continue to be the age at which people become eligible to vote.

Emily Thornberry: The right hon. Gentleman makes international comparisons, but I have to say to him that it was this country and a Labour Government that led the way in Europe and the English-speaking world in reducing the voting age to 18 in 1969. Where we led, others followed, and it will be the same here.

Let me move on to a second question that I would like to ask the right hon. Gentleman. I have listened carefully to his answer, but I did not hear any logical explanation for the different rights that we give to 16-year-olds in this country. At 16, we are free from parental control, we can leave home, we can start a family, we can get married, we can start work, we can pay taxes and we can join the forces, so can he give us a logical explanation of why a 16-year-old should not have the right to vote?

Mr Lidington: I am slightly baffled by the right hon. Lady's comments when compared with what her party did in office, because it was the last Labour Government who raised the legal age for buying cigarettes to 18, raised the age for sales of knives to 18, raised the age for buying fireworks to 18 and raised the age for using a sunbed to 18. If she wants a lesson in inconsistency, she might like to examine the mirror.

Emily Thornberry: The right hon. Gentleman mentions a range of restrictions that we have until the age of 18, but those are for the most part to do with public health, public safety and the prevention of crime. They are not the same as the basic right to vote on issues that affect your life once you are considered old enough to make other independent decisions about your life, such as leaving school, leaving home and getting married. Let me give him a specific example—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sure that it will not have escaped public notice, and it is rather a sad irony, that when a woman is addressing the House, quite a lot of noisy, boorish and, in one case rather stupid, individuals are trying to shout the right hon. Lady down. Cut it out!

Emily Thornberry: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

I want to give the right hon. Gentleman a specific example to illustrate what I am talking about. According to the Government's own figures, the number of 16 and 17-year-olds receiving carer's allowance for looking after disabled relatives at home has risen by more than 50% over the past four years, so last year, over 2,000 16 and 17-year-olds gave up their youth and often their schooling to care for relatives at home. How can it be fair and how can it be logical to expect them to take on that responsibility because of failures of the state and then to deny them a say on how that very state is run?

Mr Lidington: The logic of the right hon. Lady's argument is that she wishes to lower the age of majority from 18 to 16. She listed a number of areas in which she supported the age at which activity should be allowed to 18, on the grounds that only then could people be expected to have sufficient maturity and responsibility

to have those rights. My argument to her is that the age of majority should be set matching both rights and responsibilities. I think that it is perfectly reasonable to say that, from the age of 18, we entrust young men and women to exercise those rights and responsibilities in full. On the final point she made, it is right that sensible local authorities have particular care for the role of young carers. In my experience, local authorities, whichever party runs them, make every effort to do that.

Emily Thornberry: I am genuinely surprised at the Minister's response. This is what he said two years ago, speaking to the Youth Parliament:

“When the voice and the vote of young people is absent, decisions are taken that affect young people's lives that they have not always chosen”.

Not for the first time in these exchanges, I have to say that I agree with him—all of us on the Labour Benches agree with him. Why does he no longer agree with himself?

Mr Lidington: If the right hon. Lady had been with me at the Youth Parliament, which was indeed both a memorable and an enjoyable occasion, she would have discovered that a significant number of the young men and women there were actually over the voting age. I fully support the role that the Youth Parliament plays, the role that its members play throughout the country and the role that organisations such as school councils play in getting young people used to the idea of exercising democratic responsibility. That seems to me to be excellent training for the full adult responsibilities they will inherit when they turn 18, and I hope that it will encourage more young people to go out and vote.

Emily Thornberry: The Minister says that he was only talking about 18 year olds, but you were there, Mr Speaker; he was talking to 370 under-18s. These discussions have revealed that there is no logical principled objection to votes at 16. That is why the Welsh and Scottish Governments support it and why every single political party in the House supports it, except, of course, the Conservative party and the Democratic Unionist party—joined, once again, in opposition to change. They are not the coalition of chaos; they are the coalition of cavemen. [*Interruption.*] Does he not realise—

Mr Speaker: Order. One Member who thinks he knows what he is talking about is gesticulating at me. The answer is that it is a matter of taste, not of order. It is blindingly obvious and should not really escape somebody of great intelligence.

Emily Thornberry: I was talking about cavemen, Mr Speaker. Why does the Minister not realise the lesson that we women taught his predecessors 100 years ago? When change is right it cannot be resisted forever, and this is a change whose time has come.

Mr Lidington: My advice to the right hon. Lady is to wean herself off the habit of watching old versions of “The Flintstones” on the relevant cartoon channel.

We ought to salute the fact that not just the Youth Parliament but many schools and other youth organisations throughout the country are working hard to get young people used to the idea that, as they grow up, they

should take an interest in current affairs and then, when they reach the relevant age, exercise the full rights and responsibilities of an adult by participating in elections and political campaigning. The situation here, with the national voting age at 18, is one that is followed by 26 out of the 27 other members of the EU and by the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. Unless she is going to denounce all of those countries as somehow inadequate by her own particular standards, she ought to grow up and treat this subject with greater seriousness.

Q3. [903648] **Colin Clark** (Gordon) (Con): The Government's policy on tax has made the UK one of the most competitive places to do business, as was confirmed by the recent growth figures. Does my right hon. Friend agree, therefore, that raising tax would damage the UK economy, as we have seen in Scotland, where growth has fallen behind the rest of the UK?

Mr Lidington: I am very happy to agree with my hon. Friend. We devolved new powers from this House to Holyrood, and it is obviously for the Scottish Government to determine how to use them. It is a matter of great regret, however, that they have chosen to use those powers to break their promises and penalise aspiration in Scotland. In our Budget, we increased the Scottish Government's spending power by £2 billion, so the SNP has no excuse for hiking the taxes of hard-working people, including public servants, and penalising businesses. The leader of the Scottish nationalists in Westminster used to champion wealth creation and free enterprise. I hope he will ask the First Minister of Scotland to think again.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I welcome the Minister to his place. If the reports are true, he may be auditioning for a new role. I wonder if he is sending a "round robin" letter.

The Minister has previously said that

"the Single Market is essential to this government's agenda for trade and competitiveness."

Since BuzzFeed published the leaked Brexit analysis, has the Minister recognised that the single market is essential to jobs and prosperity?

Mr Lidington: When we leave the European Union in March next year, we will, as a matter of legality, leave the single market and the EU customs union. The Prime Minister and the entire Government have also made it clear, in both the Lancaster House speech and the Florence speech, that we are seeking a new partnership with our neighbours in the European Union that will ensure that we continue to have frictionless trade, which is in the interest of not just our people but the people of every one of the 27 other EU countries.

Ian Blackford: I must say that I am surprised at the Minister, because it is not a question of legality. We are going to be in a transitional deal, so we will still be in the single market when we leave the EU.

This is a Government who are in crisis, and an international embarrassment. The Chancellor, the Secretary of State for Scotland, the Scottish Conservatives and the Home Secretary have all supported membership of

the single market, but despite that, the Government are still prepared to make everyone poorer. Where is the leadership?

Mr Lidington: The leadership that the right hon. Gentleman wants was set out very clearly at Lancaster House and then again in Florence, and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will be making further speeches on these issues in the weeks and months to come. Let me point out to him, however, that the single market that is most important to the people of Scotland is the single market of the United Kingdom, which is worth nearly £50 billion every year to the Scottish economy—four times more than trade with the European Union. It is our deep and special partnership with the EU in the future, not the separatist policies pursued by the Scottish National party, that will help to deliver prosperity to Scotland.

Q5. [903650] **Mr Ranil Jayawardena** (North East Hampshire) (Con): I know my right hon. Friend shares my passion for ensuring that all children have opportunities to succeed, regardless of who they are or where they come from. Can he tell us what progress the Government have made in reducing the attainment gap between less well off secondary school pupils and their peers, and—given their positive impact—when the round of free school applications will open?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Government's clear ambition and purpose is to ensure that our school system works for every child in every community in this country. Our reforms have already raised school standards. Nearly 2 million more children are attending good and outstanding schools, and since 2011 the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers has shrunk by 10% at GCSE and by 10.5% at key stage 2. I know that Education Ministers will be happy to talk to my hon. Friend about their plans to further improve standards in schools.

Q4. [903649] **Mr David Lammy** (Tottenham) (Lab): Last Sunday in my constituency, Reece Oduleye-Waters, who was just 17, was stabbed, with life-changing results.

The knife crime that is happening across our country is not being driven by minors and young people; it is being driven by gangsters, organised criminals, and dirty money. Cocaine alone is worth £12 billion to the market in this country, with 100 tonnes of it crossing our borders. So I ask the Minister this: why are we cutting our border force, why are we cutting our police, and why has London been offered, in the violence reduction strategy, a community fund of only half a million pounds? No one could buy a house for half a million in London.

Mr Lidington: I, like every other Member of this House, have nothing but the most heartfelt sympathy for Reece and his family and friends for the most appalling experience that they have endured and are still living through. The right hon. Gentleman rightly says that there are complex causes of the knife crime we are seeing. I agree that there is no doubt that organised crime is contributing to this, and is exploiting young people; organised criminals try to groom young people and attract them into criminal gangs. The Government will publish later this year a violent crime strategy

looking not just at the criminal justice system, but at how we can work effectively with all other agencies to ensure that young people are diverted away from that sort of activity in the first place. But it is also true that those carrying a knife can now expect to end up in jail; we have toughened the sentences. And despite what the right hon. Gentleman said, we have also protected police budgets; a quarter of all police are in London.

Q8. [903653] **Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Demand for school places in the London Borough of Bromley is forecast to grow by some 20% over coming years, but repeatedly proposals for much needed schools have been delayed, in no small measure because of concerns at the way the Education and Skills Funding Agency has handled the planning application process. On behalf of the Prime Minister, will my right hon. Friend agree to meet me to discuss the very real concerns of local parents as to the competency of the agency?

Mr Lidington: Either I or my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary will be happy to talk to my hon. Friend. The purpose of the ESFA, formed at the start of this financial year, is to provide a more joined-up approach to funding, covering both schools and colleges and other providers. I note that Bromley has increased both primary and secondary school capacity by more than 6,300 places since 2010, and the ESFA is delivering nine schools in Bromley, but there is clearly more work to be done, and Ministers will gladly talk to my hon. Friend about that.

Q6. [903651] **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): Recent research shows that international students are worth a staggering £20 billion to the UK economy; that research was commissioned by Nick Hillman, Conservative parliamentary candidate in Cambridge in 2010 and a former adviser to Lord Willetts. Yet the policies of the Prime Minister have stopped that steady increase in the number of international students coming to our country. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it is a touch careless of the Prime Minister to have squandered billions of pounds that could have been available to our schools and hospitals?

Mr Lidington: The facts say that we are the second most popular destination in the world for students and university-sponsored visa applications are up by nearly one fifth since 2010, so I would argue that, contrary to what the hon. Gentleman alleges, we are doing a good job in attracting international students.

Q10. [903655] **Richard Drax** (South Dorset) (Con): South Dorset is the most beautiful constituency in the whole of the United Kingdom, so improving the infrastructure to create jobs and prosperity is difficult. What we can do is improve our rail links on the Salisbury line and at Yeovil Junction to get faster trains to Weymouth. Will my right hon. Friend reassure my constituents and me that the Government are behind this scheme, to do exactly what the Government want: create more wealth and prosperity in South Dorset?

Mr Lidington: As my hon. Friend will know, the Chancellor last year set aside very considerable sums of money—more than £20 billion—to finance infrastructure improvements in rail, road and broadband, in order to

generate growth around the country and facilitate housing developments; my hon. Friend's constituency has seen considerable new housing development in recent years. I will ensure that Transport Ministers talk to him about the particular concerns he has expressed.

Q7. [903652] **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): On 25 January 1985, the Conservative Government promised that no nuclear waste would be dumped in the Billingham anhydrite mine. Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that that promise still stands?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman will have to forgive me, but my memory for statements that were given in 1985 is a little bit rusty. That was seven years before even I was first elected to this House. I will look into the point that he has raised and write to him to set out the position.

Q13. [903658] **Iain Stewart** (Milton Keynes South) (Con): To secure our future prosperity and to meet the employment challenge posed by artificial intelligence, this country has an urgent need to improve its digital skills base. Will my right hon. Friend therefore congratulate the Open University in my constituency on securing a leading role in the Government's Institute of Coding?

Mr Lidington: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating the Open University on securing that lead role in the Institute of Coding, which is an important new initiative to get universities to work closely with business to develop specialist coding skills. The Government are investing £84 million to deliver a comprehensive programme to improve the teaching of the computing curriculum, and we look forward to working closely with the university and the institute.

Q9. [903654] **Ged Killen** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): After 10 years in this country, one of my constituents missed out on the right to claim indefinite leave to remain by 22 days when she left the country to attend her father's funeral and broke her leg, making her unable to return. The Home Secretary is aware of this case, and my constituent has been told that she will have to wait a further 10 years to reapply. This will mean that she will be unable to adopt a child, which could be the only way in which she can start a family in this country. Will the right hon. Gentleman raise this issue with the Prime Minister when she returns, and may we have a meeting to discuss the issue?

Mr Lidington: Obviously I know no more details of the case than those that the hon. Gentleman has just described, but, like many Members, I have immigration casework in my constituency, so I am familiar with the type of problem that he describes. If he would like to write to me after these exchanges to set out the details, I will discuss the matter with my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, and the relevant Minister will certainly meet him.

Q14. [903659] **Craig Tracey** (North Warwickshire) (Con): Last week, I visited RNAS Culdrose as part of the armed forces parliamentary scheme and was delighted to see the great outreach programme that the sailors are using to promote science, technology, engineering and maths—STEM—skills and innovation in the local

community. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this initiative to inspire the skills that our armed forces and our country will need to succeed in the future is a huge credit to the forward thinking of the team at Culdrose and that its approach should be highly commended?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend raises an important point. I know about the important role that Culdrose plays in the life of Cornwall, but he has highlighted the fact that its work deserves to be in the national spotlight as well. We want and need to build the science, technology, engineering and mathematics skills that we will need in a growing and rapidly changing economy, as we highlighted in the Government's industrial strategy, and the initiative at Culdrose will contribute to the success of those objectives.

Q11. [903656] **John Mann** (Bassetlaw) (Lab): It is an extraordinary fact that this year, last year and every year for more than a decade, one London borough, the London Borough of Islington, has received more Arts Council funding than all the midlands and northern ex-coalfield communities combined. Who is going to be brave enough to reverse that inequity so that my constituents, especially my young constituents, can have fair and equitable access to arts funding?

Mr Lidington: I am not sure whether that was meant as an attack on the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) or the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), but I can say to the hon. Gentleman that if there is a particular bid that he feels has been unfairly treated, he is welcome to take that up with the new arts Minister, who I know will want to examine the case carefully. In general terms, however, more than half the arts funding in England is awarded to arts activities outside Greater London.

Q15. [903660] **Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Holiday homes in Cornwall are a mixed blessing. They provide important support to our local economy, but they also take up vital housing stock and push up prices beyond the reach of many local people. In addition, many people avoid paying council tax on them by switching them to business use and then enjoying the benefits of small business rates relief. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that unacceptable? Will he use his good offices to help the Government to find a way of closing the loophole?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend raises a valid point, and it is right that holiday home owners should pay the correct tax. Obviously, individual decisions on whether a property should pay council tax or business rates rests with the Valuation Office Agency, which rightly operates independently of Ministers. However, if a property is available for rent for 140 days or a more a year, it will be subject to business rates. If it does not meet that test, council tax will be due. If an individual provides false information in order to seek business rates relief, that person is liable to summary conviction or a fine or both.

Q12. [903657] **Angela Crawley** (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): The Prime Minister wants to bring forward legislation to tackle domestic violence and abuse, but her Government are currently taxing the same survivors

for using the Child Maintenance Service. For survivors of domestic abuse, using the collect and pay service is not a matter of choice; it is a matter of safety. Will the right hon. Gentleman urge the Prime Minister to commit to using legislation to scrap the tax for survivors of domestic violence?

Mr Lidington: A Government consultation on this matter is imminent, and I urge the hon. Lady to make her representations to that consultation and also directly to the relevant Minister.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): Following last year's terrorist attack in Manchester, the Government committed £24 million to the city. With the effects still being felt across the area, including in my constituency, will the Government provide an assurance that they will continue to support Manchester?

Mr Lidington: We will certainly continue to support Manchester right across Government through the various agencies and spending programmes that the Government have available. Manchester demonstrated its resilience and its strong sense of community identity and purpose last year, and they will serve it well both economically and socially in the years to come.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The whole House will warmly welcome the fantastic news that has saved thousands of jobs at Bombardier in Northern Ireland. We should pay tribute to Bombardier's management, both in Belfast and in Canada, the workforce and the unions, which worked well together, hon. Members on the Democratic Unionist party Bench, including my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), and the Government, which rode in strongly to support the company. I urge the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to get behind improving manufacturing in Northern Ireland, because vital decisions are outstanding. I also gently urge the Government, who always listen very carefully, to get on with it.

Mr Lidington: May I first thank the right hon. Gentleman for his words? Although it is now a few years since I had the opportunity to visit Bombardier in Belfast, I still remember how important that enterprise is for the provision of high-quality, well-paid skilled work both in the city and more widely in Northern Ireland. He is right to say that the Government worked closely with Northern Ireland leaders and politicians. The Prime Minister raised the matter personally more than once with President Trump and with Prime Minister Trudeau, and my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary has also been active on Bombardier's behalf. We are pleased by the outcome. The right hon. Gentleman can rest assured that the Government will remain a strong supporter of business in Northern Ireland, but the sooner that we can get back to devolved government in Northern Ireland, the easier it will be to ensure that practical benefits flow back to Northern Ireland.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): A vibrant high street is critical in traditional market towns such as Knaresborough, which has had a market since 1310. In this age of internet shopping, will my

right hon. Friend confirm the Government's support for traditional markets and for policies that will boost our high streets?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is right to speak up on behalf of his constituents, and I know he is a tireless campaigner for Harrogate and Knaresborough. Markets like the one in Knaresborough are part of the local fabric and tradition of towns right across this country. The Government want to help those markets and town centres to prosper in a rapidly changing retail environment. I am sure my right hon. Friend the Communities Secretary will be happy to write to him with further details.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Lincoln's walk-in centre will close in a few weeks, despite there being inconsistent and insufficient service provision in place to mitigate the closure. Will the Minister pass on to the Prime Minister my request for her to meet me both to discuss and review that closure?

Mr Lidington: If the hon. Lady would like to provide a bit more detail than she has had the time to set out today, I will ensure that a Minister sees her about this.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Next Wednesday we will be assessing and voting on the local government finance settlement. A group of us from the shire counties are very concerned that there is not enough money for rural counties like ours, where adult social care costs are spiralling out of control. My own county is facing a black hole of £10 million because of adult social care costs. What message should I take back to the leader of my council?

Mr Lidington: One message is that the Government have made an extra £2 billion of funding available to local authorities for social care. Obviously, local authorities are currently deciding whether to use the more flexible precepting powers they have in respect of social care. My hon. Friend met my right hon. Friend the Communities Secretary a few days ago, and I would encourage him to continue talking to the Communities Secretary and

other Ministers in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government about the particular circumstances in Shropshire.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): The current edition of *The Economist* carries an article that says the hostile takeover bid for GKN by Melrose "casts doubt not only on the survival of GKN, Britain's third-largest independent aerospace and defence firm, but on much of the rest of the industry, too."

The right hon. Gentleman knows that, where national security issues are involved, Ministers have the power to intervene to protect the public interest. Will they do so in this case?

Mr Lidington: As I understand it, the bid for GKN is being examined by the relevant independent authorities. Clearly this is also something that the appropriate Ministers in the Ministry of Defence and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will be monitoring very closely. For now, it would be wrong of me to speculate about this case in more detail.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): My constituency of Chelmsford is a very popular place to live, and this week we have had the very good news that more first-time buyers are getting on the housing ladder than at any time in the past decade. Will my right hon. Friend update us on the Government's progress on helping people to buy a house?

Mr Lidington: I am pleased to be able to say that the number of first-time buyers is now at the highest level for about 10 years, which is a tribute to the various initiatives that both the Communities Secretary and the Chancellor of the Exchequer have put in place to encourage first-time buyers—the cut in stamp duty, for example, will benefit about 95% of first-time buyers—but we also need to improve housing supply. Constituencies like hers and mine are showing the way to much of the rest of the country on the need to build houses to meet the legitimate demands and expectations of young people who are working incredibly hard and want to get a foot on the housing ladder.

Point of Order

12.45 pm

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday, in the National Assembly for Wales, when my constituency colleague Adam Price asked for a vote on the Labour Welsh Government's plans to potentially close hospitals in Carmarthenshire, the First Minister misled the Assembly and Assembly Members, and in doing so provided details of correspondence between the local health board and my constituency office. He claimed that our office has made no effort to engage with the health board over this issue.

I first became aware of the proposed closure plans on 18 January this year, following a panic email from Mr Steve Moore, chief executive of the Hywel Dda University Health Board, in which he explained that the closure plans had been leaked and were due to appear in the local press imminently. Our office replied on 19 January, asking for an urgent meeting. Although I do not expect you to comment on health policy in Wales, Mr Speaker, or indeed the manner in which the Labour Government of my country harvest information from public bodies in order to smear opponents, I would be grateful if you could say what advice you would give MPs who may find their data protection rights breached by a public body and how I could put on the record a correction of the comments by the First Minister.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Member for his characteristic courtesy in giving me advance notice of his intention to raise this point of order. It is not my role, I am very pleased to say, to pass judgment on matters before the National Assembly for Wales. That said—the hon. Gentleman in in pursuit of advice—if he believes that there has been a breach of data protection requirements, he should most certainly raise the matter with the Information Commissioner. We will leave that matter there for now.

Freedom of Information (Amendment)

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

12.47 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for the disclosure of information held by public authorities or by persons contracted to provide services for them or on their behalf; to amend the Freedom of Information Act 2000; and for connected purposes.

Nearly 20 years on from the revolution of the Freedom of Information Act, this Bill would extend its parameters into the unaccountable outsourced state. It would also enhance the existing powers available to private citizens, investigative journalists and concerned communities so that they are not forced to wade through a swamp of bureaucracy before getting answers about the decisions that are made in their name.

I would first like to pay tribute to the many other Members who have campaigned on this issue for many years, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), who has a very similar Bill in this Session and has focused particularly on housing associations, which I will come to shortly. Those in power have had a long and difficult relationship with freedom of information, and, like much that challenges government, it has met resistance every step of the way. The Thatcher Government were so concerned in the 1980s that they warned that FOI would reduce the sovereignty of Parliament itself.

In that context, it was remarkable that the last Labour Government, who had been out of power for 18 years, committed themselves to shining a light on the shadows cast by decisions made behind closed doors. Tony Blair said at the time that the Act

“is fundamental to changing the way we do politics in this country...there is still far too much an addiction to secrecy and wish to conduct Government business behind closed doors”.

Tony Blair, of course, came to regret the revolution that followed, but it was nothing short of revolutionary. Literally thousands of cases, on every topic imaginable, saw information drawn into the public domain—expenses, bonuses, stop-and-search figures and child sexual exploitation were all exposed and brought to light because of this Act. That was a Labour achievement and it is one we should be proud of.

That is why the last two Labour manifestos pledged to extend FOI to private contractors performing public services. We propose extending this Act because we recognise the climate in which FOI operates has changed, as the Government's addiction to outsourcing has exploded.

The collapse of Carillion is just one recent example of an ever-growing shadow state in which some of the Government's more dubious policy priorities are outsourced for private profit, leaving citizens in the dark about what is happening in their name. Under the coalition, outsourcing almost doubled to £120 billion. Never before has shareholder interest over the public interest had such a large stake in the functioning of our state. Transparency and accountability have diminished in consequence, and the limited scope of the Freedom of Information Act allows too many of those who are performing public functions with public money none the less to hide behind a cloak of secrecy.

Bad decisions, targets missed, warnings ignored—the result time and again is similar to the scandal exposed in the past fortnight, which should have been predictable. Carillion was not an isolated example of incompetence and indifference from one individual contractor; it was a symptom of a much broader problem—private contractors providing public services that should never be driven by profit. In the welfare system, we see contracts structured by Government farmed out to the private sector, and the consequences only truly exposed when things fall apart.

We saw that in the last Parliament, when we were pursuing Concentrix, the firm contracted to identify fraud in the tax credit system. That multinational corporation was ruthlessly pursuing single parents and families, on the instruction of the Treasury, and treating them as guilty until proven innocent. It accused them of living with people they had never met, or told them they were to have their tax credits arbitrarily cut because they did not respond to a letter they had never received. One single mum, who worked two jobs for little pay, said to me, “I feel as if I am being treated as a criminal.”

The scandal was not just the treatment of these parents, or the pursuit of profit at their expense. The scandal was the Government’s absolute failure to manage the contract effectively, and then the denial of information to Members of this House who were demanding to know what went wrong. A similar case is that of Cygnet, a private provider of mental health services. Its hospital in my constituency was judged unsafe owing to some very severe shortcomings, but even something as basic as the action plan agreed by the regulator, the NHS and the provider has been withheld from public scrutiny as it is deemed to be the property of the private provider.

It should not take public exposure for decent people to be treated with dignity, or for information to be put into the public domain as a matter of course. The current situation is allowing private contractors to withhold information that is very clearly in the public interest. Maurice Frankel and Katherine Gundersen, from the fantastic Campaign for Freedom of Information, have pulled together examples of the type of request private contractors have refused. They include: the number of prison staff at HMP Birmingham and the number of attacks at the prison—information currently held only by G4S—whistleblowing policies applying to Virgin Care staff providing NHS services, and the number of employees providing outsourced services for a local council employed on zero-hours contracts.

Extending the Act into areas that used to be overseen by the state and were therefore subject to FOI is not only the right thing to do; it is the smart thing to do. When institutions or private providers are permitted to withhold information, bad decisions are made and mistrust builds among communities. The Grenfell Tower fire has highlighted the desperate need for public access to information held by the providers of social housing. Housing associations, which own or run many former council estates, are completely outside the scope of

the Act, and residents are denied information that they have a right to know. In one instance, a housing association refused to reveal information to residents about the cause of a fire in one of their flats, and whether potentially toxic lead pipes were used for the water supply to a property. Making contractors accountable to the public they serve for the decisions they make will lead to better, safer, clearer decisions.

The original Act still gives too much power to authorities to delay and obstruct an individual’s right to information. In 2015, the Government commissioned an independent review of FOI, which made several recommendations to improve the functioning of the Act. This Bill takes up those recommendations. It includes strictures on the delaying tactics available to authorities and a statutory time limit for internal reviews, and provides that an offence under the Act should be triable either way rather than being summary only. There has never been a prosecution under section 77 of the FOI Act, in large part because there is a six-month deadline for bringing prosecutions, which is long gone by the time the public authority has made a decision and the commissioner has received and investigated a complaint. Extending the offence to be triable either way gives authorities a chance to bring prosecutions and ensure that the Act is enforced.

Sunshine is the best disinfectant—advice from their former leader that the Government may wish to remember. Ultimately, few could disagree with the need for parity for public and private providers when they are delivering public services. Whether it is Concentrix, Carillion or Cygnet, why would we hold private providers to a lower standard of transparency and accountability than their public competitors? If sunlight really is the best disinfectant, here today is the chance to clean up the murky world of our outsourced state, to drive up standards, to improve trust and to ensure that it is always citizens, not shareholders, who are the ultimate authority for our public services.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Louise Haigh, Tommy Sheppard, Andy Slaughter, Paula Sherriff, Jo Stevens, Ian C. Lucas, Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods, Nic Dakin, Alex Sobel, Diana Johnson, Anna Turley and Clive Efford present the Bill.

Louise Haigh accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on 15 June 2018, and to be printed (Bill 159).

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (OPPOSITION DAY)

Ordered,

That at today’s sitting, paragraph (2) of Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments) shall apply to the Motion in the name of Jeremy Corbyn as if the day were an Opposition Day; and proceedings on the Motion may continue, though opposed, for three hours after commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—
(*Rebecca Harris.*)

Opposition Day

UN-ALLOTTED HALF DAY

Government's EU Exit Analysis

12.57 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I beg to move,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, That she will be graciously pleased to give directions that the EU exit analysis which was referred to in his response to an Urgent Question in the House on 30 January by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union be provided to the Exiting the European Union Committee and made available to all Members on a confidential basis as a matter of urgency.

The saga of the Brexit impact assessment rolls on. This all started back in December 2016, when the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union first told the Brexit Committee that the Government were working on “sectoral impact analysis” in 57 areas—later, one was added to make it 58. In October last year, he got rather carried away with the idea and elaborated, saying that the analyses were “excruciating detail”, throwing in for good measure that the Prime Minister and the Cabinet had read the summaries. When various right hon. and hon. Members sought disclosure of the impact assessments, they were met with a flat refusal.

Things moved on. In November last year, we presented and won a Humble Address requiring the Government to disclose the impact assessments arising from the Government's analysis—an important statement of principle. So far, so good. Some documents were made available, and I was one of those who went to the Treasury to see them. I was escorted to a room, where I had to pass over my phone and sign a document on confidentiality. I sat down, and two files were solemnly brought to me; I was allowed to read them and take some notes. We now know that those documents contained a description of the sector that could have been found in any House of Lords or Select Committee report, a summary of the EU law and policy—surprising that I had to give up my phone to read that—and then a very generalised view from the sector. I went through the footnotes to that third section and struggled to find one that did not relate to open-source material. Press releases and evidence given to Select Committees were there, all of which I solemnly noted before I handed the files back, got my phone back and left the premises. Those documents are now available online, minus the sector analysis and therefore the open-source material.

In September, when questioned by the Exiting the European Union Committee about the rest of the documents, the Secretary of State said that the Department had not done any impact assessments on any sector of the British economy. He made the point that the use of the word “impact” did not mean that an impact assessment had been done within the formal definition used by the civil service. As a former defence lawyer, I was struck by that defence. It was technically right that someone cannot be censured for contempt for failing to hand over impact assessments because they have not done any, but I was never sure which was worse: relying on that technical defence, or not doing the impact assessments in the first place.

Roll on one month, and in the past two days it was leaked that an assessment called the “EU Exit Analysis – Cross Whitehall Briefing” does in fact exist. It is reported that that document looks at three of the most plausible Brexit scenarios based on current EU arrangements with the range of predictions. Consistent with the principle established back in November 2017, the Opposition yesterday called on the Government to release that analysis. In true groundhog fashion, the Government said no, as they did last year.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): The right hon. and learned Gentleman had a distinguished career in law before he came to this place. Does he condemn the leak of a Government document? To what extent are any Government documents to be regarded as confidential? Will he condemn the leak?

Keir Starmer: Before I was in this place, I held the post of Director of Public Prosecutions. We took leaks from our department or any other civil service department very seriously. I can only assume that an inquiry is in place in relation to this leak, and in the circumstances we should say nothing more about it.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I have repeatedly raised concerns that the north-east and other regions will be hard hit by the very obvious risks of Brexit. It seems from the leak that the Government share that view. Does my right hon. and learned Friend share my view that it is completely unacceptable that the Government think it is okay to keep businesses and people in regions such as mine in the dark?

Keir Starmer: My hon. Friend demonstrates that hon. Members have been trying on behalf of their constituencies and regions to get a proper analysis of the impact of Brexit on the individuals, businesses and communities they represent. That is why it is so important to have that information. It will mean that we can have an informed debate and hold the Government properly to account.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): The right hon. and learned Gentleman described his experience of dealing with leaks. Does he accept that we have a curious cult of secrecy across Government today and have had for some years? A leak is a serious matter and I deplore leaks when documents are revealed whose contents compromise the national interest or are loaded with party political or other significance, but it is impossible to see how an objective analysis of the economic consequences of the various options that the Government are considering compromises the national interest. A properly open Government should make such information freely available to all those who have a legitimate interest in the subject, including MPs.

Keir Starmer: I agree. It is significant that the original documents that were requested last year were initially refused on freedom of information grounds, only then to be made available in the form I described, and then to be put in the public domain in any event, which demonstrates the point that many Governments—this Government are doing the same—put their arms around information that ought to be in the public domain to inform the debate. It is the wrong way of doing business.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I will give way one more time and then make progress.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): If the Government are eventually forced to release the impact assessments, as I suspect they will be—I am sure the right hon. and learned Gentleman suspects the same—and if they confirm that any deal the Government strike will be worse than the one we have with the European Union, will he and the leader of the Labour party change their position and campaign much more vigorously to keep us in the European Union?

Keir Starmer: We will look at information when it is put into the public domain. We have been looking at analysis and data for months, and have been visiting businesses and communities for months, to inform our position.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I have taken a number of interventions and will make progress. I will allow interventions later, otherwise I will not get very far.

Yesterday, standing at the Dispatch Box, I asked the Government to release the documents referred to in the leak. As I have said, the Government said no. The Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), who is in his place, advanced three defences for that position, none of which withstand scrutiny. His first defence—that the analysis is rubbish—was astonishing. He was asked whether he could name a single civil service forecast that was accurate. He glibly replied: “They are always wrong”. He may have forgotten that he is now part of the Government, and yesterday transposed himself back to being spokesperson for Vote Leave. Ministers and the Government commissioned those papers, and it is frankly ridiculous to attempt to rubbish them as an excuse for not publishing them.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC) *rose*—

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind) *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I will complete this point and then give way.

There is a serious point. Is it seriously Government policy that impact assessments are so inherently unreliable that it is better to proceed without them? That is the logic of the position described yesterday. Is it not better to adopt the approach tweeted last night by the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee), who said:

“The next phase of Brexit has to be all about the evidence. We can't just dismiss this and move on. If there is evidence to the contrary, we need to see and consider that too”?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Keir Starmer: Before I give way, I will make one further point about the line of defence of rubbishing the analysis. It is deeply discourteous and disrespectful to the civil servants who have worked on those papers and are presumably continuing to work on them, often in difficult circumstances. In my experience, having been a civil servant, and having had civil servants as staff, they do a very good job whether or not they agree with the instructions given to them. To glibly answer

that they are always wrong was deeply disrespectful to them. I hope the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), who will speak for the Government today, will take the opportunity formally to apologise to the civil servants who prepared those papers in good faith, and assure them of the support we all have for the work they are trying to do.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) and then to the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford).

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): My right hon. and learned Friend makes the good point that, yesterday, we saw a pretty grim approach to economic forecasting, which was full of jokes and did not address the seriousness of the situation. Does he agree that an opportunity presents itself? The Conservative Government created the Office for Budget Responsibility—independent forecasters who could do the job of providing the public with the facts if only the Government would tell them what their policy is.

Keir Starmer: I do agree, and that is a very important point. Essentially, the OBR is saying that it cannot do its job because it does not have the information to do it. That is why it is far better to proceed on the basis of assessments of risk and impact, and to allow the OBR to do its job.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con) *rose*—

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con) *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I will give way in one minute, but may I just finish this point?

Having been a civil servant for five years and having engaged in risk assessments, I can say that the purpose of the exercise is to identify the risk, the size of the risk, and the likelihood of the risk. The fourth column, which is always the really important one, is what the Government will do to mitigate the risk. That is why these risk assessments are so important.

Vicky Ford: I thank the shadow Secretary of State for giving way. I agree with him on the important work of the civil service. Many real stakeholders, including the digital industry, the banking industry and the legal services industry, have come to me this week to say what a good job our civil service is doing in preparing for the Brexit negotiations. My understanding of this paper is that it suggests that the no-deal scenario is not very attractive and that cutting and pasting the Canada or the Norway deal is also not very attractive, but that is not what the Government are proposing. Does he not agree that it would be better if our Ministers got out of this House and on with their work to deliver a better deal?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention. The hon. Lady will remember that one question I asked of the Minister yesterday was whether the model that the Government are pursuing has also been subjected to an impact assessment. I did not actually get any of the questions that I asked—about six—answered or even addressed by the Minister yesterday. I hope that some of them might be addressed later on today.

Anna Soubry: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for giving way. Can he help us with this: has he established the status of these documents? From what I gather, these were not some loosely put together drafts of a document. Has he been able to establish whether these are the documents that were to be made available to members of the Cabinet—next week, I think, if not this week—under lock and key and subject to them not making notes? This is really important. Are these documents the ones that were deemed to be of such importance that the Cabinet should see them?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention. I will answer it, and make a second point as I do so. This is a really important point. The second line of defence that was deployed yesterday for not releasing these documents was that they are not complete, they are at an early stage, and they are just evolving. As I recall it, that was exactly what was said about the first set of documents that we were trying to have released last year. We have heard that one before. I have not yet ascertained the status of the documents, but, as I understand it, they were being shown to key Ministers ahead of an important Cabinet Brexit Sub-Committee meeting next week. No doubt, the Minister will be able to confirm that. If those documents are in such a form that they can be shown to Ministers to brief them for an important meeting next week, they are certainly way past the stage of an early script that has not been approved.

Hywel Williams *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I promised that I would give way, and I will.

Hywel Williams: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman. Is he aware that, this morning at Welsh questions, the Wales Office Minister, in response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), said “We have many assessments as we go through this process”, so it is not just the one, but many? Will it not be essential that the Government release those assessments when they become available as we go through the process?

Keir Starmer: I think that it is, because, otherwise, all that is available are the increasingly stale assessments that were put—eventually—into the public domain last December.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I will press on. *[Interruption.]* I will give way once, twice and then a third time to a Member on the Government Benches, just to be fair.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): The hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) makes an important point on where the devolved Administrations have already done their work on the assessments. Therefore, is it what the Minister said yesterday at the Dispatch Box that the Government will not assist them with that work, because many of these areas are partly devolved and partly retained?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention, because it is consistent with the point that was made earlier about the regions. Each of the regions and

nations needs to understand the risk that it faces, so that it can then, if necessary, put the various mitigations in place. We need to press on these issues, so that is vital.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that if the Government had at their disposal any economic evidence or forecast that backed up their chosen approach, it would already be in the public domain; it would not be called a leak?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention, and I agree that it would be highly likely that such material would be put into the public domain.

I come back to this serious point: the choice now to be made is how we leave the EU and what the future relationship might be. That is a profoundly important question. There are many different choices, and we absolutely need—and there should be—a robust impact assessment that we can all see and all discuss.

Charlie Elphicke *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I will give way once more, and then I will get on to the third point.

Charlie Elphicke: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for giving way. Is it his party's policy to remain in the European Union's customs union—yes or no?

Keir Starmer: Mr Speaker, I rather thought that the point of interventions was to engage in the debate that was going on, rather than to make a completely different point. Our position on the customs union has been made clear very, very many times, and I do not see that that is an intervention on the point that I am making, so I will press on.

The third line of defence that was advanced by the Minister, who now seeks instructions from the civil servants he disparaged yesterday, was that any disclosure might harm or undermine the negotiations. Again, we have heard that one before. We have always accepted that anything that genuinely undermines the negotiations should not be put into the public domain, but there is a difference between that and something that is simply embarrassing to the Government, a point made by the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) yesterday afternoon. This motion provides for confidentiality. That defence was immediately undermined by the Minister himself yesterday. When there is a leak, Governments usually say that they will not comment on the leak, and that they do not rely on the information in the leak, because if it is not to be in the public domain, nobody should rely on it. But the Minister not only commented on it, but sought to rely on the leak to advance his own case. When challenged by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) about the customs union, he prayed in aid the figures, saying that “there is economic growth under all the scenarios in the economic assessment.”—*[Official Report, 30 January 2018; Vol. 635, c. 683.]* One cannot simply say, “I will rely on the figures to advance my own case, but I won't publish the full figures so that anyone can question me properly on what I am saying.” We now need to go back to first principles.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con) *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I will press on, but I will give way again in a minute.

As I have said, only question was asked on 23 June 2016, which was whether we should leave the EU—not how and not what the future relationship should be. These are incredibly important questions. We need an informed debate, including on the likely economic impact of different approaches. Publication is needed in the name of transparency; publication is needed in the name of scrutiny. There has been an indication that the Government will accept this motion, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister. When he does so, may I caution him, because his fellow Minister, the hon. Member for Wycombe, yesterday found himself saying, at the beginning of his answer that

“this economic analysis is not what is formally known as an impact assessment.”—[*Official Report*, 30 January 2018; Vol. 635, c. 680.]

Let us not go there again—where a motion is accepted only for later there to be a quibble as to whether the precise wording was sufficient to release the documents. If the motion is being accepted, it needs to be accepted in spirit, in form and in full. Secondly, let there be no confusion about editing or redacting. That is not provided for in this motion, just as it was not provided for last time.

Finally I ask the Minister, if the motion is to be accepted, when do the Government intend to release the documents? I remind the Minister that when this question arose at the end of our first Humble Address, Mr Speaker was asked what he considered to be a reasonable timeframe for the Government to respond. On that occasion, Mr Speaker said:

“One can take a view about this, one can consult “Erskine May” and one should reflect in a sober and considered fashion, but if the hon. Lady is asking me whether I envisage this being something that needs to be deliberated on over a period of several days, the answer is no.”—[*Official Report*, 1 November 2017; Vol. 630, c. 932.]

The Opposition anticipate and expect the same sort of timeframe to be kept to in this case.

1.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): The Government will not be opposing this motion. As the motion is therefore expected to pass, I will focus my remarks on three important points: first, how we plan to comply with the terms of the motion; secondly, an explanation of exactly what the analysis to which the motion refers is and the significant caveats to the status of the analysis, so that all Members fully understand the preliminary nature of the analysis and the challenges around this type of modelling more broadly; and, thirdly, the fact that there are parts of the analysis that remain negotiation-sensitive and should not be put into the public domain. The right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), who speaks for the Opposition, has recognised the latter point in his motion, which refers to confidentiality. A key part of this is about the importance for Government of being able to conduct internal thinking when it comes to preparing policy.

Let me start with the terms of the motion. We will provide the analysis to the Exiting the European Union Committee and to all Members on a strictly confidential

basis. This means that we will provide a hard copy of the analysis to the Chair of the Committee. A confidential reading room will be available to all Members and peers to see a copy of the analysis, once those arrangements can be made. This will be under the same terms as previous arrangements in similar circumstances, under this and previous Governments.

Hywel Williams: We have heard many requests and demands for this information to be published here today and in the press. Has the Minister had any similar requests from the devolved Government in Cardiff for Welsh-specific information from these assessments?

Mr Walker: I personally have not yet seen such requests. We do intend to make this information available to the devolved Administrations, as we did with the previous reports that we made available to this House. It is then a matter for the devolved Administrations to ensure that such documents are handled with appropriate confidentiality; we have no objection in principle to their being shared with Members of the devolved legislatures on the same basis of confidentiality.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): As the Minister is a former economist, can he persuade me that it will be worth my while to visit this reading room, given that every economic forecast that I have ever seen has been wildly inaccurate?

Mr Walker: My right hon. Friend raises an interesting point. I would like to turn to the analysis itself, so he pre-emptively some of the caveats that are important to mention.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Walker: I will give way in one moment.

The document is preliminary, unfinished and has only very recently been presented to Ministers in any form at all. It contains a large number of caveats, and sets out on every single page that this is

“draft analytical thinking with preliminary results”.

The analysis has not been led by my Department or, for that matter, by any single Department. This next stage of analysis has been a cross-Whitehall effort to support our negotiating priorities. It is not yet anywhere near being approved by Ministers, and it has only been brought together in a draft paper for them to review this month. Even the ministerial team in my Department have only just been consulted on this particular paper in recent days, and have made it clear that it requires significant further work. It does not yet reflect this Government's policy approaches and does not represent an accurate reflection of the expected outcome of the negotiations.

It would not be right to describe the figures as Government numbers, as they have not had formal Government approval or sign-off as most analysis or policy would. The primary purpose of analysis at this stage was a preliminary attempt to improve on the much criticised analysis published around the time of the EU referendum. It is there to test ideas and to design a viable framework for the analysis of our exit from the European Union.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): Since the Conservative party governs with the support of the 10 Democratic Unionist party Members—of whom I am not one—I am very curious to know whether any Member of the DUP will have advance notice of this economic analysis ahead of the Select Committee or, indeed, in addition to the Select Committee.

Mr Walker: The simple answer is no. We would make this information available to the whole House on the same basis, while responding to the points on confidentiality that are covered in the Opposition motion.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Walker: If the hon. Lady will give me one moment, I will give way. I just want to complete my point about the caveats to the analysis.

At this very early stage, the analysis only considers the off-the-shelf arrangements that currently exist, and we have been clear these are not what we are seeking in the negotiations. It does not consider our desired outcome, which is the most ambitious relationship possible with the European Union, as set out by the Prime Minister in her Florence speech—such an agreement is in the interests of both the UK and the EU—and, to be crystal clear, it does not consider a comprehensive free trade agreement scenario as some reports have suggested, but simply an average FTA. We believe that we can do much better, given our unique starting point and shared history. Therefore, the scenarios in this analysis continue to suffer from the flaws that we have seen in previous analyses of this type.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Walker: I will give way to the hon. and learned Lady after I have given way to the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire).

Yesterday, a number of Members of this House spoke eloquently about the challenges of modelling uncertain outcomes over an extended period. The analysis presented by many organisations prior to the referendum is a clear example of those challenges. To date, we have seen outcomes that are quite different from some of those that were set out.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I find this conspiracy theory so absurd. The Treasury published very clear and totally wrong short-term forecasts for the referendum debate, and it published very clear and, I think, equally wrong long-term forecasts before the referendum debate, so that the whole nation could engage with these wrong forecasts. The latest lot of leaks looks very much like the wrong long-term forecasts that the Treasury previously published. I look forward to the Minister getting some more common sense into the thing, because there is absolutely no reason at all to suppose that leaving the EU will cause any hit to the long-term growth rate of the UK.

Mr Walker: My right hon. Friend makes his point well. I think that the point on which we would all agree is that there have to be caveats to any form of modelling. As Members will see when they look at the analysis, it sets out the caveats very clearly.

Thangam Debbonaire: I am so grateful to the Minister for being very patient and giving way to me, but I must press him on this point. It is curious to think that the Government are at this moment planning their negotiating strategy without having considered adequate impact assessments. I went to the so-called reading room in December. It was laughable that I had to sign a piece of paper, a copy of which I was not allowed to remove, in order to promise that I would not reveal what was in the documents. If there is going to be another reading room, I will do exactly what I did last time and reveal what is not in them, which is quite a lot. When will the Government work out that they need these impact assessments to have a decent negotiating strategy?

Mr Walker: As we have said many times, the Government are informed by a wide range of analyses, but I am responding to the motion from the hon. Lady's Front Benchers that respects the importance of confidentiality in this case.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Walker: I will give way to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) in a little while. I just want to finish my point about the nature of the analysis and the caveats that are contained in the document, as Members will see when they view it. Economies of all sorts face an uncertain future in the face of new technologies and the next phase of globalisation, which presents both challenges and opportunities.

Alison McGovern: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Walker: Not right now.

Of course, there is a specific role for this sort of modelling, but it must be deployed carefully and appropriately alongside a full range of policy work in our EU exit plans. On its own, no model or analysis will be sufficient to provide us with the full picture of the various benefits and costs of different versions of Britain's future relationship with the EU. Such models cannot predict the future. It is the Government's job to use these sorts of models appropriately and to develop them as best they can. Despite this—and, in many cases, because of it—the analysis remains extremely sensitive.

Joanna Cherry: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Surely the million dollar question is this: if the Government have not yet assessed the model agreement that they want, when are they going to tell the British people what it is that they want, cost it and publish the results?

Mr Walker: The Prime Minister has set out a very clear strategy for developing an FTA between the UK and the EU that goes much further than previous models. As I am explaining, the analysis under discussion looks at the existing models and compares some of them, which is not the same as what the hon. and learned Lady sets out.

Mr Kenneth Clarke: I thank my hon. Friend for announcing that the common-sense decision has been made overnight to stop trying to withhold these documents. I accept what he says about the caveats attached to all forecasts, although the idea that they are all rubbish is a new and sensational claim made by some of his colleagues.

Just to be clear about the status, is it not the case that the perfectly responsible Government Departments that produced these papers have reached the stage of briefing and informing Cabinet Ministers as they go to the next stage of discussions to try to create a policy for where we are going in the negotiations with the European Union? That status is the same as that for forecasts put to a Chancellor before making a Budget. Does my hon. Friend therefore accept that, although his words about caveats in economic forecasts are wise, we should not be tempted to drift into the rubbishing of the whole thing, which his colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), rather unwisely embarked on yesterday?

Mr Walker: My right hon. and learned Friend knows a lot from his own experience as Chancellor about the confidential information presented to Ministers ahead of Budgets, but that process has to go through a number of stages. As I have said, this information, which is preliminary and not yet finished, was presented to Ministers for the first time in recent days. It is, therefore, not in a form that is approved to go forward in the way he describes.

Despite, and in many cases because of, the points I have made, the analysis remains sensitive. Let me stress that the only reason we do not oppose the Opposition motion is that it makes clear that the analysis is to be shared with the Select Committee and Members on a confidential basis. We are about to embark on exploratory talks with the European Union regarding our future relationship and will be in formal negotiations over the coming months. Having an incomplete analysis such as this in the public domain would not serve the national interest in the upcoming negotiations. I cannot imagine that any reasonable Member of this House genuinely believes that it is in the national interest for the Government to have to publish at the start of the negotiation unfinished, developing analysis of scenarios that we are clear we do not want.

There is, however, another equally important reason why this analysis should not be put in the public domain, and it is simple: the functioning of Government—by which I mean any Government—about which my right hon. and learned Friend knows a great deal. I ask hon. Members who have been Ministers, who aspire to be Ministers or who have ever held a position of responsibility how they would feel about having to publish their team's work in progress partway through a project. I am sure they would agree that publishing unfinished initial findings can be extremely misleading, and I am confident that they would join me in ensuring that that does not happen on a routine basis.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): There is another reason why this set of analyses is peculiar and quite different. I listened carefully to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), but he is wrong on this count. This is not like advice to a Chancellor. This analysis, as I understand it, comes out of the back of the reality that all the previous forecasts, heavily reliant as they were on a gravity model of economics, have proved so wildly wrong that a variety of ways are being looked at to try to rectify that. There is, therefore, an experimental nature even to the economics, not just to the straight

analysis, and that is why it does not have a massive bearing on the Government's negotiating strategy at this point—because they themselves are questioning whether it is feasible to make a serious analysis or forecast that may be even slightly correct.

Mr Walker: My right hon. Friend makes an interesting point and I will leave it to Members to consider it when they see the actual information under discussion.

Throughout this process I have been impressed—and the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) has been clear repeatedly that he has been very impressed—by officials across Departments and the way in which they are rising to the challenge of delivery of our exit from the European Union. To do that, however, we need to have the space to undertake internal work and to challenge preconceptions.

Vicky Ford: I thank the Minister for giving way and for saying that the information will be made available to all Members in a confidential room. I remember making that suggestion when speaking about the sector-by-sector reports, which I have been to see and some of which are extremely useful. How many Members of this House have actually been to see them? I believe that the figure is probably fewer than one in 10, and I sometimes wonder whether Opposition Members are having a huge fight but not bothering to follow up on the real details that matter to real jobs in this country.

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend makes her point very well. I do not have the answer to her question, but we can certainly look into it and perhaps write to her in response.

Keir Starmer *rose*—

Mr Walker: I want to complete my remarks and give other hon. Members a chance to speak, but of course I give way to the right hon. and learned Gentleman.

Keir Starmer: I assure the House that I and many of my colleagues have been to see the documents and discussed what I thought was not in them.

Mr Walker: Returning to the hard work of our officials, if every time any element of their work leaked we were forced to present unfinished work for the scrutiny of Parliament, the public and the press, there would be a very real chance that the quality of that work would suffer. It is simply not conducive to an open, honest and iterative process of policy making in government. That is as true for all the Government's work as it is for EU exit. I do not believe that a single Member of this House believes that that would be in the national interest, so I urge the Select Committee, whose Chairman is here, to provide some assurances, in good faith, that, for those reasons and reflecting on the words of the motion, which recognise the confidential nature of the document, this preliminary analysis will not be made public.

Anna Soubry: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. I have to say that, of all the Ministers, I think he does an outstanding job in exceptionally difficult circumstances. I thank him for the work he does. However, with bucket loads of respect, the Government cannot

[Anna Soubry]

have it both ways. Either these are rather meaningless analysis documents that have not been done on any proper modelling and cannot be relied on and all the rest of it—in which case, publish the wretched things, because they are not of any value to right hon. and hon. Members—or they are indeed of great value and must be kept secret and highly confidential. Which one is it, because at the moment we do not know?

Mr Walker: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, as always, for her kind praise, but I think I have already answered the challenge she sets as to the reasons why some of the information in the report should be kept confidential. That is something on which the two Front-Bench teams clearly agree, because it is in the Opposition motion. I also just want to emphasise that the misrepresentation in some of the press reporting of this leak makes this an exceptional request that the Government agree to on an exceptional basis. They do not accept a precedent for future action.

Finally, it is also for those reasons that I believe that forcing the release of partial and preliminary analysis risks undermining the functioning of Government at a vital moment.

Alison McGovern: Will the Minister give way?

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Walker: Not now. The public have voted through a referendum to leave the European Union. We must deliver on that result, in the national interest. I agree with the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras that we should work together to ensure that, and that must include scrutiny.

Only yesterday the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe committed to ensuring that Parliament has the appropriate analysis on the terms of our exit from the European Union ahead of the vote on the final deal we agree with the European Union. That is entirely right and we will deliver on it. However, delivering on the referendum result, in the national interest, does mean being able to have a stable and secure policy-making process inside Government. It means Government taking seriously their obligation to preserve the security of our analysis and the work underpinning our negotiations, and receiving that analysis means Parliament sharing in that responsibility and obligation. As all Members of this House come together to deliver for the people the best possible outcome of the referendum result, it is with that sentiment that we will comply with the motion.

1.39 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful for the chance to speak in this debate and I commend the main Opposition party for securing it.

I am wondering why we are here because, yesterday, the Minister's colleague beside him on the Front Bench, the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), spent over an hour valiantly, loyally and completely unsuccessfully trying to persuade the House that the

sky would fall down if this information were shared with anybody. Now we are being told that it can be shared at the very least with 650 people.

Incidentally, part of the reason why relatively few MPs—certainly those in the Scottish National party—went along to the “Kremlin” reading room to look at the sectoral analysis is that, having seen part of the papers, I told a lot of my colleagues not to bother. It simply was not worth their time to go through the security checks to read stuff that they could get by looking online.

Again, we are seeing a symptom of the fact that, despite all the assurances we get that Brexit will restore “sovereignty” to Parliament, this is really about trying to restore the alleged sovereignty of a minority Government over the will of Parliament. Parliament is supposed to tell Government what to do, but every time it looks as if Parliament is going to tell the Government to do something they do not want to do, it causes absolute panic on the Government Front Bench. It also causes a headache for civil servants, as one of their main responsibilities is supposed to be to prevent Ministers from doing anything that causes political embarrassment to the Government—good luck to them. If they can achieve that, they must be quite remarkable people.

Stephen Kerr: May I ask the hon. Gentleman a very simple question? Does he condone or condemn the leaking of Government papers? It is an important question.

Peter Grant: At this point, the answer is no: I neither condone nor condemn because I do not know what the circumstances were.

I walked away from a potentially successful career in NHS financial management. I wrestled for six months with my own conscience, seeing things that I knew had to be brought to public attention but knowing there was no way I could do that, and knowing that the public were being deliberately misled about what was going on in the health board that I worked in. The only way I could bring it to public attention was to resign and walk away from the job. So I will never, ever condemn anyone who believes they are acting in the public interest by doing something that they are not supposed to do.

I would be very surprised if there is a single Member in the Chamber today who is not at this very moment considering an important constituency case that has been brought to them by someone who technically was breaking the rules by raising it with a Member of Parliament. There are times when the public interest has to outweigh all other considerations, and until I have seen the full circumstances of why this information was disclosed, I am not going to condone or condemn, and I do not think anyone else should prejudice the case by commenting on it now.

Geraint Davies: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is a distinction between a leak and whistleblowing? Whistleblowing is in the public interest. The provisional evaluation of the economic impacts, be it incomplete or imperfect, and given that good is not the enemy of perfect, should be in the public arena. This is a whistle blow, not a leak.

Peter Grant: I am grateful for that intervention. We have to be careful about language. There is whistleblowing as defined in the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 and it is not clear whether this incident would comply with that.

As a council leader, I sometimes found myself having to respond to information that technically should not have been disclosed. I always took the view that, if the motivation was clearly public interest, we should seek to protect those who did that, even if they had not technically done it in the correct way. The question today should not be about the motivation or principles of whoever disclosed this information into the public domain. The question should be first about what the information tells us, and secondly about what the Government's determination to hide this information from the people tells us about the Government's handling of Brexit.

I hope that, when the Under-Secretary of State responds, he will do what the Minister did not do earlier, and tell us when the Government started to prepare this analysis. Is this the homework that the Secretary of State had to confess to a Select Committee he had not done yet when the House asked for it? It looks suspiciously like this is not only the Secretary of State's late homework but that he copied it off his new pal Big Mike in the high school up the road in Scotland. The similarities between the Scottish Government's analysis that the Government rubbished two weeks ago and the Government's own analysis are so striking that it would be a remarkable coincidence if the people who prepared those analyses had not been copying from each other.

Tom Brake: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that it is clearly important to get this information out into the public domain or in controlled circumstances. Is he as worried as I am that, despite having information out in the public domain that tells us that Brexit, whatever version we go for, is going to cause us huge damage, not only the Government but, it seems, those on the Labour Front Bench are still going to proceed none the less?

Peter Grant: Again, this may not be the time for that debate. My position is perfectly clear. We have the results of four national votes and we have to seek to respect those as far as possible. We cannot respect them all because two of us want to leave and two of us want to stay, and the European Union does not allow bits of nation states to stay or go. However, on the Government Front Bench and, to a lesser extent, on the main Opposition Front Bench, there has been a failure to distinguish between leaving the European Union and leaving the single market, the customs union and various other European institutions, which is where the real damage exposed by these analyses lies. It is possible to leave the European Union, to comply with the referendum result, and not to bring down on ourselves, for example, the potential 8% reduction in Scottish GDP as a result. That can only be done if the Government admit that they got it wrong and step back from the red line on single market and customs union membership. There was no referendum about the single market or the customs union. At the moment, we only have unilateral political dogma from the Government, telling us that we have to leave.

The real reason why these analyses were never done and they were kept secret for as long as possible after they had been done is that they show that, in deciding to take us out of the customs union and the single market, the Government got it badly wrong. All we need is for the Government to admit they got it wrong and this whole debate then becomes an irrelevance.

The Government's behaviour demonstrates again the fallacy of the argument that Parliament holds the Government to account. In effect, we do not have an electoral system that is designed to produce a proper Parliament. We have an electoral system for this place that is designed to produce one winner and one loser, and it does not like it if there is more than one party on the alleged losing side, because the system cannot cope with having more than one big Opposition party. It does not like it if it is unclear who the overall winner is. This place is always in turmoil if a coalition has to be formed and there is a minority Government. The whole procedure of Parliament—the way that Bills are produced, the way that time is allocated and so on—is based on the assumption that the Government decide and just every once in a while Parliament tries to tell the Government that they should have decided something different.

In the discussion we had about the first batch of Brexit papers before Christmas—there have been elements of it again today—we heard that it is disloyal to the country and to our constituents for any Member of Parliament to suggest that the Government have got it wrong and should be doing something different. Whether it is in relation to publishing or not publishing the papers, to handing them over in secret to a Committee or not, to the decision to take us out of the customs union in the first place or to any other decision that the Government take and announce without having the full mandate of the people, it must be open to any Member of Parliament to criticise and seek to change it.

When I keep hearing Members—not so much those on my Benches, because we have a clear mandate from our constituents—on either the Government Benches or other Opposition Benches being denounced as traitors and enemies of the people simply for standing up in this place for what they believe in, we have to ask ourselves what is going on with democracy in these four nations. In some ways, that is even more fundamental than our membership of the EU and its related institutions. We have to get a grip.

It was disappointing to hear comments yesterday from Government Back Benchers about London-based elite remoaners. No one on the Government Front Bench picked up on that and said that that kind of language is not acceptable. There should never be any need to question the integrity or motivation of anybody in the Chamber simply because we disagree, however passionately, with what they are saying.

Vicky Ford: I listened to what the hon. Gentleman said earlier about the sector-by-sector reports and I think I heard him say that he had told other colleagues not to bother to go and read them. My understanding is that we need a trade deal that works for all sectors of the economy and especially for areas such as food, agriculture and farming. My memory of those sector-by-sector reports is that that is an area that is enormously detailed, so perhaps he will think again about encouraging other Members to go and look at this detailed information.

Peter Grant: Part of the Government's response earlier today to the disclosure of these documents was that the quotation or citation was selective and incomplete. I am afraid that is what we have just heard from the hon. Lady.

Joanna Cherry: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Peter Grant: May I deal with the first intervention first, please?

What I said was that the reason I had told my colleagues that it was not really worth while for them to hand over their phones, make appointments and so on to go and see the documents, was that there was nothing in there that they could not have got quite easily on the internet. Is it really a good use of a Member's time to go through a security check more severe than at an airport, in order to read in a classified document that Airbus and Boeing make aeroplanes? To read in a classified document that gambling legislation in Northern Ireland is devolved but not elsewhere? These are all things that were in the documents that the Government said they could not disclose. To read in the sectoral report on the electricity industry that lots of people in the United Kingdom rely on electricity for domestic and commercial purposes?

Come on, Madam Deputy Speaker: there may well be information in the latest batch of documents that there is good reason for wanting to keep classified and confidential, but the Government's attitude is that they tell the people and Parliament as little as they can possibly get away with. We all know that the reason for the change of heart from yesterday to today is nothing to do with the Government's having decided that, because part of the documents had been published, they might as well give Parliament everything. The Government are not opposing the motion today because they know they would go down badly if they forced it to a Division. They do not have the support of their own Back Benchers; I doubt if they even have the support of their own Front Benchers. Their culture of excessive secrecy no longer has the support of their own people. They are not forcing the matter to a vote today because they know they would not only lose, but lose so badly that it would call into question the continuation of the Government in its entirety.

Stephen Kerr *rose*—

Peter Grant: I did say I would give way to my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry).

Joanna Cherry: As usual, my hon. Friend is being modest. He is not explaining to the House that he is a member of the Exiting the European Union Committee and has been part of the project to produce detailed reports of sectoral analysis, so he knows, like anyone who has bothered to read the reports—I see the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) is still sitting beside the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr)—that all the information in these top-secret documents is already in the public domain.

Peter Grant: I am grateful for that intervention. I am aware of the time, and I do not want to impinge too much on other people's—

Stephen Kerr *rose*—

Peter Grant: I will give way once more, but I hope the intervention is a bit more relevant than the earlier one.

Stephen Kerr: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his gracious approach to my intervention. It is just that he is contradicting himself. He says that the Government

are not responsive to Parliament—that Parliament is some kind of constitutional eunuch—and in the next breath he says that the reason there will not be a vote today is that the Government cannot control their own side. He cannot have it both ways. This Parliament is very successfully holding the Government to account and is being very thorough in its scrutiny. In defence of the honour of this Parliament, I needed to intervene to say that.

Peter Grant: The reason why Conservative Back Benchers will abstain in this debate is that the Government Whips have told them to abstain. The reason why the earlier motion on the main Brexit sectoral analysis was not opposed was that the Government told their Back Benchers not to oppose it. Since then a number of Back Benchers, sitting in this Chamber, have said that they would have been quite happy to lead a move against that Humble Address before Christmas but the Government Whips told them not to. The fact of the matter is that all too often the Government hold Parliament to account, not the other way around.

We shall not fix that today, but if we appreciate that that is the background against which this fiasco has developed, it is easier to understand how it is that, as soon as there is a Government who do not command a substantial majority in the House, there are problems. The British electoral system has a phobia against minority Governments or coalition Governments, despite the fact that in numerous other places—some of them not too far north of here—there are examples of Governments operating very successfully indeed, either in coalition or as a minority Government.

The Minister, as part of his argument to try to discredit his own Government's analysis, points out that it is based on average free trade agreements, as opposed to the all-singing, all-dancing with bells and whistles free trade agreement that the Government keep telling us they will achieve within the next year or two. What is that assurance based on? What grounds does this Parliament have to believe that the Government have a snowball in hell's chance of finding anyone to give the United Kingdom on its own a better trade agreement than they are willing to give to the 500 million people of the European Union single market? Have the Government done an analysis to tell them that they are going to get better trade deals? I hope not, because if they have done such an analysis, that analysis is quite clearly rubbish as well.

Given that analyses that come out of Her Majesty's Treasury are no longer to be trusted, may we now take it as the Government's official position that we can no longer believe what was said in the 16 analyses that were done by Government Departments in 2013-14, showing what a disaster a yes result in the Scottish referendum would be? And can we just cut to the chase, and save everybody a lot of time, by getting the Government to admit now that the bucketsful of analysis that they are going to produce next time around are also worthless and incomplete and selective, so they can just not bother producing them and save us all a lot of time?

Madam Deputy Speaker, when you get a Government who have to defend their own excessive secrecy by telling the people of these islands that they cannot rely on information that comes out from the Government, whether it was meant to come out or not—when the

Government tell us we cannot rely on information that the Government themselves are producing—that is what undermines Britain's negotiating position with the European Union. It is not the fact that information might be published that the EU could have put together itself quite easily; it is that the Government's action in attempting to conceal that information and then seeking to discredit it demonstrates to our EU partners what they probably knew—that they are negotiating with a disorganised, disunited, shambolic and incompetent Government. That weakens Britain's negotiating position more than any release of Brexit analysis papers could ever do.

1.56 pm

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant), although obviously I did not agree with much of what he said at the end of his speech.

I am delighted that the Government have had the good sense to agree to the motion. I am concerned about the circumstances in which these documents will now be made available, in some sort of secrecy, despite the fact that they can clearly be read on the internet. Why we are going through that farce, I do not know.

May I gently say to my Government, this madness has to stop. If we were in the middle of the summer, I might say that it was overexposure to a hot sun that seems to have caused a collective outbreak in the Government of a form of madness. Their inability to grasp Brexit and do the right thing, frankly, is now at a point where, as I say, it has got to stop. We have to start to do the right thing; and the right thing is to get this Brexit sorted out, to form a consensus in this place and within the country, and deliver—deliver not just on the referendum result, but on the hopes and aspirations of our people that we will have an economic future out of the European Union that will be safe and secure for generations to come.

Geraint Davies: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Anna Soubry: In a moment.

The reality of these documents, of course, is that finally it seems that our Government have decided they are actually going to make some choices; they are actually going to form a view in Cabinet. It has only taken 19 months since the referendum to work out what they want from Brexit.

The Prime Minister told us, in her Lancaster House speech, what she did not want, but what nobody in the Government—in the Cabinet—has told us is what this Government do want by way of Brexit. And if I am agitated—and I am—I can assure the Front Bench that whilst I think most of the people of this country are just fed up to the back teeth, the people of this country are also agitated, because they are worried and they are nervous. And being blunt, there are millions and millions of people in this country who do not believe that either of the two political parties in this country represent their views, and indeed will forward their views.

I see it in these terms. I think there is a group of people—the hard Brexiters—and you are not going to change them. In my party, my Government believe that somehow they can “manage” the 35 hard Brexiters, who for decades have been banging on about Europe in

a way that I think is not, at times, particularly good for their mental health—and they think they can “manage” them. They cannot be managed. Even if they were given what they wanted today, they would complain that it had not been done yesterday. For many of them it is a battle to the death, and they will not hesitate to destroy this party or our Prime Minister to get what they want. They can see the prize and they will be damned if anybody is going to get in their way. The Government need to wake up to that reality. So we have that problem to cope with, and that is the way to deal with it: see it off, build a consensus, and jump into the middle ground and put this country's interests before anything else. As the CBI said, “Goodbye ideology; wake up to the interests of our country.”

Over on the other side is a group of people who still want to fight the battle of the referendum—they are remainers, they are angry and they cannot and will not accept that we are leaving the European Union—but here in the middle is the majority of people. They are like corks, bobbing around in a sea. They feel queasy and uneasy, and they are worried about their own futures and their children and grandchildren's futures, yet there is nobody for them—no thing, no vehicle coming along upon which they can jump; a big, warm ship that says to them, “Come on board. You've got a great captain at the wheel and we can see the land of our destination over there.” It might be Norway; it could be the European Free Trade Association—actually, I would like it to be the single market and the customs union, but hell, I will compromise. I will take EFTA. Why? Because I want to form a consensus to get the best thing for our country.

That is there, but at the moment there is nothing for people to get into that will save them from what, unless this madness stops, will undoubtedly be a catastrophe. Call it what you will—“walking off a plank” is how I think a noble Lord quite properly described it yesterday. Others have described it as “sleepwalking to a Brexit disaster” or “jumping over the cliff”. Whatever metaphor one wants to use, if this Government—and it can only be this Government—do not get a grip on the situation at the top, we will indeed walk into a Brexit nightmare.

Sir Desmond Swayne: My right hon. Friend said that the Prime Minister had not set out what she wanted. I contend that she has done precisely that. Of course it is arguable whether she will get it, but as for the boat that my right hon. Friend wants to welcome everybody on to, the Prime Minister has set that out.

Anna Soubry: With great respect to my right hon. Friend, that is absolute nonsense, and the good people of this country now require honesty and transparency. Some of us have been over to Brussels. Many people—right hon. and hon. Members, some of whom I can see on the Opposition Benches—have spoken to people at all levels of the 27 nations and to ambassadors from other countries. They have been over to Brussels and spoken to all manner of people, and no, we are not pleased. Don't patronise; we are not stupid; we know when we are getting a line. We have spoken to disparate people, and every single one of them says, “Wake up, Britain. You're not going to get a bespoke deal. You're probably going to get Canada.”

[Anna Soubry]

I do not want us to be like Canada. That is not what people in my constituency voted for. They did not vote to be poorer—and they would be poorer, God help us if we got a Canadian deal. People have a right to know what the consequences of the various options are. The problem with the Prime Minister's position is that she has told us what she does not want—the customs union, the single market and the European Court of Justice—and that has seriously reduced the options available to our country. By drawing those red lines and refusing to move, she puts the EU in a position whereby it is limited in what it can offer us. I say to my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) that we are deluding people if we continue to peddle this nonsense.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The right hon. Lady is giving a passionate speech. The one thing that the Prime Minister has said she wants is to keep frictionless trade in Northern Ireland. The problem is that that is utterly irreconcilable with what she said she does not want, which is the single market and customs union. Therein lies the fundamental confusion that is causing so much difficulty in the country right now.

Anna Soubry: I agree with the hon. Gentleman—I nearly called him my Friend, although on this he is, because he is absolutely right. The agreement made in December between the European Union and ourselves is such a fudge that it is impossible to put it into a text that could become a treaty. It is a superb fudge, and it has delivered the political outcome, but the reality, which has been accepted by this Government, is that in order to solve the problem in Ireland we are staying in the—not “a”, but “the”—customs union and single market. That is what the Government basically agreed to do in December.

Alison McGovern: The right hon. Lady has hit on the heart of the problem, which is that the Government will not say what they want. However, turning to this issue, does she agree that the reason why the public are in the dark is that we have excellent independent economic forecasters in the Office for Budget Responsibility who say that they simply cannot do their job because we are all in the dark about what the Government actually want? Ought they not to rectify that?

Anna Soubry: The hon. Lady is quite right—she can be my Friend in this debate, because she makes an important point. What responsible Governments do, quite properly, is to say to impartial, objective officials, “Right, these are the options. Cost them out, or assess them, and so on and so forth,” and yet bizarrely the Government did not put forward their own preferred option. What on earth does that say about our Government's position? What further evidence does anybody want that they have not worked out their position? They have got to do that, because at the end of March the European Union will publish what its position is going to be, and there is every chance that our Government will still be messing about, fighting off hard Brexiteers and not grasping the nettle and doing their duty by the country.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I have huge respect for the right hon. Lady on this issue. Does she agree that we would not be hearing any of this stuff about the reports being negotiation-sensitive if the Government could lay their hands on a single report that said there would be economic benefits to Brexit, rather than economic costs?

Anna Soubry: This is an astonishing idea. The right hon. Gentleman—he is definitely my Friend today—seems to be saying that if there was a report saying that going off the cliff or some other madness would be beneficial to our economy, the Government might publish it, because it would help in their dealings with the hard Brexiteers. Of course, the right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right.

What the Government have done, to their credit, is to ask the objective analysts to go away and look at the options, albeit apparently not their preferred option—although we have made that point, so I will move swiftly on—and they have come back, having no doubt done their job, as they always do, thoroughly, openly, honestly and exceptionally well. We now know that these reports were prepared, and apparently some Ministers have already seen them. According to reports, I think in *The Times*, Cabinet Ministers were to go and see them under lock and key. They were to read them, they were not to take in their phones and most certainly not to make any notes, and they were to inform themselves, so that finally our Cabinet could perhaps come to a conclusion about what we want from Brexit. Yet apparently these very same reports are so useless and flawed—they are based on weird modelling and cannot be trusted—that they have to remain top secret. They were not good enough—or were they?—to inform Cabinet members. It is nonsense.

Geraint Davies: The Minister said that these analyses are provisional, incomplete and not fit for purpose, so is the right hon. Lady as amazed as I am that the Prime Minister should conduct phase 1 of the negotiations with no economic analysis? No wonder we are the laughing stock of Europe.

Anna Soubry: Well, no, because I thought the conclusion to phase 1 was actually quite good, so I am certainly not going to undermine it, but the hon. Gentleman makes an important point.

Many hon. Members sat through the many hours of debate during the Committee stage of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill and, at the end of it, one thing on which those of us who take a sensible approach to this all agreed was that we had had some terrific debates. The dreadful irony was this: if only we had had those bloomin' debates before the European Union referendum. What is undoubtedly happening is that people are becoming better informed. They understand now the huge complexity that Brexit is. They realise that there are serious consequences to our decision to leave the European Union, and that is why they are darned worried, not just for themselves but for their children and their grandchildren. People have a right to know. My constituents who work at Boots have a right to know the consequences for them and the pharmaceutical sector, based on the different models and choices that are still available to our country. The people who own and run Freshcut Foods have a

right to know about the consequences of, say, duties on imported fruit and vegetables from European countries and what those will mean to them, in the real world, doing the job that they do.

That is at the heart of all that is happening now. People want to know, because they are finding out about the promises they were made. The £350 million for the NHS is all gone; they were lied to—they were conned—on that. They were told this was going to be the quickest trade deal—I think I am right in saying they were told it would take a day and a half to do a trade deal.

We are nowhere near doing that trade deal, and we will be nowhere near doing it, because the other Brexit reality is this: we are not going to have a meaningful vote in this place—we are not—because there will not be anything meaningful to vote on. What is going to happen, unless the Government get into the right place, is that, yes, we will have an agreement on the divorce—that will be there in the withdrawal agreement—but in terms of the actual relationship we will have with the European Union once we have left, we will have a few woolly heads of agreement. That will mean pretty much nothing—not even to those of us who have spent what feels like a lifetime now looking at these options. We will have a series of heads of agreement. That is not meaningful; that does not give us the ability to decide whether this is in the interests of our constituents and our country. It will have no meaning whatever. Again, people—my Government and everybody else—have to wake up to the reality of what we are going to get in October.

Tom Brake: I thank the right hon. Lady for giving way, and I am hoping that she might say that I can be her Friend as well, but maybe the question I am about to ask will not allow that to happen. Does she think that we can have a meaningful vote in this House if that does not include the option of voting to stay in the European Union?

Anna Soubry: The right hon. Gentleman and I used to be Friends, because we used to be in coalition, so he can be my Friend today. *[Interruption.]* Actually, I am very proud to have served in the coalition, because it was one of the best Governments we ever had, but in any event, we will move swiftly on.

The right hon. Gentleman makes a really good point, because the other danger is that we sleepwalk into some trap that will be set—that if we do not vote for this woolly agreement, the alternative will be “off the cliff”, and, of course, there are alternatives. It would be wrong to say to the European Union, “Can we come back and negotiate?”—the EU is amazing in the way it has put up with so much nonsense and with still not knowing what our country wants—but I do not think we will be in that position. However, the EU has already made it clear that if we want to remain in the European Union, that option is still open to this country; indeed, if we want to remain a member of the single market or the customs union, that option, too, is available to our country. So, in that sense, it should be a meaningful vote.

However, let me just say this. Such is my concern as events have developed that I have come round to the very firm view that it is not just in this place that we should have a meaningful vote; the people of this country, too, are entitled to a meaningful vote. We had a referendum,

and I have always respected the result and will continue so to do. However, as this Brexit reality unwinds, and as people and even Members of this House—we know that some did not even know what the customs union was—*[Interruption.]* Oh, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am sure I speak on behalf of everybody when I say it is wonderful to have you back. *[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”]* We know your pain, and we all love and have great affection for you and, indeed, your family. We wish you all well.

That is the view I have come to. It is not for us to undo this EU referendum result, and we cannot; it has to be the people, and this has to be led by the people. The people are entitled not just to know the facts about Brexit but to have a say. I am forming the view, based on conversations I have had with my constituents, that many of them are now saying, “I did not realise how complex this was. I did not realise and appreciate how many cons and tricks had been played on me and how many untruths had been told. As I think about my future and my children’s future, I now want a real, meaningful say in this.”

Joanna Cherry *rose*—

Anna Soubry: I will quickly give way before the bird lands.

Joanna Cherry: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for giving way. She is making a truly outstanding speech, and I really commend her for it. On the point she made earlier about the ability of the United Kingdom to change its mind, does she agree that the olive branch extended by Donald Tusk and Emmanuel Macron means that it is open to this country unilaterally to change its mind and revoke the article 50 notice?

Anna Soubry: The hon. and learned Lady is right—she, too, could become my Friend for the day. In all seriousness, she is absolutely right. I am sure that it was a pure coincidence that, the day after certain members of the all-party parliamentary group on EU relations went over to Brussels, Tusk and Juncker—I am not sure whether it was Juncker, but, anyway, Members know who I mean—tweeted in the way that they did. They made it very clear that if the people—and it has to come from the people—want to change their mind, we can stay in the European Union, and if the people want to retain membership of the single market and the customs union, that option, too, will be open to us in October.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): We are starting to have that very important discussion about the fact that, as I put it, the people must finish what the people have started. That is by no means a disrespectful way of looking at the first decision; the two decisions are separate, and we are talking about a review and an update or a confirmation. This is by no means about talking down to people who voted one way or the other; it is about being very mature about the fact that we have all learned a great deal in the last 18 months.

Anna Soubry: I agree with most of what the hon. Lady says. The point in all of this is that this has to come from the people. Arguably, we—as politicians and Members of Parliament—are one of the reasons why the 52% who voted to leave voted in the way they did,

[Anna Soubry]

because they feel so disconnected from us and feel that we do not represent them. Actually, they always think their own MP is rather good; it is just that all the others are not, which is always interesting. It does not quite make sense, does it?

It is really, really important that we get this right. This has to come from the people. As the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) said, they started this. We gave them the power, and we must let them still have that power and exercise it. However, as I say, my real message today is to my Government and my Prime Minister: get a grip, and let us start leading on this. They should see off those people who do not run this country and who do not represent Conservative voters or the people of this country. They should park them to one side and build a consensus, never forgetting that, if there was a free vote in this House tomorrow or next week, I believe that the majority of hon. and right hon. Members would vote certainly for EFTA, and also for the customs union. So let us now be big and brave and do the right thing by the people of this country and the generations to come.

2.18 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), and I echo what she said to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, on behalf of all of us in the Chamber about seeing you back in your place. We feel for you enormously.

Such is the interest in our debate today that we have been joined by a robin—[*Interruption.*] Not that Robin—I was thinking of the other one, which has been hopping around the Gallery.

Well, well, well, this is all rather familiar. However, as well as the despair expressed by the right hon. Lady, I feel a growing sense of puzzlement. Let me give Members just a little history. We were led to believe in the first instance that the Government had been carrying out assessments of the impact of Brexit on different sectors of the economy. Then we were assured by the Secretary of State that they had not. Now we discover that, in fact, they have, although clearly those are not the same assessments we had mistakenly been asking for before. If I understand it correctly, they are now the assessments that will be shown to Cabinet Ministers in the locked room over the next week or so.

I want to say something about what the Minister's hon. Friend—the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker)—said yesterday. We on the remain side need to be honest and acknowledge that forecasts have been made that have proved to be spectacularly wrong. The right hon. Member for Broxtowe just referred to a forecast by the International Trade Secretary, whose precise words were that a post-Brexit free trade deal with the EU should be the “easiest in human history”. In 2016, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union forecast that by September this year, the UK “can negotiate a free trade area massively larger than the EU.”

Well, that forecast was wrong too, and then there has been the repeated assertion by many Ministers, including the Prime Minister, that no deal is better than a bad deal.

All of us know that is nonsense, because no deal is the worst possible deal of all, which merely proves that when it comes to talking about inaccurate forecasts, some Ministers live in very, very vulnerable greenhouses.

If Ministers in the Department do not trust any of the forecasts, it prompts the question: why did they bother to commission them in the first place? I see that the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Wycombe, has tried today to soothe the no doubt ruffled feathers of his civil servants with a tweet—I do not habitually follow his tweets, but they were drawn to my attention—saying that

“I still love them and my critique is of economic method, not individuals”.

I am sure that will be of great reassurance to hard-working and professional civil servants.

Then there is the very perplexing question that it would be good to hear an answer to. What confidence should we have when the Minister said yesterday from the Dispatch Box that we do not need to worry about the gloomy forecasts, because the very same analysis shows that under every one of them, the British economy would continue to grow? How do we know that that forecast is true if it is being produced by the same people whom the Minister said from the Dispatch Box always get their forecasts wrong? It is a farce—it is a Whitehall farce.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend just pointed to the extraordinary circumstance whereby we see Ministers against civil servants, and I have never seen that situation in my lifetime. Does he not agree that at the heart of this is honesty and transparency for Parliament and the public in the most important debate that we will have for generations?

Hilary Benn: I agree absolutely. Indeed, I made the point yesterday about the importance of transparency and about a lack of transparency not being in the national interest. I gently say to Ministers that trying to have a go at people who are asking questions about what analysis has been done and what it shows, and attempting to suggest that all of them are trying to undo the referendum result, is an unwise approach. I think it reveals a great defensiveness and a lack of confidence on the part of Ministers about the position that they have put the Government in.

Tom Brake: I bring the right hon. Gentleman back to the issue of growth. Yesterday, the Minister said that all the forecasts suggest there would be some growth. Does he remember, as I do, how keen the Government were to claim that the UK was until recently the fastest-growing economy? Now, Ministers are clearly saying that if there is some growth—however small that is—it is excellent news for the United Kingdom economy.

Hilary Benn: Indeed, that is the case. Ministers have made those arguments and, of course, when the growth is better than that in any other countries, they would. However, what the analysis appears to show cannot be avoided: in all the options that it looked at, the country would be less well off than we would otherwise be.

We are told that the analysis is preliminary. Nineteen months after the referendum, how on earth can it still be preliminary—really? We are told that the people who are meant to be in charge had not seen it until two nights ago, when it is about to be shown in a locked room to members of the Cabinet. We are told, as has been said, that it does not include modelling of the Government's preferred option. Why on earth not? The answer is a simple one: the Government do not know what their preferred option consists of. Therefore, they cannot model it.

Apart from anything else, the Government said that they really hoped with the Florence speech last October to get the European Council to move on to phase 2 of the negotiations, but we clearly were not ready then, because we now know that they had not done the modelling, and we are still not ready now, in view of what we have been told. As any teacher would understand, there are only so many times that the family dog's eating habits can be offered as an excuse for not producing homework.

Being told graciously, as we all were yesterday, "We will give it to you eventually, when the deal has been done," was not on. I very much welcome—I say this to the Minister in all sincerity—the fact that overnight Ministers have had a rethink and will accept the resolution. I say on behalf of the Exiting the European Union Committee—because we are buying some more lever arch files—that we will handle the material when it is given to us in the same, I hope, professional way that we handled the last lot of information, in line with the commitments I gave to the Secretary of State.

This shambles—I use the word deliberately—is a symptom of a fundamental problem that the country faces. First, the Government took decisions early on, such as leaving the customs union, leaving the single market, having nothing to do with the European Court of Justice and no free movement, without having made any assessment of what impact that would have on the British economy—none. The decisions were taken for ideological reasons, without looking at any evidence.

Anna Soubry: May I take the right hon. Gentleman one step back? Does he now share the view of many right hon. and hon. Members on the Government side that the other mistake was to trigger article 50 too early as well, and that has not helped us in our negotiations either?

Hilary Benn: In retrospect, there is force in the right hon. Lady's argument, but since the Government chose the date on which to trigger it, we would have expected them to plan how they would be in a position to be able to negotiate what was required.

The second thing that the Government have done is to demonstrate their complete inability thus far to set out what they would like in phase 2 negotiations—that deep and special partnership. Why? It is an open secret that the Cabinet is in disagreement about the right way forward—that is not just among 35 Government Back Benchers, but inside the Cabinet. Every day we open the newspapers to find the symptoms of that inability to reach agreement spread all over the pages. Heaven knows what the people we are supposed to be negotiating with make of all this. As a result, neither this House nor

the 27 other member states are any the wiser about what we or they will be asked to consider when the Government finally reaches a decision.

What is the task now? The Government need to tell us what they will be seeking. Much more importantly, they need to indicate what trade-offs they are prepared to make to achieve the things they say they want, because the choices have consequences that cannot be avoided. It is clear that the Government face, apparently with equanimity, the prospect of going into a negotiation from which, whatever they achieve, we will come away with less than we currently enjoy. My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) absolutely hit the nail on the head when she said that if there was any evidence to the contrary, boy, would we have read about it already.

The Government need to face up to the consequences of their own red lines for the border in Northern Ireland. I reinforce the point that has been made, including by my hon. Friend, because the Select Committee was in Dublin last week, and we went to look at the border in December. It is not just a fudge. We could describe it as an attempt at alchemy, because the Government are hoping that they can turn the base metal of full alignment into the gold of an open border, when nobody knows how that extraordinary achievement can be brought about, given the utter contradiction between the two positions that they have set out.

The Government also continue to insist—I hope at some point they will stop, because it does not add to their credibility—that between now and the end of October this year, we can negotiate and reach agreement on all these things: trade in goods and services; security and foreign policy co-operation; policing; information sharing to fight terrorism; the regulation of medicines, aircraft and food safety; the transfer of data; the mutual recognition of qualifications; and our future role in the 30 trade agreements that the EU has negotiated on our behalf—and everything else—the Minister sitting there knows better anyone what a long list it is—and that we are going to get a final agreement by October, and by the way, even if things go well, the negotiations will not even start until March! That is why we do not know—the right hon. Member for Broxtowe was right—what will be on offer by the time we get to the end of the article 50 negotiations.

I conclude with the issue that the House is going to have to confront—and we had better start thinking now about how we are going to deal with it, because the House is going to have the final say: we are going to vote on the draft agreement. Before it does so, however, the House needs to make it clear that we will expect to know what our future relationship, when it comes to trade in goods and services, is going to be. The vague offer, come October, of a possible post-dated cheque for an unspecified agreement simply will not do. Ministers should not rely—I say this with all the force I can offer—on the House of Commons just accepting whatever they come up with, on the grounds that the alternative is no deal at all; it is not the only alternative, and if Ministers do not start exploring those alternatives pretty quickly and doing the analysis to support what the implications of those alternatives will be, they may well find that Parliament ultimately decides it will have to do it for them.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con) *rose—*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I call Rachel Maclean.

Mr Kenneth Clarke *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Oops. I call Mr Kenneth Clarke. You were not on my list, but you have just been added.

2.31 pm

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): The Speaker got an ambiguous reply from me, and I will explain why in a moment, but first may I add my sympathies to those already expressed in the House, Mr Deputy Speaker, and say how delighted I am to see you back in the Chair?

I will explain why I hesitated when the Speaker asked me if I wanted to speak. First, I think—I will have to check—I agreed with every word that the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) just said. I was also hugely impressed by the speech made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry). I was not at all sure, therefore, if I would try to catch your eye, Mr Deputy Speaker, because I did not wish to detain the House by simply repeating the arguments they gave, as other people want to speak. By my standards, therefore, I hope I shall make what might be described as a long intervention—I usually intervene for longer than other people anyway.

I want to comment on the status of these economic analyses and how one should use economic analyses, and what has been presented here. Brexiteers make a great deal in their arguments, when they try to dismiss the documents we are all going to see, of the inaccuracy of some of the documents put out at the time of the referendum. There is no doubt that the authorities then put out forecasts, in good faith, in which they overestimated the short-term consequences of the vote. It has to be said that some of those campaigning on the remain side—David Cameron and George Osborne, I am afraid, who are both friends of mine—grossly exaggerated the material they had, such that the arguments on the remain side in the national media, at times, were almost as silly as those on the leave side—on the question of money for the health service or Turks coming to this country. It was a wholly unsatisfactory campaign.

We should not exaggerate how wrong those forecasts were. The vote to leave has already made this country poorer than it would have been. The living standards of many people in this country are lower now than they would have been had we voted to remain. The vote produced an unfortunate devaluation in the pound and a surge in inflation at a time when very many people's wages could not follow it, and that has had consequences. On the lack of any policy, I would defend my Government's not having a policy yet on what they are trying to negotiate by pointing out that the Opposition party does not either. The right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) wisely declined to answer the question of whether the Labour party was in favour of staying in the customs union because he has not a clue what the Labour party's view will be once it has settled its internal arguments—but that is a diversion.

The fact remains that we have already damaged ourselves. We are experiencing some economic growth, although it is not benefiting every section of the population, but that is because the global economy is, to everybody's

surprise, doing rather better than was expected six months ago. There is global growth. No one is quite certain why. I am certainly not, but it is beginning to look quite strong—it is strong in the United States and the European Union, and it is not too bad out in China—and as always we are benefiting from that. It was unforeseeable when the forecasts were made last summer, but now we have this strong surge, and we do not know how sustained it will be. It all looks a little fragile—there are one or two uncertainties about—but it is lifting the British economy a little, and I am glad that it is. But, because of the impact of the referendum, growth in this country is pretty feeble compared with the rest. We are the laggard in the G7. We are the laggard among the European economies against which we normally match our performance. That is the damaging consequence of the vote cast in the referendum in 2016.

Alison McGovern: Does the Father of the House agree that the extraordinary actions taken by the Governor of the Bank of England in response to the vote are very poorly understood, which creates an even worse impression of the forecasts made beforehand?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I must inform the House that there will be a six-minute limit after the current speech, and if people intervene I will have to bring it down further. I do not want to stop debate; I just want to warn everybody.

Mr Clarke: I agree entirely with the hon. Lady. The Governor actually lessened the impact that the Bank forecast by taking very prompt action to minimise the consequences. He would still agree with me, however, and has done publicly, that there has still be damage to the economy already, and he has tried to quantify the effect on GDP as a whole.

I will conclude with one last point—I said I would be short—about these forecasts. I hope we get more full information from the Government as events unfold and some impact assessments of their policy, once they have decided what it is, but it is almost inevitable that the impact will be detrimental to some extent. I know of very few economists who believe in market economics at all who would say that leaving the largest, richest multinational trading agreement in the world can be anything other than, to some degree, detrimental. I look forward to someone such as my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), with whom I often agree on economic policy, trying to explain to me how leaving the single market and customs union can have anything but a negative impact on the economy. How on earth can tariffs and customs barriers between us and our major market on the continent—the planning permission for those lorry parks, the recruiting of those thousands of staff—have a positive effect? How can regulatory divergence, which will damage trade, particularly in goods and services, have a positive effect? Whatever the best efforts of economists in these and future papers, they will be trying to measure the detrimental effects on the British economy that this step is bound to have. The country will be poorer if it pulls out of its present economic and trading relationships with the EU. It is our duty in this House, on a cross-party basis, to do what we can to minimise the damage.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. There is now a six-minute speaking limit. I call Emma Reynolds.

2.39 pm

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): As ever, Mr Deputy Speaker, it is a pleasure and a privilege to serve under your chairmanship. It is also a pleasure to follow the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke).

In the referendum, people were asked to decide whether or not we should leave the European Union. They were not asked about the form that Brexit should take; that was not on the ballot paper. However, as was pointed out by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), the choice now is about how we are to leave the European Union. There are many different options and models. We need to secure the best possible deal to protect people's jobs and livelihoods, and we therefore need to pursue policies based on evidence, not ideology.

Let me say gently to Ministers that the debate which took place in our country about the EU referendum was one of the most divisive that I can remember. It divided the country pretty much straight down the middle. It divided cities, regions, rural areas and towns. It divided generations, and in some cases it divided families. I will admit that it divided my family: close family members voted to leave the EU, and we had many robust debates about it, although thankfully we did not fall out over it in the end.

Surely the role of the Government in the 19 months since the referendum should have been to try to unite the country again, to bring the country together, and to stand above the fray and do the right thing, rather than getting their hands dirty in the fray and levelling accusations at Members. I say to Ministers—not the thoughtful Minister from whom we heard today, but perhaps the Minister who spoke yesterday, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker)—that they should not question the integrity of Members of this House. I see it as my duty, in representing the people of Wolverhampton North East, to ensure that leaving the European Union does not make them poorer. I will hold to that very firmly, and I will not be cowed by Ministers or any other Members who tell me that I am not acting in the national interest.

Some of the extremists—or Brextremists—on the Conservative Benches advance the same arguments day after day, week after week. If any of us dares to question the mess that the Government are in, we are told that we are acting against the national interest. If we ask what impact a certain model or option for Brexit will have on our constituents, we are told that we are betraying the will of the people. Ah—the other Minister, the hon. Member for Wycombe, has entered the Chamber at a very appropriate time.

If economists, or any other trade experts, warn about the consequences of leaving the customs union or the single market, they are told that they are always wrong and it is rubbish. I am afraid that we are descending into a position in which a Government are making decisions solely on the basis of ideology, and not on the basis of evidence.

Seema Malhotra: My hon. Friend is making a very powerful and passionate speech. The report appears to highlight the fact that the biggest negative impact comes

from the UK's decision both to leave the customs union and to leave the single market, neither of which we have to do if we leave the European Union, and the fact is that both decisions were made without proper debate, scrutiny and the presenting of evidence in the House. Is that not interesting?

Emma Reynolds: I agree with my hon. Friend. As the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) said earlier, those options were taken off the table soon after the referendum result. They were not debated very much in the House. There were no impact assessments, or economic analyses, whatever the difference between those may be. There was no discussion about the impact of leaving the customs union and leaving the single market. What will be the impact on the car industry in our country? What will be the impact on Jaguar Land Rover, which employs thousands of people in my constituency, and on Honda, whose representatives gave evidence to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee? They said that if we left the customs union, the delays at the border would cost hundreds of thousands of pounds, and could lead to job losses. Why are we not listening to those people?

When the Secretary of State appeared before the Exiting the European Union Committee, we asked him about the automotive sector, and about the evidence presented to us by businesses. He said that

“existing trade associations tend to reflect the existing interests of existing factories, businesses and so on. They tend to be small-conservative. In other words, they support the existing trade and do not think too much about future trade.”

Wow. Gosh. So we should not even bother to listen to the existing factories and existing businesses that employ tens of thousands of people throughout the country. Ideology will see the position in its own way. That is what we have been reduced to. If we follow the argument to its logical conclusion—my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) made this point—why should we bother to have the Treasury? Why should we bother to have a Budget? Why should we bother to set up the independent Office for Budget Responsibility? If we are going to rubbish all the experts all the time, we do not need to listen to anyone; we can simply follow our own ideology to its logical conclusion. I cannot believe that we have come to this, but we have.

Let me say this to the Government. We need a better analysis from them—a proper analysis—of the impact on the car industry of leaving the customs union. I am also very concerned to read in the leaked reports about the impact on my own constituency and my own region, the west midlands. This is a serious point. I want to know what more is behind the analysis that suggests that the midlands, Northern Ireland and parts of the north will be hardest hit, and I also want to know what exactly is the solution to keeping the border invisible between Northern Ireland and the Republic. When the Select Committee was in Dublin last week, we were told that the Government proposed that regulatory alignment, as agreed in December, would apply to 142 areas, not six, as the Secretary of State told the Committee.

I am afraid that the Government need to take this issue much more seriously. I am sick of the blunder. I am sick of the arrogance that tells us that everything will be okay. Where is the evidence that the trade agreements that the Government want to forge with

[Emma Reynolds]

other countries around the world will replace the jobs and the other benefits of the trade that we already have with our nearest neighbours in the European Union?

2.47 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Let me begin, Mr Deputy Speaker, by associating myself with what has been said by Members in all parts of the House. We are so glad to see you back in your place.

I thank the Minister for coming to the House and agreeing to publish the statements. I think that, on the whole, transparency is a good thing. I also join in the praise that has been given to the civil servants. In my experience, they are fantastic. My daughter is a civil servant and I know how hard they work.

It is a shame that the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), who has just left the Chamber, was unable to say, when pressed: whatever the results of those statements were, what would be the position of the official Opposition? I think we all accept that forecasts vary: they have a range of outcomes and a considerable degree of uncertainty is built into them. However, the official Opposition have been unable to say today what their position would be on the basis of the figures that appeared in any statement, whether the implications for the country were negative or positive. They are unable to tell the millions of people who voted for their party, including those in their constituencies, whether they would change their position. Would they, as a Liberal Democrat asked earlier, call for a second referendum? Would they call for us to go back into the European Union? They have been unable to say. I think that they are letting down their voters and I think that that is a shame.

I am a member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee. We have spent considerable time looking in detail at economic analysis covering a range of sectors. Let me say at the outset that I am not an ideologue. Indeed, I do not think that there is a label that describes me. I am definitely not a Brexiteer. I did not campaign on either side of the referendum and I was not in the House then. I ran a small business for more than 20 years before I came here. I spent my entire career working with other small businesses in Birmingham and the west midlands. I can say to Members in all parts of the House that, when running a business, there is no such thing as certainty. Certainty in business is an illusory concept. We are trying to get certainty from economic forecasts for the Government to set out a negotiating position. That is an inherently impossible position. There is no such thing as certainty—as any entrepreneur or small businessperson will say, if asked.

When my business went bust and we had to start it all over again, I did not expect the Government to give me certainty to start my business again. I just got on and did it because I had to pay the mortgage and feed my children. That is what businesses up and down this country do. They deal with ambiguity and make contingency plans.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Businesses always look at forecasts, do modelling, look at outcomes and then make investments accordingly

and choose which option to take. What we are seeing from the Government is a lot of muddling and not much modelling.

Rachel Maclean: The hon. Gentleman is right that businesses create forecasts, but they also understand and accept that in any forecast and in any market there is uncertainty and they have to develop contingency plans—alternative plans in order to make their business successful. If he were doing business with the United States under Donald Trump and wanted to export, does the hon. Gentleman think there would be certainty in that? I would argue that there is not, but many successful businesses trade with the United States.

Anna Soubry: The one thing businesses want—this is the message I and others have received for a very long time now—is certainty. Of course they know that things can change. Does my hon. Friend not accept that we are in a situation at the moment where British business is going to want to know absolutely that the transition arrangements are firm and will be met to give them that certainty by March? It is in March that they start to make their plans.

Rachel Maclean: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. Absolutely: when we have spoken to businesses in the Select Committee hearings, of course they want certainty, but the point I am making is that it cannot be provided, whether it is Brexit or not, in any economic situation to the extent that some people seem to want.

Seema Malhotra: Does the hon. Lady not agree, however, that there is a difference between uncertainty in a macroeconomic climate and legal certainty about how we may be trading with our neighbours?

Rachel Maclean: I agree that there are various areas where uncertainty can exist, but there is legal uncertainty when a business enters any new market or develops any new product. That always exists and businesses need to take that into account. The debate today seems to be about the need to provide certainty for businesses. It would be very desirable to provide certainty, but it cannot ever be done in quite the way suggested by forecasts and economic analysis.

Wera Hobhouse: I think it is agreed across the Chamber that we cannot create absolute certainty for absolutely every situation. This is why we have modelling, where uncertainties are already built in, and that is what we are talking about: different scenarios with different built-in possibilities and uncertainties. But that at least needs to be done, with the work published.

Rachel Maclean: The hon. Lady is absolutely right, and I think the Government and the Minister have agreed to publish this, so businesses can look at it and form their own view. However, I am certain that every single business I know—small growing businesses—will look at that but not take it as being handed down on tablets of stone. They will seek a range of outcomes and make their plans based on that.

We clearly have a difficult task in these negotiations. It is a negotiation—it depends on both sides. There are calls in this House for the Government to set out

exactly what is going to be achieved. Again, that cannot be done because so much depends on what the other side will do. It is a negotiation that involves two parties—two sides.

I started by saying that there is no label that comfortably sits on me. I am not driven by ideology. What I am driven by is, genuinely, the wisdom of our voters and constituents—the wisdom of crowds and the wisdom of democracy. We might not like it. It might make it very difficult for our Prime Minister and Government. They definitely have a difficult and extremely challenging task to deliver in the best interests of this country. My personal view is that I would like to back them to get on with it and deliver in the best interests of our constituents.

2.55 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): First, may I add to the earlier comments about how good it is to see you back in your place, Mr Deputy Speaker? It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean).

The debate has been conducted in a cordial and respectful manner. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of previous debates about the impact assessments and many of our Brexit debates, when Members on the Government Benches have repeatedly impugned the motives and questioned the patriotism of Members not only on my side of the House, but on their own Back Benches. This kind of conduct has to stop because debate in this Chamber cannot function on that basis.

When we take our Oath of Allegiance of office, we swear to act in the national interest, in faithful service to those who elected us, and we do so on the understanding that everyone else in this place does the same. Although I may believe that other Members err in what they hold to be in the best interests of our country, I would never for one moment doubt or question the sincerity with which they hold those views, I would never question their patriotism and I would never impugn their motives.

The contest of ideas that illuminates and enlivens this Chamber is one of different solutions, predicated on a common understanding that we all place the interests of our country first, even if we differ over what best serves those interests. Without that common understanding, our democracy breaks down.

That is just one part of a worrying shift in our political culture, however: one where parliamentarians simply trying to do our job are dismissed as traitors or saboteurs; and where the civil service is told, “We’ve had enough of experts,” because they do not give Ministers the answers they want. The job of civil servants is not to tell Ministers what they want to hear. It is to tell them what they need to hear—to speak truth to power.

Parliamentarians requesting information are not betraying our country. We are simply trying to do our job and stand up for our constituents. So when we call for the release of these documents, it is not about undermining the process; it is about improving the process. Parliamentary government requires an informed legislature. That means we must have access to this information. It is not good enough to tell us to wait until October, because by then it will be too late, as we are entering a crunch-point in the negotiations right now.

Earlier this week, we saw the EU agree its transition negotiating guidelines in just two minutes and, as we have seen, once Mr Barnier gets his marching orders he

does not deviate from them. In about six weeks the EU will agree the negotiating directives for the final trade deal phase of the withdrawal talks. We should let that sink in for a moment: in six weeks, we will be asked to make the most important choice in our post-war history.

We talk of the fantasy Canada plus plus plus, but these leaked reports give the game away. They do not have anything on a Canada plus plus plus scenario, because such a scenario does not exist. It cannot exist. The “plus plus plus” is presumably supposed to mean the services sector, which accounts for over 80% of the British economy, but just two weeks ago at the Brexit Committee we heard from Christophe Bondy, the lead Canadian negotiator on CETA—the comprehensive economic and trade agreement—who said there is no way for services to be part of a CETA-type deal. The fact is that a Canada-style deal would be about as much use to this country as a chocolate teapot.

It is crystal-clear that the most seamless and secure Brexit—the Brexit that is best for Britain—is an EFTA-a EEA-based Brexit. That is the only Brexit that protects jobs and opportunities, while also delivering control and influence. An EEA-EFTA Brexit ensures maximal access to the single market, being an internal market with the majority of the single market. It therefore protects jobs and investment, strengthens our hand in taking on multinationals such as Google and Amazon when they fail to pay their fair share, and protects vital workplace rights.

Peter Grant: Given the hon. Gentleman’s desire to retain access to the single market, can he explain why he does not want to just stay in the single market? Would not that provide the best possible access?

Stephen Kinnock: One of the key issues in the referendum was the free movement of labour and, as I shall go on to explain, there is an important provision in the EEA agreement that enables the application of an emergency brake on free movement. That is an important distinction between the EEA and the single market and it is one that we should look at seriously.

An EEA-EFTA-based Brexit would let us take back more control. It would end the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice and direct effect, ensuring that British courts had sovereignty. It would also allow us to shape the rules of the internal market through the EEA joint committees and veto those that did not work, with the right of reservation as enshrined in the EEA agreement. An EEA-EFTA Brexit would allow us to reform free movement by triggering articles 112 and 113, following the protocol 15 precedent, potentially allowing us to introduce a quota-based system to manage the inward flow of labour.

Above all else, an EEA-EFTA Brexit would allow us to reunite our deeply divided country. The Brexit referendum was won on a narrow margin, but the result was clear, and that was why I voted to trigger article 50. The Prime Minister then called an election, hoping to secure a mandate for a hard Brexit, but she had her majority cut substantially. The country said no to a hard Brexit. Any rational Government would accept that decision and commit to a sensible Brexit, rather than ploughing on through this fantasy hard Brexit land of rainbows and unicorns. The country said no to a hard Brexit. It said yes to a Brexit that bridges the divide. Our future

[Stephen Kinnock]

relationship with our most important commercial, diplomatic and political partner is on a burning platform, and we have only until the end of March to put out those fires. I therefore urge the Prime Minister and her Cabinet to show some leadership, get off the fence and commit unequivocally to an EEA-EFTA Brexit.

3.2 pm

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Deputy Speaker. May I also welcome you back to your place? You are much loved in this Chamber, and you have been deeply missed.

The best thing to do with these forecasts is not to hand them to the Brexit Committee but to put them in the nearest waste bin. I will explain why. I backed remain in the referendum, partly on account of the Treasury's forecasts in April 2016 setting out what it thought would happen in the case of a vote to leave the European Union. It provided two scenarios: "shock" and "severe shock". There were no categories entitled "success" or "continued economic brilliance for our country". The "shock" scenario predicted recession and a sharp rise in unemployment. It also predicted that GDP would be 3.6% lower and that unemployment would be 500,000 higher, with 74,000 jobs being lost in the south-east alone. It wanted to ensure that everyone understood how badly every single region of the country would fare.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a great point. We all remember "Project Fear". Will he confirm beyond doubt that those Treasury predictions related not to effects that would happen after Brexit but to what would happen immediately after we voted to leave the European Union?

Charlie Elphicke: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am looking at the forecast of 500,000 more unemployed, and it relates to the beginning of 2018. The Treasury produced a little chart showing just how bad it would be, how joblessness would rise and how if people did not vote the right way they would lose their jobs and be visited by recession.

Under the second category—"severe shock"—it was forecast that GDP would be 6% lower and that unemployment would increase by 800,000. Those forecasts made me think that there was a big risk involved, and that we ought to back remain. I advised my constituents to back remain, but they advised me that they did not agree and that they wanted to leave, by a margin of about two thirds. So I thought, "Well, we will make do, and try to secure the economy as best we can, because things are obviously going to be really dreadful and I am really worried about the employment situation." But what has actually happened? I have not seen a recession. In fact, growth has continued in this country. There are 32.2 million people in employment, and 1.4 million unemployed. That is an unemployment rate of 4.3%, and unemployment is at a 42-year low. Rather than going up by 500,000 or 800,000, it has in fact fallen by 250,000.

We do not hear about that from Opposition Members, do we? We do not hear them saying, "Well, wasn't that Treasury forecast completely and utterly wrong?" All we

hear them saying is, "Don't be mean to civil servants who come up with forecasts that are hopelessly wrong." We do not hear them asking why those forecasts were wrong. There has been no recession, and GDP and employment have continued to grow. It is hard to think of any part of that dossier that was correct. Indeed, it is now notorious as the "Project Fear" dossier.

I have asked questions about this in the Treasury Committee, of which I am a member, and every time I ask a Bank of England official or a Treasury official about it, they shuffle nervously and sometimes give a little cough. Sometimes they say, "The reason we did not have a massive rise in unemployment and a recession was that the Bank of England cut interest rates by 0.25%." Interest rate cuts can be assimilative, but I am not sure that a 0.25% cut really made that much difference to 500,000 jobs. I think that the Treasury's predictions in April 2016 were wrong, and if they were wrong before, the chances are that they could well be wrong again.

Andrew Bridgen: I, too, was worried about "Project Fear", and I wrote to the Treasury after the referendum asking it to name and shame the 80% of economists who had claimed that there would be absolute meltdown if we voted to leave the European Union. The Treasury refused to name and shame them. I wanted their names because I wanted to ensure that they never got a job anywhere near government because their predictions were so bad, but the reason that the Treasury would not name and shame them was that they were already working there. They are the architects of this latest report.

Charlie Elphicke: Again, my hon. Friend makes a forceful point, and these people are not just in the Treasury.

The shadow Secretary of State—a knight of the realm, I should add—was kind enough to come down from St Pancras to see us in Dover recently. Grandly, he came down to tell the people of Dover that we ought to retain the benefits of the single market and the customs union. Everyone understood what he meant. He meant that we should stay in the single market and the customs union, that we should continue to have a trade policy made in Brussels rather than in Britain, and that we should continue to have uncontrolled EU immigration into this country with completely open borders. My constituents are very clear on one thing: they do not want uncontrolled immigration into this country. It has not helped them or their families, and they do not feel that it is helped their prosperity. They do not want trade policy to be made in Brussels. They want it to be made in Britain. That is why this Government are right to be leaving the single market and the customs union.

This is not a question of forecasting; it is a question of a mandate. That mandate was handed to us by our electors when they voted to leave the European Union. I understand that there are those on the other side who wanted to remain and who still want that. I respect that. I do not really respect their constantly re-fighting the referendum, but I respect the fact that they feel passionately that we should be back in Europe. However, that is not my mandate from my constituents, and it is not the mandate given to a lot of Opposition Members who represent constituencies in Wales and in the north of this country, who ought to spend a bit more time

talking to their electors on the doorstep and a bit less time at grand dinner parties enjoying elite establishment-type conversation about how terrible it is all going to be.

Let me move on from Hampstead to the speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean). She was absolutely right that we cannot predict the future, so why is it that the EU-funded CBI so passionately wants Britain to stay within the single market and within the customs union and says that businesses do, too? The answer is that it loves the regulation produced by Brussels, which helps to keep things in their place, but we need to become more competitive as a country. If we become more competitive, we will grow more quickly.

Wera Hobhouse: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Charlie Elphicke: I will not give way as I have given way twice already.

The Treasury analysis was wrong in the first place. The Treasury did not predict containerisation or innovations such as the internet. We are about to have an automation revolution, with cars driving themselves, and a revolution in solar power, which will reduce our unit energy bills, and this country is well placed to become much more competitive than any Treasury forecast would predict, but we can all see that that kind of future is coming down the road. To make sure that we embrace that future, this country needs maximum freedom, maximum discretion and the maximum ability to diverge from the policies and laws of the European Union and to embrace the wider world.

In the future, 90% of global economic growth will not come from the European Union, but from the world outside the EU. Over the past 40 years, it is an historical fact that the EU's share of global GDP has fallen from 30% to just 15%. That is relative decline. We do not need to see relative decline. The future for this nation is global.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. This has been such a heated debate that we must now reduce the time limit to five minutes.

3.12 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be in this debate under your chairship, Madam Deputy Speaker. I normally find it a pleasure to debate the hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke), but being referred to as an "elite" by a representative of the Conservative party sticks in my craw. Coming from an ordinary background and having fought to get here to speak on the behalf of my constituents, who take all kinds of views on the economy, it pains me to be attacked and accused of being part of some kind of elite that is unconnected from my constituents. That is a disgraceful way to conduct this debate.

I want to make two simple points. The idea that all forecasts are wrong and that everything will be all right in the end is a myth. It is the easiest thing in the world to stand up here and say, "Blame the economists. Blame the forecasters. This is all crystal ball stuff," and the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European

Union, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), gave us an excellent example of that kind of nonsense yesterday. An economic forecast is a set of assumptions and a set of data for the current state of the world and then a long sum that allows us to make some conclusions about what particular circumstances might mean for GDP, employment and a range of other economic variables. It is just maths.

Andrew Bridgen: Has the hon. Lady ever heard the phrase "garbage in, garbage out"? If we use garbage figures and make garbage assumptions, we will get garbage out of the other end.

Alison McGovern: The hon. Gentleman just made my point for me. It is just maths. It is clear and transparent. There is a set of assumptions, a set of data and a set of conclusions. If he thinks that some of those assumptions or some of the data are garbage, it is up to him and those who agree with him to show their working. All that they have to do is do the maths better than the forecasters. We do not have to have a stupid row about whether forecasters get everything wrong all the time, with people saying that we should not believe them anyway. We just have to be transparent and show our working and then we can disagree honourably and openly, rather than making constant ad hominem attacks against people who are not here to defend themselves.

To be frank, I have criticised how economics has been conducted in the past, and I agree with some criticisms of the traditional assumptions made in economics, but this debate is not about that. This is about whether we ought to know about the economic consequences of the various options before the Government, and it is certain that we need Government economists to model various outcomes. The last person to have a massive pop at economic forecasting was our friend George Osborne. I remember well that he loved to tear a strip off the former Prime Minister Gordon Brown's economic forecasts, thinking that it was a great old argument to accuse the then Labour Government of fiddling the figures. What did George Osborne do? He set up the Office for Budget Responsibility so that we would have independent forecasts, and I will return to that when I conclude my remarks.

I caution Members against making the kind of remarks that we heard earlier in this debate—that things will somehow be okay in the long run, and that short-term forecasts and estimates of the fall in GDP do not really matter because things will all work out in the end. All that will obviously be true if we wait long enough, but how long will we have to wait? I urge Government Members to consider not just the "it will be all right in the end" point of view, but the damage done in the meantime. The past shows us that we cannot just wait forever. If a regional economy is de-industrialised and damaged, we know how long it takes to recover. Economists call it hysteresis—the act of scarring. If a factory in a town is shut down, that town may never recover economically. That is why this is not just about the long term. Brexit has the capacity to exacerbate inequality severely and significantly, so we cannot accept that things will be all right in the end.

We need proper modelling of not just the global effect on GDP or the effect on employment, but of the effect of the Brexit proposals on each and every town in our country. The OBR has asked the Government on

[Alison McGovern]

numerous occasions for a statement of policy so that it can make a forecast and model it. The spring statement is coming up, so I say to the Minister, as I said yesterday, that he should do the decent thing—do what George Osborne would have wanted—and give the OBR a statement of policy and let it be modelled. Then we can all see what the Government's Brexit has in store for our country.

3.17 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I want to make a few points about the politics of all this and what that says about our politics. I do not need to go over the pantomime of the Government saying that there were economic assessments in excruciating detail, then that there were none at all, and then that there were two lever arch files. That has all been well documented. We then saw this week's report, and what has the response been? Yesterday, the Minister turned up at the Dispatch Box to rubbish the Government's own document and to attack the civil service and the Bank of England in tones more hostile than I have ever heard a Minister use. He capped it all by telling us that discussing such things was really not in the national interest and that it would undermine our negotiating position. The first thing that we can learn from this saga is that winging it has become a point of principle for those in charge. I do not know whether we reached this point through carelessness, a tendency to busk or something worse, but the way that things have been handled has been extremely corrosive of trust in the Government and has left people asking not only about what is known, but what is being hidden.

The documents say that in every scenario modelled, the country will be poorer than it would otherwise be, with the effect being felt most keenly in sectors such as chemicals, clothing, manufacturing, food and drink, cars and retail, and felt most deeply in the west midlands, the north-east and Northern Ireland. Those sectors and those parts of the country collectively employ millions of people and generate billions in tax receipts for our public services. If the lower growth depicted in the documents transpired, we would have lower incomes and a lower standard of living than would otherwise be the case.

How should we react to this? My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) is correct. If the Government had a forecast showing economic benefits from Brexit, we would not hear these arguments about negotiation sensitivity. It has been said far too much that those who ask questions are somehow undermining the national interest. Ministers are trying to create a world in which they are the sole owners of information, and in which the public and Parliament are allowed to see that information only when Ministers decide.

This is not just a conventional political argument; it is an attempt to downgrade the role of representative democracy. The irony is not hard to see, because the real danger to the national interest comes not from asking questions about the economics of Brexit but from pursuing a policy that we know will make the country poorer than it otherwise would have been, in order to satisfy the nationalist ideology driving the project. It comes

from putting the appeasement of a faction within a political party above the leadership task of securing the greatest prosperity for the greatest number of people. The Government are governed not by the analysis but by those political imperatives, which is the real point.

Those of us who want to see the information do not want to see it because we are necessarily saying that the forecasts are correct to every decimal point. That is not really why Ministers do not want to publish the forecasts or do not want us to see them. The exam question for them is not the economic consequences of Brexit but how to keep the right wing of the Conservative party happy.

The right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), who is no longer in her place, told us the other day that there are 35 "hard Brexiters". The reason why the Government rubbish the economics is that, for them, it is not about the economics. My plea is for honesty and for Ministers to say, and to admit, that they actually do not care, first and foremost, about the economics of Brexit. This is about putting politics above the economics. It is about keeping the Tory party together and, in particular, it is about appeasing the right wing of the Tory party. I cannot think of anything that downgrades the national interest more than that.

3.22 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): This has been an interesting debate, and I appreciate the intent behind it, but we have to be a bit more basic in our expectations. Everybody with any sense of how the world works, or even the tiniest ability to listen to experts, knows that leaving the EU is a disaster in slow motion. It is an omnishambles.

Like a train in a spaghetti western running on to a half-collapsed bridge, we know that the plunge is coming, but the people driving the train are shovelling more coal into the boiler—they have never looked over the side and they are fairly sure the train can make the jump to safety on the other side. Frankly, the blank refusal to look at what is actually happening makes blind faith look like scepticism.

The assertion that we will trade jam with China and scones with Brazil to make up for loss of access to the world's biggest barrier-free marketplace, and the claim that 27 countries will be crippled without our expertise, is madness, as the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), who is no longer in the Chamber, said.

I do not know what is in the tea in Whitehall, but it is pretty strong. If the analysis is anything like as rubbish as the policy position, its value, as has already been said, will be questionable, but I agree with Labour that it should be published. I am happy to hear that we will get to see the analysis, but it should go further. The people who put us here, and who pay for everything that gets done here and in our names elsewhere, are entitled to know just how much ignorance is at the heart of Government strategy and what the Government's best forecast is of just how much disaster we are facing.

We all know there is a cliff edge, but none of us knows how high the cliff is. We have seen some analysis, most pertinently from the Scottish Government, and no one is predicting benefits. The best that anyone says is that there might be some way to ameliorate the worst effects, some way to make the pain a little less.

Leaving the EU is bad; walking away from the customs union and the single market is worse. Voters had many reasons for voting to leave. I have heard people offer different reasons, but none of them reckoned that we would end up with better trading relations. The people who will have to suffer the blunt trauma of this exit deserve the scant respect of having these forecasts opened up to scrutiny.

Labour's motion calls for Members to be allowed to see the forecasts, and I acknowledge the Government's movement, but I regard that movement as only a good first step on the way to everyone having sight of the forecasts. Frankly, I do not understand why the Labour motion is so narrowly drawn. In fact, I cannot for the life of me understand why there is so little opposition to exiting the EU, the single market and the customs union among Labour Members.

I appreciate there was a substantial leave vote in many of the seats that Labour worries about, and that there was a bit of a UKIP vote against a fair number of Labour MPs, but I cannot understand why an entire party would abdicate the responsibility of leading. Contrary to the Tony Blair doctrine, politics is not always about finding out where people are already heading in order to try to lead them there; sometimes we have to stand and say, "It is this way." Sometimes we have to say that we believe something is the right thing to do, and the right thing to do now is surely to seek to protect, to the greatest extent possible, our membership of the single market and the customs union.

As we are where we are—heading down a track that comes to an abrupt and uncompromising end—the Government should at least have the courtesy of letting us see what they think are the best-case and worst-case scenarios. On courteous behaviour, I ask the Government to confirm that the analysis will be sent to the devolved Administrations at the same time as it goes to the Chair of the Exiting the European Union Committee.

The public should also be offered the courtesy of a glance at the research. We are told by the Brexit Department that everything is going swimmingly and will be all right if we just have enough faith and patience, so I cannot see why there would be any reluctance to publish the intellectual musings of the Brexit Secretary and the underpinning, in-depth research that I am sure went into those musings.

All might be for the best in the best of all possible Brexits, but we have no way of knowing what kind of Brexit is heading our way, what the great vision of the Government is or what kind of economic disaster zone is heading our way. I have seen nothing plausible to counter those who say that the economic outlook is almost apocalyptic—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I call Geraint Davies.

3.27 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Being Welsh, I enjoy a leak, but when does a leaker become a whistleblower? Although we have to take precautions, I would contend that the information is in the public interest and should be in the public arena. The Government say this information is unreliable because they have not finished their economic analysis, so I wonder why we

have ended up in a situation in which the Prime Minister appears to be going into a negotiation with no idea of the economic impact of different scenarios even in phase 1, particularly in relation to the Irish border.

It appears that the Government are intent on keeping secret any information that is put together, which reminds us all of what Keynes said: "When the facts change, I change my mind." The Government want to conceal the facts so that people do not see the awful truth of Brexit and of what it will mean to the economy.

Of course, people can see with their own eyes the damage that has already been done. Every family will have to pay £1,000 for the divorce bill. The London School of Economics has said that inflation is 2.7% instead of 1.7%, because of devaluation, which is costing every worker a week's pay each year. We are now at the bottom of the G7 for growth, having once been at the top, and we have growth only because there is global growth. What is more, people and businesses know there will be a two-year transition period. People and businesses around the country want to know what the sectoral analysis is. In Wales, where 70% of exports are to the EU and where there are 25,000 jobs in Swansea bay, there is great concern. If we face a cliff edge and no deal, the steel in south Wales will be decimated by the Chinese, and the agricultural industry will be decimated by any trade deal with New Zealand. We therefore need to know the facts and to have a vote in this place in October. People should have the final say on the deal on the table, and the sooner we get this information, the better.

There are benefits and opportunities outlined in this paper, contrary to what people have said. Those opportunities have been identified as the opportunities to deregulate environmental, worker and other standards. People in my constituency and elsewhere are worried about the fact that workers' rights will be reduced to reduce business costs; that the Government have been taken to court on numerous occasions by the EU for poor air quality; and that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is saying we will have only recycled or reusable plastics in 2042, whereas the date for the EU is 2030.

We are worried that all our standards will fall below EU standards, and that we will give away public health safeguards and food standards in our dealings with the United States. This is not what people voted for. People want to have on the table in front of them precisely what this will mean for their families, regions and countries. The Government are intent on denying us that information. They expect us all to go into closed rooms and not to disclose outside them what they have already said is not reliable data. It is time for them to come clean, and for us to have clarity of where we are going and the data on which we are basing our decisions.

The reality is that the Government do not know where they are going. We are told that in conversations between the Prime Minister and Mrs Merkel the latter asks, "What do you want?" and our Prime Minister says, "What can you offer me?" There is a circular dialogue, with nobody knowing what they want. We know that the EU27 will defend their interests, and defend the integrity of the single market and the customs union. We have a choice before us. It is my considered opinion that as the facts emerge we should think again.

[Geraint Davies]

This is not what people voted for when they voted to leave; they have a right now to have a look at the deal on the table and they should have the opportunity to have the option of staying in the EU if they do not like what they see. If someone orders a steak in a restaurant and gets a bit of chewed up bacon, which is the best we can hope for from this Government, they should have the right to send it back. People should have the final say and the Government should come clean.

3.32 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to wind up this debate. It is one of a series that reflect the historic period this is for our country. In the decisions we are making, we are shaping the future of this country for generations to come. Nobody in this House should underestimate that responsibility. It is unfortunate that today's debate appears to have been largely boycotted by both the mainstream Conservative party and, unusually, by the ideologues of the European Research Group, with the exception of its two former chairs, who were careful to flank the Minister in his opening remarks.

I guess that we had much of the real debate yesterday, in response to the urgent question tabled by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), so I want to make reference to some of those comments, too. There have been moments during the past couple of days when the debate has risen to meet the responsibility that we have to the country, but too often it has fallen short. Accusing Members of being saboteurs or mutineers, or of thwarting the will of the British people, for wanting information released is as unhelpful as it is dishonest; this is a little ironic coming from people who have spent much of the past 43 years seeking to overturn the will of the British people as expressed even more strongly in 1975. Releasing information is not about whether we leave the EU, as the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) argued yesterday—that was settled when this House voted to trigger article 50. The debate now is about how we leave, and clearly a small minority in this House are so dogmatic in their hostility to the EU that they would crash out at any cost. But they are, as the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) pointed out, a very small minority. So it falls to the majority of us in this House to ensure that that does not happen, and being provided with the information that we need to inform our decisions is crucial.

The Opposition are therefore pleased that the Government have recognised that that majority would have found its voice this afternoon and supported our motion, and they have therefore pre-empted this by accepting the proposal we have put before the House. However, let me seek reassurance on the nature of the release of those papers. The Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), set out terms along the lines of those set out on the last occasion—this very much has a sense of *déjà vu*—but he will know that those documents were rewritten before they were released. So I hope that the Minister who concludes this debate will confirm that the papers to which this motion refers will be released in full and unamended. That should not be a problem because they are already in the public arena.

The Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Worcester, in opening the debate, described the papers as “work in progress”. In order that we do not have to keep repeating this farce, will Ministers commit to releasing the final versions of the papers following the discussions with members of the Cabinet, which, apparently, they were prepared for? Will they also commit to releasing future analyses as they are completed, so that this Parliament can fulfil our responsibility to make informed decisions?

In yesterday's discussion, it was said that we would weaken our negotiating hand by sharing assessments and that the EU27 would never do such a foolish thing. Oddly, the EU does not seem to see it that way: the European Parliament has published dozens of impact assessments, on a range of sectors and areas; and a number of departments of the Commission have made their Brexit readiness documents available. With a quick search, I was able to find on the internet the Swedish Government's assessment of the impact on borders and trade, the Danish Government's report on the fishing industry, the German Economic Ministry's assessment of the impact of a hard Brexit on German GDP and the Irish Finance Minister's “Getting Ireland Brexit Ready” document. The transparency that other Parliaments and other Governments are giving to their people should therefore be replicated by our Government.

Without wanting to add to the discomfort of the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Worcester, at the praise heaped on him by the right hon. Member for Broxtowe, I want to welcome the different approach taken today by him in his opening remarks. It marked a sharp contrast with that adopted by the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Wycombe yesterday. Denouncing the work of his own civil servants is both unacceptable and dangerous. Does he suggest that the Government should adopt the same approach to all economic assessments? Should we disregard the work of the Department for Transport on infrastructure investment or the modelling done by the Department for Work and Pensions? Should we just reject any economic analysis that suggests there may be post-Brexit options that might not offer the sunny uplands that he promised in a previous life? I have to say that, yesterday, it sometimes looked as if he was not certain whether he was speaking for the Government, or from where his heart is as a former chair of the European Research Group.

The hon. Member for Worcester said today that the end relationship that the Government want has not been modelled. Clearly, that needs to be done, but there is a crucial first step: they need to say where they want to be. As a former DExEU Minister said in another place yesterday,

“there are still no clear answers to those basic, critical questions. All we hear day after day are conflicting, confusing voices.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 30 January 2018; Vol. 788, c. 1423.]

That option needs to be realistic and honest. In today's debate and yesterday, there was lots of talk about respecting the British people, and that is absolutely right, but it is about more than respecting the outcome of the referendum. We fulfilled that responsibility by triggering article 50. It is about being honest with the British people about the journey on which we have now embarked, consequent to triggering article 50. It is about setting out the options—realistic options—and

sharing the consequences of the different choices available. And there are different choices. There is no evidence that the British people want the extreme Brexit favoured by the European Research Group, and quite a lot of evidence to the contrary.

Those who campaigned so hard for a referendum on our membership of the European Union said that we should trust the people. Now, they should trust them with the information on the consequences of the options before us. They also argued for the importance of parliamentary sovereignty. Now, they should accept that too. The British people have a right to know, and we as their representatives have a duty to know. As the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee), said yesterday:

“It’s time for evidence, not dogma, to show the way. We must act for our country’s best interests, not ideology & populism, or history will judge us harshly. Our country deserves no less”.

He is right. The Government need to respond to our motion today not just by accepting it, but by honouring it in full.

3.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): This has been a great debate, and I am grateful to all the right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part. I apologise to those whose speeches I was not able to hear today; I know they were listened to closely, and I look forward to reading them in *Hansard*.

I am sure that we are all proud to be part of one of the world’s oldest parliamentary democracies. It is right that Parliament holds the Government to account for the decisions they make, but Parliament should be careful not to pursue a course of action that would harm Britain’s national interest, or one that would jeopardise the UK’s prospects during this crucial period in her history.

In drafting their motion, hon. Members have highlighted the need for material to be kept strictly confidential and unpublished during the negotiations, and we are grateful for that; but I cannot emphasise enough the importance of maintaining that position, in the national interest. In seeing the analysis, Members of the House will be sharing in the responsibility and obligation that the Government have to ensure the security of negotiation-sensitive materials.

We have reiterated many times that the publication of negotiation-sensitive information would be fundamentally detrimental to the UK’s negotiating position. We would risk undermining the hard work of our tireless officials, seeking to achieve the best deal for the UK in Brussels. The civil service is, quite properly, doing a huge amount of work to support the Government as phase 2 of the negotiations gets under way. As part of that work, analysis is being done as we define the end state. A first draft of that work was being looked at, and Ministers provided comments and asked for further work to be done, and that is the right process.

At this point, I wish to take on some opening remarks in which it was suggested that I had said that this analysis was rubbish. I said no such thing. It was suggested that I had been disrespectful to civil servants. I did no such thing. In fact, I paid tribute to our excellent officials three times in my remarks yesterday, and I am very happy to work with such high-quality, dedicated, intelligent

officials, applying themselves to the task at hand irrespective of how they voted at the referendum. To pick up on the themes explored by the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) about the conduct of the debate, I wish to state on the record, in the light of today’s press coverage, my admiration both for the Cabinet Secretary and for the Prime Minister’s Europe adviser, who I am absolutely sure are carrying forward the Government’s policy diligently and properly. They do not deserve the criticism they have received in the press.

In making the critique I made yesterday, I relied on three things: the caveats that Members will see on the face of the analysis itself, historical experience, and my own long-held beliefs, which I believe are well founded—if I do say so myself. I relied on arguments that I have made in this House throughout my years here, whether in the Chamber or in the Treasury Committee, and I certainly do not resile from what I have said.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) picked up on the theme of uncertainty. The point here is not to rubbish all analysis, but to do what I suggested at the end of my remarks yesterday—to ensure that we have a healthy scepticism in this Chamber for reports and for analysis of economics based on the things to which I have referred. Parliament has rightly agreed in this House that Ministers have a duty not to publish anything that could risk exposing our negotiating position. We have an obligation to the people of this country to ensure that we strive to achieve the best possible deal for the UK. Forcing the publication of this analysis would put that at risk. Despite the repeated assertions of Members of this House, this draft document is not an impact assessment or a statement of Government policy; it is a very preliminary draft only seen by DExEU Ministers this week and does not constitute a meaningful commentary on the expected outcome of the negotiations.

As I attested to yesterday, the document has been circulated only to test ideas and design a viable framework for the analysis of our exit from the European Union. As we have said repeatedly, this work is constantly evolving. The report does not consider our desired outcome—the most ambitious relationship possible with the European Union, as set out by the Prime Minister in her Florence speech. All Members must surely agree that the Government cannot be expected to put such analysis into the public domain before it has been completed, particularly when it is sensitive. As I have said before, this Government will not provide a continuing commentary of the analysis we are undertaking. It would be speculative and damaging, especially as the analysis does not reflect the UK’s preferred outcome in the negotiations.

I wish to emphasise that it is the Government’s view that this is an exceptional request today given the misrepresentation in the press of the reporting of this leak. This motion will therefore be agreed to on an exceptional basis, and it does not set any precedent for future action.

Deirdre Brock: Could the Minister confirm, as I asked previously, that he will undertake to release the analysis, at the same time as releasing it to the Select Committee, to the devolved Administrations?

Mr Baker: The Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), has just told me that he has

[Mr Baker]

already given that assurance, but what I will say is that we will work with the Chair of the Select Committee to ensure that we comply scrupulously with the motion. In particular, we will need to discuss the requirements for confidentiality to which the House will be agreeing today.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thank my good friend for allowing me to intervene. I take it from what I have heard in the Chamber that this is a sort of evolving document. It is more like an aide-mémoire to help the negotiators. It is not something set in stone and it will change during the negotiation. Is that the sort of document to which we are referring?

Mr Baker: As we have said many times, we conduct a wide range of analysis to support our negotiating position as we proceed through this process.

To reply to the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), I reassure him that we will comply scrupulously with the motion, working with the Chair of the Select Committee. We will ensure that we comply with the confidentiality requirements of the motion and that the House is satisfied. He asked me about future analysis and the reassurance that I gave yesterday stands. We will ensure that, at the time of the meaningful vote, the House is appropriately equipped with the analysis that it needs to make a decision.

Paul Blomfield: I just want to be absolutely clear: the papers that we are talking about today are a work in progress and, in discussion with the Chair of the Select Committee, they will be released in full. And given that they are a work in progress and the suggestion is that we should therefore be looking to the final documents as the crucial guidance to this House, will they be released when they are completed?

Mr Baker: I heard what the hon. Gentleman said the first time, but the commitments that we are giving are that we will comply scrupulously with this motion and that we will make available to both Houses analysis at the time of the meaningful vote. That is the commitment into which we are entering, but I have heard his request for a continuous evolving analysis. What we have said is that we will not give a continuous rolling commentary on our analysis. We will proceed to ensure that the national interest is protected. We made a commitment to provide Parliament with the appropriate analysis it needs to make a decision on the final deal at the time that we vote, in the way that is set out in the written ministerial statement that we laid.

The Secretary of State has been consistent in stressing the importance of parliamentary scrutiny and oversight of the Brexit process. We have done this willingly to ensure that the parliamentary process is followed. I endorse the actions that we have taken, as I accept collective responsibility regarding the point that was raised earlier.

Finally, as I reiterated yesterday, the people of this country on 23 June 2016 took the decision to leave the European Union. The purpose of the analysis that we have conducted is not to question that decision—which this House voted to respect when it supported triggering article 50—but to ensure that we have the best possible

outcome for the British people. We are accepting this motion today on the exceptional basis of the poor reporting of a leak.

Mr Speaker: Is the Minister giving way or has he concluded his oration?

Mr Baker: I have concluded.

Mr Speaker: The Minister has concluded his oration, and we are grateful to him.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, That she will be graciously pleased to give directions that the EU exit analysis which was referred to in his response to an Urgent Question in the House on 30 January by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union be provided to the Exiting the European Union Committee and made available to all Members on a confidential basis as a matter of urgency.

Keir Starmer: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Government not having voted against the motion, it is—as I understand it—carried, which is a victory for transparency and accountability. Can I seek your guidance that this motion is, as the previous motion was, considered to be binding on the Government? Further, may I ask your guidance on what you might consider to be a reasonable period of time within which the Government should comply with the motion?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for his point of order. The answer is twofold. First, yes, the motion is binding. I think that the Government are clear about that, and the Minister has indicated the intention of the Government to comply with it. Secondly, if memory serves me correctly, the motion refers to “a matter of urgency.” Therefore, the expectation must be that the report that is the subject of the debate will be released, published or made available to those persons mentioned in the motion as a matter of urgency.

I have now to announce the result of a Division deferred from a previous day. In respect of the Question relating to capital gains tax, the Ayes were 306 and the Noes were 240, so the Ayes have it.

[*The Division list is published at the end of today's debates.*]

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (RESTORATION AND RENEWAL)

Ordered,

That at today's sitting :—

(1) proceedings on the motions relating to Restoration and Renewal of the Palace of Westminster in the name of Andrea Leadsom may continue, though opposed, for up to three hours at which time proceedings on the Motion on Restoration and Renewal (Report of the Joint Committee) shall lapse if not previously disposed of;

(2) the Speaker shall then put forthwith the Questions necessary to dispose of the Motion in the name of Andrea Leadsom relating to Restoration and Renewal (No. 1), should it be moved by a Minister of the Crown;

(3) should that Motion be disagreed to, the Speaker shall then put forthwith the Questions necessary to dispose of the Motion in the name of Andrea Leadsom relating to Restoration and Renewal (No. 2), should it be moved by a Minister of the Crown;

(4) the Questions referred to in paragraphs (2) and (3) shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved;

(5) proceedings may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption, and

(6) Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply in respect of proceedings specified in this Order.—(*Andrea Leadsom.*)

Restoration and Renewal (Report of the Joint Committee)

[*Relevant documents: Forty-fifth Report of the Public Accounts Committee of Session 2016-17, Delivering Restoration and Renewal, HC 1005, Thirteenth Report of the Treasury Committee of Session 2016-17, Restoration and Renewal of the Palace of Westminster: Preliminary Report, HC 1097.*]

Mr Speaker: We now come to the debate on restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster. Before I ask the Leader of the House to open the debate, it might be helpful if I explain the meaning of what is on the Order Paper and the implications of particular votes, so that there is clarity at the outset and no one is under any misapprehension.

Motions 5, 6 and 7 on the Order Paper will be debated together. I inform the House that I have selected the amendments that are listed on the Order Paper. I will shortly invite the Leader of the House to move motion 5 on Restoration and Renewal (Report of the Joint Committee). Debate may continue for up to three hours. At the end of the debate on motion 5, it is expected that the Leader of the House will move formally the Restoration and Renewal (No. 1) motion. I will then call Members to move the selected amendments for decision without any further debate.

If the Restoration and Renewal (No. 1) motion is not agreed to, I expect the Leader of the House to move formally the Restoration and Renewal (No. 2) motion. I will then call Members to move the selected amendments for decision without further debate. If the Restoration and Renewal (No. 1) motion is agreed to, the Restoration and Renewal (No. 2) motion will fall and neither it nor the amendments to it will be moved.

I think that, among my perspicacious and highly intelligent colleagues, there is no need for puzzlement. It is all pretty clear if they look at the Order Paper, but if any right hon. or hon. Member proclaims ignorance of the meaning of these matters, that Member can always beetle along to the Chair at a suitable moment and seek enlightenment. I am sure, however, that they are all far too sagacious to require that.

3.55 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): I beg to move motion 5,

That this House has considered the report of the Joint Committee on Restoration and Renewal of the Palace of Westminster (HL Paper 41, HC 659 of Session 2016-17).

Mr Speaker: With this we shall consider the following:

Motion 6—*Restoration and Renewal (No. 1)*—

That this House—

(1) affirms its commitment to the historic Palace of Westminster and its unique status as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Royal Palace and home of our Houses of Parliament;

(2) takes note of the report of the Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster 'Restoration and Renewal of the Palace of Westminster', HL Paper 41, HC 659;

(3) accepts that there is a clear and pressing need to repair the services in the Palace of Westminster in a comprehensive and strategic manner to prevent catastrophic failure in this Parliament, whilst acknowledging the demand and burden on public expenditure and fiscal constraints at a time of prudence and restraint;

[Mr Speaker]

(4) accepts in principle that action should be taken and funding should be limited to facilitate essential work to the services in this Parliament;

(5) agrees to review before the end of the Parliament the need for comprehensive works to take place.

Motion 7—*Restoration and Renewal (No. 2)*—

That this House—

(1) affirms its commitment to the historic Palace of Westminster as the permanent home of both Houses of Parliament;

(2) takes note of the report of the Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster 'Restoration and Renewal of the Palace of Westminster', HL Paper 41, HC 659;

(3) agrees that there is a clear and pressing need to repair the services in the Palace of Westminster in a comprehensive and strategic manner to prevent catastrophic failure; including steps to safeguard the safety of visitors, schoolchildren, staff and members;

(4) notes that works in the Palace should commence as early as possible in the next decade;

(5) authorises necessary preliminary work required to avoid unnecessary delay, without prejudice to a parliamentary decision on the preferred option;

(6) endorses the Joint Committee's recommendation that a Sponsor Board and Delivery Authority be established by legislation to commission and oversee the work required, and the establishment of a joint Commission to lay estimates;

(7) agrees that steps be taken now to establish a shadow Sponsor Board and shadow Delivery Authority, and to ensure that its members have a range of relevant expertise;

(8) instructs the shadow Sponsor Board and Delivery Authority to undertake a sufficiently thorough and detailed analysis of the three options of full decant, partial decant and retaining a parliamentary foothold in the Palace during a full decant; to decide whether each option properly balances costs and benefits, and whether or not the identified risks can be satisfactorily mitigated; to prepare a business case for the preferred option for the approval of both Houses of Parliament; and thereafter to proceed to the design phase;

(9) instructs the shadow Sponsor Board and Delivery Authority to apply high standards of cost-effectiveness and demonstrate value for money, and to include measures to ensure: the repair and replacement of mechanical and electrical services, fire safety improvement works, the removal of asbestos, repairs to the external and internal fabric of the Palace, the removal of unnecessary and unsightly accretions to the Palace, the improvement of visitor access including the provision of new educational and other facilities for visitors and full access for people with disabilities;

(10) instructs the shadow Sponsor Board and Delivery Authority to ensure the security of Members, Peers, staff, and visitors both during and after the work;

(11) affirms that in any event the delivery option must ensure that both Houses will return to their historic Chambers after any essential period of temporary absence.

Andrea Leadsom: This debate arguably should have taken place about 40 years ago, so I can say that I am delighted that here we are today, finally discussing the future of the Palace of Westminster. There are difficult decisions to make on how we best protect one of the world's most iconic buildings for future generations, but we must address those decisions head on.

In any mention of this topic, I am sure the House would like to join me in first paying tribute to the excellent work done by the Joint Committee on the Restoration and Renewal of the Palace of Westminster, chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) and the right hon. Baroness Stowell of Beeston. A number of members of that

Committee are present in the Chamber today, and the House owes them, along with the restoration and renewal programme team and our engineers, a debt of gratitude. Their work, and that of our colleagues in the other place, has laid the foundations for the House to take an informed decision on this important issue.

The Palace of Westminster is the seat of our democracy, an iconic, world-famous building—and it is in dire need of repair. Both motions and all amendments on the Order Paper recognise the need for that work. Anyone who has read the report of the Joint Committee will be aware of the two core difficulties we face. The first is one that none of us can shy away from: the costs associated with a programme of works of this magnitude will be significant. While it is our responsibility to safeguard this UNESCO world heritage site, it is equally our responsibility to ensure value for taxpayers' money. We have been clear that there can be no blank cheque for this work, and value for taxpayers' money will frame the choices we make today.

The second issue is the state of disrepair within this building. The issue is not a structural one. As the Clerk of the House noted in his evidence to the Public Accounts Committee, the building is believed to be "beautifully built and structurally sound."

The problem, rather, is the services infrastructure that supports the ever-increasing and shifting demands of Parliament—and it is under considerable strain.

Since 1850, we have developed the hotch-potch of pipework and wiring to such an extent that our essential services are now aging faster than it is possible to repair them. Much of the building is supported by infrastructure that is still in place decades after the substantial rebuild of the Palace following the second world war.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): If these matters are so pressing, urgent and obvious, why have we been having September sittings, which enormously disrupt any programme of work?

Andrea Leadsom: In truth, work is going on the whole time, whether we are sitting or not, to manage essential repairs. Of course, the engineers are able to get on with more work when we are not here, but the reality is that we have to take a serious decision today about the future for generations to come, as opposed to the patch and mend that has been going on not just for a couple of years, but for 40 years and more.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that every Member of the House will have a free vote on this matter and that Ministers will not be subject to a payroll Whip?

Andrea Leadsom: On the Government side of the House, there will be a free vote for all Members, and for Ministers.

John Spellar: It is the same on the Opposition side.

Andrea Leadsom: It sounds as if it is a free vote, and all Members are free to make the choice they wish to make.

There are some critical risks in the Palace of Westminster. First, the lack of fire compartmentation increases the risk of fire, meaning that 24-hour fire patrols are necessary to keep us safe. Over the past 10 years, 60 incidents have

had the potential to cause a serious fire. Secondly, there is a huge amount of asbestos packed into the walls that needs to be carefully and expensively removed to enable repairs. Thirdly, many pipes and cables are decades past their lifespan, with some now being impossible to access. The likelihood of a major failure grows the longer the systems are left unaddressed.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): As a doctor, I know that asbestos is dangerous when it is exposed, not when it is hidden and packed in walls. To what extent does asbestos hidden and packed in the walls, where it is not disturbed, act as quite good fireproofing for the building?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point that I am really not qualified to answer, but I agree that the health risk is in moving and removing asbestos.

As Leader of the House, I work closely with the Clerk, the Director General and others who are responsible for the safety and wellbeing of those in this building to ensure that risks are minimised. There are more than 7,500 people working in Parliament, and we welcome 1 million visitors each year, including many schoolchildren. Nevertheless, keeping everyone safe is becoming a growing challenge with each passing year.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): That is one point that I must confess I fail to understand. We hear the Armageddon scenario that we are going to be washed away in slurry, burnt to death or electrocuted, and yet we have thousands of visitors from the public in this place every day. I see no signs to say, "Welcome to the death trap."

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises the core issue. We make every effort on the House Commission and through the House authorities, the Clerks, the Director General and the engineers to keep this place safe. We have all the certificates required to evidence that we keep this place safe. The point is that it gets harder to achieve that safety with every year that passes. That is the key point that we are seeking to resolve.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Would it be wise to have thousands of visitors coming into a building where the walls have been opened and asbestos is floating around in the atmosphere? What recourse will members of the public have should they get illnesses as a result, given that there is supposedly Crown immunity in this building?

Andrea Leadsom: As I have made clear, that would not be allowed to happen. We take every step possible to minimise risks. We do not take risks with people's health and safety. We do not wish to do that. The point I am making is that with every year that passes, it gets more difficult to manage.

What is the next step? Just as the need for works is pressing, so too is the need to be sure that we are acting in the right way, with the right planning and design capabilities in place. The way forward on R and R must be supported by the House. At the same time, we have to be able to justify to our constituents and to taxpayers that we are doing what is necessary to safeguard the Palace of Westminster and that we have thoroughly examined the costs.

I have listened carefully to Members, and I thank all those who have come to drop-in sessions, explored the basements and toured the Palace with the R and R team. I have reflected on all the amendments proposed to the motions I tabled the week before last. Today, there are very clear options before the House.

I turn first to motion No. 1. This motion recognises that, given the scale of the challenge ahead of us, Members must first consider the vast cost associated with any programme of work. With competing demands on our public services, and calls for capital investment in other areas, Parliament will want to think carefully about the impact this will have on the taxpayer, and may ultimately choose to limit spending on the Palace to essential repairs. The case for further work to be done is, however, compelling, and it is important that we do not impede future progress in any decision made today. So this first option also agrees to reviewing the need for comprehensive works before the next general election.

The full cost of an R and R programme under this scenario would not be incurred until late into the next decade.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Does the Leader of the House accept, after all that she has said up to this point, that there is no cheap option here? If the public think, or if the press think, that we can find a cheap option, they are deluded. There is necessary work that needs to be done, and necessary money that needs to be spent.

Andrea Leadsom: The Government believe that it is for Parliament to take this decision, and I think the hon. Gentleman makes a very strong and compelling point.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): The right hon. Lady is quite rightly talking about other people, outside this place, who have a concern and have an interest. When I inquired, at the display table this afternoon, what consultation had taken place with the many thousands of people who work in this building, I was told, "None." I was told that senior stakeholders were consulted but the workforce were not. What answer does she have? Is it not correct that the people who work here have no voice here this afternoon?

Andrea Leadsom: There has been much extensive consultation, formal and informal, over many years, so that is not the case. In fact, reports from the Joint Committee, the Public Accounts Committee and the Treasury Committee, and the recent financial and explanatory memorandums, have all been useful tools for Members and staff of this place, who wish to acquaint themselves further with the issues around cost and complexity. These documents have also made clear the wide range of views on costs and varying approaches to the works.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): As someone who served on the R and R Committee, I can assure my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) that there was consultation, and we were very keen that the staff of the Palace were very much involved in this whole process.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his clarification and grateful to him also for his contribution to the Joint Committee.

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

That brings me to motion No. 2. If the House accepts that it will bear the cost from the taxpayer's purse, it will be concluding that the work should be undertaken only on the basis of the most robust cost assessments possible. So the second motion seeks to establish an Olympic-style delivery authority, overseen by a sponsor board that will have a majority of members who are parliamentarians. That would produce up-to-date, fully costed proposals for restoration and renewal as soon as possible. The establishment of an Olympic-style delivery authority with external professionals will guard against unacceptable cost and timetable overruns of the sort that we saw with the Elizabeth Tower refurbishment.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): If these proposals are to be agreed by the House, can I implore this place to become its own planning authority, so that we are not dependent on the Greater London Authority or Westminster City Council; and not only to be our own planning authority, but to extend that remit to areas such as Parliament Square and even Abingdon Street?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend makes a good point, but I think part of the role of the delivery authority will be to look at the best combination of cost, respect for our parliamentary democracy and, of course, the right solution for this Palace, which is what this debate is all about.

If motion No. 2 is successful, the sponsor board and delivery authority must consider three options: first, full decant; secondly, partial decant with access to one Chamber at all times; and thirdly, full decant with a parliamentary foothold, allowing for parliamentary access during the works, such as to Westminster Hall and Elizabeth Tower. It is important to note that the second motion before the House today does not commit to a final decision. By asking a delivery authority to further evaluate those three options, parliamentarians and the public can be confident that the delivery authority will take into account the risks, costs and benefits of each approach, as well as accommodating the needs of our parliamentary democracy, before recommending its final, preferred, fully costed option in 12 to 18 months' time. The motion allows those who support the Joint Committee's recommendations to see them properly stress-tested.

For the clarification of Members, motion No. 2 differs from amendment (b) to motion No. 1 in two key ways. First, the amendment recommends a single option of full decant. The first problem with this is the lack of decant accommodation available to us under the current plans until 2025. The amendment does not allow us to proceed any quicker with a full programme of work than motion No. 2 allows for. The second problem is the fact that the Joint Committee report itself acknowledged that, while recommending full decant, it had not fully costed that option. Amendment (b) therefore does not settle the issue of value for taxpayers' money.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): But the problem is that neither motion makes a decision, and in the end this place is here to make decisions on behalf of the nation. It is time we got a grip and made a decision. I do not mind what the decision is in the end, but make a decision we must, surely to God.

Andrea Leadsom: I sympathise with the hon. Gentleman's perspective on this, but the reality is that we have to look at the best value for taxpayers' money, not simply at the one proposal made by the Joint Committee, which it acknowledged it had not fully costed. To quote the Joint Committee report:

"We recognise that there is still work to be completed in order to validate our conclusions."

The costs allocated were not budgets for the programme, and there are real concerns around value for taxpayers' money arising from the hon. Gentleman's amendment.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Lady is seeking to say that her motions suggest better value for the taxpayer, but if we make a decision with three options that have to be fully worked up and costed, that will mean a considerable cost in time and taxpayers' money. However, making a decision now, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) said, will mean that we can get on with it, set the path forward and get value for taxpayers.

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry, but I must absolutely disagree with the hon. Lady. The problem with going for the one solution that she suggests is that the Joint Committee itself made it clear that it had not fully costed the options or even considered the options for fully decanting both Houses. She is also wrong, as is the amendment, on the grounds of the capability for full decant. If Members consider the challenge of decanting from this place, what exactly are they proposing? The planning that will go into fully decanting potentially 7,500 people—the works of art, the furniture, the books—will take a considerable amount of time in itself. That has to be properly planned, properly costed and properly evaluated, so the option for partial decant could, potentially, be a better, more valued option for the taxpayer than the proposal for full decant.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The delivery authority that my right hon. Friend has described will, she said, contain a majority of parliamentarians. For the sake of clarity, can she tell the House whether the parliamentarians will be allowed to vote, or will all kinds of other people be able to vote on our future too?

Andrea Leadsom: The sponsor body will, in effect, be the client of the delivery authority. The delivery authority will be made up of professionals who have expertise in a project of this size and the historical expertise we would need to be able to look at how best to resolve the problem. Parliamentary involvement in the sponsor body will ensure that the views of parliamentarians are taken into account at all points, until the delivery authority comes back to both Houses for a final vote.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way—she is getting a lot of requests. On the subject of decanting, and just for the record—I will speak to this later—the House should know that until very recently there was a contract with Church House, under which, should we have needed to decant at short notice in an emergency, which can happen at any time, Church House had always stood ready to accommodate Parliament, as it did during the second world war.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises a very important point about an emergency decant from this place. The security advice is that it is not safe these days for MPs to be coming in and out of the secure parliamentary state, so that would rule out a decant option off the estate. Secondly, and very importantly, on the day before the recess I attended—as I think you did, Mr Speaker—the emergency decant preparations done by the House in the event of the sudden need to move from this place, so those preparations are going ahead. However, what we are talking about here is about being out of this place for a significant length of time, so options such as Church House would simply not be suitable.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): I am very grateful to the Lord President of the Council for giving way. I was on the restoration and renewal Committee, and the conclusion that we came to, preliminarily favouring a complete decant, was based on the assumption that a temporary Chamber could be put up in Richmond House. We now understand that the measurements we were given which led to that conclusion were wrong, and that Richmond House would have to be pulled down completely. That is a completely different cost basis, and I for one would not have come to that conclusion had we known the true picture.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises another key point, which is that the options for decant have recently been examined by the House Commission, with all the various options for refurbishing the northern estate, which many hon. and right hon. Members will know is also in dire need of refurbishment and work on the mechanical and electrical facilities. My hon. Friend is exactly right to point out that, in terms of Richmond House, and having costed the different alternatives, it now becomes clear that to knock down all but the grade I listed facade and to rebuild the building behind it is, in fact, the one solution that has the same cost estimates attached to it as all the various temporary solutions. Yet that project—rebuilding Richmond House—would give a permanent legacy, with better Committee Rooms, more accommodation for staff in this place and a proper business contingency Chamber, as well as offering a solution for the decant.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Andrea Leadsom: I am going to make some progress, and then I will take some more interventions.

Crucially, the approval of an arm's length sponsor board and delivery authority allows the project to be led by those with the necessary skills and the experience of delivering large-scale projects. On behalf of Parliament, the sponsor board will oversee the work of the delivery authority. As it will be crucial for Members' views to inform and shape the programme as it develops, parliamentarians will have a majority of members on the board. In short, motion No. 2 invites the House to make a clear statement about the need to act with urgency, but it also ensures that a rigorous and professional business case will be drawn up that will provide confidence to Members and to the public.

Simon Hoare: On that point, would my right hon. Friend give way?

Andrea Leadsom: I will just continue for a moment.

If the second motion is carried today, the final recommendation, fully costed, of the sponsor board and delivery authority will come back to this House in 12 to 18 months for a vote. Following that vote, the House-approved business case would immediately progress to the design phase.

The Palace of Westminster will, in all cases, remain the home of our Parliament. That has always been the plan. To make it absolutely clear to all hon. and right hon. Members, full or partial decant will not take place until 2025 at the earliest.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): The Leader of the House is completely right that we do not yet have anything like enough information to evaluate which option the House should now pursue. I was predisposed to support the decant proposal, but I regret to tell the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), that I took my name off her amendment, having done some preparation for this debate. I do not think we begin to have the information, but setting up the delivery authority is a no-brainer for a project of this scale and nature.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. The need for action is absolutely vital. Each of the motions provides that opportunity, but it is vital that the House itself makes the decision.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I say a huge thank you to my right hon. Friend and her team for all their excellent work, but does she not agree that the time for talking is over? We have to grasp this do the right thing. I cannot believe I am going to say this, but in this instance, in supporting amendment (b), absolutely everybody vote leave.

Andrea Leadsom: I thank my right hon. Friend for joining that sentiment. I point out that in terms of progress of work, neither motion 2 nor amendment (b) is suggesting any faster progress. As I set out, the difference between them is that amendment (b) offers only one solution. The motion 2 offers the opportunity to discuss the best combination of value for taxpayers' money as well as solutions for parliamentarians.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Leaving aside for a second the merits and demerits of supporting the project or not, the Leader of the House and others have stressed the desperate urgency for this work to be carried out. Why on earth, then, have the Government prevaricated and wasted 18 months in getting this debate to the Floor of this House, before even getting it to the House of Lords?

Andrea Leadsom: There has been no waste of time. There has been consultation, and work has been ongoing to make some vital repairs. The hon. Gentleman may have noticed that the cast-iron roofs are being repaired—*[Interruption.]* No, he must appreciate that there is a need to consult, look at different options and make the right assessment. This decision could, and probably should, have been taken 40 years ago. I do not accept his accusation that there has been any prevarication, and certainly not on my watch.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): On the subject of value for money, does the Leader of the House share my concern that, actually, a decant has already happened? The essential maintenance work that is due to happen around the cloisters, which are heavily damaged, for which offices have already been evacuated, has been brought to a halt, with expensive equipment shoring up the stonework of this place. No date for getting on with it has yet been set. That is a huge waste of money and does not bode well for getting on with the more substantive project we are discussing today.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend makes two important points. One is that we do need to get on with it, and the second concerns the importance of planning for this. It is vital that we get good value for taxpayers' money. Roughly, the projections show that we will be spending £90 million a year, of which roughly half will be throwaway once we get on with R and R, and the other half will be work that needs to be done anyway and will not be throwaway. They are the sorts of numbers we are looking at. We do need to get on and take a decision, but we must fully cost the best value for taxpayers' money.

I have listened closely to the very real concerns expressed by colleagues—that in some way we might be forced out, never to return to this place. Both of today's motions are intended to make it explicit that this is not, and will not be, the case. To put the matter beyond doubt, and recognising the depth of concerns from some colleagues, I am happy to confirm today that were the House to agree that we must take action now, the commitment to returning to the Palace will be enshrined in the legislation that the Government will subsequently introduce to set up the sponsor body and delivery authority. It will be on the face of the Bill, putting the matter beyond doubt.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend clarify something? If we adopt the idea of a delivery authority—I take the point my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) made about it being, in many ways, a no-brainer—will it not mean that in 18 months we get a simple “take it or leave it” decision? We will either accept what the delivery authority says or reject it completely. Would it not be better if the delivery authority did the proper costings he rightly said were needed so that we could then make an informed choice?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is exactly right: that is what the delivery authority would do. It would look at the best combination of options—value for taxpayers' money along with the right solutions for the restoration and renewal of the Palace—and come back, in 12 to 18 months, with its recommended option, which would then be put to the House for a final “take it or leave it” vote.

Michael Fabricant: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I fear it may be a point of frustration, or perhaps a point of attempted clarification, but nevertheless let's hear the fella.

Michael Fabricant: I do not think it is frustration. I think my right hon. Friend may have misunderstood a point I made in my lengthy question. Is it not the case that we will not be able to choose from a number of

options put forward by the delivery authority, but will have either to accept its recommendation or to start from square one, which would not be satisfactory?

Mr Speaker: That was really an intervention without permission masquerading as a point of order, but never mind—we have heard it.

Andrea Leadsom: Nevertheless, Mr Speaker, I am delighted to answer my hon. Friend, because it is an important point. The whole purpose of the sponsor board having a majority of parliamentarians on it is to ensure that throughout the deliberations of the delivery authority it can take soundings from parliamentarians, and it will be the sponsor board and the delivery authority that will finally decide on the best combination outcome to put to both Houses for a final vote.

I have set out the options before the House. This is a matter for Parliament, rather than the Government, and for my party—and, I think, for all parties—it will be a free vote.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Andrea Leadsom: I will give way one last time.

John Redwood: I am very grateful. It is on a point of clarification and information of general interest. In the costings for the grander scheme—where we leave these premises—how much of the cost is for essential replacements and renewals, and how much is for the nice-to-have additions and changes?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. About 75% of the cost of the works to the Palace of Westminster is for work that is non-cosmetic—it will be dealing with mechanical and engineering works, the fire risks, and so on—but aimed at preserving essential services for future generations. We have a duty to do it. This is not about carpets and curtains, but about profound and essential services, for the largest part.

Simon Hoare: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Andrea Leadsom: I will not give way any more.

The Government do not have a position on this and will respect the views of the House, but as a Member myself I would like to take a moment to share my own position on this very important subject. When I became Leader of the House, I took on the restoration and renewal project with a healthy degree of scepticism. I, like many, felt that the case for a major restoration programme had probably been overstated, that the Palace looked fine and that we could continue to patch and mend as we went along, as we have done for many decades. However, during my seven months in the job, I have, as they say, gone on a journey. I have lived and breathed this topic. I have visited the basement and seen for myself what our engineers are up against.

Should a catastrophic failure happen in this place, I want to look back to this moment and know that I chose to protect the Palace for future generations. I want to be clear that we do everything we can to minimise the risks this building faces, but we must recognise that as time passes without comprehensive action those risks only increase. My role has brought me close to the heart of these issues, and I am not the only Leader of the House to have arrived at this view:

both of my predecessors, my right hon. Friends the Members for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington) and for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), share my desire to take action. Today I will be voting to take action. I will be voting for motion No. 2.

4.29 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for her comprehensive speech about this very important issue. I was pleased to learn that the two motions tabled in her name are amendable; I had previously thought that they were not. I agree with her that we need to take action immediately, and I feel that amendment (b) to motion No. 1, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), will enable us to make an immediate decision.

I want to deal with three main issues. The first is the issue of the reports that have been published. A Joint Committee of the Lords and Commons was appointed by both Houses in July 2015. It took evidence, and a report was published on 8 September 2016. The Committee deliberated, and reached the conclusion that there should be a full decant of Parliament because that was the most cost-effective option. The Committee proposed that there should be a shadow delivery authority, a sponsor board, and updated costings. A second report was published by the Public Accounts Committee on 10 March 2017. The PAC endorsed the Joint Committee's recommendation. In particular, it said that the feasibility of a full decant must be demonstrated clearly and beyond reasonable doubt, with a comprehensive risk analysis, before a final decision was made. Both reports were produced on a cross-party basis, and I thank the Committee members in both Houses for all their deliberation and hard work.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that, whichever option we choose, it is important that we do not break the 1,000-year link between the governance of the country and this site, and that we should therefore have a debating Chamber on this site while the restoration works continue?

Valerie Vaz: I will come to the issue of what will happen about a debating Chamber on this site, but I am afraid I must tell the hon. Gentleman that the link might be broken through factors beyond our control. We would be forced to leave if there were a fire, or any other act of God.

I thank the former Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington), who did try to find time for a debate. As I said earlier, the PAC's report was published in March—I emphasise that date—and I then had a conversation with the right hon. Gentleman, who was very keen to get the debate going, but what we had not realised was that the hills were alive with the sound of a general election. As a result of the election, the response to the report was not made by the Government.

Simon Hoare: Will the hon. Lady confirm my understanding—this is really in response to what was said by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House—that we cannot bind our successor Parliaments, whether in legislation or by other means, to abide by any measure that we pass? It can be revoked, and it can be changed. Is that also the hon. Lady's understanding? Many of

those who take my position on the issue fear very much that were we to leave this place, 101 reasons would be found for why we could not return.

Valerie Vaz: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we cannot bind future Parliaments, but I disagree with his other point. I think that when he has heard the rest of what I have to say, he will recognise that that is not the case.

The second issue is that there are new threats. Security, as well as safety, is now a key factor. While work is taking place in Norman Shaw North, Norman Shaw South and Derby Gate under the northern estates programme, all the security considerations will be taken into account. We know what happened at Westminster on 22 March. Our friend and protector PC Keith Palmer died; we were in lockdown. For all sorts of reasons, we need a contingency Chamber. The northern estates programme is on to that; discussions are ongoing with Westminster Council and they have been quite productive. Since the Department of Health and Social Care has now moved out into Victoria Street, it may well be possible to use the space behind the façade of Richmond Terrace, and that could very well be our contingency Chamber; it will become the contingency Chamber when we move back to the House.

Ian Paisley: Does the shadow Leader agree that amendment (b) guarantees that all Members will return to this site under paragraph (8)? That is essential for anyone who loves the history of this site; they recognise that coming back here is important, but if they really care about the historic nature of this site, we will make sure it is maintained for future generations by properly restoring this building.

Valerie Vaz: The hon. Gentleman sums it up perfectly, and I cannot add anything more to that.

The governance of the project is another major area of concern. There will be a sponsor body and a delivery authority. We had a very helpful seminar, which we might be able to set up for Members. It looked at the two successful projects of Crossrail and the 2012 Olympics and how the sponsor body and the delivery authority were set up and operated; we on the House of Commons Governance Committee, which I sat on, heard from Sir David Higgins on how he operated with those two bodies. He said he spent time building up the relationship and the two bodies acted in concert. As Members will know, Baroness Jowell was, when a Member of this House, successful in ensuring the delivery of a very successful Olympics. I know the situation now is slightly different as we do not have an end-date as we did with the Olympics, but Sir David Higgins made it very clear that so long as the professionals, who will be on the delivery authority, have a Gantt chart—I did not know what it meant then, but I do now—so there is a timeframe and the costs are allocated, there should not be any need for any overrun.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): What does the hon. Lady say to the argument that if Members were still somewhere in this place, they would be able to have far greater oversight of the works in progress, which would incentivise the building works, because if we decant that incentive goes away?

Valerie Vaz: As with everything, we do delegate things to people—we do delegate things to professionals. I am pretty sure it would be impossible for 650 Members to have their say on how this place operates. That is why we have the delivery authority and the sponsor body.

Dr Caroline Johnson: The hon. Lady believes there will not be an overrun, but when work on the Elizabeth Tower, which houses Big Ben, is to take five years, does she think six years for the entire Palace of Westminster is a realistic estimate?

Valerie Vaz: I cannot look into the future, but I will address those points later.

Michael Fabricant: Does the hon. Lady understand the concern I raised with my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House: if we leave it to the delivery authority, with just a few Members on it, and we end up with a take-it-or-leave-it decision to make, the final decision will in effect be made by the delivery authority, and not really by this House? I used to build radio stations and did a re-equip of Broadcasting House and other things, so I have some small experience in this, and in reality there will be choices to be made. Of course we want the data from the delivery authority, but this House should finally make the choice between a number of alternatives, not just have a take-it-or-leave-it one.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me his resumé. Perhaps he is suggesting that he should be on the sponsor body. Actually, it is the delivery authority, which has the experts on it, that will be accountable to the sponsor body. The sponsor body will have Members on it, and they will be the custodians and guardians of the project.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): The two biggest projects in this country in the past few years have been the Olympic games, which involved a complicated build and had to be delivered on time, and Crossrail. As the hon. Lady rightly says, Sir David Higgins was involved in both those projects, and they were both delivered on time and to budget. We have got better at this, and following that particular procedure is by far the best way.

Valerie Vaz: I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. Those two amazing projects have been, and continue to be, delivered.

Mr John Hayes: My hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) asked about the delivery authority and who will make the decisions. It is clear that that authority will make many critical decisions and, as the hon. Lady says, it will contain experts. Will those experts be voting members? Will they take key decisions? Or will it just be the parliamentarians who will be voting members on the authority?

Valerie Vaz: The delivery authority, with its experts, will carry out the day-to-day work. They are the experts in every aspect. Members here have other jobs to do, and they will be on the sponsor body. However, the delivery authority will be accountable to the sponsor body. As I have explained, Sir David Higgins is an absolute expert at this, and he ensured that both the projects that have just been mentioned were successful.

Mr Hayes *rose*—

Valerie Vaz: May I just finish addressing some of the issues that have been raised?

Some Members have asked whether we could move one Chamber at a time. Anyone who has visited the basement, as many Members have, will have seen all the wires and pipes. When the new technology was put in place, it was a patchwork effect. For example, the wi-fi was just slapped on, alongside the pipes. Those systems run along the whole building. Fires and floods do not respect any boundaries between the House of Lords in the House of Commons; for them, this is just one building, so if work has to be done, it has to be done to the whole building.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does that not underline the fact that decanting half the building would be problematic, because the services run throughout the whole of the building and we therefore cannot decant just half of it?

Valerie Vaz: I agree. I cannot add anything further to that.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): I took part in the basement tour yesterday. It was made clear to us that a significant amount of the asbestos had been removed over the past few years, adequately and safely, while we remained here and while members of the public were able to use the building safely. Does that not illustrate the fact that significant repairs can be carried out while we are here, safe and well protected?

Valerie Vaz: The asbestos is just one aspect of this. We are talking about much more than that. We are talking about electrical cables, water pipes and all sorts of things including the telecoms system, so it goes well beyond just the asbestos. May I just say for the record that the place is safe? We would not allow people into the building unless the accounting officer was convinced that members of the public and parliamentarians were safe. That has nothing to do with the fact that the work needs to be done, but please do not let us give everyone the impression that this is not a safe place.

Turning to costs, the Public Accounts Committee has said that weak governance would increase costs and that good governance would cover that. The Committee recommended that the National Audit Office should have a role in this, and the Committee and the NAO will work to ensure that best value for money is achieved. As I have said, the delivery authority will be accountable to the sponsor body, which will have Members on it.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that, as we know from various engineering projects, the projections for the final costs can only ever be notional?

Valerie Vaz: That is absolutely right. As we have seen from Crossrail and from the Elizabeth Tower project, we never know what we are going to find. The Elizabeth Tower had structural issues, which was why the costs increased. With Crossrail, they actually found bodies. We do not know what they are going to find under here. There might be the odd monarch or two, or perhaps the odd Member or two following the basement visit. Who knows?

Mark Tami: Where's Boris?

Valerie Vaz: Yes, Boris's mummy. [*Laughter.*] Not another Johnson! Although people say something similar about me, too.

Blacklisting has been mentioned, and some Members referred to a certain company that may have been involved with the Elizabeth Tower project. That would be a matter for the delivery authority, but things clearly need to be tightened up because blacklisting is against the law. The project will obviously require specialists, but fewer and fewer companies offer such skills, so we need to consider the heritage issues.

Mike Gapes: I declare an interest in that I am chair of the all-party parliamentary Crossrail group. Artefacts may be found and important discoveries may be made when the work is done, so can we ensure, just as with Crossrail, that the work is not done in such a way that will destroy the historic things that could be added to the displays about the heritage of our Parliament?

Valerie Vaz: I absolutely agree. I have a daughter who studied archaeology, so I know about that. I also have a friend who is an engineer on Crossrail who got very cross with the archaeologists, but this is about our heritage and it is important that we protect it.

Another question that arose was, "What will our constituents say?" Well, this work is necessary for safety, and everyone agrees about that. We need to do the work now and it cannot be delayed, because any delay will just increase the costs. We will also be investing in skills for the future.

I had the opportunity to go to Canada, where exactly the same is being done. A chamber is being built in the courtyard, and it is extremely impressive. However, the Canadians also have a long-term vision and a plan that came from looking at the work that must be done to Government buildings over the next 10 years, which is something that we should certainly consider.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): The shadow Leader of the House mentions the work taking place at the Canadian Parliament in Ottawa and the temporary chamber that is being built in one of its courtyards. If there is to be a full decant of this place, does she agree that a temporary chamber should be built within the precincts of the Palace of Westminster to ensure that there is parliamentary footprint on this historic site, even just once a year?

Valerie Vaz: That is where some of the misinformation has arisen. We may be leaving this building, but we are not leaving the parliamentary estate. We will be around. We are going to be here.

I do not know whether Members have seen the helpful memorandum by the accounting officer on the costings for options 1 and 2, but I hope that further costings will be drawn up if any amendment is passed.

In conclusion, we have a duty to protect this beautiful heritage building in which we all work. We have the chance to upskill people and to showcase our skilled workforce to the rest of the world. We can train the engineers of the future and encourage more women and girls into this area. There are 11-year-olds today who could be the apprentices working on this building, and they would be able to say to their children and grandchildren, "I worked on Parliament." We can make Parliament truly accessible for people with disabilities.

What a legacy it would be if we could move the education centre, the lease on which will be running out, to the contingency chamber. We will have more meeting rooms and an up-to-date, compliant building. We could leave behind a great legacy in skills and in civic pride. We will be able to do our work here safely and securely on behalf of our constituents in their Parliament.

4.49 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I am aware that we are already one hour into this three-hour debate and that there are lists upon lists of people who want to speak, so I will not take interventions and will be as succinct as possible.

This building is probably more important to me than to many here, because I come from an ethnic minority Commonwealth background and was brought up looking at the photographs of this fantastic building. It is a real honour to be here, so it was a shock when I became aware of the disaster that lurks around us, below us and above us. I believe we need a full decant because of the nature of the building's infrastructure.

Most Members will be aware that the House has a basement, which has a long passageway that runs the length of the building. There are 86 vertical chimneys running from that passageway and they were originally designed for ventilation. That of course means a fire could travel laterally and vertically extremely quickly. At present, the chimneys carry a mass of electrical services of varying age, many of them clearly defective. We have gas pipes, air conditioning conduits, steam pipes, telephone systems, communications fibres and, of course, a hugely overloaded sewerage system, which I understand the Leader of the House discovered to her mishap—possibly through her shoes—when she visited.

The infrastructure serves the whole building from end to end, moving up through the chimneys, and there is a small duplication in the roof. In the days before the dangers of asbestos were known, that dangerous material was literally and liberally splashed everywhere by brushes from buckets, but asbestos can be dealt with. The infrastructure dangers are other than asbestos.

The sewerage system consists of two large steel tanks that collect from a very large pipe that runs the whole length of the building. The system was put in place in 1888 and it is just waiting to repeat the bursts we have already had. If those bursts go over some of the equipment and infrastructure, the disaster will stare us in the face.

We try to make not only the sewerage system but all the other systems fit our demands. This means that we are pushing on a door that is solidly locked. We have to take the infrastructure out. Despite the suggestion, it is not likely that we will find bodies because we will be repairing and renovating the infrastructure, not the structure of the building. We will not be digging down to look for Guy Fawkes or one of his relations.

The point we have to understand is that the longer we wait, the risk of a catastrophic collapse of services nears upon us. If my memory is correct, the risk is rated such that by 2020 we will have a 50:50 chance of a catastrophic collapse of our services. That does not just mean fire; it also means a collapse of our electricity or gas services, for example. About a dozen fires broke out last year. It has been asked, "Why wait?" I support amendment (b) to motion No. 1—the amendment tabled by the Chair and deputy Chair of the Public Accounts

[Sir Paul Beresford]

Committee, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) and my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown)—because we need to assess the situation. We should not wait, but we have to assess before we go any further.

All the connected infrastructure needs to be removed and replaced. I am disappointed by the two motions. Motion No. 1 would kick the whole problem into the long grass and, to a major degree, so would motion No. 2. Both motions would mean extra expenditure when we are staring a full decant in the face. The thought that we could take out the infrastructure in half the building is engineeringly ludicrous. While we did that, we would have a long delay and more expense, and the other half of the infrastructure would continue to deteriorate while we sat and stared at the problem in the first half of the building.

Amendment (b) to motion No. 1, in essence, takes the Joint Committee's recommendations on repair and renovation. As has been said, it is a bicameral, cross-party report. Many members of the Joint Committee were as cynical as anyone, including me, when they went in but, after the evidence, their conclusions were unanimous and conclusive. They took extensive advice from many who should and do understand the problems and solutions, and that is in the report and its conclusions.

I hesitate to use the word “experts” because it has become traditional to sneer at experts but, as a part-time dentist, if I have a patient with a very severe condition such as cancer, they want to see an expert. This building has a very severe and potentially fatal condition, so we need to take notice of the experts. Any method other than a full decant will vastly increase the costs, the time taken to do the works and the risk of disaster, and that risk is getting worse day by day, as I have said.

The security risk from a partial decant is obvious if one pauses to think about it. I have read the letters and papers from my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh). His amendment entails a partial decant. That has been rejected by the Joint Committee, by the Public Accounts Committee and by many, many other—if I dare use the word—experts. The approach the amendment sets out will, in essence, double the time for works, double the costs, increase the security risk, and increase the risk of fire and of a complete breakdown of the services in the other half. The thought of cutting a sewerage system—or the electrics or any of the other works—in half does not make sense because of the nature of the building. I am sorry to say this, but I would not give my hon. Friend—I hope he remains a friend—a LEGO set to play with.

I did say I would be as succinct as possible, so let me just say that it would be a severe derogation of our duty to not move expeditiously, and I urge support for the amendment standing in the name of the Chair and Deputy Chair of the PAC and of many others, including myself.

4.56 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Of all the things this House can do to endear itself to our constituents, spending billions of pounds on renovating our place of work is not one of them. In these days of austerity and tightening of belts, and with the impending

economic disaster of Brexit coming our way, I would bet this would be near the bottom or at the very bottom of the public's concerns. The sums involved are simply eye-watering—£3.6 billion rising to £5.7 billion, and that is before all the unforeseen difficulties and the additions that hon. Members will certainly want to factor in. So it is no surprise whatsoever that people are making an estimation that this could come in at a cool £10 billion to £12 billion.

As with so many things that fundamentally impact on my constituents, I thought I would ask a few of them what they thought about these proposals. It was no surprise that they were not seen all that favourably. Mrs McLeod from Pitlochry just said curtly:

“You must be joking”

Mr Morrison from Errol said:

“In these days of food banks and austerity I am sickened that they are even thinking about this”.

Mr Mac Donald from Kinloch Rannoch just casually inquired:

“why are you even still in that place, it's time to come home to your own Parliament here”,

a sentiment with which I wholeheartedly concur.

Sir Hugo Swire *rose*—

Pete Wishart: I will make a bit of progress and give way in a moment.

Surprisingly, no one in my less-than-scientific survey of a few people in Perth and North Perthshire thought there were any admirable qualities in spending billions on a parliamentarians' palace. I am pretty certain that, even if I went looking for anyone who thought there were, I would not find any in my constituency.

Let me compare and contrast what is happening in this Chamber with what has just been happening in the Scottish Parliament, where we are setting out our budgets. We are allocating billions of pounds to socially useful programmes that will enable our citizenry. What are we doing here? We are talking about spending billions of pounds on a royal palace to accommodate Members of Parliament. Nothing could distinguish better the priorities of these two Parliaments.

I do, however, accept that we have an issue. [HON. MEMBERS: “Oh really!”] Yes. Because of the decades of prevarication and indecision, this building is practically falling down. The failure of successive Government to face up to their responsibility in looking after this place means we now have a building that could, as people have said, face a catastrophic failure at any time.

The mechanical and electrical engineering systems are already well past their use-by date and the risk of that catastrophic failure rises exponentially every five years. Some of the high-voltage cables in the building are decaying, and fire is an ever-present risk, only compounded by just how easily any fire would spread. Most worryingly, as we have heard from the Deputy Leader of the House and the Leader of the House, there is a substantial amount of asbestos in the building. Mice and other vermin are a common feature, and I have heard that some staff even have names for the mice that they frequently acquaint with on a daily basis. It is not a robin we need in this House, but a flipping big eagle to pick up some of the huge mice that kick about this place. The Palace of Westminster is simply falling down.

The most important aspect that we have to consider is our responsibility for the staff who work in this place. This is a workplace for thousands of people, and we are putting them at significant risk by staying here.

Chris Bryant: I sympathise with some of the hon. Gentleman's argument, but it is simply untrue to say that this building is falling down. It is not. There is work that needs to be done, not least to protect staff and give them a proper place to work in, and to provide decent disabled access, but if we simply let either motion go through, we will be committing more money than if we vote for the amendment in the name of the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee. That is what I fear.

Pete Wishart: I have an elegant solution to the difficulties and travails of this House, which is to consider making this beautiful building a tourist attraction for people from all around the world. There are immense development opportunities in this UNESCO world heritage building. Let us design and create a Parliament for the 21st century—one that will be useful for 21st-century parliamentarians—rather than try to shoehorn all this activity into a mock-gothic Victorian tourist attraction. That is what the hon. Gentleman should support this evening, not billions of pounds being spent on some parliamentarians' palace.

Chris Bryant: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Pete Wishart: No, I want to make some progress.

We have a duty of care to the staff and for their wellbeing and safety. It is therefore disappointing that the motion seeks, once again, to kick any future works into touch and to delay the decision. The simple fact is that the decision should have been made a decade ago, not kicked into touch for another Parliament to deal with. The whole story of resolving our difficulties in this House is littered with prevarication and indecision. We will not support any measure that leaves our staff here for a minute longer than is absolutely necessary. We are not prepared to have them continue to be put at risk.

It will not come as any surprise to you, Mr Speaker, or any other Member to hear that I, as a Scottish National party Member, do not share the dewy-eyed affection and nostalgia that some Conservative Members feel towards the Palace. I love this building—it is fantastic. It is one of the truly iconic buildings in the world, and it is a real pleasure and privilege to see this place as I walk into it, but I have to concede that I could probably discharge my responsibilities as a Member of Parliament from somewhere else. I think I would just about manage. On the distant date when all these works may be completed, I and my Scottish colleagues will be well gone from this place. We will be sitting in our own independent Parliament in Scotland, considering the issues that all normal states have to deal with. Probably, when all this is concluded, the first colony on Mars will be thinking about independence.

When I look at this building, its stunning architecture and the condition it is in, I see it as a sad metaphor for Brexitised Britain: dilapidated, falling to bits around our ears, generally unloved and in need of a lot of attention and support. Does not that just sum up where this nation is?

Ian Paisley: Is it not the case that it would take a crowbar and a pint of Irn Bru to wrestle my honourable cousin from Scotland from this place—that he actually loves it here? [*Laughter.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) may be seeking to recover his composure—I certainly did not exhort him to resume his seat. We want him on his feet so that we can hear him continue.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker. I will enjoy a refreshing cup of Irn Bru with the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) any time, but on his substantive point, I assure him that I cannot wait to get away from this place and for my nation to take control of all its own affairs.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): Is it true that there are only 22 voters in the hon. Gentleman's constituency who separate him from fulfilling his wish?

Pete Wishart: Yet again, there is a cunning plan in place, because a precedent has been set. If I, for whatever reason that I cannot foresee, was less than successful in the next election, defeated Members for Perth and North Perthshire are simply given a peerage in the House of Lords.

We have proposed a sensible approach to the current issues facing this House. There is nothing wrong with considering a new-build Parliament off site. It is deeply disappointing and depressing that when that was sensibly presented by my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) to the Joint Committee, it was rejected out of hand and did not even get the time of day as a proposal. Is that not absolutely shocking? It was a failure of true diligence of this House to consider all available options—just rejected immediately. It would have been a solution. Just imagine developers lining up to get a share of this place, a UNESCO site; just imagine what they could do. We are trying to shoehorn a Parliament into this mock Gothic building. We need a 21st-century Parliament designed with all the features that we require as 21st-century parliamentarians to do our job, and that cannot be achieved on this site without decades of work and billions and billions of pounds.

That brings me to amendment (b) to motion No. 2. This is really, really important. For goodness' sake let us at least end the useless tradition that actively eats into our productivity as Members of Parliament and restore electronic voting in whatever approach we pursue. [*Interruption.*] Another proposal that has gone down particularly well with my Conservative friends! We waste days of parliamentary time just stuck in the packed voting Lobby, waiting to make that simple binary choice of yes or no.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I am conscious that I am probably one of the few Members who have taken part in the debate so far who was actually only elected in 2017, but one thing that struck me when I got here was going to the education centre and the bemused look on the children's faces when I explained to them that to vote in this place, I have to walk through doors, yet in the education centre, the kids get to vote by electronic keypads.

Pete Wishart: As my hon. Friend will remember, only two weeks ago, we wasted up to two hours on voting in the EU (Withdrawal) Bill. We could have been debating, legislating or taking up issues on behalf of our constituents. WebRoots Democracy came up with a report today that said that one month—one month—was lost on voting in the Parliament between 2010 and 2015, at the cost of £3.5 million in Members' time. This nonsense has to end.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The hon. Gentleman is presupposing that a month was lost in voting in the House of Commons. Do you have any information as to how much of that month was taken up by voting on SNP amendments?

Mr Speaker: That is not a matter on which I have taxed my mind, and I do not think that I am required to do so, but I have known the right hon. Gentleman since we first jousted together in 1983 at a half-yearly Federation of Conservative Students conference, and I knew his puckish grin then and I know it now. He has made his own point in his own way and we will leave it there.

Pete Wishart: It is a puckish grin with which I am also familiar. All I want to do is to assist hon. Members: help us in our campaign to reclaim our time so that we can properly spend the time debating and looking after our constituents—[*Interruption.*] Yes, take back control, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) says.

Mr Rees-Mogg *rose*—

Pete Wishart: On that very issue, how can I resist the hon. Gentleman?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He says that time in the Division Lobby is wasted. On the Conservative Benches, we find it quite useful talking to our friends and colleagues. Is that not true in the SNP?

Pete Wishart: I do not know how much of a blessing it is to Front Benchers when hon. Members get backstage and buttonhole them. And this is what we get—the shrieks of, “Oh, we need to meet up with our ministerial colleagues in the Lobby.” But that prerogative is exclusively the right of Conservative Members. I do not detect many Government Ministers, as we spend most of our time voting with Labour, and I am pretty damned certain that no Labour Members have encountered a Government Minister in their Lobby over the course of these years. The Conservative Members may have that right, but it is a right that is not open to the rest of us.

I will help Conservatives Members with this one: we could have electronic voting that we would have to do in the vicinity of the Chamber. We would all have to come here and we would get some sort of device, because the technological solution would be to press a button that is handed out to us. We would all be here, so if hon. Members wanted to speak to Ministers or talk to the Leader of the House about a particular issue, they could just go up to them and say, “Hello, Leader of the House. Can I have a word with you please?” None of that would be stopped.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman just clarify that he is saying that we should have individual desks?

Pete Wishart: A number of solutions have been designed in Parliaments around the world. In some Parliaments, that solution may include desks. What I am suggesting is a technological solution, whereby we would come to the Chamber and press a button to vote. We could vote on anybody's proposal and time would not be wasted.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I have served in the Scottish Parliament, which uses electronic voting. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is an issue—I saw this a number of times—with SNP MSPs who incorrectly press the wrong button?

Pete Wishart: Let me use the hon. Gentleman as an example. Sometimes he is not even there to vote on these issues because he is away refereeing football games, earning thousands of pounds, so it is really good to see him in his place today, prepared to vote.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): According to the Public Whip website, in the last full five-year Parliament, the hon. Gentleman voted in only 49.9% of votes. Does he want an electronic system so that he can boost his own record without doing any real work?

Pete Wishart: I do not know quite what the hon. Gentleman misses when it comes to these sorts of issues. I vote for issues that are reserved here in this Parliament and this House. Conservative Members are trying to stop me from voting, through English votes for English laws, so we are in a situation where these particular difficulties exist in the House.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Is it not also true that the Public Whip does not record the fact that there are England and Wales only votes that we are excluded from in this House?

Pete Wishart: The whole trend of EVEL legislation is to ensure that we do not vote on those particular issues; they have put in mechanisms to stop us doing that.

I will conclude, although I know that the House has very much enjoyed the alternative view on the issue. I want this House to move on in where we work and in how we do our work. But I have a sneaking suspicion, from my 17 years in this House, that neither of these things will be delivered any time soon.

5.12 pm

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): I will be brief because I want to concentrate on only one aspect of the debate, which is safety. I know that there are important issues to be discussed about costs, timing, and whether we have a full or partial move. For the record, I support those who say that we must be clear that Parliament should stay in the Palace of Westminster in the long term. But before we consider these long-term issues, we need to look at what is happening here, today and every day. What is happening is that we are asking not only ourselves and our staff, but also thousands of visitors, to come to a building that is not safe.

It might be an exaggeration to say that Parliament is a death trap, but it would not be a wild exaggeration. Anyone who has taken the tour of the basement will have seen the full horror of the current arrangements. We have already heard about the regular fires that break out. I think the Leader of the House said that there have been 60 over the past 10 years, and 12 in the past year alone. Chunks of masonry have fallen off high parts of the building. We are lucky that no one has been killed so far because of this. It is not remotely conceivable that people would be allowed to work here if this were a normal building, let alone that thousands of tourists would be allowed to visit it.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): On the right hon. Gentleman's tour of the basement, did he happen to give any consideration to the working conditions of the individuals who are tasked with undertaking repairs in the basement areas? Having seen the basement myself, it seems incredibly unsafe and unfair to expect them to continue in those conditions.

Damian Green: I agree with the hon. Lady. The wider point about safety was put very starkly by the recently retired Black Rod, David Leakey, who said:

“There could be a major fire, there could be loss of life.”

The one thing we know—the one unarguable fact we know—is that the more we delay, the more likely some horrific outcome becomes.

We need to be clear about who statistically is most likely to be affected. It is not us. There are about 1,500 legislators in the two Houses. There are 15,000 people who have passes to come into this building. About 1 million people visit every year. The Education Service has more than 100,000 visitors a year, most of them, of course, children. It cannot be right to increase the risk of catastrophe for those people by continuing to delay.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that one of the ways we can protect ourselves and our staff and visitors is by engaging with the fire safety training module on the intranet? It is good for us, our staff and our visitors, but fewer than 20% of Members undertake the training.

Damian Green: I am glad to have given the hon. Gentleman the opportunity to make that public service announcement.

I want to address directly one of the arguments that has been used to advocate delay and continuing to muddle through in the way that we have done for too long. The argument is that in the wake of the terrible tragedy of Grenfell Tower, we cannot be seen to be spending large sums of money on this place. I would turn that argument absolutely on its head. Having seen the appalling effects of a fire in a building that had inadequate protection, I think it would be the height of irresponsibility not to take action to make safe a building that we know is barely safe now and that is getting more dangerous every year.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I did the underground tour as well. It was very frightening to see the gas pipes alongside the electrical wiring, but the most frightening thing I saw was the sheets of metal sitting above that wiring. They were full of water that was dripping down through the building and were there

to stop the wires getting soaking wet. Given that we work in such conditions, how can we not make urgent efforts to get the work done in this building?

Damian Green: The hon. Lady's point illustrates the general one that those who have spent most time and effort looking at the conditions of this House, either on various Committees or, indeed, inside Government, are the ones who are most keen to take early and decisive action. No one's conscience should be comfortable with the potential consequences of delay and inaction in these circumstances.

I have great sympathy with and support for the Leader of the House, who has been energetic and active in bringing this matter before us. I agree with those who say that this should conceivably have been dealt with 10 years ago, but I assure the House that the Leader of the House has been very energetic in bringing it before us and we should be grateful to her.

The conclusion I draw is simple: get on with it—just get on with it. In the spirit of that conclusion, I will support amendment (b) to motion No. 1, as that is the best way to minimise the chance of a disaster happening as a result of inaction—a disaster that would reflect appallingly on this House.

5.18 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I confess to being one of those who holds this building in enormous esteem. There are bits of it I do not particularly like, but I have to say that the experience of walking through Westminster Hall, looking up at the angels, carved in probably the 14th century and supporting the roof, is one of the great joys that I would want every single one of my constituents to be able to experience at some point. It is against that background that I care passionately about what we do.

It is not just that we enjoy being here and fought to be here, because we wanted to come into this building and change the world and this country in the way we think is right according to our particular light; it is that we know we are trustees of this building for future generations. The best political generations in our history are the ones that have taken that responsibility the most seriously. In the early 19th century, they did not do it well and it led to a massive fire in 1834, which destroyed ancient paintings and buildings that had been here since the 13th century and before. My terrible fear is that if we do not take our job as trustees seriously now, regardless of party political advantage or, I say to my SNP friends, of ideological interest, we truly risk losing one of the great treasures of this country.

The problems have already been laid out. As the Chair of the Administration Committee, the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), said, there is a single 130-year-old drain that could burst at any time. There is a high-pressure steam heating system next to high-voltage electricity cables, with wires that are decaying into flammable dust every day, next to gas pipes, phone cables, broadband cables and running water, all wrapped in asbestos.

To answer the point made by the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) about asbestos, about two years ago the Clerk had to ring the Leader of the House to say that part of the central heating system had burst through some of the asbestos around the cabling, which was immediately next to the air conditioning

[Chris Bryant]

system of the Chamber of the House of Commons. There was a real danger that he would have to close the Chamber and Parliament indefinitely until that was sorted out. The real problem is that we have a central heating system that is elderly, at high pressure and could burst at any time. It normally takes us about two and a half weeks to switch it on because of the fear of its doing that. That is the real problem about asbestos in the building.

Dr Caroline Johnson: My point was that we are told that these wires and cables are in tall stacks, which are full of asbestos. We are also told that they are going to burn, but they are clad in asbestos. My point was about the assessment that has been made of the fire protection provided by that asbestos, which we know to be one of the most non-flammable products.

Chris Bryant: This is the problem. In many of the spaces we are talking about, which are effectively very narrow chimneys, there is very little room, because they were intended to be ventilation shafts, in essence, but are now so full of generations of heating, electricity and other kinds of cabling that it is impossible to get in there to check. It is even impossible to get in there to check the extent to which the cabling has decayed.

We know that there is asbestos in some places, but we do not know whether there is in others, so of course we have to take precautionary measures. That is the problem; we do not know where all the asbestos is. A lot of it will have to come out because we have to remove other things, not because we are specifically removing the asbestos.

There are long corridors with no fire doors. We have 98 risers in the building and miles of inaccessible and narrow wooden tunnels that would act as funnels for a fire that, I tell you now, would speed through the building faster than most of us in the Chamber could run. We do not meet the national fire safety standards that we impose on other buildings in the country, so we have fire wardens patrolling the building 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Remember the fire at Windsor castle? The major problem was that it spread rapidly because there was no compartmentalisation. The only royal palace in the country that has not had compartmentalisation brought in since that date is this one, which is the most visited by the public. It is a nonsense.

Mr John Hayes: The hon. Gentleman is making the measured case that I expected him to, but surely the characteristics he attributes to this building are shared by many great historic buildings. We think of cathedrals, which are widely visited every year and have the same problem with stonework. We think of the great houses that have the same fire risk. Many historic buildings have the same problems. The issue is not those problems, which we of course need to solve; it is how we solve them.

Chris Bryant: The right hon. Gentleman talks about big houses; I think he is asking me to advertise my book on the history of the aristocracy, which is in all the good bookshops at the moment. I would simply say to him that nearly every one of the major houses that fell into disrepair in the last 100 years did so as the result of a massive fire. I think we should take a lesson from that,

which is that we must be very, very cautious in this building. When that fire comes, I would not want to be a Member who had voted against taking direct, clear action now; I truly would not.

It must surely also be a disgrace that this Parliament, which introduced proper legislation to ensure disabled access in every other public building in the land, has the worst disabled access of any public building in the land. It is almost impossible for somebody with mobility difficulties to get up into the Gallery, although the staff try really hard. On top of that, the building is very dark—it is almost impossible for many people who are partially sighted to see their way around—and we should, as a matter of honour, be putting that right.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend mentions fires, as a number of hon. Members have done. We have talked about actual fires. Only a few months ago, in my office there was a smell of burning and soot falling from the grates in my ceiling. I phoned the emergency number, but by the time I had reached the door of my office there were fire wardens in the corridor. That is the reality of preventing fire, and happily, so far, it has been successful.

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. As several others have already said, this is not primarily about us; it is about the safety of the thousands of people who come to visit the building, the 8,000 who work in it, and the 15,000 who have passes.

The hon. Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) was absolutely right to say that it is crazy that great big scaffolding has been put up in the cloisters to make work possible on one of the most beautiful bits of the Palace, one of the other bits that survived the 1834 fire—the cloisters that were put in by Henry VII and then Henry VIII. The problem is that at the moment we simply do not have the capacity and the capability within the House authorities to get those major pieces of work done in the House. That means that parts of the building are falling apart, water is coming in where it should not, and we are degrading a national asset. That is why it is so important, as the right hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) said, to set up a proper sponsor body and delivery authority to do this properly—to bring in really high-quality staff and to make sure the work is delivered on time and on budget, as we can do in this country.

In all honesty, motion No. 1, if left unamended, says, broadly speaking, “Let’s not do anything in this Parliament.” It is not the long grass; it is the very, very long grass. I believe that would be an utter dereliction of our duty, which is why Historic England, who are, after all, the Government’s own advisers on the built heritage in this country, have said that if we were to go down that route, they would have to put this building on the at-risk register. That is a profoundly shocking thing for us to be told if we are not going to take action.

Motion No. 2 is mildly better. I am a bit disappointed in the Leader of the House that she is not going any further than that motion, because it also means that we refuse to make a clear decision now. It means that we try to set up a sponsor body and a delivery authority, for which we want to get the best people, without giving them a clear direction of travel. It means that they will be repeating the work that was done by the Joint Committee.

We produced our report 16 months ago and it is only now that we are getting the debate, so my bet is that when this sponsor body reports, with the three options that it has looked at, the Government will not want to table the motions. There will be a general election coming up; there will be some issue that has to be sorted out, and the debate will be another two years after that. I say to hon. Members that if they are thinking of voting for motion No. 2, they will have to make this decision all over again in four years' time, by which time the risk will have increased—and the cost.

That is why I support amendment (b) to motion No. 1. It implements the unanimous recommendations of the Joint Committee and the Public Accounts Committee; it sets up a sponsor body and a delivery authority; and it takes an in principle decision. It is the only way to take an in principle decision today.

Andrea Leadsom: I just want to set the record straight, because the hon. Gentleman is attributing inaccuracies to my remarks. Motion No. 2 will ensure that the best combination of urgent action can be taken in a cost-effective way. The delivery authority will come back to this House with a final preferred solution within 12 to 18 months and with proper costings. As for his proposal to go down just one route, his own Joint Committee acknowledged in its report that it had not done the costings properly.

Chris Bryant: Well, we disagree, because I know what has happened over the last 10 years. Governments have repeatedly fought shy of bringing motions to the House. I have enormous respect for the Leader of the House. She has worked very hard on this, but as she said to me last week, it may be that somebody else is Leader of the House in future and that person might not be so keen on bringing anything to the House. My guess is that when we get closer to a general election, no Government will want to bring the matter back to the House. Therefore, much as I admire and respect her, I just do not think that her solution is the answer.

I want to say just a few other things. The first is about trying to stay in the building while the work is being done. I appeal to colleagues to think hard about that. We are talking about 10 times as much work happening on a daily basis as is happening now. That is 10 times as many people hammering, drilling, sanding down buildings, moving cabling, bringing in vast amounts of material and all the rest, and 10 times as many portakabins. Earlier today I was on the roof of Westminster Hall, looking at the work being done there. Because people have complained about the noise, the people there are only able to work at night, and guess what that has done to the budget? It has tripled it. When work was being done on the Royal Gallery, the House of Lords said, "We can't hear ourselves think," and so decided that the work could be done only at weekends and at night, and guess what? That added £1 million to the work. The truth of the matter is that if we try to stay, we will dramatically increase the cost of the work, and we will be going bananas.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con) *rose*—

Chris Bryant: Talking of which.

Tom Tugendhat: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. Does he agree that an emergency decant, should for example we discover something horrible in

the woodshed—or rather, in the basement—or should something go wrong with clearing the asbestos, would massively increase the costs of us having to find alternative accommodation?

Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, which is why, incidentally, to those who say, "If we ever move out, they'll never let us back," I say, "Who is this magical 'they' who's going to prevent us from coming back in?" The truth is that whether we choose to come back will always be a decision for Parliament. If future generations decide that things should be done differently, good luck to them, but we should not make a decision now that makes it impossible for us to protect this building, because—this is precisely the point that the hon. Gentleman made—the most certain way for us to be permanently excluded is to have a catastrophic failure in the building, such as a fire or a flood.

Mrs Moon: Before casting their votes tonight, those Members who want to remain should nip into the Library and read sections of "Mr Barry's War", in which they will see the absolute chaos when Parliament refused to decant the last time. It was horrendous. It drove Pugin almost mad. We must leave.

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; that is a great book and it, too, is available in all good bookshops, although it is not by me.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): I am swaying between the amendment that the hon. Gentleman is promoting and motion No. 2. The reason I am drawn more to the motion No. 2 is that I would like us to have the occasional foothold in this place—the occasional use of the Palace in an extended period. Is there any way that the amendment can achieve that?

Chris Bryant: "A foothold" is a difficult thing to specify, but some people have said, for instance, that we should keep the Chamber functioning—I guess that is what most people mean. The difficulty with keeping the Chamber running is that the Chamber is not just the Chamber. It is not a hermetically sealed unit; the air conditioning, the heating, the electricity and all the rest of it come from somewhere. The public have to have access through large parts of the building. We would also have to access from somewhere, and it could not just be through some kind of polytunnel. It is actually phenomenally difficult to achieve that.

There was one other option, which was for us to sit in Westminster Hall. I love the idea of sitting in Westminster Hall. The hon. Member for somewhere down in the south-west—the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg)—and I were joint advocates of that. The problem is that the floor is not solid—there are no solid foundations—and we would have to put something inside the roof, which could destroy it, so there are real problems.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I should point out to the House that Members are free to intervene if the Member on his or her feet wishes to take the intervention, but there are now 80 minutes left. I must, in all courtesy, warn Members that a lot of Members who want to speak will not be called. Some of them are also seeking to intervene, and I am sure they can join the dots.

Chris Bryant: I have maybe one small paragraph more, Mr Speaker, which is simply to say that I am very fond of the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), but I disagree with his views on this, because, in the end, they are not in the long-term interests of the Palace of Westminster itself. In particular, the idea of us sitting in Portcullis House, I am afraid, is for the birds. The advice from the security people is that it is simply begging somebody to use the fact that Portcullis House sits on top of the tube station, so I would say to the hon. Gentleman that that is a non-starter.

My final point is that there is only really one proposal on the table that allows us to make a clear decision and to move forward more swiftly, and that is the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier).

5.36 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I am also very fond of the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), but I do disagree with him on one fundamental. What the whole House is united about is our understanding that we need to get on with this job. That is why I have lived and breathed this issue with my hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Mr Vara), who is sitting on the Front Bench, why we took the motion to the Backbench Business Committee with the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), and why we have constantly encouraged the Government to bring these motions forward.

The work needs to be done, but the question I have to pose is, if this work is so important—if the building is so dangerous—why, in these decant options, are we waiting until 2025? That is the question we have to ask. I ask why the work is not proceeding far faster and at a pace. I ask myself why we still have so few fire doors and why the Library corridor, which is 100 yards long, has no fire door in it. Those are the sort of points we should raise. We are united—I say this to the hon. Member for Rhondda—on the need to take action, but I do ask why, if this work is so urgent, we are waiting until 2025. This whole debate about the decant has muddied the waters. Frankly, the Government should have been taking action years ago. If it is inconvenient to us, so be it. That is the most important point.

When my hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire and I first saw the report, we were not saying that we were the experts. I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) that nobody suggested we were setting ourselves up as experts. I deliberately went out and consulted experts; I did not just consult my own conscience.

Like everybody else, I love this place, but I am not so important, and we are not so important. What about the 1 million people who visit this place every year? What about the fact that this building is the iconic centre of the nation, particularly as we try and resolve the very difficult questions of Brexit? Do we really want to take the enormous political decision, at this very difficult time for our nation, to move lock, stock and barrel from the iconic centre of the nation?

Members should understand that if we vote for the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier)—it is the crucial amendment tonight—we are taking the decision. It is not motion No. 2 tabled by the Leader of the House

and it is not asking for further assessment. If we vote for the amendment, we will be taking the decision now, and there will be no going back on it—we will have to move out. Members should not believe that it will be for only five years. They should look at the Canadian Parliament. I predict that we will be out of this building for 10 or even 12 years. The Canadian Parliament, which is building a replica Chamber, is moving out for 12 years. We have to think of our constituents and ask ourselves this question: do we really believe in this at this time of unparalleled austerity? In particular—I have seen Opposition Members make this point many times—do we believe that we should take the decision this evening to spend £5 billion up-front on our own workplace? It is a very difficult decision and a very difficult argument to make to our constituents.

When we started consulting experts, many other issues really got us worried. For instance, not a lot has been said so far about the fact that the decant proposal is to build a replica Chamber. Although we have heard a lot about the Joint Committee, it did not get all its facts right: it wanted to build the replica Chamber in the courtyard of Richmond House, but unfortunately, it was five metres out. That is not a very competent process. Therefore, the Leader of the House was right that we cannot risk voting for the amendment, because there has not been sufficient assessment of the proposals. When it says that this is a unanimous report, it has to listen to my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), who was on that Committee. He has now changed his mind—

Mr John Hayes *rose*—

Dr Caroline Johnson *rose*—

Sir Edward Leigh: I cannot give way very often because the Speaker asked me not to speak for long, but I had better give way to my right hon. Friend.

Mr Hayes: To be fair to the Leader of the House, as I think we want to, she has been absolutely clear that the proposal is to demolish Richmond House—she has been certain about that—and to build the replica Chamber nearby us. The message we would send to our constituents is simple: not only have MPs voted to leave Parliament, but they have voted to build another building to occupy and another Chamber a stone's throw away. What a nonsense!

Sir Edward Leigh: Could we imagine for a moment the United States Congress doing this, or the French National Assembly? This is actually on the table. [*Interruption.*] The United States Congress is building a replica Chamber? I think not.

Dr Johnson: On the original costings of £3.52 billion for the full decant, I was told today in a meeting with the business director of the project that at the time, they assumed that a building was available of the right size and in the right location. In fact—it has not actually been properly costed yet—the estimate is that the new work on Richmond House would cost an additional £550 million.

Sir Edward Leigh: We are worried, and we are right to be worried, about the costs of the replica Chamber. It has been said to me that it may be necessary at times, if we carry on with this work—nobody is denying that we should proceed with it as fast as possible—that this

Chamber may have to leave. I fear that if the replica Chamber is built, we will be out of the Palace of Westminster for up to 10 years. We will be too comfortable, so we have looked for and have consulted on alternatives. We tracked down Sir Michael Hopkins, the architect of Portcullis House. Nobody had raised this idea with him before then—he built the most bomb-proof, the most secure and the most expensive, by metre, building in the country—but the atrium of Portcullis House is exactly the right width, with this Chamber and the Division Lobbies, for an emergency Chamber for a few months. It would not be too comfortable there, but it is possible. Westminster Hall has been mentioned. The Second Church Estates Commissioner, my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), mentioned Church House, which is built to bomb-proof standards. There are alternatives if we have to move out, so get on with it.

The argument that the Joint Committee has established beyond peradventure that it is cheaper to have a full decant is not accepted by many experts—I say this to my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley. It was not accepted in the Deloitte report, which talked about net cost analysis. The Joint Committee report did not take sufficient cognisance of the cost of the replica, the work of the patch-up, which will have to be done in the coming years and months, the security costs and the VAT costs. All these costs have been factored into the Deloitte report. There is no time to go into detail, but do not accept the facile argument about the two proposals. We have the decant proposal, which would stop 1 million people a year visiting this building and have all the other disadvantages that I have talked about—do not accept that the decant proposal is much cheaper. Many accountants and experts take an alternative view.

Before we proceed to a vote, let us listen to the hon. Member for Ealing North and remember the thousands of employees working in this building. Of course, we want them to be safe, but we also want them to have a job, and what would happen with a full decant? This is urgent. We must get on with the work now, build the fire doors and so on, and let us remember this historical point—the hon. Member for Rhondda has made many historical points, and I will end on this one: when this House of Commons Chamber was destroyed by firebombs in 1941, Winston Churchill and Clement Attlee, representing the best in their two parties, made a conscious and absolute decision that this House of Commons would not be bombed out of its historic home, and that was why we moved to the Chamber of the House of Lords.

I commissioned an architect, pro bono, who proved conclusively that this would be perfectly possible. He looked at all the wiring issues, the sewage issues, all that we have talked about, and found that it would be perfectly possible. Are we really being told that in this day and age we cannot divert sewerage and electrical wiring? They do it all the time in the private sector. They build pop concert arenas for tens of thousands of people in two or three days, but we are told by the experts that it is impossible to resolve this problem. I return to my historical point: when the chips were down in 1941, Clement Attlee and Winston Churchill decided that this Chamber would not move from this building. I therefore urge colleagues to vote down the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch and vote for motion No. 1. We must get on with the work.

5.46 pm

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): I want to be brief, so I will not take interventions.

It seems a very long time since we had the pleasure of sitting on the R and R Committee—it seems a very long time because it was in fact a very long time ago. We reported in September 2016, and it is now the beginning of 2018, so it has been the best part of 17 or 18 months, in which time the Government have ducked, dived and dodged, and done everything but bring this issue to the House. Finally, they have tabled two motions, the purpose of which, as hon. Members have said, is to kick the can down the road. I really thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), therefore, for tabling her amendment today.

It is crazy that this is a half-day debate. Regardless of hon. Members' views—whether they are in favour of or against moving out—it is crazy that one of the most important buildings in the country, the home of our democratic institutions, only merits a few hours of debate. When the R and R Committee first met in July 2015, I started with the view that we should stay. We had been here for hundreds of years and I thought we could do the work around us. How difficult could it be? Like other Members have said, the fear that, if we moved out, we would never move back again was certainly doing the rounds.

I changed my mind. I recognised that the only sensible choice was a full decant—not a partial decant and certainly not staying here and somehow muddling through for 30 or 35 years. I came to that decision because I—and, indeed, the whole Committee—looked at the evidence. I know we live in world today where evidence and facts are to be ignored—or if we do not like them, we just create our own or find other ones that suit our case—but we did not do that. By the end, every member of the Committee recognised that remaining in the House was not a sensible option, for a whole host of reasons.

Cost was one of those reasons, but today I want to talk about just two aspects: safety and security. I advise those who have not taken the tour of the basement to do so and to see for themselves what other hon. Members have talked about: the state of the plumbing and electrics, and the constant measures that have to be taken because of the risk of fire.

A very important point is that every year we are spending tens of billions of pounds—[HON. MEMBERS: “Millions.”] I am sorry. We are spending tens of millions of pounds just to patch and make do, and that figure is growing. Sadly, whichever option we choose, much of that work will be ripped out because it is a muddling-through solution. We are not even standing still: the building is getting worse by the day. We are falling further and further behind and we face the real prospect of a catastrophic failure. If a fire started and was funnelled through the 98 or so risers in the building, the effect would be devastating. I think it fair to say that, if someone had to design a building to burn down, this would be a pretty good one to start with.

We hear a great deal about the possibility that Members would be elected and would then not be able to sit in the Chamber, but what about their safety? And what about the safety of the thousands of employees who work in the building? We should be thinking about them when

[Mark Tami]

we vote tonight. A lot of work is being done on fire safety, but we must be honest: it is badly behind schedule. If a fire broke out and then took hold, and there were people working on the top floor of the building, what would be their chances of getting out? I know that that sounds dramatic, but we know the facts and we are sitting here talking about, effectively, doing nothing about them—and possibly voting to do nothing about them.

However, as other Members have said, fire is not the only risk. Asbestos is a huge problem. When we know exactly where it is, we may be able to leave it in place, or at least know how to handle it, but we do not know exactly where it is. Large parts of the building may contain asbestos, but we just do not know, so we have to establish precautions. Even if we decided to stay, we would probably be evacuated on a regular basis because a ceiling had come down and asbestos was present.

As we have seen, security is an existing and growing problem for us. Some Members think that we can maintain security while working in a building site, but I do not see how that could work. I have been here long enough to remember—I was sitting on the opposite Benches at the time—when the pro-hunting protesters entered the Chamber. And how did they get into the building? They pretended to be contractors. The threat that we face now is far more severe than that. I think there is no doubt that if we stayed, security would be compromised.

We need to face facts. A full decant in conjunction with the programme of work on the northern estate, utilising Richmond House as a secure zone, is the only sensible option. Of course it is a difficult decision and it does involve a lot of taxpayers' money, but we are here to make difficult decisions and to defend them if we think that they are right. Nothing will be served by dithering and delay. Let us get on with it and deliver a Parliament that preserves its rich history, but is fit and safe for the 21st century.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. A five-minute limit will now apply to each Back-Bench speech.

5.53 pm

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): There can be a broad measure of agreement that the House needs to be maintained properly. All those who have spoken would acknowledge that work needs to be done, and indeed, that has always been the case. Since William Rufus commissioned the building of Westminster Hall, there have been major refurbishments of the Palace. Geoffrey Chaucer was Clerk of the Works for one of them. After the great fire of 1834—

Chris Bryant: The right hon. Gentleman has obviously got my book.

Mr Hayes: Indeed.

After the great fire of 1834, there was the major refurbishment—in fact, it was largely a rebuilding of the Palace—that led to the place where we now sit. Buildings of this kind are always hard to maintain and will always require constant maintenance work. This is not a moment; it is a process. It will be an ongoing

process whatever decision we take tonight. Let me make my case as quickly as I can—particularly given your advice, Mr Speaker.

I could make this case on cost grounds. Indeed the report produced by the Leader of the House is very honest about that. The report heavily qualifies the estimates therein. It says that there is significantly more work to be done by professionals before budgets can be set and the accounts therefore made certain. We are not absolutely certain what the costs of the decant would be, nor are we absolutely certain what the costs of staying here would be. But what I think we can say, from all of our experience and intuition, is that they are likely to be considerably greater than the provisional costs that we have now. Every building project I have ever known has run over budget and over time.

Tom Tugendhat: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Hayes: No, I will not give way, as Mr Speaker has advised me not to, much as I adore my hon. Friend.

The best comparisons we can offer are Portcullis House and the building of the Scottish Parliament. When the Scottish Parliament was first envisaged, the cost was thought to be about £40 million—it cost £400 million. When Portcullis House was first envisaged, the cost was thought to be a fraction of the cost of the eventual outcome and it took years longer than anyone imagined. So do not be persuaded by any argument on costs because I would bet a pound to a penny that those cost estimates will be very way far off the mark when the final accounts are settled.

I could make the argument on the basis of tradition. It is true that traditions matter and this is the heart of our democracy. Imagine the headline that says, “MPs vote to leave Parliament”. What nonsense that is. And imagine what our constituents would think of us and how we would be diminished in their estimation, and rightly so.

So I could make the argument on the basis of tradition. We do tread in the footsteps of giants here. In Richmond House we would be stepping in the footsteps of Stephen Dorrell and Frank Dobson. Much as I admire them both, I do not think either would claim to be giants.

But I am not going to make those arguments. Instead I am going to make the argument on these sole grounds; it is the argument about people. It is about the hundreds of thousands of people who visit this Palace every year and are inspired and enthralled by it. Some of them will end up being Members, as I did after I came here as a schoolboy. It is about my constituents who visited the House today and sat in the Gallery and watched the proceedings of the House. Do they want to go to some alternative? Are they going to be excited and enthralled? Are they going to believe in our democracy when they visit Richmond House with its fantasy duplicate alternative Chamber? Surely not. That is not what people expect of us or of this place and it is vital that they can continue to come here to enjoy that experience.

There is another group of people who are voiceless in this debate: the staff who work in this place, the staff who have given, in many cases, 10, 20, 30 or 40 years' experience. No one seriously believes that all of those will be accommodated in the new arrangements. We know what would happen. It would start with early retirement and then there would be voluntary redundancy, and then redundancy.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: We will now have a Pound; Mr Stephen Pound.

5.59 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I was not too happy about the mention of early retirement before you called me, Mr Speaker.

I rise to support amendment (a) to motion No. 2. In doing so, I find myself in some slightly strange company: the principal sponsors of the amendment are four aristocratic knights of the realm, the Chair of the Defence Committee and my humble self. That shows that this issue arches across any political divide.

From listening to the debate, it worries me that some are casting this in terms of mods and rockers—traditional, antediluvian tweed-wearing crusty port sippers who want nothing to change whatever, and the young meritocratic thrusters, epitomised by the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), whose normally sunny and pleasant disposition has, I suspect, been poisoned by the awful reality of the cost-overrun at Holyrood.

There are two emotions permeating the debate today that we really need to consider. In everything we say and do, we must give credit to the Leader of the House, who has done an extraordinary amount of work on this. In some ways, it must be tempting for her to take this Gordian knot and just slice through it. One of those emotions can be summed up in this way:

“If it were done when ’tis done, then ’twere well it were done quickly”.

That was a tribute to our Scottish friends. The second emotion involves recognising that this building is not just a matter of stone, porphyry, marble and stained glass. It is not just a structure; it is a home, a statement and a place of democracy. It stands for something in this nation and beyond, far more than mere bricks and mortar. This is the place where democracy lives. It is so easy to say that we could move elsewhere and that it would still be a Parliament, but it would not be the Palace of Westminster. It would not be the building that has survived fire and bombing—it has survived the most horrendous impacts and we have somehow come through—and it is crucial that that footprint be retained and we maintain our presence in this building.

When the Leader of the House introduced the debate today, she twice used the word “iconic”. It is one of the most overused words in the British language. It is a word that we toss around; we call London taxis iconic. We use the word very promiscuously, but if ever that word had a resonance, a meaning and a reality, it is in respect of this building. This is the iconic building. Let us not even think about the tourists who come here and who would be displaced if we moved to the QEII. Let us not think about those things. Let us just think about what this building means as an icon of representative democracy, where the people’s voices are heard in this building, in this Chamber, in this Palace of Westminster. We cannot lose this. We have fought too hard over generations to maintain and keep it.

Yes, there is work to be done, but is it really beyond the wit of humanity to come up with some kind of compartmentalised, bulkhead system whereby we could do the work in sections? There is only one sewage pipe—I do not want to go into the dreadful scatological

details—but surely we could section it off and work on one bit and then another. I am prepared to lay down my liberty and to work in that coprophiliac hell down there if that needs to be done. What needs to be done must be done quickly. Let us all agree on that. Let us also agree that moving to Perth is not an option. But whatever we decide tonight, let us not take lightly the duty and responsibility that weighs on our shoulders to preserve, maintain, keep, endorse and support this place, this home of democracy, this true icon of all that we hold dear.

6.3 pm

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I rise to speak to amendment (c), and I hope that in so doing I can be helpful to the House in explaining an option for a decant that has historical precedent. This would not be the first time that the Commons and the Lords had met in other places. Westminster Abbey Chapter House has been used, and Church House was used extensively during the second world war. Church House was first used as a contingency Chamber on 7 November 1940, and it was used during three main periods during world war two. In fact, in 1944, both Houses of Parliament were forced to decant to what was then known as the Churchill club, as Church House was sometimes described. I would like to assure Members that the corporation of Church House still stands ready to speak to the Government about once again accommodating Parliament, should the need arise. Many of Churchill’s famous speeches were made in Church House. The then Prime Minister announced the sinking of the Bismarck and the loss of HMS Hood in Church House in 1941, and a plaque can be seen in the Hoare memorial hall, where he made the speech, commemorating that event. Heritage is taken seriously, and any visitor would immediately be aware of the links with Church House.

I will give Members a quick guided tour of what is available at Church House. The main assembly room has exactly the same number of seats as this Chamber, and it was designed with a bombproof roof to increase security after the experience of world war one. The assembly room is set within two sets of exterior walls to address the security needs of the time, and that would address today’s needs, too. Dean’s Yard, with which Members are probably familiar, has a secure entrance with a narrow archway and barrier and contains a quadrangle with no access from outside, around which cars can circulate securely. It would be possible to close the relatively little-used Great College Street and Great Smith Street without great disruption. There are many committee rooms and reception rooms, and Bishop Partridge Hall, which is roughly the same size as the Grand Committee Room, is often used for events—Members may have been there. There is a chapel, a large dining area, catering and, yes, licensed refreshment facilities.

All that is why Church House had a contract with the parliamentary estate until recently to provide a default setting to decant at short notice in times of emergency. It is worth emphasising that it would take less public money to adapt Church House for the needs of one or both Chambers than to construct a replica building. The optics for parliamentarians are therefore strong, because explaining to our constituents, as taxpayers, why we are spending such an amount of money gets a bit easier when we can explain that it has been done before.

To add a little more historical information, Church House has been used for the state opening of Parliament. A simple ceremony was conducted with little of the

[*Dame Caroline Spelman*]

picturesque tradition that we see in a full state opening, but it was 1939. The King himself made his speech from the throne in Church House, so it has even been used for that purpose.

I simply wanted to provide colleagues with some thoughts on how decanting could be done more quickly. I listened carefully to the Leader of the House, and she said that we would be decanting in 2025—the middle of the next decade—which, in the spirit of the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), is not very rapid. Church House would stand ready to help, as it has done before, and there is a strong historical precedent that can be used to explain to taxpayers why it may be an entirely practical solution to address the concerns of hon. Members on both sides of the House.

6.7 pm

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow so many erudite speeches, particularly that of the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh). He is a former Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, and I have enormous respect for him, but I was puzzled to hear him say that he wanted quick action, but also that he did not want to make a decision tonight. He and I share a healthy scepticism of experts—someone does not get to chair the PAC without being able to challenge experts—and that is why the Committee considered the work of the Joint Committee of this House to assure ourselves and help to assure the House that its work was robust and thorough.

It is no accident that the Deputy Chair of that Committee, the hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), 13 Select Committee Chairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) back my amendment (b) to motion No. 1. We regularly consider large projects and how they are managed. We routinely and regularly criticise Departments for their poor procurement, poor project management and poor contracting, and it is important that we get all that right. It is also important that we bottom out what we are trying to achieve right at the very beginning and that we work through the figures. We know that the Joint Committee did not draw up full and detailed costings, which would take a long time to get right, but its figures were robustly reached and were orders of magnitude of the cost. However, the costings are still pegged to 2014 prices, so let us not use them as though they are the actual figures. That is why further work needs to be done. It cannot be done unless we make a very clear decision tonight. That does not mean kicking it into the long grass; it means making a firm decision about the options. That is why I propose a decant, because we know that moving the project quickly, specifying it well and doing it over a short period of time will be a lot cheaper.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My concern is that the figures are not, in fact, robust—they are out by 16.5 feet in the proposals for Richmond House. We had hundreds of pages of consultants' reports, and this key fact is wrong. If that key fact is wrong, how many other facts are wrong?

Meg Hillier: My Committee's work did not particularly look at that aspect. We were looking at the refurbishment side. The hon. Gentleman sat on the Joint Committee

and agreed its report. The National Audit Office assessed the robustness of the methodology used in that report—it did not do a full analysis, because such assurance is a very long job—and it assured us that the work was thorough and credible.

There was a sampling of some of the examples we have heard from other hon. Members tonight, and the costs were considered in order to extrapolate the indicative cost figure—the order of magnitude. The work of the Joint Committee was robust and thorough, as far as it could go, but until Members of this House make a decision, we cannot go into the full detail of the figures. That is why we need to make a decision.

The Palace of Westminster is, of course, a world heritage site, which means it comes under UNESCO rules. I have been in touch with Francesco Bandarin, UNESCO's assistant director general for culture—I have copied our correspondence to the UK permanent delegation—and under UNESCO rules the UK Treasury is responsible for funding this building and making sure it is preserved as a world heritage site.

By December 2018 the Government have to provide information to UNESCO about their plans for this building, and in 2019—incidentally the year that we are expected to leave the European Union—we will also be on the world stage because UNESCO's committee will consider the Government's decisions and proposals and assess whether they are acceptable and will do enough to preserve this world heritage site.

As other hon. Members have said, it is not about us. It is about members of the public and the staff who work here, but this is also an internationally iconic building. Are we really saying that we are unable to make a decision tonight to ensure that we work up full costings and a full programme of work so that we can get on with the job, as the Public Accounts Committee concluded?

I have also seen correspondence from David Orr and Jennifer Wood, the external members of the Palace of Westminster restoration and renewal programme board, who wrote to David Natzler, the Clerk of the House, in March 2017 and last week to reiterate their "serious concerns" about the "continuing delay" in holding debates on this issue, so I congratulate the Leader of the House on ensuring that we had this debate today. They also say that

"the idea that the debates...will not be a Decision in Principle but instead would give approval to a shadow Sponsor Board and shadow Delivery Authority and commission them to study further options before bringing the matter back to Parliament"

is a matter of concern. They say that one of the motions "envisages only essential work doing this Parliament followed by a further review before 2022 to consider the need for comprehensive works...We are dismayed by these developments and seriously concerned about the level of risk that is being tolerated."

We have heard about the risks and safety issues, and it is a real concern to me that we must move forward. We cannot keep putting this into the long grass. We have to make a decision.

Let us be clear: we are a group of people who, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) said, aspire to run the country. In doing that, we have to make decisions. We need to make a decision tonight about this building. Of course it is going to cost money but, let us face it, it is not as if the Treasury is going to give that money to something in my constituency—we cannot see such things as equivalents.

This building is at risk unless we make a decision. Let us move forward and get the full costings and the full programme of works so that we can get on with the job.

6.14 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): There is good news in this debate, which is that there seems to be universal agreement, from Members in all parts of the House, that where urgent work needs doing to guarantee the future safety of those who work in this place and those who visit, we should press on with it. Indeed, there is a strong feeling that there is a need for greater urgency in such work. From most things that I have read and heard, it seems that rewiring is a very urgent priority, as that is where the worst fire risk seems to come from. Substantial pipe work may also need doing, where pipes need replacing or re-routing as part of a safety plan. These things can all be done through compartmentalising—taking things in stages and linking up as appropriate. We know we can work alongside builders and maintenance companies, because we are doing that all the time. I pay tribute to those who are working on the Elizabeth Tower at the moment. They are getting on with their work in a way that is not disruptive of our work at all. They must be working in confined and difficult circumstances, but they have so far done it in a way that is entirely compatible with the work of Parliament. So I hope that the Leader of the House would take away the sense that urgent work for the safety of people here in future and for the safety of the very fabric of the building might be accelerated, with options looked at so that we can press on with it in a timely and sensible way.

I find myself having more difficulties about the much bigger scheme being launched any time soon. As we have heard, quite big elements of it have not been properly thought through or costed, which makes taking a decision in principle a bit more difficult. I find myself in that interesting position where many parliamentarians find themselves: having been entirely of the leave faith on the referendum issue, now, showing flexibility and how I am always influenced by the facts, I find myself firmly in the remain camp on this parliamentary discussion.

Let us first address the issue of decanting to an alternative Chamber, which we would have to build. We hear there are problems with the site for one of the potential alternatives. I just do not think our constituents would understand our spending a very large sum on producing a temporary replica of this Chamber for a limited number of years—we are told it will be a short period, but some of us think it will be for rather longer—when there are so many other priorities. My constituents want us to spend more on health and social care, the military and so forth, and I agree with them.

Andrea Leadsom: For clarity, let me say that what is being talked about is a permanent business contingency in Richmond House that provides a real legacy gain to the parliamentary estate and is a secure gain for all parliamentarians for future generations.

John Redwood: I am grateful for that correction, and I did understand that, but the public are saying that this is really only going to be used for a few years because we will come back to use the main Chamber, and this is a very expensive investment in contingency, particularly

as one hopes the contingency never occurs. We know from history that there are other ways of dealing with a disaster contingency, as unfortunately people had to do during the second world war. We would cross that bridge in the awful event that we needed to do so, but investing a lot of money in such a protection would be a strange thing to do—I rest my case. I do not think my constituents would regard that as something they would want their taxpayers' money spent on at the moment. I agree with them that we need to spend a bit more on health and social care. Those would clearly be the priorities if we had this extra money to spend.

Finally, let me say that I agree with those who think there is something very special about this place and something important about it for our democracy. This is the mother of Parliaments and this building does have great resonance around the world, being associated with the long history of freedom, and the development of the power of voice and vote for all adults in our country. It would be strange indeed to be turning our back on that for a period, particularly when we are going through a big constitutional and political change in order to implement the wishes of the British people as expressed in the referendum. Particularly during this period, it is important that our visitors can come to be reminded of our national story and why we are where we are. All those of us who seek to represent people should be daily reminded of that national story when we come here—

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

John Redwood: No, as I am conscious of time.

We need to be reminded of that story as we go past the memorial to suffragettes, as we go past the statues and paintings of those who made such a contribution to past political battles and debates, and of those who were part of the story of wresting control from the monarch and establishing the right of many more people to vote and have their voice heard through Members of Parliament. That proud history makes this more than an iconic building, more than a world heritage site; it is a living part of our democracy. Our interaction with it and our presence on this grand political stage is the very essence of our democracy. I do not want us to move away for a few years at this critical moment in our national story.

6.20 pm

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): It is good to follow the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), but I wonder how many times people have said in this place, “This is a critical time of national importance, and therefore we should do nothing.” I am sure those words have rung in many people's ears.

I declare an interest: after the 1840 fire, the stone for the building we now sit in was brought from my constituency. Quarried near a village called Anston, it came via the Chesterfield canal. This icon we have lived in for all this time is something that the people of my constituency like and enjoy, and they—especially children at local schools—are very proud of where it came from. Most of those who, like me, worked in industry and have looked at the health and safety issues here say, “You need to sort that out, Kevin. It's not as it should be.”

[Sir Kevin Barron]

This place is changing quite rapidly. I have been here longer than most, but for the last few weeks, for the first time, I have had workmen outside my office window. There would be nothing surprising about that, except that my office is at the very top of the building, above Speaker's House, overlooking the Thames. As everyone here knows, work on the roof has been going on for quite a long time now, because of the state the roof is in. When I came to the Chamber today, along the corridor by the *Hansard* offices to a lift that brings me down to Members' Lobby, I saw some steel props holding up the roof. It looks a bit like my workplace before I came into Parliament—Maltby colliery. There are some yellow covers, but the props are pinned on the carpet and holding the roof up in the corridor—such are the needs that this House has.

Many hon. Members have talked about the money, so let me look in this excellent publication answering Members' frequently asked questions about the restoration and renewal programme. We have been—I have three decades' experience of this—in a position of patch and mend in this place. The publication states:

“Nearly £60 million was spent on essential work to the Palace during 2015/16, £49 million was spent the year before that, and the backlog of essential repairs”

was

“estimated at more than £1 billion in 2012”.

It continues:

“in turn, the risk of system failure, is growing significantly over time. By 2020, some 40% of the mechanical and electrical plant... will be at an unacceptably high risk of failure. By 2025, it will be more than 50%.”

I worked with my hands before I came here, and I would not want to be responsible for some of the kit I have seen when looking around. When I worked underground as an electrician, I was responsible for keeping equipment in proper order so it would not blow up, probably taking hundreds of lives with it. Some of the work here needs to be sorted out, and sorted out quickly.

I listened to the talk about cost, and I looked at the 2014 figures for the three options we have. The cost given for the rolling programme, taking place over 25 to 40 years, is £5.67 billion; for the two-phase approach, taking between 9 and 14 years, £4.42 billion; and for the full decant, single-phase approach, £3.52 billion.

Dr Caroline Johnson: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Kevin Barron: No, because other people want to speak.

Last night, the HS2 Bill was debated in this Chamber. In 2010, it was estimated that it would cost £32.7 billion, and then it went up to £55.7 billion. In 2016, the National Audit Office said it had a running cost overrun of some £7 billion, and most people on the Conservative Benches voted in favour of it. I can tell the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), who is no longer in his place, about the cost overrun on most things—you know about them if you get somebody in to build an extension on your building. They cannot put in a bathroom without cost overruns. It is about time that this House took the right decision and sorted itself out. Of course we love this iconic place, but we

will not like it if we cannot sit in it because of emergencies that may come along. I shall be supporting amendment (b) to motion No. 1 in the Division Lobby tonight.

6.25 pm

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): I want to go back to this 16 and a half feet—16ft 5in to be precise. When we sat on the Committee, we looked at and studied the report from Deloitte, we took evidence from experts, we sat for hours and we came to a conclusion based on the possibility that an inexpensive temporary Chamber could be put in Richmond House. That was fundamental to what we concluded. It turns out that that was wrong—that actually the measurements were out and therefore it would not work. That seems to me to undermine all that we tried to do. If the people responsible could not even measure a courtyard, how could they possibly get the figures right on the overall proposals that were being made? I regret that the work that we did and the conclusions that we drew have been fatally undermined by the fact that the figures we were provided with on an essential basis for our conclusion were wrong.

Chris Bryant: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I will not on this occasion because time is so limited. I do apologise. I always like to give way, but I think that I had better not on this occasion.

That troubles me. The other thing that troubled me throughout the Committee process was that we never looked at the figures on the basis of a discounted cash flow, and so the assumption that was made was that a pound spent in 40 years' time had exactly the same value as a pound spent tomorrow. That is incorrect. A pound spent in 40 years' time obviously has a lesser value. When we consulted the Comptroller and Auditor General about that, he said in evidence that that was not how Government projects were done: Government projects look at the economic return that one gets on the expenditure, and not on the discounted value of money that one may spend in future. However, this is not a project that reveals a return; it is not an investment in that sense, but a cost. Therefore we need to look at the discounted cost, at which point the remaining in becomes the cheapest option by a considerable margin. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) may shout no, but that is what the figures show when we apply a sensible discount rate.

The other thing that has concerned me throughout this process is that we are being too precious and we are assuming that we will not accept any modest inconvenience. The hon. Member for Rhondda said that costs go up because work has to be done at night. We have to accept that, in this process of saving this building and ensuring that we are here, there may be some modest inconvenience to Members of Parliament. Are we really so precious that there must never even be the slightest sound of a hammer bashing a nail into a piece of wood? Are our ears so sensitive that we cannot bear that strain upon them?

I, along with the hon. Member for Rhondda, was extremely keen that we should sit in Westminster Hall, because Westminster Hall is not part of the main restoration and renewal project; it is outside it. The argument that we got against Westminster Hall was the most negative naysaying approach that we could have had—that the

roof put up by Richard II would fall upon our heads if we had a little bit of heating in there. The naysayers wanted to put us in a glass pod—a temperature-controlled pod to ensure that we were kept at the perfect temperature, boiled to the right level in Fahrenheit or centigrade, whichever you prefer. This is a building that has survived for 800 years, not a hot air heating system. Once they said it was a glass pod, the glass pod was then too heavy for the floor. Whatever way we look at it, they were naysayers. It seems to me that we could have sat there in our overcoats, as that would have solved the problem in the winter. And in the summer, some hon. Members more racy than I am might have felt it possible to take off their jackets. It seems to me that there is an easy, affordable solution whereby we maintain a Chamber in our historic residence. That is what we should do and that is what we should vote for.

6.30 pm

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): May I first congratulate the officials of the House on all the work that they have done on the various aspects of R and R? We think that it has been first class. It has been detailed and considered. Anything that my hon. Friends or I say today is in no way a criticism of the professional way in which the House staff have gone about their work. That includes the recent issuing of the client advisory services contracts not least to ensure that the building is safe for the thousands of staff and visitors who are here every single day, and to minimise the risk of catastrophic failure. As it is a House matter, it may well be that this House concludes that an expensive restoration of this royal palace, in whatever guise, is the right thing to do because some argue that this is the historic home of the UK Parliament. If that is the decision, although I may not agree with it, I will certainly respect it.

My criticism of the motions before us today and the amendment in the name of the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) is twofold. First, it is flawed that we are not even prepared to consider, on cost-effective grounds, the delivery of a new Parliament on a new site. My second criticism is that we are prepared to proceed without taking this once in a 160 or 170-year opportunity genuinely to modernise the way we work.

On my first point, the Leader of the House has outlined a delivery body to investigate the three options before us: a full decant, a partial decant, and a full decant while retaining a foothold. Motion No. 2 clearly includes a cost-benefit analysis of each option. But if we are to agree to the creation of a delivery body with a sponsor board doing a cost-benefit analysis of these three options, surely we should do the same cost-benefit analysis of the delivery of a new Parliament on a new site.

Meg Hillier: The hon. Gentleman makes a point that has been repeated a number of times in this debate, which is that all three options—in his case, four—should be worked up. It costs a lot of money to work up options to the level that Members are asking. We need to consider that, which is one of the reasons why I am proposing a clear decision tonight.

Stewart Hosie: I respect that the hon. Lady is proposing a clear decision. The problem is that the decision that she is proposing and the other options on the table

explicitly exclude even an analysis of what we believe would be the most cost-effective grounds.

Under any of the other motions before us, we would end up in the ludicrous position of agreeing to proceed on the basis of a decision to rule out that which might be the most cost-effective option. At the same time, we are expected to allow a delivery body to reinvestigate three options or proceed with a single one, when those options were priced in 2014. Those costs may now be wildly inaccurate. We will be abandoning the opportunity that a new Parliament building might offer.

Depending on the option chosen by the delivery body mentioned in the motion of the Leader of the House, and given that the timescale for completion could be anywhere from eight to 40 years, we may also be in a position—although we cannot be certain—in which what appears to be a sensible or cost-effective decision today looks absolutely bonkers in a few years' time when the floor is up, the roof is off and people look behind the oak panelling. In short, to prohibit the delivery body from even doing a cost-benefit analysis of a new Parliament building is short-sighted. This is important because when the new build option was ruled out in 2012, it was after a pre-feasibility study had been completed, and that study suggested that a new parliamentary building might cost £800 million. I understand that updating those figures for inflation, using the tender price index from 2012, and applying a 22% optimism bias would still give an updated net capital investment figure of £1.4 billion. That figure may be completely wrong—it may be double, treble or quadruple that—but for goodness' sake, if the starting point is lower than all the other options, surely we are duty bound to have the delivery body investigate it.

On the second point of concern, namely that of modernisation, I very much support the amendment in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). We simply must have seats for every single Member in both the temporary and permanent Chambers. The only argument I have ever heard against the modernisation proposal—we heard it earlier today—is that Members can accost a Minister if they happen to be in the same voting Lobby. I have never had any difficulty contacting a Minister or their Parliamentary Private Secretary if the situation is urgent, and I have never once heard that criticism raised by those in the Scottish Parliament, where electronic voting is the norm.

My hon. Friend made some fun of this issue earlier, but let me add a little weight to it. The 10 votes we had on 17 January took a combined total of 1,200 man, woman or people hours—two hours per MP—which is time that could have been far better used. In the Scottish Parliament, those votes would have taken 10 minutes.

Given that neither of the motions in the name of the Leader of the House or the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch accommodates our ambitions, we are unable to support any of them.

6.36 pm

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): I want to start by thanking my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House for tabling the motions and for the very able way in which she opened the debate and put the arguments so very clearly.

[Sir Patrick McLoughlin]

Nobody wants to leave this House—of course we do not—but we do have a duty and an obligation to future generations to make sure that it is looked after and repaired properly. That is the most important thing.

I hope that the delivery body will look at working on this site 24/7. This is an island site: there is no reason why it cannot be worked 24/7. As I understand it, the proposals that would take seven or eight years are based on working a normal week. This is an island site with no neighbours. I fully agree with the point made earlier—I was going to suggest it myself—that we should give ourselves planning permission on this site. We should be able to deliver that. As a world heritage site, there will be certain obligations, and that is absolutely right. That is why I am much more optimistic that this project can be done quicker than the previously proposed timescales.

During my period as Secretary of State for Transport, I was very fortunate to see some remarkable projects in this country, one of which was London Bridge station, which has just been completed. It was awful that people had to suffer the development of London Bridge, but we can now see that it is a great example of English engineering and people doing a job. However, it would have been done much more cheaply and much quickly if we could have closed it. The fact is that when we operate in buildings at the same time as engineering work is being done to them, the work takes longer and it is more expensive.

Some colleagues say we can segment the work and do it in sections. I would like to know how many of them have done the basement tour. I suggest that they go and work there for six months—actually, I think six hours would probably be enough for them to realise that the conditions are absolutely intolerable for people to work in.

I have reservations about the proposal to build a completely new Chamber. If we are sensible about this, the simple fact is that, if we give two and a half years, and no longer, to do this work, there is no reason why we could not find alternative accommodation. The House sits approximately 146 days a year. It is not always as full as this. In fact, quite often it is a lot emptier. I very much doubt that we would need an exact mirror of the Chamber for the emergency period.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: I would rather not, because I know that other Members want to speak, and time is rather tight.

Those are some of my suggestions about the way forward. We should set the delivery body up and move forward, and that body should be instructed to look at doing it a lot more quickly and efficiently; 24/7 working would suffice. That would mean we would be out of this place for a lot less time. On the basis that we have to get on with this job and have been delaying it for far too long, I will tonight support amendment (b).

6.40 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On behalf of the House Commission, I would like to set

out briefly for the House the background to the northern estates programme and its link to the proposed restoration and renewal of the Palace.

The northern estates programme covers Norman Shaw North and South, 1 Parliament Street and Derby Gate, where works are due to start later this year. Those buildings house around a third of Members and our staff. The Norman Shaw buildings were brought into use as offices for Members and their staff in the 1970s and now require major works, as does 1 Parliament Street. The Commission gave its approval to a major programme of refurbishment and renovation of the northern estate at the end of 2015, following scrutiny by the Administration and Finance Committees. The plans approved were to do the minimum necessary.

The plan at the time was to decant Members from the northern estate to 7 Millbank, do the works on the northern estate and then return Members to the northern estate. However, during 2014-15, security advice hardened against the use of 7 Millbank for Members. At the same time, Ministers were persuaded to pass Richmond House to Parliament. We finally got the keys to that three weeks or so ago.

The plan changed, and this time it was to decant northern estate Members into Richmond House after some improvements. It also became clear from the Joint Committee report that the courtyard of Richmond House, which has been referred to a number of times, was the only viable location within the secure perimeter for an interim Chamber.

Now a much more ambitious programme of works is being planned on and around Richmond House. It involves construction of what is, in essence, a replica Chamber for use during R and R that can be used as a contingency Chamber in the longer term, as agreed by the Commission in September. It also involves construction of immediate surrounds of Lobbies, business offices and so on, as well as Committee rooms and the necessary decant space for the third of Members and their staff whose offices are in the Palace.

Subject to the outcome of today's debate, we will probably sequence the main work on the rest of the northern estate, decanting one building at a time while we prepare the Richmond House block. The costs are substantial, with very roughly half attributable to the need to restore the old northern estate and half to a decant to enable restoration and renewal of the Palace. In return, we will have a contingency Chamber that can have many functions and a legacy building that can play a vital part in our education and outreach efforts, as well as providing space that should, in time, enable us to end our reliance on expensive leased office space for hundreds of parliamentary staff.

Those were words from the Commission. I would now like to say a few words of my own. We must get on with this, and that is why I support amendment (b). I have been involved as Deputy Leader of the House, in a ministerial capacity, from 2012 to 2015 and then on the House of Commons Commission, and I am afraid there has been much delay and procrastination on this. I agree that the Leader of the House has grasped this and is moving forward, but there has been much delay. The excuses for why we cannot proceed have been multiple.

This is an opportunity to create a Parliament fit for the 21st century. I agree with the earlier point on electronic voting and also that we should have a horseshoe

Chamber in which every Member of Parliament has a seat, which most people in most environments would expect to be the norm. We need a fully accessible Parliament for visitors and Members of Parliament. It is not right that Members of either House who are in a wheelchair cannot in some cases even get into the Chamber and certainly cannot sit, for instance, with their own party. That is something that needs to be addressed as well.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con) *rose*—

Tom Brake: Finally, we have an opportunity to create an exemplar environmental building, incorporating state-of-the-art retrofitted environmental measures, built to the best environmental standards and minimising the environmental impact of the building—by transferring waste and building supplies up and down the river, for example.

I fully support the delivery authority and board model that is proposed. That model was very successful in delivering the Olympics, partly because all the parties were bound together and agreed to proceed with that project. I hope that we might reach the point where we agree to do the same in relation to the renewal of the mother of all Parliaments.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Members can do as they wish, but I would discourage the taking of interventions in the upcoming speeches, if we are to have an orderly conclusion to the debate.

6.45 pm

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): The problem with today's debate, and the reason I will be supporting motion No. 1 in the name of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, is that in many ways we are being asked to take a bit of a punt and a bit of a guess. What I like about the motion is paragraphs (4) and (5), which amendment (b) seeks to amend, because I honestly do not believe that we have enough facts before us. We should have been given a plan set around a timeframe, showing how and when certain components could be delivered.

We are told on principle that we must all just leave, and that it will cost billions. As my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) pointed out, some of the facts in the report are not correct. But regardless of that, when I was listening to the speech by the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), I noticed that the project has become a shopping list to which we can add new items. The cost goes up and up. Even in the words of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, only 75% of the projected costs are for the necessary work. So at a time when there is tightness on the public purse, it appears that we are bringing in a shopping list of things that we may not need. I find that very hard to defend to my constituents. I have rightly told them, and will carry on doing so, that the Government have a responsibility to live within their means, but now it seems that with our own buildings, money is no object.

I will be supporting motion No. 1, but I would like to see more detail, especially with regard to paragraph (4)—“funding should be limited to facilitate essential work”.

Because there is that other aspect of this debate, and for all the Members who say that there is absolutely no way that we would not return to this Chamber, there has been movement. The SNP has now made it quite clear that it does not think we should come back, and we have just heard that the Liberal Democrats think we should change the way we do our democracy—that we should have a horseshoe, and that we should sit at desks. We are a debating Chamber. We do not sit here and read things into the record, like they do in the United States Congress; we debate. This afternoon, I have sat through this debate and it has been excellent; I respect all the points that have been made. At times this afternoon I was wondering where I might be going tonight, but I have listened very carefully, and the arguments I have heard tonight in this great Chamber have led me to believe that at this moment in time, motion No. 1 is the one to support, because we need more details about exactly how the work will be carried out, when, and at what cost, and that process needs to be developed and brought forward in a more sensible way.

None of us in here would like to create a situation where the health and safety and wellbeing of the people who work here would be seriously put at threat. But one cannot on the one hand argue that we must move because there is a 50:50 chance that a fire will occur by 2020, which could kill everyone on the top floor, and then say, “But we would not leave until 2025.” We have heard that in the second world war, this Chamber was bombed and we moved to another area. Well, we could go from the invasion of Poland to the moment Adolf Hitler shot himself, and we would still wait another year before we left the Chamber. So if the urgency for health and safety reasons is that great, why are we not doing anything until 2025?

Many points have been made. I absolutely agree with what my right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) said about working 24/7. That absolutely should be mandated, to get on with this work, but I urge my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House also to look at the parliamentary timetable and what we do in those two weeks in September. Can they be redistributed in the year? Could that be the tour of the United Kingdom that many people are suggesting? Three months at 24/7 over the next seven years would give us quite a lot of time to get a lot of the work done—including the total decant out there.

I want to see a lot more robust detail laid out, and motion No. 1, in the name of my right hon. Friend, allows that to happen. We are taking action today: we are having this debate. It has fleshed out a lot of the arguments, and there has been movement on both sides, but I feel that the time has come for us to have things laid out more clearly and more succinctly.

6.50 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): To everything there is a season, to every time a purpose: a time to break down and a time to build up. Words written 3,000 years ago surely are apt today for this building, which is 1,000 years old.

I served on the Joint Committee. I attended that Committee as a sceptic, believing that we were only being pushed out of this place for some false reason, but the evidence led to one undoubtable and unalterable conclusion: in order for us to preserve a building that

[*Ian Paisley*]

we love, a heritage that we cherish and a history that we are in charge of, we have to decant from this building, refurbish it, restore it, renew it and revive it, and on that basis allow ourselves to have a new building for future generations.

We should dispel the nonsense that there is no easy solution. We must take the difficult choice and we must take it expeditiously. No more dilly-dallying should be allowed to take place. There is not a cheap option. Some Members are trying to hide behind the costs—“If we do the work over time, it will be cheaper.” That is a fraud upon all of us and it does not fool any of us. It does not fool anyone out there in the general public, up there in the Gallery or, indeed, in any newspaper across this country.

We do not own this building; we are custodians of it for future generations. The right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green) made a strong case when he spoke about the security and safety needs of this building, but those of us who care about the history of this building have probably never even visited the cloisters because we cannot. We are largely excluded from going there because it is crumbling. That most historic part can be preserved and revived only if we embark upon an ambitious plan to rebuild those parts of this crumbling building.

As Members of this House, when we enter each day we walk over stones that were laid by William the Conqueror’s descendants. We walk where Cromwell marched his army. We hear echoes around this building, the place where Wilberforce chanted the call for freedom. We pass through corridors where the smoke of Winston Churchill would have passed by. Indeed, on this great Bench, our heroes of Craig and Carson—and, indeed, my da—actually sat. If we really love this building, as many say they do, we should be brave and urge, as amendment (b) does, that we get on with this process expeditiously.

Mr Speaker: I call Peter Aldous. You have a minute and a half, max.

6.53 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): For 27 years before arriving in this place, I practised as a chartered surveyor. Although I was a general practice surveyor, not a building or quantity surveyor, I spent a large part of my working life inspecting a wide variety of buildings.

The Palace of Westminster is the most iconic building in the UK. It is not ours; it belongs to the nation. We are the custodians, with the responsibility of passing it on to the next generation in a better condition than we inherited it. For my part, the evidence is compelling. We need to get on with this work as soon as possible. If a chartered surveyor had made a recommendation to delay the work, and there was then an incident such as a major flood or fire, they would be sued for professional negligence. There is a real risk of fiddling while Rome burns, so we need to implement the Joint Committee’s recommendations as soon as possible. Time really is of the essence, and thus I will be voting for amendment (b).

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. There is no time for an effective speech.

6.55 pm

Three hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the motion, the motion lapsed (Order, this day).

The speaker put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Order, this day).

Mr Speaker: I am going to take this slowly so that we all know exactly what we are doing—we now come to motion 6, which is to say the Restoration and Renewal (No.1) motion. I call the Leader of the House to move.

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That this House—

(1) affirms its commitment to the historic Palace of Westminster and its unique status as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Royal Palace and home of our Houses of Parliament;

(2) takes note of the report of the Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster ‘Restoration and Renewal of the Palace of Westminster’, HL Paper 41, HC 659;

(3) accepts that there is a clear and pressing need to repair the services in the Palace of Westminster in a comprehensive and strategic manner to prevent catastrophic failure in this Parliament, whilst acknowledging the demand and burden on public expenditure and fiscal constraints at a time of prudence and restraint;

(4) accepts in principle that action should be taken and funding should be limited to facilitate essential work to the services in this Parliament;

(5) agrees to review before the end of the Parliament the need for comprehensive works to take place.—(*Andrea Leadsom.*)

Mr Speaker: I now call the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) to move amendment (c).

Amendment proposed: (c), at end of paragraph (2), insert: ‘(2A) regrets that no detailed assessment has been carried out of the cost-effectiveness of relocating Parliament away from the Palace of Westminster, and calls for any future review to include such an assessment.’—(*Pete Wishart.*)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 47, Noes 410.

Division No. 111]

[6.56 pm

AYES

Austin, Ian	Grant, Peter
Bardell, Hannah	Gray, Neil
Berry, Jake	Hendry, Drew
Black, Mhairi	Hosie, Stewart
Blackford, rh Ian	Killen, Ged
Blackman, Kirsty	Lake, Ben
Brock, Deidre	Law, Chris
Brown, Alan	Lucas, Caroline
Cable, rh Sir Vince	MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Cameron, Dr Lisa	Madders, Justin
Chapman, Douglas	Mc Nally, John
Cherry, Joanna	McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
Cowan, Ronnie	McDonald, Stuart C.
Davey, rh Sir Edward	Monaghan, Carol
Day, Martyn	Moran, Layla
Docherty-Hughes, Martin	Newlands, Gavin
Edwards, Jonathan	O’Hara, Brendan
Foster, Kevin	Saville Roberts, Liz
Fysh, Mr Marcus	Sheppard, Tommy
Gethins, Stephen	Stephens, Chris
Gibson, Patricia	Stringer, Graham
Grady, Patrick	Thewliss, Alison

Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williamson, Chris

Tellers for the Ayes:
Pete Wishart and
David Linden

NOES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Ali, Rushanara
Allan, Lucy
Amesbury, Mike
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Baker, Mr Steve
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benn, rh Hilary
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackman, Bob
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Brabin, Tracy
Bradley, Ben
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brady, Sir Graham
Brake, rh Tom
Brine, Steve
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bruce, Fiona
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Buckland, Robert
Burden, Richard
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Charalambous, Bambos
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coaker, Vernon

Coffey, Ann
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Cooper, Rosie
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Coyle, Neil
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
David, Wayne
Davies, Chris
Davies, Geraint
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Docherty, Leo
Dods, Anneliese
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duffield, Rosie
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellis, Michael
Elmore, Chris
Elphicke, Charlie
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evensnett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Farrelly, Paul
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Frank
Field, rh Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, rh Caroline
Ford, Vicky
Foxcroft, Vicky
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick

Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Glendon, Mary
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Grant, Bill
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Andrew
Grogan, John
Haigh, Louise
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Carolyn
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Healey, rh John
Heapey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Herbert, rh Nick
Hillier, Meg
Hinds, rh Damian
Hobhouse, Wera
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Diana
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Darren
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Mr Marcus

Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kendall, Liz
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Khan, Afzal
Kinnock, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lamont, John
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Karen
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Lloyd, Tony
Lopresti, Jack
Loughton, Tim
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malhotra, Seema
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Masterton, Paul
Matheson, Christian
Maynard, Paul
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Mearns, Ian
Menzies, Mark
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miliband, rh Edward
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, rh Nicky

Morgan, Stephen
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Neill, Robert
Norris, Alex
Offord, Dr Matthew
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Owen, Albert
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Pawsey, Mark
Peacock, Stephanie
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Philp, Chris
Pidcock, Laura
Pincher, Christopher
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Rayner, Angela
Redwood, rh John
Rees, Christina
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Robinson, Mary
Rodda, Matt
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Danielle
Rowley, Lee
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Sharma, Alok
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Shelbrooke, Alec
Sherriff, Paula
Simpson, David
Skidmore, Chris
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Henry
Smith, Jeff
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Nick
Smith, Royston

Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Sobel, Alex
Soubry, rh Anna
Spellar, rh John
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevens, Jo
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Streeter, Mr Gary
Streeting, Wes
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Sir Robert
Tami, Mark
Thomas, Derek
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Timms, rh Stephen
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vaz, Valerie
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Walker, Thelma
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Western, Matt
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whitfield, Martin
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Dr Paul
Wilson, Phil
Wollaston, Dr
Sarah
Wood, Mike
Woodcock, John
Wragg, Mr William
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
James Duddridge and
Simon Hoare

Question accordingly negated.

Amendment proposed: (b), delete paragraphs (4) and (5) and at end add:

'(4) accordingly endorses the unanimous conclusion of the Joint Committee that a full and timely decant of the Palace is the best and the most cost-effective delivery option, as endorsed by the Public Accounts Committee and the Infrastructure and Projects Authority;

(5) accepts that expenditure on the Palace during this Parliament will be limited to preparatory work for the comprehensive programme of works envisaged, together with works essential to ensure the continuing functioning of the Palace;

(6) endorses the Joint Committee's recommendation that a Sponsor Board and Delivery Authority be established by legislation to develop a business case and costed programme for the work to be approved by both Houses of Parliament, and to commission and oversee the work required, and that immediate steps be taken now to establish a shadow sponsor Board and Delivery Authority;

(7) instructs the shadow Sponsor Board and Delivery Authority and their statutory successors to apply high standards of cost-effectiveness and demonstrate value for money in the business case, to report back to Parliament with up to date costings and a realistic timetable for the duration of the work, and to include measures to ensure: the repair and replacement of mechanical and electrical services, fire safety improvement works, the removal of asbestos, repairs to the external and internal fabric of the Palace, the removal of unnecessary and unsightly accretions to the Palace, the improvement of visitor access including the provision of new educational and other facilities for visitors and full access for people with disabilities;

(8) affirms that the guarantee that both Houses will return to their historic Chambers as soon as possible should be incorporated in primary legislation.'—(*Meg Hillier.*)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 236, Noes 220.

Division No. 112]

[7.11 pm

AYES

Aldous, Peter	Coaker, Vernon
Ali, Rushanara	Coffey, Ann
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Collins, Damian
Ashworth, Jonathan	Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Bacon, Mr Richard	Coyle, Neil
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Creagh, Mary
Barron, rh Sir Peter	Creasy, Stella
Benn, rh Hilary	Cruddas, Jon
Benyon, rh Richard	Cunningham, Alex
Beresford, Sir Paul	Cunningham, Mr Jim
Betts, Mr Clive	Dakin, Nic
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta	Davey, rh Sir Edward
Blomfield, Paul	David, Wayne
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Davies, Geraint
Brabin, Tracy	Debbonaire, Thangam
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Dodds, Anneliese
Brake, rh Tom	Donelan, Michelle
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Doughty, Stephen
Bryant, Chris	Dowd, Peter
Buck, Ms Karen	Duffield, Rosie
Burden, Richard	Dunne, Mr Philip
Burt, rh Alistair	Eagle, Ms Angela
Byrne, rh Liam	Eagle, Maria
Cable, rh Sir Vince	Elliott, Julie
Cadbury, Ruth	Ellis, Michael
Campbell, rh Mr Alan	Elmore, Chris
Carden, Dan	Esterson, Bill
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Evans, Chris
Champion, Sarah	Farrelly, Paul
Charalambous, Bambos	Field, rh Frank
Churchill, Jo	Fitzpatrick, Jim
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth	Flint, rh Caroline
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Foster, Kevin

Foxcroft, Vicky
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Frith, James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gaffney, Hugh
 Gapes, Mike
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gauke, rh Mr David
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Glindon, Mary
 Goodwill, Mr Robert
 Graham, Luke
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Green, Kate
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
 Griffith, Nia
 Grogan, John
 Haigh, Louise
 Hair, Kirstene
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hanson, rh David
 Hardy, Emma
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayman, Sue
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Healey, rh John
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Herbert, rh Nick
 Hillier, Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Huddleston, Nigel
 James, Margot
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, Diana
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Mr Kevan
 Jones, Sarah
 Jones, Susan Elan
 Kane, Mike
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Killen, Ged
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Kyle, Peter
 Laird, Lesley
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lamont, John
 Lee, Karen
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leslie, Mr Chris
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lidington, rh Mr David
 Lloyd, Tony
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lucas, Ian C.
 Lynch, Holly
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid

Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Sandy
 Maskell, Rachael
 Masterton, Paul
 Matheson, Christian
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McInnes, Liz
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Menzies, Mark
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morgan, Stephen
 Mundell, rh David
 Neill, Robert
 Norris, Alex
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Owen, Albert
 Paisley, Ian
 Pawsey, Mark
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Perkins, Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pidcock, Laura
 Pollard, Luke
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Rayner, Angela
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Danielle
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Mr Bob
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sherriff, Paula
 Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Skidmore, Chris
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
 Stevens, Jo
 Streeter, Mr Gary

Streeting, Wes
 Sweeney, Mr Paul
 Tami, Mark
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tredinnick, David
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twigg, Stephen
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, Valerie

Walker, Mr Robin
 Walker, Thelma
 Western, Matt
 Whitfield, Martin
 Williams, Dr Paul
 Williamson, Chris
 Wilson, Phil
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Woodcock, John
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Anna Turley and
 Clive Efford**

NOES

Adams, Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Allan, Lucy
 Amess, Sir David
 Andrew, Stuart
 Argar, Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Barclay, Stephen
 Bardell, Hannah
 Baron, Mr John
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Bellingham, Sir Henry
 Berry, Jake
 Black, Mhairi
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Bob
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buckland, Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Burns, Conor
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Cartledge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chapman, Douglas
 Cherry, Joanna
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Clark, Colin
 Clarke, Mr Simon
 Cleverly, James
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Cooper, Rosie
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Crawley, Angela
 Davies, Chris
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Day, Martyn
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh

Docherty, Leo
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, rh Nigel
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Double, Steve
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Evans, Mr Nigel
 Evennett, rh David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fernandes, Suella
 Field, rh Mark
 Ford, Vicky
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gethins, Stephen
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibson, Patricia
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, John
 Goldsmith, Zac
 Goodman, Helen
 Gove, rh Michael
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Bill
 Grant, Peter
 Gray, James
 Gray, Neil
 Green, Chris
 Griffiths, Andrew
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Simon
 Hayes, rh Mr John
 Heappey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Hendry, Drew
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Holloway, Adam
 Hosie, Stewart
 Howarth, rh Mr George
 Howell, John
 Hughes, Eddie
 Jack, Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Mr Bernard

Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Lake, Ben
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Law, Chris
Leigh, Sir Edward
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Linden, David
Lopresti, Jack
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mc Nally, John
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Monaghan, Carol
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Newlands, Gavin
O'Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
O'Hara, Brendan
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Pound, Stephen
Pow, Rebecca
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence

Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rowley, Lee
Rutley, David
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shannon, Jim
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Sheppard, Tommy
Simpson, David
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Spellar, rh John
Spencer, Mark
Stephens, Chris
Stephenson, Andrew
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Sir Robert
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Hywel
Wishart, Pete
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William

Tellers for the Noes:
James Duddridge and
Simon Hoare

Blomfield, Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burt, rh Alistair
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Churchill, Jo
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Coyle, Neil
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cunningham, Alex
Dakin, Nic
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Debonnaire, Thangam
Dodds, Anneliese
Donelan, Michelle
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Duffield, Rosie
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Elliott, Julie
Ellis, Michael
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, rh Caroline
Foster, Kevin
Foxcroft, Vicky
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gauke, rh Mr David
Gibb, rh Nick
Glendon, Mary
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Graham, Luke
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, rh Damian
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John

Haigh, Louise
Hair, Kirstene
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Carolyn
Hayman, Sue
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Healey, rh John
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Herbert, rh Nick
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Hopkins, Kelvin
Huddleston, Nigel
James, Margot
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Killen, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lamont, John
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Karen
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lidington, rh Mr David
Lloyd, Tony
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Masterton, Paul
Matheson, Christian
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Menzies, Mark
Metcalfe, Stephen

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put.

The House divided: Ayes 234, Noes 185.

Division No. 113]

[7.24 pm

AYES

Aldous, Peter
Ali, Rushanara
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bacon, Mr Richard
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Benn, rh Hilary
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta

Miliband, rh Edward
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morgan, Stephen
Mundell, rh David
Neill, Robert
Norris, Alex
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Owen, Albert
Paisley, Ian
Pawsey, Mark
Peacock, Stephanie
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pidcock, Laura
Pollard, Luke
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Danielle
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Skidmore, Chris
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth

Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, Mark
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Timms, rh Stephen
Tomlinson, Justin
Tredinnick, David
Tugendhat, Tom
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Mr Robin
Walker, Thelma
Western, Matt
Whitfield, Martin
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Anna Turley and
Clive Efford**

NOES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Beckett, rh Margaret
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Bone, Mr Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Brady, Sir Graham
Brigden, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William

Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chapman, Douglas
Chope, Sir Christopher
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Cooper, Rosie
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Davies, Chris
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Double, Steve
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duguid, David
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Elphicke, Charlie
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael

Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodman, Helen
Gove, rh Michael
Grant, Bill
Gray, James
Green, Chris
Griffiths, Andrew
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hands, rh Greg
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Hinds, rh Damian
Holloway, Adam
Howarth, rh Mr George
Howell, John
Hughes, Eddie
Jack, Mr Alister
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leigh, Sir Edward
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr
Ian
Lopresti, Jack
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
McCabe, Steve
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy

O'Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Pow, Rebecca
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rowley, Lee
Rutley, David
Shannon, Jim
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Sheppard, Tommy
Simpson, David
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Spellar, rh John
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr
John
Wiggin, Bill
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William

**Tellers for the Noes:
James Duddridge and
Simon Hoare**

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House—

(1) affirms its commitment to the historic Palace of Westminster and its unique status as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Royal Palace and home of our Houses of Parliament;

(2) takes note of the report of the Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster ‘Restoration and Renewal of the Palace of Westminster’, HL Paper 41, HC 659;

(3) accepts that there is a clear and pressing need to repair the services in the Palace of Westminster in a comprehensive and strategic manner to prevent catastrophic failure in this Parliament, whilst acknowledging the demand and burden on public expenditure and fiscal constraints at a time of prudence and restraint;

(4) accordingly endorses the unanimous conclusion of the Joint Committee that a full and timely decant of the Palace is the best and the most cost-effective delivery option, as endorsed by the Public Accounts Committee and the Infrastructure and Projects Authority;

(5) accepts that expenditure on the Palace during this Parliament will be limited to preparatory work for the comprehensive programme of works envisaged, together with works essential to ensure the continuing functioning of the Palace;

(6) endorses the Joint Committee’s recommendation that a Sponsor Board and Delivery Authority be established by legislation to develop a business case and costed programme for the work to be approved by both Houses of Parliament, and to commission and oversee the work required, and that immediate steps be taken now to establish a shadow sponsor Board and Delivery Authority;

(7) instructs the shadow Sponsor Board and Delivery Authority and their statutory successors to apply high standards of cost-effectiveness and demonstrate value for money in the business case, to report back to Parliament with up to date costings and a realistic timetable for the duration of the work, and to include measures to ensure: the repair and replacement of mechanical and electrical services, fire safety improvement works, the removal of asbestos, repairs to the external and internal fabric of the Palace, the removal of unnecessary and unsightly accretions to the Palace, the improvement of visitor access including the provision of new educational and other facilities for visitors and full access for people with disabilities;

(8) affirms that the guarantee that both Houses will return to their historic Chambers as soon as possible should be incorporated in primary legislation.

Mr Speaker: We come now to the petition. If, inexplicably, there are right hon. and hon. Members who do not wish to hear Mr James Cartlidge present his petition, a decision that would be the source of considerable bafflement

to me, I hope that they will leave the Chamber quickly and, preferably, quietly, with Mr Watling conducting his important private conversation outside the Chamber—the hon. Member for Clacton should conduct his conversation outside the Chamber, as we can then have the remaining pleasure of listening to Mr Cartlidge in an atmosphere of sobriety and respect as he speaks to his petition.

PETITION

Sudbury Bypass

7.37 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. This petition is about the restoration and renewal of the road infrastructure of Sudbury. As it happens, we had a suspect package in a bank in Sudbury, which caused the closure of the road through the centre of the town and massive gridlock, resulting in my receiving a huge number of social media messages saying that it is a perfect day to introduce a petition for a Sudbury bypass. Sudbury is a beautiful historic town, the birthplace of Thomas Gainsborough, but it suffers from terrible congestion and pollution, so I am therefore delivering a petition signed by 3,768 citizens.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that the town of Sudbury, Suffolk, has suffered from heavy congestion for too long, hampering the development of the town, causing dangerous levels of pollution and reducing the living standards of its residents; further that the Department for Transport should recognise the strong business case, the support of the Suffolk County Council, the New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership and the Haven Gateway Partnership; and further the Government should provide support for the construction of a Sudbury bypass, including any necessary funding, to improve the future of the town and surrounding areas; and further that a local paper petition and online petition on this matter received 3,711 signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Department of Transport to support the construction of a Sudbury bypass.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002106]

British Jihadis (Iraq and Syria)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

7.38 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): I am afraid that many of my remarks on this important subject are going to be somewhat critical of the Government, but let me say first that I do recognise the strong commitment, from the Prime Minister downwards—I am sure this extends to the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), who is valiantly standing in for her colleague today—to counter the threat posed by the evil of militant, expansionist Islamist extremism. Nor do I wish to pick fault in the basic direction of the Government's counter-terror strategy. A number of voices from all parties criticise the Prevent programme, and in particular its methods. I think they are mistaken. My fear, and my reason for calling the debate, is not that the tools available to the Government to combat extremism are being focused wrongly or used inappropriately; it is that those tools, in particular the legal framework, are insufficient to tackle a threat that would destroy our way of life and everything we stand for.

I remind the House that it is not just a handful of UK citizens who have returned from Iraq and Syria. The Government's latest estimate, expressed by the Minister for Security and Economic Crime in his letter to me last week, is that just under half of approximately 850 UK-linked individuals of national security concern who have travelled to engage in the conflict in Syria and Iraq have returned.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on raising this important issue and outlining it very quickly. Does he agree that the research carried out by the Soufan Centre in October 2017 estimating that at least 425 British ISIS members had so far returned to the UK—the largest cohort in Europe—is worrying, and that this House has a right to know how many of them are still in sight and on the radar of our security forces?

John Woodcock: The hon. Gentleman captures succinctly the essence of my speech. Not only has the institute made that estimate, but the Government corroborate the fact that just over half of those 850 people have returned to the UK.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I too congratulate the hon. Gentleman on calling this debate. Is he as surprised and appalled as I am that these people are allowed back into the country, after going abroad to fight with our enemies and to threaten our lives and our freedoms?

John Woodcock: I guess I am, but can the hon. Gentleman come up with something that would persuade another Government to take such a UK citizen? I would like them never to set foot back here again, but I know that we would never allow a foreign resident who had committed a terrorist atrocity to stay in our country.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): There are individuals being kept in jails in, for example, the Kurdish-controlled areas of Syria who have not yet been tried for any activity. They are being held there,

but the British Government refuse to interact with them on the grounds that they are in Syria, even though they cannot leave. Does my hon. Friend understand that there is also a problem for the people who have not yet been tried but whom the British Government do not seem willing to take any responsibility for?

John Woodcock: My hon. Friend and I have spoken about her constituent and the distress caused to her family. It is important that there is due process that is transparent both for the individuals involved and the public.

Lest anyone doubt the relationship between travelling to jihad conflict zones and radicalisation, it is worth noting that research from the Institute for Global Change, which surveyed a sample of prominent jihadis from the middle east and Africa, found that nearly two thirds had fought in one of the three major hubs of jihadi conflict over the past 30 years. Here in the UK, Salman Abedi travelled to Libya shortly before his terrorist attack, which killed 22 people at the Ariana Grande concert in Manchester last year. Two of the London Bridge attackers, Khuram Butt and Youssef Zaghba, had expressed an interest in travelling to Syria to join Daesh.

Are more than 400 of those returning individuals in jail or going through the court system? We simply do not know, because the Government will not release the figures, despite repeated requests. There is strong demand from the public to know how many who travelled to fight foreign jihad are currently free in British communities. Those men and women are escaping justice, despite having been prepared to fight British troops in the name of a sickeningly evil cause. If they are not locked up or deradicalised, they are potentially able to import back to British streets brutal killing techniques learned on the battlefield. The Government must know what the figure is. It is simple to collate, and they were prepared to give it back in May 2016 when Advocate General Lord Keen responded to a parliamentary question stating that, at that point, there had been 54 successful prosecutions of returnees from Iraq and Syria, with 30 more cases ongoing.

The refusal to update the number of prosecutions is fuelling the suspicion that in fact only a fraction of returnees are being charged because it is often too difficult to amass sufficient evidence that is admissible in an open court. That suspicion extends to suspected terror suspects who are deported back to the UK. Here, the lack of prosecution cannot be attributed to someone slipping into the country unnoticed, difficult though that in itself should be. Deportees are directly handed back to the UK authorities by another nation. They should be delivered straight into the judicial system and made to pay for their crime, but how many are? Again, at present we do not know because the Government have claimed that they do not hold the information in this form. That is simply not credible.

Last month, I was granted special access to a British woman in a removal centre in Izmir, Turkey. The Turkish authorities wished to deport her back to the UK with her two young children. I hope that the Minister will share my concern over the detention of those children, who are aged just three and one, and will report to the woman's Member of Parliament about what they are doing on this case.

[John Woodcock]

The Turkish authorities gave me the identities of six other British nationals, two adults and four children, who they said had been deported from the Izmir removal centre in the past 12 months. In speaking to the Security Minister before this debate, I was asked not to name these individuals on security grounds. On this occasion, I am content to agree to that request, but I will say this: it comes to something when a foreign country is prepared to be more forthcoming to a British MP about the terror threat posed by particular British citizens than Her Majesty's own Government.

Some will claim that this obfuscation is based on a laudable need to maintain a deterrent effect rather than on a desire to save the Government from embarrassment; that it is better to remain vague because future generations are less likely to be deterred from following the next call to global jihad if they know how few of their brothers and sisters have been jailed for previous attempts. Yet such a view surely grossly underestimates the sophistication of the jihadis' communication capacity. If British justice is falling short, Daesh, al-Qaida and whatever is the next strain of this evil perversion will be able to get that message out to potential recruits. Will the Government take this opportunity to be more transparent on this vital issue?

In her response, will the Minister answer the following questions: how many UK nationals deported back to the UK have been subject to a managed return because of their suspected support for ISIS, as described in the Home Secretary's response to me here on 8 January; how many of those have been charged with a terror-related offence; how many of the aforementioned "approximately 850 UK-linked individuals" were deported back to the UK; how many of those have been charged with a terror-related offence; and what is the total number of these 850 who have been charged with a terror-related offence?

Finally, rather than attempting to hide the weakness of our legal system in regard to returning jihadis, will the Government consider the following proposal to strengthen it? The Home Secretary has already said that she will consider extending the period of pre-charge detention to allow the authorities more time to prepare a case, but will the Government consider the steps that have been taken in Australia where it has been made an offence to travel without a verifiable legitimate reason to certain designated terror hotspots—as Iraq and Syria were while that conflict was taking place. The declared area offence law is in its infancy in Australia, having only been on the statute book since 2014, yet the independent reviewer of terror legislation there has just recommended that it be extended for a further five years. Surely there is value in following our ally to create our own UK jihadi travel ban, placing the burden on the suspected terrorist to give proof of legitimate purpose if he or she travels to a designated conflict zone.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I respectfully say that the hon. Gentleman is absolutely on to something there because, crucially, there is evidence that can be provided to prove the case. The difficulty in so many other cases is that, if we want to uphold our way of life, that means not prosecuting people unless we have sufficient evidence to put them on trial and convict them.

Unfortunately, it is very often difficult to establish what they have been doing in Syria, and it is therefore difficult to bring a prosecution. His idea is a good one.

John Woodcock: I thank the Minister.

Alex Chalk: Not yet!

John Woodcock: I am sorry—I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support. He is absolutely right.

The approach that I have described would reflect the reality that, for the overwhelming majority, there is no legitimate reason whatever to travel to a jihadi conflict zone. The fact of their going is proof enough that they are supporters of terror. By following this simple step, which is already on the statute book in other countries to which we are allied, we would have a better chance of ensuring that these people face the consequences of their actions if they survive their experience to return to the UK.

7.51 pm

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) for calling this debate; it is a pleasure to follow him. This is an important debate, following the appalling terror attacks in Britain in recent years. I hope that my words will be complementary to his. I wish to shed a little light on some of the difficulties faced by the military, and people in the foreign affairs and security worlds, regarding this issue. I had some knowledge of the ISIS campaign while working in the armed forces prior to my election to this place.

We are in a muddle about how to deal with British jihadis. I am very sympathetic to the Government, who are doing their best, but I feel that they have been somewhat hidebound by human rights and policing legislation, and laws from earlier Governments that make military action in some foreign states extremely difficult. The reality is that it is easier to kill a British jihadi in that state, rather than to arrest, turn or rehabilitate them. I do not mean that in either a positive or negative way; merely it is a statement of fact. My understanding is that this is down to what are known as detention pathways. These are processes that stipulate the rules and procedures to be followed when making arrests in order to do so lawfully and to respect the detainee's human rights, whether people think they should be respected or not. This works on two levels.

First, the detention pathway in states that do not control their own territory, such as Syria and the Syrian regime, is non-existent. It is therefore incredibly problematic for the United States or UK allies in Syria to be able to make an arrest legally and without challenge, and therefore equally difficult for the UK to take possession of that prisoner. Is that person a prisoner of war, a terrorist or a criminal? It becomes even more difficult in cases involving proxy forces whose understanding of the Geneva conventions may be somewhat murkier than one would sometimes wish.

Secondly, even in allied states such as Iraq—for example, in the Kurdish territories of northern Iraq—detention pathways are still problematic because they can be challenged in or from the UK by human rights lawyers here if they think that human rights violations are taking place. We have seen some pretty appalling examples of ambulance chasing on an international scale, and I

am very glad that some of those lawyers have been struck off. Those states are fragile for a reason. The rule of law and the behaviour of soldiers are not always as good as one would wish or as is almost always the case in our own standards.

The use of UK law overseas—especially the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000, which regulates the police in the UK—has been problematic. Please do not misunderstand me, Mr Deputy Speaker: one of the principles of ethical war is that it is legal. However, warfare that becomes too overtly legalistic and belongs more to a box-ticking culture, rather than a culture of a fundamental, natural understanding of ethical law, is not necessarily moral. I know from my modest experience that there is evidence that some of the legal hurdles that UK forces operate under make war neither more legal nor more ethical. My hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) wrote a pamphlet a couple of years ago called “The Fog of Law”, which is well worth reading.

In summary, through no fault of our own the Government have inherited a difficult position and a difficult problem with regard to the application of lethal force and UK law overseas in fragile or collapsed states. I do not have a simple answer, because it is a deeply complex problem and I saw it somewhat in action. Those laws do not always take into account local circumstance, failed states or fragile states, and are perhaps more evidence of the proof of unintended consequences.

7.55 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) on securing this debate and on raising an important issue on which he has done much work. I know that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Security and Economic Crime, on whose behalf I am speaking tonight, very much values his contribution. May I also thank all colleagues who have contributed this evening, including my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely)?

The safety and security of our country, our people and our communities remains the Government’s No. 1 priority. Regretfully, our country and, indeed, this House have seen the tragic impact of terrorists who seek to use violence to undermine and destroy our society’s commitment to liberal values. Of course, their cowardly actions serve only to strengthen our resolve and our determination to protect the United Kingdom and to disrupt those who engage in terrorism.

Central to that work to protect the public is our management of the threat posed by British-linked individuals who aspire to travel, and who have successfully travelled, to Syria and Iraq to fight for Daesh. The Government have also planned and prepared for the risk posed by those who return.

We have been clear over the past few years that people should not travel to Syria and parts of Iraq. The horrific nature of Daesh’s brutal regime is well documented and there is no doubt that anyone who, for whatever reason, has travelled to those areas against UK Government advice is putting themselves not only in considerable danger, but under justifiable suspicion.

As we have stated previously in the House, we know that more than 850 UK-linked individuals of national security concern travelled to engage with the Syrian conflict. We estimate that over 15% of those who travelled have been killed in fighting in the region and just under half have returned to the UK. A significant proportion of those individuals who have already returned are assessed as no longer being of national security concern. The Government have been clear throughout the conflict that any British national who has travelled to Syria or Iraq and chosen to fight for Daesh has made themselves a legitimate target while in the conflict zone.

Alex Chalk: As a distinguished barrister, my hon. Friend will know, however, that the difficulty for prosecuting authorities is establishing what those individuals were doing in those foreign fields. Given that we apply the rule of law and believe in justice, that inevitably means that, all too often, under the current system people who were probably doing something will get away with it.

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. He brings his legal learning, knowledge and experience to the House, to great effect. He is right and has hit the nub of the problem, namely the tension that this democratic, liberal country faces when dealing with people who have gone overseas and to whom we require, rightly, the rule of law to apply as it does to any other citizen. The difficulty posed by that, of course, is the gathering of evidence to prove the case to the required standards.

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the Minister for allowing me to intervene. Does she accept that another part of the problem is that the British Government in some situations do not appear to be willing to do what many other countries have done, which is to repatriate those who are, for example, in Kurdish-run jails in Kurdish-run areas of Syria and require those people to stand trial? That is creating a Kafkaesque situation for some British citizens who have not yet been proven to have engaged in these activities. Will she engage to look at that?

Victoria Atkins: I will ensure that the Minister hears the hon. Lady’s concerns. As I said at the beginning, national security is very much at the forefront. I will ask the Minister to write to her on that point.

John Woodcock: Can the Minister tell me, or get her colleague to write to me on, the proportion of the 850 individuals who are no longer deemed to be of national security concern and whether any of them have been tried? It is quite possible for them to go over and commit crimes, find out it is all terrible, and come back and no longer be of security concern, but they still need to be held accountable for their actions while they were over there.

Victoria Atkins: I am told that a significant proportion of the 850, minus the more than 15% of those who have been killed in the region, are assessed as no longer being of national security concern. Again, I will ensure that the Minister responds to the hon. Gentleman’s comments.

We have been equally clear that anybody who does return will be investigated by the police to determine whether they have committed criminal offences or pose

[Victoria Atkins]

a risk to national security. Whenever possible, British nationals fighting for Daesh should be brought to justice either in the UK or in the region. Where there is evidence, the Crown Prosecution Service will seek to prosecute these individuals. Of that, the House can be completely certain.

Indeed, the police and Crown Prosecution Service have already investigated and prosecuted a number who have returned. For example, last month an individual was sentenced to 10 years after being found guilty of possessing an AK47 gun, receiving £2,000 for terrorist purposes and membership of Daesh. That conviction demonstrated our ability and commitment to work with our international partners to use evidence from the conflict area to support a successful prosecution.

Of course, prosecution decisions must be taken independently by the police and the Crown Prosecution Service where there is evidence. As hon. Members have identified, given the nature of this conflict, it is not always possible to gather sufficient evidence to seek prosecution. However, in these cases I can reassure the House that this Government and the police have a range of tools and powers to manage the threat returners may pose, and we are using them. For example, we can use the royal prerogative to cancel British passports where they are at risk of being misused.

On the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) raised about banning people from the country, the Home Secretary may deprive a person of their British citizenship where satisfied that doing so is conducive to the public good. That may only happen, however, if the person would not be left stateless as a result. That is in line with our commitments under international law, as a signatory of the 1961 UN convention on the reduction of statelessness. We can remove passports where someone is of dual nationality, but we have to abide by the law when it comes to citizens who have only a British passport.

We can impose travel restrictions for individuals subject to terrorism prevention and investigation measures, subjecting them to a range of conditions. We can also use temporary exclusion orders to prevent individuals who are suspected of involvement with terrorism from returning to the UK, except where they do so in a strictly controlled way, and to place in-country conditions upon return, including regular reporting to a police station.

The hon. Member for Barrow and Furness raised Australian exclusion zones. My right hon. Friend the Security Minister, following a meeting with his Australian counterpart last year, instructed officials to examine the Australian legislation and assess its usefulness in a UK context. As with all our counter-terrorism legislation, that option is kept under review. We are not aware of any prosecutions of Australian nationals as a result of criminalising travel to specific areas of Syria or elsewhere. The complexity of that legislation was perhaps demonstrated when, last November, the Australian Foreign

Ministry revoked the declaration of Al Raqqa province as an area where travel was not permitted for Australian citizens. That decision reflected the fluidity of the situation on the ground in that conflict zone and the difficulty in maintaining an effective and proportionate travel ban in such circumstances. The whole of Syria remains a do-not-travel destination under Australia's travel advice, as is the case with our own Foreign and Commonwealth Office, but it is kept under review, in line with all other counter-terrorism legislation.

I know that the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness understands, as other hon. Members do, that when it comes to matters of national security we cannot reveal how we are managing certain operations or cases, or we risk undermining this critical work. That means, I suspect, that I cannot answer some of the questions he has posed today, but I can reassure the House that the figures covering the use of these powers will be shared in the annual update to the Government's transparency report on disruptive and investigatory powers.

John Woodcock: The key question is whether that update will match those, without naming names, to the 850 who were known to have travelled to Iraq and Syria. That information is missing at the moment, and the House deserves to hear it.

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Gentleman. I will ensure that my right hon. Friend the Security Minister considers that, as well as the five questions that the hon. Gentleman posed in his speech.

Before I finish, I would like to discuss the deportation of suspected Daesh fighters to the UK from Turkey or other countries, as it is obviously a matter of interest to Members across the House. Because Governments do not necessarily disclose whether they have any security or terrorism concerns regarding individuals they deport, it is not possible to provide a figure for how many may have been deported to the UK due to suspicions around Daesh membership. However, the hon. Gentleman should be in no doubt that where we have security concerns regarding any individual being deported to the UK, their case will be treated with the utmost attention and determination. We have done, and we will continue to work extremely closely with the deporting country to manage that return, share any evidence that might be available, investigate the individual upon return and mitigate any threat they may pose through the powers I have mentioned previously.

I have listened to the thoughtful and well argued contributions from Members on both sides of the House this evening and I recognise the attention that this issue rightly receives from Parliament and the wider public. I can assure the House that the Government treat this issue with as much attention and commitment as possible, to ensure that we continue to do everything we can to keep this country safe.

8.8 pm

House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 9(7)).

Deferred Division

CAPITAL GAINS TAX

That the draft Double Taxation Relief and International Tax Enforcement (Lesotho) Order 2017, which was laid before this House on 14 September 2017, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 306, Noes 240.

Division No. 110]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip

Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca

Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heapey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hermon, Lady
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Souby, rh Anna
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory

Streeter, Mr Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Swire, rh Sir Hugo
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Thomson, Ross
 Throup, Maggie
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom

Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Hendry, Drew
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen
 Hill, Mike
 Hillier, Meg
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hoey, Kate
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Hosie, Stewart
 Howarth, rh Mr George
 Hussain, Imran
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Mr Kevan
 Jones, Sarah
 Jones, Susan Elan
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Khan, Afzal
 Killen, Ged
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Laird, Lesley
 Lake, Ben
 Lamb, rh Norman
 Lavery, Ian
 Lee, Karen
 Leslie, Mr Chris
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Mr Ivan
 Linden, David
 Lloyd, Tony
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lucas, Ian C.
 Lynch, Holly
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Mann, John
 Marsden, Gordon
 Martin, Sandy
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 Mc Nally, John
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McInnes, Liz
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Monaghan, Carol
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Nandy, Lisa
 Newlands, Gavin
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Onasanya, Fiona

Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pidcock, Laura
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Pound, Stephen
 Powell, Lucy
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rashid, Faisal
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reynolds, Emma
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rowley, Danielle
 Ruane, Chris
 Ryan, rh Joan
 Saville Roberts, Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Sherriff, Paula
 Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Eleanor
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Laura
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Owen
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Stephens, Chris
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sweeney, Mr Paul
 Tami, Mark
 Thewliiss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twigg, Stephen
 Twist, Liz
 Umunna, Chuka
 Vaz, Valerie
 Walker, Thelma
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitfield, Martin
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Williams, Hywel
 Williams, Dr Paul
 Wilson, Phil
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
 Alexander, Heidi
 Ali, Rushanara
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Amesbury, Mike
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Austin, Ian
 Barron, rh Sir Kevin
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
 Blomfield, Paul
 Brabin, Tracy
 Brake, rh Tom
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burden, Richard
 Burgon, Richard
 Butler, Dawn
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, rh Mr Alan
 Campbell, Mr Ronnie
 Carden, Dan
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Cherry, Joanna
 Clwyd, rh Ann
 Coaker, Vernon
 Cooper, Rosie
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Coyle, Neil
 Crawley, Angela
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Cunningham, Mr Jim
 Dakin, Nic
 Davey, rh Sir Edward
 David, Wayne
 Day, Martyn
 De Piero, Gloria

Debbonaire, Thangam
 Dent Coad, Emma
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Drew, Dr David
 Dromey, Jack
 Duffield, Rosie
 Eagle, Maria
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Ellman, Mrs Louise
 Elmore, Chris
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Flint, rh Caroline
 Flynn, Paul
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Frith, James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gapes, Mike
 Gardiner, Barry
 George, Ruth
 Gethins, Stephen
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Goodman, Helen
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Gray, Neil
 Green, Kate
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Nia
 Grogan, John
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hanson, rh David
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayman, Sue
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Sir Mark

Question accordingly agreed to.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 31 January 2018

[STEWART HOSIE *in the Chair*]

Personal Independence Payments

9.30 am

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): This debate is rather over-subscribed. More than 20 people wish to speak. If everyone takes two minutes, I might be able to get most of you in; if people take four or five minutes, I will get seven or eight in. If you take interventions, the number will go down. It is all in your hands. I cannot impose a formal time limit, but think about your colleagues when you are into your sixth or seventh minute.

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the claimant experience of the personal independence payment process.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hosie. I am going to be really stingy with interventions. I can already feel the wrath of my colleagues, but I have to do that because of the number of people who have put down their name to speak.

I called this debate because of the sheer volume of casework my constituency office receives regarding personal independence payments. My constituents find many aspects of the process difficult, not because they are not capable but because the forms are confusing and the assessment procedure is complex and exhausting. There are more face-to-face consultations, more regular reviews and more reassessments of awards than under the preceding benefit, disability living allowance.

The initial impetus for this debate came from my constituents, but as soon as I asked on social media for people to tell me their experiences, I realised the huge scale of this issue in North West Durham and all over the country.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Does she agree that the Government made the situation significantly worse by passing regulations in 2017 that have been found to be blatantly discriminatory against those with mental health conditions?

Laura Pidcock: I agree strongly. That ruling was a wake-up call for the Government.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Laura Pidcock: I will make a bit more progress.

I asked people to comment and send me emails about their experiences, and I was absolutely deluged. I received more than 600 emails and 1,500 messages on Facebook and Twitter. Most of those people took a great deal of time to tell me what had happened to them. Individually, their stories are shocking; collectively, they shame the Government and the Department for Work and Pensions. They are testament to a broken and cruel system. I will come back to those harrowing stories in a second.

Stephen Kerr: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. She mentioned her Twitter appeal and so on. An official survey shows that 76% of people in the system responded to say that they were satisfied. That itself is not a happy position, but it shows that her representation of people's average experience as wholly negative on the basis of a Twitter appeal does not reflect the results of a scientific survey.

Laura Pidcock: What an absolute joke that is. To diminish those people's experiences, which made me weep, is an absolute disgrace. Those people took their time in extremely difficult circumstances to tell us about the difficulties with the system. To talk about another survey to try to diminish those experiences is a disgrace. *[Interruption.]* I will not take any more interventions. The Child Poverty Action Group handbook on personal independence payments states that the Government's case for replacing DLA with PIP was that it had become an outdated benefit.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Laura Pidcock: I have to make progress—just give me a minute.

DLA was criticised for having complex and subjective criteria and inconsistent decision making, resulting in too many awards and too few reviews of awards. The Government say that the PIP process is “a more active and enabling benefit”.

I disagree in the strongest possible terms. The introduction of PIP was another cuts exercise. The coalition Government made the need to make savings a clear aim of the new benefit. *[Interruption.]* They said it themselves. According to the Library, PIP was expected to reduce expenditure by £1.5 billion, and 607,000 fewer people were expected to receive PIP by 2018. That kind of reduction cannot be achieved without the anguish and suffering of thousands of people.

Gloria De Piero: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Let me share the experience of a constituent from Kirkby who is a long-time claimant of DLA because of his post-traumatic stress disorder. He is unable to leave the house, so he has always had a home assessment. Since his last assessment, his wife has been diagnosed with terminal cancer. He was told, “No, we won't do a home assessment this time.” Is it not a disgrace—*[Interruption.]* Well, he was denied. He came to me; I sorted it out. The Government need humanity, compassion and, frankly, some common sense.

Laura Pidcock: Those stories are so, so common. The changes have hit those most in need of a social security system while reducing the overall welfare budget, and have taken away the safety net for a massive number of people. When cost-cutting is the motivating factor behind changes, we hit trouble, just as we have with universal credit. Let me take Members through some of the difficulties that my constituents and many other people—

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Laura Pidcock: I am making progress. There are 20-odd people down to speak; it would be disrespectful to them not to do so.

[*Laura Pidcock*]

The initial claimant form is often daunting and time-consuming. People have to rely on stretched services and support agencies to complete the form. At the same time, the questions are very restrictive and do not fit the description of everyone's illness. Following that, claimants are invited to a medical assessment by an outsourcing company—Atos Healthcare or Capita Business Services, depending on their location in the United Kingdom. The accessibility of venues is often cited as a problem: claimants are invited to assessments miles away from their homes and in inaccessible rooms. Some say that that is a test from the outset. There have also been reports of assessments taking place in expensive gyms and spas in my area, which makes claimants feel on edge. Some people are sure that they were filmed upon entering the assessment, and I believe them.

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. I have lost several members of my family to motor neurone disease, a progressive disease for which there is no cure—people do not get better. Does she agree that people with terminal illnesses such as MND should not be up for reassessment?

Laura Pidcock: There are hundreds of stories of people with conditions that will not change being reassessed. That is terrible.

There are extensive concerns about the suitability of PIP assessors—that was a clear theme throughout the correspondence—who often do not have the medical expertise to assess claimants with particular medical conditions. A midwife, for example, may assess a claimant with mental health problems, but they will not know every sign and symptom of every mental health condition, as they are not qualified. That calls into question the accuracy of the assessment.

Constituents have told me how brutal and gruelling the medical assessments are, as they lay bare the claimant's disability and how they cope with it, but they are based on a medical model of disability rather than a social one. One person put it brilliantly: they said the assessment was like a functionality test, and that it did not capture or consider how someone can live their life each day. The fact that assessors do not take notice of professional medical assessments from doctors or psychiatrists, and that that information is considered only at tribunal stage, is not even questioned. Assembling that information at assessment stage is such a waste of energy for people, especially since doctors charge for medical assessment letters. In my view, that cost should be met by the state, not by the person making the claim.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab) *rose*—

Laura Pidcock: I will take one last intervention, then I must press on.

Kate Green: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. Does she agree that the costs that pile up at tribunal are in part a function of a mandatory reconsideration system that, again, does not look at additional evidence properly?

Laura Pidcock: That is right. I will come on to mandatory reconsiderations in a second.

The outsourcing of the assessment process is very much part of the problem. Some 60% of assessment reports completed by Capita healthcare professionals and sent to the DWP were judged to be of an “unacceptable” standard. Neither Capita nor Atos has ever met the DWP contractual target that no more than 3% of reports should be found unacceptable. I wonder what it would take for those companies to lose a contract with the Government. No action is taken, because the Government are ideologically wedded to the outsourcing model, despite such poor results. Incredibly, I have read that those companies pay people bonuses for completing extra assessment reports, which in my view incentivises rushing and contributes to inaccuracies. Many feel as if they have been lied about in their reports—that is all part of the same inadequacies. I have even had reports of healthcare professionals who conduct the assessments asking claimants if they have thought about killing themselves. While I understand that it is a difficult subject to broach, sensitive language needs to be used when dealing with such topics; otherwise, it can be damaging and triggering for that person.

If a claimant is not awarded the points they think they are entitled to, or they are told that they are not entitled to PIP, they must challenge the DWP's decision through a mandatory reconsideration. Constituents of mine, and many people who have been in touch, have said that the process is completely pointless due to the DWP not reviewing medical evidence or investigating whether the decision maker's report was accurate. Actually, DWP workers feel unable to challenge the assessor's report. Advice and support agencies also state that hardly anyone has their decision overturned at that stage. I cannot help but think that is just another stage in the process to grind people into submission.

If the mandatory reconsideration process is unsuccessful, the decision must go to tribunal, putting tribunals as well as claimants under enormous pressure. Advice and support agencies say that they are under a great deal of strain, trying to deal with the demand from people seeking representation. Latest figures show that 68% of PIP decisions are overturned on appeal, so the DWP's systems are clearly not working. That is completely indefensible: all that trial and trauma for claimants to be proved right, if—it is a big if—they manage to go that distance. People have reported that they have to wait over a year for a tribunal date.

What is very clear is that the assessment process is working against claimants entitled to the benefit. Many campaigners believe that the companies who provide medical assessments are heavily encouraged to hit targets by the Government in order to cut the welfare budget, and I believe them. Perhaps it is because there is an ambivalence to these people, or—more likely—because the Government do not see it as the state's role to provide that support.

Luke Graham: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Laura Pidcock: I will give way once more to the Conservative side, and that is it.

Luke Graham: I thank the hon. Lady. I would not necessarily disagree with some of the criticisms she is making of the assessment process. Some of my constituents face those challenges, and we would be happy to work

across the House to try to fix them. Does she recognise that under PIP, 66% of claimants with mental issues now get the higher rate of benefit, versus 22% under DLA? Can I ask her for a little balance when she comes to look at the system rather than just criticism?

Laura Pidcock: The balance is that thousands of people are locked out of the system and never even get an award because they are so ground down by the process. The Government need to realise what a cruel and callous system they are putting people through and the knock-on effect that has on our constituents. I am a bit shocked by the disbelief on the Conservative side—they look stunned that this is taking place. That is the reality for disabled people in this country. People are falling further into depression and self-harm, having suicidal thoughts and becoming reliant on food banks. All of those things are harmful for our society. Losing Motability cars was a consistent theme, along with falling into debt. The NHS is also being put under much strain.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Laura Pidcock: I will make a bit more progress.

In the past seven years of this Government, the Department for Work and Pensions has become a harsher and colder organisation. A culture has grown through successive Secretaries of State that sees claimants as numbers and fraudsters instead of people with needs, and a burden on the state rather than citizens with potential. The Government's own figures put the rate of fraud for PIP at 1.4%—not even worth talking about—yet the system is built on the presumption that people are lying and need to be found out.

Here is a symbol of that callousness: a few weeks ago in my surgery, one of my constituents showed me a decision letter telling her that she was no longer entitled to PIP—her lifeline. The letter was dated 25 December—merry Christmas from the DWP. That is far from the most shocking story. Over the past week, I have read several hundred testimonies from people who have suffered under the system.

A whole community out there has been frightened, mistreated and intimidated by the Government, the media and the DWP. I will read a few of those testimonies—they put things much better than me—before drawing my speech to a conclusion. One says:

“I hope change can be made as presently the PIP system is too brutal, rigid and unfair to people like me who want to live an able life despite disability”.

Another says:

“Why are they treating disabled citizens as though we are undeserving of welfare support?”

Another says:

“I do not want to be in this situation. I am not choosing this life or lifestyle. I am a human being with feelings and emotions. I need help, support and understanding, not being ridiculed or made to feel like a criminal and waste of space and a burden on society or that I am going to be caught out at any opportunity for my disability.”

This one was the most striking:

“being on benefits is like being in an abusive relationship with the state. We cannot escape our abusers, we need them, we are financially dependent on them”.

This is what I ask of the Government: remove the contracts from Atos and Capita with immediate effect and bring the assessments back in-house; remove the assessors' bonuses; abolish the mandatory reconsideration step of the process, because it is utterly pointless; make it compulsory to take medical documentation into account at the initial assessment, because it is traumatic for people to have to go through their medical conditions in detail, and the evidence from professionals is already there. There must be consequences for inaccurate assessment reports about people's health conditions, and we should redesign the assessment process alongside disabled people so that it accepts a social model of disability, not a medical model.

The judgment against the Government towards the end of last year when, as was mentioned, a High Court judge said the changes were “blatantly discriminatory,” should give the Minister pause for thought. It is an opportunity for reflection. What has become of not just this Government but our society when we treat people as criminals and fraudsters for being disabled? Do they really know what fear is experienced across this nation at the clatter of the letterbox? People are scared that there might be a brown envelope from the DWP. It is time for the Government to admit that the system is a disaster and that a review of PIP and the whole benefit system is urgently needed.

9.46 am

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock), who clearly has a huge amount of passion about this subject. Although I would not necessarily agree with all of the stats she cited, it is important that we continue to do everything we can for those who are often among the most vulnerable people in society. Collectively, we will raise many examples and suggestions on how we can continue to improve the system.

I do not intend to speak for long—I have spoken in every debate like this for the past two and a half to three years, so I will try to avoid repetition. First, I want to make it clear that there have been mistakes. In any system there are mistakes. The hon. Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) raised a classic example of a mistake. That should not have been the case; that is not designed to happen. If people need home visits, those should be a given. That was a genuine mistake.

There were claims that PIP was brought in for financial savings. The concept was actually designed under the previous Labour Government; it just happened to come in as we came into office. We are currently spending £3 billion a year extra, and that figure will increase every single year of this Parliament. That is not a cost saving by any definition.

Under DLA, only 16% of claimants got the highest rate of benefit, but under PIP it is 26%. Only 22% of people with mental health conditions got the highest rate, but the figure now is 66%. That is why we are spending £3 billion more a year, and rightly so. If someone with a mental health condition wanted to access the higher mobility rate, they had to be severely mentally impaired unless they had a physical disability, so only 12,660 people with a mental health condition accessed the higher mobility rate. Since the introduction of PIP, over 100,000 more people are benefiting from that rate.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that in the impact assessment from May 2012 for the introduction of personal independence payments under the coalition Government, the objectives were to ensure that expenditure was sustainable and to save £2.24 billion a year by reducing claimants by 500,000 a year?

Justin Tomlinson: And the reality is that we are spending £3 billion more on supporting the most vulnerable people. That is partly because we have an extremely proactive Minister who, rightly, meets regularly with charities, stakeholders, individual users and MPs from across the House. I did the same when I was a Minister, and the system continues to be improved.

Finally, under DLA the higher rate was given for visual impairment at 36%, but it is now 79%. The system is not perfect and we need to continue moving it, but we can all access the stats from the Library. They are independent of the Government. They are the reality. That does not excuse mistakes or times when the system lets people down, but it is a fallacy to think that the old DLA system was better. It was not better, which is why the charities and stakeholders support the principle of PIP.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Does my hon. Friend recognise that, taking the journey time for the end-to-end process, the waiting time has been reduced by 40 weeks to 13 weeks in the past four years? That has to be an improvement. There is a long way to go, but I am sure my hon. Friend would agree.

Justin Tomlinson: That is an important point. *[Interruption.]* There is an Opposition Member who favours randomly plucking stats out of the air. It is the official statistics, independent of the Government, that I am giving; our teams can go and research them in the Library. I shall give an example of a big difference being made. Those who are terminally ill now have their process speed-tracked and the decision is given within seven days.

I shall not speak for too much longer as many Members want to raise suggestions, but I want to address the question raised about lifetime awards. Under DLA 70% of claimants had a lifetime award, and when I became the Minister I thought, "That is sensible; it does away with the need for an assessment." However, one in three people with a disability or health condition will have such a significant change within 12 months that their condition will have changed—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for North West Durham sighs, but for the majority of people—*[Interruption.]* Terminally ill people will be processed within seven days; I am talking about people applying for the benefit for the first time. Their condition will change within the first year—predominantly getting worse. If they enter the benefit on the lower rate and are put on to a lifetime award they will miss out on money they are entitled to. That is one of the most significant changes.

If someone enters the system on the lower rate, the system will try to estimate when they might be in a position to access a higher one, and automatically trigger that. That is one of the reasons why we are spending an additional £3 billion on making sure people do not miss

out—and not just for a few years; there were cases of people missing out on money they were entitled to for 20 or 30 years.

I will conclude with appeal rates. It is always a worry, looking at those. The hon. Member for North West Durham claimed every case was wrong—and some were; we need to continue to improve the system, because there should never be a mistake. However, the evidence from those independent appeals is that those cases are ones where additional written or oral evidence has been presented. Something on which I agree with the hon. Lady is that we should be able automatically to get access to health records. There are data protection issues, and we would need to get the consent of the claimant, but if they were willing to do it we would all support that approach. It would make everyone's life a lot easier and the system a lot smoother. There is also huge support for allowing the claimant, if they wish to, to have sessions recorded. Again, that can be used on appeal.

I encourage the Minister to continue her great work of engaging not just charities and stakeholders—the users—but Members of both Houses. I urge all colleagues in the Chamber, if they are passionate, have first-hand experience and have taken the time to watch an assessment and talk to the staff, to take up the Minister's invitation to meet and engage. Let us collectively continue to deliver an improved disability benefit.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Order. We have 35 minutes. Brevity is at a premium.

9.54 am

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I congratulate my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock), on the debate.

The hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) is right in what he says about how the system should operate, but that is not how it is operating in practice. In the Mind survey, 55% of those surveyed found that their PIP was either stopped or reduced. I also want to mention that study's satisfaction rate for people with mental health issues. We are making the same mistake with that as we are with the work capability test. If we are going to have a system that is fair to people with mental illness, we need properly qualified assessors, and that is not happening. It was the same with the work capability test: the assessments were done by people who had no qualifications to give them an understanding of people with mental illness. That is not right.

Yesterday in the Chamber I did not get an answer when I asked the Minister, at column 708, what happens to the 22% of people with mental illnesses who, according to the Mind survey, did not appeal because of their condition. I know those cases will be looked at again, but do I advise constituents who have not appealed to make a new application, or will those concerned somehow get around to seeing them? We need clarity for those people, many of whom have valid claims but felt unable to appeal because of the onerous nature of the system. My hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham is right; in Durham, welfare rights will tell you the appeal waiting time is now more than a year for such cases.

I want to touch briefly on a couple of constituency cases. What the hon. Member for North Swindon said about lifetime awards and people missing out may be true, but I can give him an example of the opposite. A constituent was given PIP from 2016, and when his condition worsened he put in an application for the higher rate and, after an assessment, had his entire PIP taken away. The mobility issue is also creating complete heartache. A constituent of mine has got five stents and has had two heart attacks. He went for assessment in January and did not qualify for PIP. They said he was not entitled, so he will lose his mobility car. He got a letter the other day saying he had not been entitled to the car since last October. I do not know how that view was reached when the assessment happened in January.

I want to nail the idea that people on PIP somehow are shirkers, and the lazy of society. *[Interruption.]* I am sorry—that is some people's narrative. I am not going to listen to anyone who comes in here as an obvious Whips' plant to bolster the number of Tory MPs. Members who want to make a contribution should put in to speak. I give credit to the hon. Member for North Swindon, who at least made a speech rather than some cheap intervention that the Whips obviously told him to make.

In many cases, the people I am talking about are working. The worst case I know of is of a man in his 40s with a degenerative condition, who was a butcher and could not work. He retrained in IT, got a job, went for his PIP assessment and was not awarded the higher enhanced rate. Therefore he lost his mobility car. That is a guy who got off his backside, as he said to me when he came to my surgery, and went to get a job because he did not want his children to grow up in a household where the father was not going out to work. It cannot be fair that we are dealing with such people in the way we are.

The system as it has been designed is making all the same mistakes as the work capability test did. It is a sausage machine to get claims through. I would argue—to save money for the Government—for taking out the cases that we know will not improve. We are wasting our time on those individuals' cases. As to making sure that the system works properly for others, especially those with mental health issues, we must have a system where assessments are done by properly qualified people.

The people who claim PIP do not choose to be in that position. Any one of us here today could end up on it if we had a serious illness or accident. Claimants do not want to be on PIP. The way to judge a society's fairness is by how it treats its most vulnerable. I am sorry, but the system we have is not treating them fairly.

9.59 am

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) on securing the debate.

One of the first constituency cases that I ever dealt with as a new MP was that of Pauline Kerrigan of Springboig. Pauline has Raynaud's disease, as well as osteoarthritis. Previously, she was given a lifetime award of disability living allowance and transitioned on to PIP. She was then suddenly found miraculously fit for work. I have met Pauline at my surgery on more than one occasion, and it is clear to me that she is most

definitely not fit for work. Indeed, the Government were right to issue a lifetime DLA award to Pauline in the first place, but because of the transition to PIP her life was unnecessarily turned upside down.

Like many colleagues in the Scottish National party, I remain convinced that this Government's obsession with personal independence payments is little more than an ideological plaything. Week after week, my constituency surgeries are packed with disabled people who continue to feel the sharp end of the Government's cuts to social security. I remain convinced that the entire system needs a complete overhaul, and today's litany of horrifying constituency cases from other hon. Members only reaffirms that view. We need action from the Government sooner rather than later.

Last week, I and other colleagues from the SNP group met Scotland's Minister for Social Security, Jeane Freeman, to discuss progress in implementing our new social security system in Scotland. Establishing a new social security system is the biggest challenge we have faced since the inception of devolution, but I am heartened by the Government's determination to build a social security system that is underpinned by dignity and respect. When the new social security system is established, my constituent Pauline will finally be treated again with the respect and dignity she deserves. The challenge for the Government today is to ensure that Paulines in Preston, Prestatyn and Penzance are treated with dignity, and the only way that will happen is if the system is fundamentally overhauled.

10 am

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) for securing this important debate and for her passionate speech.

Our welfare state was founded by a Labour Government, based on the principles of protecting the most vulnerable in our society and providing a safety net for everyone, rich or poor, should they ever need it. Yet under this Government we have seen our welfare state eroded into a completely dehumanising and cruel experience. Yesterday, the Minister refuted my claims that the welfare system we see today is cruel; if it is not cruel, then what is it? These people have been put through the wringer and squeezed remorselessly—and all for nothing, as we now know.

I am like other hon. Members: rarely does a day go by when distressed constituents are not reaching out to me about their PIP assessments. The dread and anxiety that comes with an impending PIP assessment are overwhelming. That is not surprising, given the life-or-death situations constituents find themselves in. A survey by the Disability Benefits Consortium found that one third of those who have had their funding cut in the middle of a benefits shake-up said they were struggling to pay for food, rent and bills.

That is what happened to my constituent Deborah. Since failing her PIP assessment six weeks ago, she has been living on biscuits. Despite the cold weather in the north-east—it has been freezing—she has been unable to put her heating on. Sadly, Deborah, who suffers with severe mental and physical health problems, has been

[Mrs Sharon Hodgson]

through this once before, so she knows the physical and psychological effects it can have on claimants and their families. Deborah does not want to go through that again, nor should she.

Another of my constituents, Kelly, applied for PIP on behalf of her 17-year-old daughter, who has anti-myelin oligodendrocyte glycoprotein disease: a rare neurological illness. Kelly's daughter has limited movement in her spine and 50% lung function, due to a severe spinal scoliosis, and now has titanium rods running the length of her spine. Kelly was told that her daughter did not qualify. Susan, who has severe osteoarthritis and fibromyalgia, is in constant pain and can barely walk. She was told she did not qualify. On behalf of my constituents, I ask the Minister exactly how disabled and affected by their disabilities people have to be to qualify for PIP.

The system in place now is not what our predecessors imagined when they founded the welfare state. They expected kindness and compassion for those who need support during difficult times. Yesterday, the Department for Work and Pensions tried to play the compassionate Conservative card and announced that everyone receiving PIP will have their claim reviewed. What does that bittersweet announcement mean for the constituents I have mentioned today and the many others across the country who have already had their payments stopped? Will the Minister provide some clarity on whether and when the Department will consider those claims again?

Given the suffering that my constituents are already going through as a result of PIP, they simply cannot wait any longer. I ask the Minister, please, to confirm today how long this complex exercise is expected to take. I hope, given what we have already heard and will no doubt continue to hear for the rest of the debate, that the Minister will finally put an end to the pain and suffering that so many have had to endure as a result of the Government's heartless policies—that has to be said—and give people a chance to live with dignity.

10.4 am

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I also congratulate the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) on securing this important debate. Time is tight, so I will concentrate on one group for whom I have raised issues many times, and for whom the term "PIP" has perhaps most resonance: the terminally ill.

For any person facing a PIP assessment, the idea of an assessment creates a lot of worry and stress. For the terminally ill, the pressure is multiplied many times over—on the individual involved, who has been given that terrible diagnosis, and on the families who have to deal with the fallout of that situation. Even insurance companies—private firms—acknowledge that cancer patients and people diagnosed as having a terminal condition need special treatment and pay out immediately. They do not hang about waiting to assess people; they know that the condition is not going to change.

I am grateful to the MND Association, and I will read their description of that terminal illness:

"Few conditions are as devastating as motor neurone disease (MND). It is a fatal, rapidly progressing disease of the brain and central nervous system, which attacks the nerves that control movement so that muscles no longer work. There is no cure for MND.

While symptoms vary, over the course of their illness most people with MND will be trapped in a failing body, unable to move, talk, swallow, and ultimately breathe. Speech is usually affected, and many people will lose the ability to speak entirely. Some people with MND may also experience changes in thinking and behaviour, and 10-15% will experience a rare form of dementia."

Yet people with MND have to go for PIP assessments. The cost to terminally ill people and their families is much more than just the pain of that shortened journey to the end of their life. Research done for the MND Association shows that people with terminal illnesses face £12,000 a year more in costs, not including loss of income.

Transferring from DLA to PIP, 15% of people living with MND have had their awards reduced. A progressive condition, a terminal illness and a reduced award: surely that cannot be right? I have raised concerns many times over the challenge for many terminally ill people facing the six month rule—the requirement of a

"reasonable expectation of death within six months".

That language is surely incompatible with the variable nature of conditions and terminal illness. The DWP should review its guidance on the use of DS1500s to reflect that terminal illness is not an exact science. Will the Minister review the process for the terminally ill? Will she tell us how many people have been turned down? Will she tell us how that injustice will be urgently addressed? Will she tell us, now that there is to be a review, what appeal process will be made available to those not contacted by the DWP, who rightly feel that they are entitled to an enhanced payment?

10.8 am

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I will focus my contribution on how the PIP system treats those with less visible disabilities by talking about epilepsy. Epilepsy Action has said that nine out of 10 people with epilepsy felt that the Government's decision maker did not understand their condition—and no wonder! The assessment forms, the descriptors and the face-to-face assessments are not set up in a way that accurately reflects the nature of epilepsy.

It comes as no surprise that three out of five people with epilepsy who were already on benefits had their award decreased when they applied for PIP. In raw numbers, that is 18,000 people, 20% higher than for any other condition. I am concerned that the Department's previous announcement on supervision and safety—the change that could have the most impact for people with epilepsy—is in danger of being neglected.

People with epilepsy have contacted the Epilepsy Action helpline with their key concerns. First, what is the review's timeframe? People are waiting to find out whether their award has been changed, but as they will only be notified if there is a change, how will they know when to stop waiting? Secondly, why are claims disallowed before 9 March 2017 not being reviewed, when it is clear that the guidance was wrong before that date? Thirdly, if the DWP has reviewed a case and decided there should be no change, does the claimant have a right to appeal?

There have already been two significant reviews, and many problems with the PIP assessments remain. There are three changes the Government should urgently introduce. First, they should make sure that only those assessors who have received training for a particular condition, such as epilepsy, are allowed to make decisions on that condition. Secondly, they should increase the timeframe for providing evidence from one month to two months, to make it easier for an applicant's doctor to provide the supporting evidence that they need. Thirdly, they should commit to a full review of the "repeatedly and safely" requirements and issue guidance to ensure that it is being applied correctly for people with less visible conditions.

Taking those measures will not ease the stress of the undoubtedly stressful application process, but it may go some way to helping achieve a fairer system and to granting applicants what was promised in the name of the benefit: independence.

10.10 am

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I shall keep my remarks short, out of respect to the other Members who want to speak. I congratulate the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) on securing the debate, which is of particular importance to my constituents. I have to say that I am slightly disappointed at the state of the two Scottish Conservative Members who turned up to the debate with a clear intention to disrupt the opening speaker. They have now left the Chamber and not stayed for the debate.

This is a timely debate, given the announcement that the UK Government are to review PIP claims, at a cost of £3.7 billion, by 2023. It is hardly a surprise that the High Court concluded that the Government's changes to PIP were "blatantly discriminatory" to those with mental health conditions. That has been self-evident for some time. Of course, this disaster is of the Government's own making: they tried to rip off the most vulnerable people in society and now we are all paying the price. The taxpayer will have to foot the bill for those mistakes. What is the human cost? Claimants pushed to the edge and living their lives on the brink. When will the Government get anything right first time?

This fiasco could have been avoided had the Government approached disability benefits with humanity and compassion, rather than—as usual—as a cost-saving exercise. By the time we get to 2023, the UK Government will have delivered the worst possible outcome: a more expensive system that delivers less for applicants. Other Members will be aware—we did not need a court case or reams of statistics to know—that the changes to PIP are having a negative impact; the many distressed constituents who have visited our constituency offices or surgeries in tears are testament to that. They have spoken of feeling humiliated and degraded. They have been made to justify their disability through an intrusive, pseudo-medical assessment conducted by officials working with ambiguous criteria.

Ultimately, we in Scotland can be relieved that PIP is one of 11 benefits being transferred to the Scottish Government. I have no doubt that that will mean a noticeable improvement in the way people are treated, as the Scottish Government seek to create a Scottish

social security system that gives claimants dignity and respect. For example, they have announced that claimants in Scotland are to be given the right to have a supporter with them in meetings and assessments. That small but noteworthy change is proof that Scotland will do things differently. Perhaps this Tory Government could yet again learn from the Scottish Government's example.

Given that the DWP will continue to manage Scottish PIP cases until 2020, will the Minister outline whether this crisis will affect the smooth transition of PIP to the Scottish Government?

10.13 am

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I will primarily raise issues around the access to assessments, and I will run through some examples of constituents who have approached me. This is by far the biggest area of casework that I receive in my office.

Mr M's daughter had a stroke and is partially paralysed. She was expected to get to an appointment 40 minutes' drive away in Scunthorpe for 9 am. There is no direct bus service so they would have had to have caught the 7.34 am train from Grimsby to get there on time, and they did not know how to get to the assessment centre from the railway station. That all put additional pressure on an older parent who is responsible for somebody who has suffered a stroke.

K has mental health issues and other difficulties, including domestic violence issues that impede her ability to freely leave the house. Despite being advised of those difficulties, requests for a home visit or a local appointment were refused and she was expected to attend in Scunthorpe. C is vulnerable because of her alcohol dependency, alongside her depression and anxiety. She has no means of transport but was expected to attend in Scunthorpe. M has learning difficulties, but no exception for that, or consideration of it, was made. There was no real humanity in dealing with that individual.

Another constituent, J, had a stroke. After parking his mobility vehicle away from the assessment centre, he made the extraordinary effort to walk what is a very short distance but what took him more than 25 minutes, with frequent breaks on the way. Having made that journey and dragged himself to the assessment, he was deemed to be sufficiently mobile not to require his mobility car, which has put enormous pressure on him, his family and his ability to live a normal life. Those are a few examples, but there are more: Hogan, Arnold, Snell, Read, MacDonald, Lamb, Jones, Stewart and Godfrey are just a few of my constituents who have all had barriers placed before them just to get to an assessment.

I have had conversations on this and have had questions responded to, and we managed to get additional assessors in the area. However, issues with appointments, maternity and sickness—the assessors made available were under such pressure with the volume of assessments that they went off sick themselves; I hope they did not have to go through the assessment process, because that would have been a double injustice—mean that we do not have enough assessors in the local area to support the needs of my constituents.

I have been able to assist in some of those cases and resolve some of the issues, but why do these people have to come to their MPs or place enormous stress and

[Melanie Onn]

strain on other support services, which also have issues with their funding, to receive that advice? Why is the system so complicated? People should not have to come to see me to have these issues resolved.

When the courts ruled that the system was wholly inadequate for those with mental ill health, did that extend to the ability to access the assessment process in the first place? My constituents face not only the physical challenge of their condition but poor public transport links, the removal of Motability vehicles and the cost of alternative transport, such as private taxis. There is also a lack of consideration when those with autism or Asperger's have to go somewhere different, travel in an unusual vehicle or simply be around other people in crowded environments, or of those who struggle with depression, anxiety or agoraphobia when they are asked to go on unfamiliar routes to unfamiliar places. It is all too much and too overwhelming and it is placing these people under enormous stress.

I will make one final point, because I know lots of Members want to speak. Surely we deserve a properly resourced assessment centre locally, with more flexibility given for assessors to undertake home visits and support people, rather than to target them.

10.17 am

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) on securing this important debate. I will reinforce the points made by a number of Members this morning. To put it quite bluntly, I believe that the emotional trauma caused by PIP and the Government's approach to its administration has led to suffering on what can only be described as an enormous scale.

I will give one example of a constituent, as her case illustrates the fundamental problems with PIP, and then make two other brief points. My constituent suffers from chronic long-term and debilitating back pain, which was made worse in the aftermath of an operation, during which she suffered terribly. However, after her disability living allowance was terminated, she was awarded much less support through PIP and her mobility car was taken away from her because she had not scored enough points in the arbitrary assessment. Ironically, it can be said that, in this and many other cases, personal independence payments reduce people's personal independence and mobility. That is one of the fundamental problems with this system that we need to consider today.

I will briefly address two other points; I realise other colleagues would like to speak. First, the length of time that people suffer because of the trauma caused by the system is a problem. It is important to note that, all too often, the ordeal does not stop with the assessment, which is just the beginning of a very lengthy process. My constituent lives in flat so small that there is not even room for her husband to stay. She has to contend with living alone in cramped conditions and in pain. As if that were not bad enough, she is having to find the strength to challenge her initial assessment report formally, because it does not reflect her condition or what she said to the so-called health professional.

There is a wider issue, which was mentioned earlier, about whether due weight is given to medical evidence. In certain cases, the written evidence of GPs and consultants has been discounted or not given proper consideration because, according to the DWP, they are regarded as the applicant's advocate and are therefore, in the warped world of PIP assessments, somehow biased. The irony is that the Government give total credence to the advice given by their own so-called health professionals, who, as we have heard, are not necessarily trained in the area of medicine that they are due to assess. Reconsideration of that issue in particular should be a top priority for the Government.

Anna McMorris: I want to set out the case of a constituent who came to me. A medical professional, he was terminally ill and had weeks to live, but he was advised that he would be eligible for PIP only from December of that year. His partner was distraught, as was he. He wanted to use that money for the last few weeks of his life. It turned out that there had been an administrative error, but they had to come to me to sort that out. That is a disgrace.

Matt Rodda: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I would like to make a suggestion to the Government. How about going back to the drawing board and designing a system that listens to people and allows them to express their issues in their own words. Above all, how about developing a system that demonstrates real compassion and decency, which we had for many decades in our welfare state? The Government can and must do better. It is so obvious that the current system is designed and contrived to cut public spending. I ask the Government to think again.

10.21 am

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie.

Let us imagine how anxious someone must feel, knowing that they have to sit through an interrogation process that will deem whether they are quite disabled enough to be eligible for a helping hand. Not only does that person have the already huge day-to-day disadvantage of being disabled or suffering from mental illness, but now, thanks to the Government, they are forced to sit through a point-scoring process to judge whether they are fit to work. PIP is not fit for purpose when it comes to many physical conditions, and it certainly has not been fit for purpose for those suffering from invisible illnesses. How disgraceful that in 21st-century Britain a Government are implementing public policies that clearly disadvantage those with mental health problems.

My constituent, George, suffers from a range of debilitating conditions, and he is prescribed a huge amount of medication just to enable him to get through the day. He is also almost completely reliant on the use of a wheelchair. After working for his entire life, George, at 63, thought that when his health deteriorated, there would be support to help him to survive and pay his bills. At first, that support was there, and George received higher rate mobility and the highest rate care components of disability living allowance. However, when he was called for his PIP assessment, things took a dramatic turn for the worse.

George will not mind my saying that he is reaching an age at which he would be likely to retire soon if he was fit and well, but he has been put through a process whereby he was tested to see whether he was disabled enough. One observation that was made during his assessment was that he could walk unaided for 20 metres, but not 50. That is not considered a restriction on his ability to walk. Leonard Cheshire Disability, the charity for disabled people, makes the point that the change to the criteria obviously means that far fewer individuals qualify for the enhanced mobility component of the benefit. That is penny-pinching at the expense of someone's dignity.

The charity has also gathered the information that 74% of disabled people surveyed did not feel as though the assessor understood their disability. That was and remains one of George's biggest frustrations: he did not feel that the assessor listened to him, understood his needs or treated him with any compassion. How can someone hold so much weight in determining the future of an individual's life without being held accountable? Also, why cannot assessors consult experts in any condition or disability to help to fill their knowledge gaps? That would surely ensure that they asked the right questions in the assessment and accurately determined the individual's ability to carry out an activity reliably, repeatedly, safely and in a timely manner.

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Laura Smith: I am sorry, but I must get through my speech; I am conscious of the time.

George was assessed by Atos on 1 June 2017. He is now going through the process of appeal, but the timescale is being put further and further back and he still does not have a date for his case to be heard. He is struggling to survive financially, and he has said that he is feeling more depressed every day and having sleepless nights. He has stated—this is the important bit, to me—that if it were not for his wife, he would feel as though he could not go on any more, and he has contemplated not taking the medication that he needs. The way in which he and many, many others in my constituency have been treated is absolutely diabolical. I urge the Government seriously to stop burying their head in the sand and face up to the reality that has been created by their own policies.

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): I intend the summing-up speeches to start after the next speech, so if anyone wants to make a last intervention, they know what to do.

10.25 am

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) on securing this important debate and on making a powerful opening speech.

At Prime Minister's questions a few weeks ago, I asked the Prime Minister whether she agreed that the PIP assessment process was fundamentally flawed, and what action she intended to take to avoid the undue stress and hardship being caused to my constituents and thousands more across the country. It is very clear to hon. Members here and the people whom we represent that the process is not fit for purpose.

The chaos that is being caused is having a cruel impact on thousands of people across the country. The Prime Minister's reply was that the assessments are being conducted as well as they can be, and that people are getting the awards that they should be getting and are entitled to. She also stated that since the Government introduced the personal independence payment, 8% of cases have been appealed and 4% of the decisions are changed on appeal. In my easy calculation, about 50% of decisions are overturned on appeal, and things are getting worse.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree with my view? My constituent, Sarah Hassell, has cystic fibrosis, a degenerative disease. She is 30 and will not see retirement. Not only was she taken to a tribunal, but after that process, she was brought forward again for assessment. Her benefit was taken away, and she tried to kill herself because of this process, which she had already gone through once. The system is simply not working, and the tribunals are not working. When I wrote to the Secretary of State to ask for a response, I was just sent to a civil servant and was not graced with a response. My constituents need much better from this process.

Gerald Jones: My hon. Friend outlines a very sad and tragic case. It is one reason among many why the Government have to take note and listen.

The Prime Minister also stated that in the majority of cases, the change at appeal is due to the presentation at appeal of new evidence that was not presented at the original case. However, in the vast majority of cases that are brought to my attention at my constituency office and through Merthyr Tydfil and Caerphilly citizens advice bureaux, no new evidence is presented at appeal. The appeals are agreed, because the appeal panel recognises that constituents are genuinely in need of PIP and it supports the appeal. Furthermore, a growing number of assessments are consistently refused, and people are forced to go to mandatory reassessment and to appeal. I understand that currently about 65% of claims are overturned on appeal at tribunal. The growing number of appeals means that tribunals are taking longer to get to court—in my area, they are taking anything between four and seven months.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): Every one of us has an email inbox full of these claims. Every single week, a new claim comes forward. The Minister has spoken about home assessments, but home assessments are not being done. It can be seen in Westminster Hall today how supportive the Labour party is, and how unsupportive the Tory party is, in relation to the whole PIP process.

Gerald Jones: My hon. Friend makes an important point, with which I wholeheartedly agree. The number of cases being brought to appeal and the length of time taken highlight the unnecessary cost of taking the cases to a tribunal. It stands to reason that if a large percentage of appeals are accepted, the original decisions are fundamentally flawed.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that for those with long-term conditions, such as muscular dystrophy, the right level of assessment is

[Liz Twist]

important to avoid the need for people to go to appeal, given that an understanding of the condition could avoid that appeal?

Gerald Jones: My hon. Friend highlights the current state of affairs and how necessary it is for the Government to take action.

I will conclude by briefly highlighting one of the many cases that has been brought to me. A client in my constituency—a gentleman who lives with his wife and three children in a housing association property—suffers with epilepsy, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, anxiety, depression and heart problems. He was already in receipt of PIP and was awarded enhanced daily living and mobility at tribunal in February 2015; that award was backdated. He switched his enhanced mobility for a car through the Motability scheme.

My constituent was contacted about the renewal of his claim in April 2016, and the renewal was sent to him. The local citizens advice bureau assisted him with completing the form, and medical evidence went in. His condition had deteriorated, but he was awarded zero points for daily living and mobility. So he had to return his mobility car, which he relied on, and borrow money from a family member to purchase a car.

The mandatory reassessment was lodged, and my constituent was awarded nine points for daily living and eight points for mobility—on appeal, those were enhanced further. The case went to tribunal and the judge advised him to go back to the Motability scheme as soon as possible and get his car back, but in the meantime he had wasted money on purchasing one. Interestingly, no additional evidence was given at the appeal stage that the DWP had not had prior to the tribunal. That is just one of many cases, and I am sure that Members across the country have similar concerns. The situation is grave, as most Opposition Members and our constituents know.

Rosie Cooper: Before my hon. Friend finishes, I want to make the point that there is a fundamental lack of understanding and compassion among assessors. Unbelievably, one assessor telephoned my deaf constituent and left them a message, which they would never, ever be able to access. How many penalties would they have for that? That is so basic that it is a disgrace.

Gerald Jones: My hon. Friend highlights an interesting point, and it is something that the Government need to get a grip on.

Unfortunately, the Government seem unwilling or unable to see the mess that is being caused or to do something about it. Will the Minister take stock of what she has heard in the debate this morning, give us some answers and get a grip on the situation?

10.32 am

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a pleasure to sum up for the SNP in this debate with you in the Chair, Mr Hosie.

I congratulate the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) on securing this debate and on her recent promotion as shadow Minister. She made

a typically impassioned speech outlining the experiences of her constituents and the thousands who have got in touch with her before the debate. Those are experiences that many of my constituents have sadly shared. She was right to point out how scunnered disabled people are with the PIP process. I have had constituents across the surgery table whom I have been trying to convince to go through an appeal process, but they have been so fed up and upset at being turned down for PIP that they have told me in tears that they refuse to go through an appeal process, despite clearly being entitled to, and in desperate need of, the support that should be provided. They and many others are effectively denying themselves support that they should be entitled to.

Members have raised a range of concerns about the PIP process, and I will touch on some of their speeches. The former Minister, the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), acknowledged that mistakes have been made and that improvements could be made. He is right. One of the biggest mistakes was the UK Government's attempt to deny people with mental health conditions access to personal independence payments. They were ruled discriminatory for doing that. Perhaps the UK Government should look at making improvements that improve people's experience and are not discriminatory.

The hon. Members for North Durham (Mr Jones) and for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) described issues faced by their constituents in applying for PIP. My hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) rightly raised the additional difficulties being faced by people with terminal illnesses and touched on the briefing from the MND Association.

My hon. Friend the Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) made a very good speech based on his constituents' experiences. He was right to highlight the total disrespect of a couple of the Scottish Tories who came in with prepared interventions and were clearly trying to upset and disrupt the opening speeches. They showed total disrespect to those Members who have prepared speeches and not been called, and total disrespect to the disabled people watching this debate. They turned up to get their names on TheyWorkForYou and up their speaking record, then cleared off halfway through the debate. That is cynical, disrespectful behaviour and I hope they will reflect on it.

In this otherwise informative and impassioned debate there were good speeches from the hon. Members for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), for Reading East (Matt Rodda), for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) and for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones). This debate could not be more topical, as we have been hearing about and debating the UK Government's approach to PIP in the past week. We have had a written statement, two urgent questions and a stream of written questions on the UK Government's response to the High Court ruling on PIP. The High Court ruled that the UK Government's PIP regulations were "blatantly discriminatory" against people with mental health impairments. That follows the damning report from the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which found "systematic violations" of disability rights.

We welcome the fact that the UK Government are finally going to accept that they got this wrong and will implement the High Court ruling, but this whole shambles

prompts a number of questions. It is going to cost £3.7 billion for the Government to review all cases and to rectify the error of excluding people with mental health issues, but how much has it cost the Government to oppose the matter in the courts? How much has it cost people who have applied and been turned down for PIP support, not just financially, but in terms of their health?

Yesterday the Minister was angry that my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) suggested that some people's experiences of PIP and other benefits may have led them to consider suicide. The sad story that the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) gave in her intervention, and a case that I have shared with a previous Secretary of State, will hopefully allow the Minister to reflect on her comments yesterday. It is absolutely clear that there is an issue in this regard, and I hope she will reflect on that.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I also raised a case yesterday with the Minister of someone who had followed the process correctly, had completed their review forms and had submitted them in the timescales, yet were called to refund all the money they had received thus far. That was the administrative failure of the Minister's Department. That case is exceptionally bad. We talk about reducing harms for people in society, but it shows that when the DWP fails, the onus is on the individual to suffer the consequences and not on the Department to compensate them and deal with the issue.

Neil Gray: The hon. Gentleman was right to raise that case yesterday, which I saw him do, and I hope the Minister will reflect and respond on it.

Yesterday, the Minister suggested that savings will not be made to cover the £3.7 billion cost, but I would appreciate it if she categorically ruled out any further cuts to any other aspect of social security to fund the review, and if she explained how the DWP intends to cover the cost. Does this shambles not expose the urgent need for the UK Government to review the whole PIP application process? We hear time and again, as we did this morning, about the appeal process success rate and about how Ministers have lost court cases on their policy. We have also heard personal testimony about the way in which the application process impacts those who apply and need support.

This is topical because PIP will be devolved to the new Scottish social security agency, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden). The Bill to create the agency is currently being debated in Committee in the Scottish Parliament. The Scottish Government are seeking to make a number of changes to the way in which PIP is assessed to make sure that it treats people with dignity and respect. First, the Scottish Government are seeking to make an automatic provision that would allow the agency to gather all the relevant medical or related information at application stage, which would reduce the number of face-to-face assessments, reduce the burden on the applicant and hopefully ensure that the correct decision is taken at the outset, rather than people having to go through the flawed mandatory reconsideration and appeal process, which was raised by the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green).

Secondly, the Scottish Government will ensure that private contractors are not involved in the assessment process. There are a range of other measures that the Scottish Government will take to ensure that we get the system right for those seeking support. In conclusion, hopefully the Minister will consider the new system in Scotland once it is up and running, and the UK Government will look north and learn some lessons.

10.39 am

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) on securing this important and timely debate. She made some valid points and highlighted the sheer volume of responses that she received when she put out a call on social media. That demonstrates the clear problems with the PIP system and with the benefit.

My hon. Friend talked powerfully about the outsourcing of the assessment process, which we all know is simply not working from our experience with the work capability assessment. It is about time that those assessments were brought back in-house because there is poor-quality decision making and no scrutiny. Frankly, it is unacceptable that taxpayers' money is going out to those providers.

Ruth George: Does my hon. Friend agree that outsourcing decisions waste money and are against the interest of claimants? Discrepancies between Capita, which sees 59% of claimants at home for a home assessment, and Atos, which does the vast majority of PIP assessments but sees only 16% of claimants at home, expose the divisions in the private sector and show why the assessments should be brought back in-house and monitored properly.

Marsha De Cordova: It is important that the Government listen to the valid point made by my hon. Friend, and I hope the Minister will address it. We have heard testimony about the Department's approach to disabled people. People said that it felt cold and that they were not treated as human beings, but they have to engage with it.

I pay tribute to my many hon. Friends who have spoken—it is important that so many of them are here—including my hon. Friends the Members for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), for North Durham (Mr Jones), for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith), for Reading East (Matt Rodda), and for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones), and the good interventions from my hon. Friends the Members for High Peak (Ruth George) and for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green).

My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby highlighted the points about face-to-face assessments well. The assessment process, the centres and the information provided have to be accessible, but that is not happening on all occasions. That needs to change. This debate has been called because of the crisis in the claimant experience of personal independence payments.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Having witnessed the way in which the Tory party did politics in the run-up to the 2010 election and having sat opposite them between 2010 and 2015, this is not an accident. It is a deliberate part of the party's electoral strategy: to demonise the poor and to say that this country's problems are caused by the most vulnerable people in our society. The experience that claimants receive is a deliberate part of the Conservatives' political strategy.

Marsha De Cordova: My hon. Friend is spot on. Let us be clear: from the outset in 2010, the Government's fundamental aim for the new benefit was to make savings and to reduce the case load of disability benefit claimants. That is a fact. The expectation was to make a saving of 20%, which equated to around £1.5 billion. It is untrue to say that that was not the case. PIP was supposed to cover the additional costs of living with a disability, but that has not been the case in practice. The assessment framework is flawed and it causes delays.

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): Having heard the cases that have been discussed, does my hon. Friend agree that the process is dehumanising? It degrades individuals who are at their most vulnerable. Does she also agree that we need to take a two-pronged approach? The private sector makes millions of pounds and causes misery for others, but we must also bear in mind the fact that the policy itself is seriously flawed.

Marsha De Cordova: My hon. Friend, too, makes a valid point. We have to look at the policy intention behind PIP's introduction—to make savings and to reduce the number of disabled people who were entitled to the benefit.

The assessment framework creates a series of financial problems. Poor-quality decision making has led to disabled people losing vital financial support. The evidence is damning—it is there for all to see. When decisions are challenged, in 68% of cases taken to tribunal the finding is in favour of the claimant. That indicates that there is a problem. The process is lengthy and stressful, and many people do not know how to challenge a decision or what they need to do, so many will go without and lose that financial support.

If a claimant wants to challenge a PIP decision, they must first ask for a mandatory reconsideration, as my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham discussed in detail. That was supposed to improve the claims process, but in reality, it has had the opposite effect. Many disability organisations have noted the number of decisions on claims that have passed through the supposedly rigorous mandatory reconsideration stage, but have gone on to be overturned at tribunal.

According to the Department's own figures, about 20% of PIP MR cases lead to the decision being revised. It seems that the appeal tribunal process is being used as a backstop for poor decisions that should have been resolved at the initial stage or at the mandatory reconsideration.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): My constituent, Anthony, who visited my surgery on Friday, has a chronic illness. He has been through the process up to the point that my hon. Friend describes and he is awaiting a date for the appeal court. He will lose his car

in April. He has been to advice centres to seek advice, but they are full with a backlog, so he has now come to me. Without a date for the appeal process, what can be done and what should the Government do? He faces months and months of distress.

Marsha De Cordova: Perhaps the Minister can clarify what my hon. Friend's constituent should do. We cannot have individuals losing their vehicles unnecessarily.

Poor decision making is taking place. It has become so bad that the most senior tribunal judge said that the evidence provided by the Department was so poor that it would be "wholly inadmissible" in any other court. There has been a 900% increase in complaints about PIP.

I will talk briefly about the High Court decision. There was an urgent question yesterday, but I am not sure that the Minister answered all the points that were made. The regulations were introduced to reduce the number of claimants who qualify for PIP. The High Court said that they were "blatantly discriminatory" against people with mental health conditions. What is most scary is that but for the High Court decision, the Government could have just carried on as usual.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Marsha De Cordova: I cannot take any more interventions—I apologise.

Where do we go from here? Clearly, the Government have no idea when the examination of those 1.6 million claimants will take place. Will it be weeks, months or years? The Minister has not provided a good timeframe and I ask again if she can give us a timeframe as to when the PIP assessment guide will be updated. When will the backdated payments begin to be paid? Will there be compensation for PIP recipients who have incurred debt as a result of those regulations? Will the Department update its administration and staffing costs, which are also expected to be published? Will the Minister guarantee that no claimant will lose out as a result of their case being reconsidered? Given the damage that has already been caused, it is simply not good enough that Parliament and PIP claimants are being left in limbo while Ministers are trying to get their house in order. There have already been two independent reviews by Paul Gray, but the recommendations of the most recent one were accepted only in part by the Government.

The Minister has accused the Labour party of scaremongering. That is wholly untrue. The wealth of evidence presented today has highlighted the human impact of these benefits policies. The UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has found the Government in breach and is still waiting for them to respond. The Equality and Human Rights Commission has called on the Government to carry out a full cumulative impact assessment of their welfare reforms, but they still have not done so. Only last week, the European Committee of Social Rights found the Government to be in violation of the European social charter. Something is clearly wrong. Labour has made it clear that we would scrap the assessment regime and replace it with a good, open and holistic assessment framework.

10.50 am

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I thank the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) for securing this really important debate. I always welcome every opportunity to discuss PIP with parliamentary colleagues from all parties, and I hold regular advice surgeries.

I have so little time and have been asked so many questions that it will clearly not be possible to reply to them all, but I shall try to respond to as many as I can, which means that I will not be able to take any interventions. However, I have already set out a calendar of forthcoming events at which Members can come and speak to me. I understand how busy colleagues are, so if it is more convenient they can ask their caseworkers to come, bringing the cases that have been raised today so that we can go through them in detail.

It is clear from the cases that have been raised passionately and sincerely today that there are problems—I readily acknowledge them, and we are working hard to fix them. However, I have also heard a lot of confusion. Some hon. Members have raised issues that relate to ESA, not to PIP. Clearly some people are not aware of other financial support programmes such as Access to Work, which could help in some of the cases raised. A lot more support is available than hon. Members may realise, which is why I am running detailed teach-ins to ensure that all Members fully understand the wide range of support available.

Before I answer hon. Members' detailed questions, I really want to set the record straight. Accusations have been made today, about me as a Conservative and about all Conservatives, that frankly I am not going to accept. It is simply not fair to say that Conservatives think disabled people are scroungers or do not deserve the support that we so want them to have. Conservatives want to ensure that everybody in our society can play their full part. We want to support people with disabilities to do so. Judge us on our actions.

Myths have been cited repeatedly that we are cutting spending on supporting people with disabilities or health conditions. Independent data shows that that is simply not true. Every single year since 2010, the coalition Government and now the Conservative Government have spent more and more money, and we are committed to spending more. Expenditure on the main disability benefits has increased by more than £4.1 billion in real terms since 2010 and is set to reach a record high of more than £23 billion this year. It will continue to grow each year to 2022.

People have been scaremongering because they do not remember that people on disability benefits are exempt from the benefits freezes and that their benefits will rise again this year. PIP is not included in the benefits cap. As I said yesterday, it is really important that we get the facts out there. It really concerns me that people who really need support will be put off from going to jobcentres or contacting us to get the benefits that they need and richly deserve.

We have heard a lot about the claimant experience and the customer experience. In my short time at the DWP, I have visited DLA processing centres, assessment centres and Jobcentre Plus offices, where I have seen DWP staff who are highly motivated and well trained to provide a good service to some of the most vulnerable

people in society. I really encourage hon. Members who have not done so to visit their local Jobcentre Plus, speak to job coaches and see the excellent work that goes into supporting people with disabilities and ensuring that they get the support available. That includes support into work; a huge number of people with disabilities want to work, and we want to enable them to.

Hundreds of thousands more people are now getting support as a result of PIP than with DLA. In the constituency of the hon. Member for North West Durham, as we migrate people from DLA to PIP, 900 people's awards have been increased. Some 41% of her constituents who have moved from DLA to PIP are getting more money. When Opposition MPs say, "Let's scrap PIP and all go back to DLA," they are saying that they would deny their constituents an opportunity to benefit from PIP. More people, particularly with mental health conditions, are being supported now than were ever supported under DLA.

I want to bust a myth. In this country, we are all rightly proud of our welfare state, but there is a myth that it was a Labour invention. Developing the welfare state took many MPs from all parties over a considerable period. I am just as proud of the modern welfare state as any other Member of this House. The first woman MP in Cornwall, Beatrice Rathbone, was a Conservative. She worked with her auntie Eleanor Rathbone, and together they were pivotal in the legislation that brought in the welfare state—a milestone whose anniversaries we still celebrate. It was people reaching across the political divide, working for the benefit of the most vulnerable in our society, who enabled us to develop the modern welfare state. Conservative Members are just as passionate about ensuring the best possible support for the most vulnerable people in our society.

I assure all hon. Members that, like my predecessors, I am committed to continuous improvement. We have commissioned independent reviews of the PIP process and we are taking their recommendations on board. We are working closely with stakeholders. Only last week, I had a meeting with my PIP stakeholder group, which includes representatives of all the main UK disability rights organisations and charities, including disability rights organisations from local authorities around the country. I will be setting up panels of ESA and PIP claimants to ensure that we listen directly to their experiences as we embark on our continuous improvement process.

It is also important to revisit current experiences. I accept that we always have to make improvements, but 89% of people said that they felt that the assessor treated them with respect and dignity. Undoubtedly we have more to do, but I am committed to making the improvements that we all want to see.

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Ms Pidcock, you have only 30 seconds, I am afraid.

10.59 am

Laura Pidcock: I am completely astounded by the Minister's use of her time. She ignored every single one of our points. I would like her to write to every single Member who took time to set out in detail the inadequacies of the system, because they were all completely ignored while she spoke about Conservative Members, the history of the Conservative party and justice on welfare.

[*Laura Pidcock*]

The Minister said that the Government would be judged on their actions. They certainly will. Every single disabled person in this country is waiting to see what the Government will do to remedy the system's inadequacies. An alternative reality is being presented by Conservative Members—

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Order.

Laura Pidcock: Their use of figures diminishes disabled people's experiences. It is a shambolic system.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

People with Mental Health Problems: Detainment

11.1 am

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered procedures regarding the detention of people with mental health problems.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie, and I am very pleased to have obtained the opportunity to—[*Interruption.*]

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Order.

Mr Carmichael: Thank you, Mr Hosie; I am grateful for your chairmanship.

I am delighted to have obtained the opportunity to bring this matter before the House. It strikes me that there may be a large cross-over between many of the people whom we are about to discuss and those with whom the House has just concerned itself.

In recent years, as a community and a society, we have made remarkable progress on our attitudes to mental health. To talk about mental illness is no longer the taboo that it was when I was growing up, and as a consequence we have seen remarkable progress in recent years in relation to the treatment of people, especially in our national health service.

Today, I will focus attention on a slightly different aspect of this issue—one that does not get the same attention as the treatment of people with mental health problems in the NHS. I will talk about the experience of people who come into contact with the criminal justice system—initially, of course, with the police, then with the prosecution services and, possibly, the prison authorities. The purpose of this debate is to make it clear to the Minister that within those agencies of the state, we need a change of attitude and culture similar to those we have seen in other aspects of our daily life.

It is surprising that this issue does not get more attention. Many of the people about whom we are speaking often exhibit in public or private what might euphemistically be called “challenging behaviour”, which is a symptom or consequence of their mental illness. It seems to me that at all levels—in the police, the prosecution services, the courts and the prisons—we need a greater level of understanding of their life experience and, as a consequence, better implementation of procedures. In fact, many procedures are pretty good but, as I will come on to explain, they are not followed in a way that is appropriate or that was intended when they were put in place.

I confess that I had rather thought that, within the criminal justice system, we had got beyond that point. Almost a quarter of a century ago, both as a trainee solicitor in Aberdeen and as a prosecutor, I railed against some police officers who, at that stage, still reported people who had attempted suicide, alleging that they had breached the peace. That attitude belonged in the 19th century, not the 20th, and I hope that such things would not happen today. However, it illustrates the underlying attitude that requires exposure.

My interest in this issue was first engaged as a result of a constituent—a lady resident in Orkney—who came to see me because she was concerned about the treatment of her son. This is not an isolated case. From discussions

that I have had with people in the police, the criminal justice system and social work, I believe that it illustrates pretty well many of the ways in which the criminal justice system fails to meet the needs of people in our community, especially those who suffer from mental health problems.

I will not name these people; my constituent and her son want to retain their privacy, which is perfectly legitimate. However, the Minister should be acquainted with this case; last week, I forwarded him my correspondence file, which is fairly substantial, so that he would be aware of the background.

My constituent's son is resident in Romford. He has a history of mental illness problems, but prior to the episode that I will discuss he had taken himself off some of the medication that he had been prescribed, because it had side effects that disagreed with him. He was reported missing by his partner on 27 April 2014. She contacted the police because she was concerned that he might kill himself. Eventually, he was traced by two police constables to a shopping centre in Romford. Questioned by the constables on the street, he told them that he was in possession of two kitchen knives, and at that stage he said that he did not intend to harm others; later in an interview, he said that he was considering harming some of those he loved.

The detaining officers—the two police constables on the street—proceeded, quite rightly in my view, to detain my constituent's son under section 136 of the Mental Health Act 1983. Given the information that his partner had provided the police and what he himself had said to them in the street, that seems to have been an entirely sensible step to take. Afterwards, as a standard procedure, the constables contacted their station sergeant. The sergeant instructed them to take him—let us just call him “M” for the purposes of today—not to a place of safety, that is the hospital, but back to Romford police station, where he would be interviewed under caution. That was done and the interview was conducted. There was no legal representation for M when he was in the police station and there was no appropriate adult present either.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on the speech he is making. Does he agree that, at that point in the police station, it should be a requirement of the system for investigating officers to inquire as to whether the individual is already under treatment by a mental health team and, if so, for them to seek information from that team about the individual's psychological condition?

Mr Carmichael: I am almost certain that if the medical condition being experienced by the person in custody was physical rather than mental, that course of action would be routine—simply what was expected. That is what I mean when I talk about a culture change being necessary. We need to treat people with mental illness in exactly the same way as we would treat people with a physical illness.

In fact, M disclosed in the course of his interview under caution, which unfortunately was not tape-recorded, that he was hearing voices and that he had been on medication, but had stopped taking it because of its various side effects. At the conclusion of the interview, he was charged with possession of a bladed article

under section 139 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988. He was seen by medical professionals at some point in the course of his detention. I eventually had to submit on behalf of my constituent a data subject access request to get the custody records to find out the names of those medical practitioners. I still do not know their qualifications or whether they had, as the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) mentioned, access to the records that would have disclosed his full treatment history.

My constituent's son eventually appeared the next day, 28 April 2014, at Barkingside magistrates court. He pleaded guilty and was remanded in custody until 12 May for psychiatric reports. Those were not available on 12 May or 14 May—a familiar story for anyone who deals with the summary courts—and he eventually appeared on 21 May, when those medical reports were available. Unfortunately, at that point it was apparent that the probation service reports were not available. It was 11 June before his case was finally disposed of. He was admitted to bail on 21 May and sentenced on 11 June. He was placed on a community order for six months on the condition that he remained under the supervision of the police service. In the meantime, he spent something in excess of three weeks in Pentonville prison, on remand and in custody, and 24 hours in police custody over a case that ultimately resulted in a community disposal.

I have enormous regard for those who staff and manage our prisons, but I do not know of any body of work that suggests that people suffering from a mental health problem are ever helped by being locked up in prison. That is essentially the point here. If my constituent's son had been taken not to the police station, but to a hospital where he could have been treated and stabilised at the earliest possible stage, an inappropriate use of resource would have been avoided and he would have got the treatment he required.

Following the community order, I became involved with my constituent and a lengthy correspondence ensued. Fast-forwarding to 12 February 2015, I eventually received a letter from a deputy assistant commissioner at the directorate of professionalism within the Metropolitan police—she is a fairly senior officer—that concluded that my constituent's son's

“welfare and mental health was correctly managed during his time in police detention and that he was assessed as being of sufficient mental capacity to understand his actions on the day in question.”

She concurred that the officers had “acted correctly.” Unsurprisingly, my constituent was disinclined to let matters rest at that point. There was further correspondence, including with somebody with the glorious title of “professional standards champion”. That was not particularly fruitful, and it led eventually to a complaint to the Independent Police Complaints Commission.

On 25 January 2016—this is getting on for two years after the initial incident—the IPCC upheld the complaint. It observed in passing that the constable who had been the original arresting officer had received management action in relation to the Metropolitan police's mental health policy; I pause here to say in parentheses that the only person in this whole sorry saga who acted correctly was the original arresting officer. At every stage in the process, he seems to be the one who gets the training, the management interventions and the counselling. If this poor constable is sitting somewhere in a police

[*Mr Carmichael*]

station in London sticking pins into an effigy of me, I would not blame him, but he was never the object of our concern. It was the failure of those above him to implement their own procedures properly that has probably brought us to this point today.

Thereafter, the correspondence between the Metropolitan police and me discloses a culture that requires change. The concept of professionalism, a directorate of professionalism and professionalism champions seem to exist for the purpose of protecting police officers, rather than admitting fault, learning from the experience and moving on. Those things exist for the protection of colleagues, rather than the investigation of complaints. To this day, I still do not know the qualifications of the force medical examiner who saw my constituent's son in custody. I suspect that having made a data subject access request, I will get that information if I go to the Information Commissioner, but the fact that I have to anticipate that tells us everything we need to know about how such complaints are handled.

In many ways, my constituent's son is fortunate. The episode was not perhaps as acute as it might have been. He is particularly fortunate to have a mother who is an intelligent, strong-willed, determined and articulate woman. She was never going to be fobbed off with excuses or half-answers. Without the support of his mother in Orkney or the support my office has been able to give him through her being my constituent, I am pretty certain that these questions would have gone unanswered. I am pretty sure that the original arresting officer will be inclined in the future simply to do what he has been told by his superiors. In that way, the culture and the mistakes continue.

The Metropolitan Police Service could probably have dealt with this issue in April, May or June 2014 had they simply accepted that they made a mistake and apologised. They did not do so because of the culture that exists. I suspect and have good reason to believe—I speak often to police officers and others within the criminal justice system in London and other parts of the country—that that culture continues to exist. That requires change if we are to give people who suffer mental health illnesses and who come into contact with the criminal justice system the treatment and respect they deserve.

10.17 am

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this debate and the way in which he presented it. Perhaps coincidentally, it follows a debate I was here for yesterday on perceived failings in the way in which the criminal justice system deals with people on the autism spectrum.

The underlying challenge is the same: it is about awareness, understanding and ensuring not just that the right protocols are in place, but that they are implemented by human beings. That is a challenge, and I wholly endorse what the right hon. Gentleman said about the progress we have made as a society and a Parliament in our understanding of mental health and the consequential

priority that we need to attach to it. I pay tribute to his work on that in the Cabinet of the coalition Government, and to the work of many of his colleagues, not least the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who is tireless on this subject.

We have made progress, but the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland is entirely right to raise tough questions about implementation and culture inside the criminal justice system and the police system. I do not think anyone would argue that the police are the agency best suited to dealing with people who are solely or primarily unwell by virtue of mental ill health, but the reality is that the police spend a lot of their time dealing with, supporting and safeguarding people on the mental health spectrum.

I have just completed a tour of our police system in which I talked to every single police force in England and Wales. One of the most consistent themes in all those conversations was concern about the increasing amount of time that our police officers spend with people who have a spectrum of mental health concerns. In some of those cases, that is entirely right and appropriate, because those people may be pursuing criminal activity or there may be a public safety issue. Increasingly, however, the police are being called into situations to which those two criteria do not apply. That is increasingly uncomfortable territory for them, because they are not necessarily the most appropriately qualified people to deal with such situations.

Let me address the right hon. Gentleman's fundamental point about culture. I must put on record some of the improvements and the good things that are happening, but I need to acknowledge that there remains a stubborn cultural issue around how the police, and other bits of the public sector system, respond to complaints. I have been very explicit with the new chief executive of the Independent Office for Police Conduct, which is the new body that is taking over from the Independent Police Complaints Commission, that the Government, the IOPC and the police need to work together to try to change the culture. That is much easier to say than to do.

Too often when something goes wrong, as it inevitably will, there is a tendency to circle the wagons, blow smoke and protect the police family. We need to move away from that, and towards a culture of learning from mistakes. That is how the police improve. I argue strongly that doing so is very much in the interests of the police family, because we police by consent. That is built on a foundation of trust in our police system. Incidents such as that which the right hon. Gentleman recounted chip away at confidence and trust in our police. Therefore, it is in the interests of the police system to embrace the need for a new culture. When I speak to the superintendents conference, they volunteer that that is what we need to do.

It is a cultural change. I do not think the problem is necessarily with the frameworks, the procedures, the standards or the rights of prisoners in custody. We have made considerable progress on that, but I acknowledge that there remains a stubborn problem with its implementation in practice.

Kate Green: I accept what the Minister says about culture, but I wonder whether he could look at one systems issue, namely the matter of obtaining medical

information from a person's own mental health practitioner where an individual in detention is already under the care of mental health services. I understand that is not part of routine procedure at the moment. Will the Minister go and look at that, and see whether it should be?

Mr Hurd: I certainly give an undertaking to the hon. Lady that I will look into that. Prisoner rights in custody are pretty clear in terms of the duties on a custody officer—a custody officer is required to determine whether a detainee is, or might be, in need of medical treatment or attention, and to make sure that he or she receives appropriate treatment or attention if he or she appears to be suffering from an illness or injury or a mental disorder—but I give the hon. Lady that undertaking and will write to her.

Having acknowledged the point made by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland, I want to place on record some of the genuine improvements that have been made. He raises a real concern, which has weight in the police system because of the amount of time police officers spend, in the modern age, dealing with people on the mental health spectrum.

A considerable effort has been made in recent years to improve local responses. Crisis care concordat partnerships have been successful in pushing people together at a local level to address long-standing issues such as the overuse of police cells as places of safety. As I have gone around the system, I have been very impressed to hear about the various triage schemes in many areas. Those schemes encourage closer working and exchange of real-time information between the police and health professionals. There are different models. Some have health staff embedded in police control centres. Others have health professionals working alongside police on the ground, and sometimes in the custody suites. The common feature of those models is that they enable the police to deal more confidently with people in crisis, informed by professional advice about the best solution.

Many areas are developing community-based voluntary sector or partnership drop-in centres—sometimes called crisis cafes or places of calm—to which those who feel themselves nearing a crisis may be referred, or may self-refer, for support and advice. Such co-operation mechanisms have resulted in a significant and, I hope, welcome reduction in the use of police stations for those who have committed no offence. In 2016-17, a little more than 1,000 such uses were recorded, compared with just under 8,500 in 2012-13, so there is progress on that front.

We are changing the powers available to the police under the Mental Health Act 1983. In particular, the use of police stations as places of safety has been completely banned for under-18s. For adults, regulations now set out very specific criteria on when a police station can be used. Police officers are required, if practicable, to consult a mental health practitioner before detaining a person under section 136, but I will come back to the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) with a more refined position on requirements to consult the individual's own medical practitioner.

The period for which a person may be detained for the purposes of a mental health assessment under section 135 or section 136 is now reduced to 24 hours to ensure such assessments and arrangements for further care are completed as swiftly as possible and that people are not

unnecessarily delayed. Police powers to detain a person under section 136 have been extended to any place other than a private dwelling, enabling the police to act promptly in places such as workplaces.

Better community partnership and changes to the 1983 Act have clearly made a difference.

Mr Carmichael: The point on which the IPCC upheld the complaint of my constituent's son was that he should have been detained under section 136 as well as the Criminal Justice Act 1988 provisions, and that did not happen. That was a fairly narrow point, in many ways, but anecdotal evidence suggests that it is fairly widespread. What is the Home Office doing to establish an objective picture and find out what is happening on the ground? I suspect the procedures are not that bad, but the implementation requires some attention.

Mr Hurd: I accept the point that the IPCC found that guidance to detain under both section 136 and for any accepted offence had been breached in that case. I am not quite sure how long it took between 2014 and that judgment—probably too long. I accept that, but I come back to my earlier point. The right hon. Gentleman will know from experience that from the specific, we learn and probe general application. That is why our complaints process must work better than it does at the moment, not just for his constituent's son and others in that position, but for the police officers concerned.

A lot of police officers are, in their words, being left out to dry for long periods of time, while the processes take too long. We want a swift process of finding the truth; we want accountability—accountability matters—but then we want a culture of learning and thinking, "What have we learned, and what are we doing about it?" We are not there yet, but everyone is talking about it in the right way. Part of my responsibility as Policing Minister is to continue pushing on that.

I am running out of time, but I should mention that if a person who has been detained for an offence is identified as having possible mental health or substance misuse issues, they may be referred to liaison and diversion workers for advice and onward referral to support services. Such schemes now provide support across 80% of police custody suites and courts in England, with the expectation that 100% coverage will be achieved by 2021.

On police use of force, a new memorandum of understanding between police forces and mental health and disability settings was finalised in 2017. At the extreme end of that is the response that we have to make to the report on deaths in custody. Some of the issues that the right hon. Gentleman has picked away at—the human testimonies, and the attitudes of the police when they feel defensive—come through very clearly in that report, and we have to break those down.

As I hope I have made clear, across a range of the avenues available to the Government, we are making some progress. I repeat my undertaking to come back to the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston on her question.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Prisoners: Outdoors Endurance Activities

[MR GEORGE HOWARTH *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered outdoors endurance activities for prisoners.

It is a honour to be here and a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth—I do not think that I have been fortunate enough to do so before. I welcome colleagues on both sides of the House to the debate.

I start by praising and thanking all those who serve in the Prison Service. I frequently call them members of the forgotten army. Being an ex-soldier myself, I think that is rather appropriate, because all too often our prison officers are forgotten. There is no doubt that much can, and should, be done to improve their working environment, but I will not expand on that today. I am here to promote an exciting initiative that was trialled in Scotland and then taken on by the former MP for West Dorset, Sir Jim Spicer, who sadly is no longer with us.

In the Gallery today there are three distinguished guests, two of whom sit on the Airborne Initiative committee. Buffy Sacher has years of experience in the Prison Service, and General Sir Rupert Smith inspired me personally when he came to address young officer cadets at Sandhurst in—I think we agreed at lunchtime—1978, which was many years ago. As we all know, he has served with huge distinction in our armed forces for many years. With them is Keith Potter, a resettlement officer in the Prison Service at the young offenders institution Her Majesty's Prison Feltham, where the Airborne Initiative is currently being run. I thank them all for their input. I also thank Russ Trent, who was the governor of the young offenders institution HMP Portland and is now the governor of HMP Berwyn—I hope I got the Welsh right.

I am delighted that the Minister—I have a huge amount of respect for him, as we all do—is here, and I thank him for his time. I am speaking today about a remarkable organisation that helps young offenders and those on the margins of criminality to achieve their potential by building self-worth and giving participants a sense of achievement.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): When I read the motion, I thought that outdoor endurance for prisoners meant being on the run. I suspect and hope that my hon. Friend will disabuse me of that notion and talk about a fantastic improvement in reoffending rates, which we would all welcome. I am sure that he will touch on that, if that is indeed the case.

Richard Drax: I always welcome interventions from my hon. Friend, given his sense of humour. The whole point of the initiative, he will be glad to hear, is to stop prisoners running and reoffending. I will say more on that in a moment.

The Airborne Initiative is a five-day residential course on Dartmoor. Candidates are serving young offenders, former young offenders, those in halfway houses and those not in employment, education or training. That includes young men who are allowed out of prison on licence, are serving a community sentence or have been identified in their communities as being at risk of offending.

I hasten to say that, so far, no young women have taken the course, in the main because there are 20 times more men in prison than women.

The aim of the project is to keep those people out of jail, and certainly to discourage them from returning, as well as to encourage them to strive for more positive goals in life and, of course, to build self-reliance and self-respect. The Airborne Initiative was born out of a pioneering experiment in 1994 in Lanarkshire, in Scotland. For 10 years, specialist social workers and outdoor recreation experts took in hundreds of male criminals aged between 18 and 25, and combined outdoor physical activities with counselling for youths who had not responded to conventional punishment and rehabilitation.

As the name suggests, the scheme was supported and inspired by the regimental elders of the Parachute Regiment, of which Sir Jim Spicer was a notable member. Admirably, the regiment decided to give something back to the region from which it had drawn so many of its recruits. Despite having measurable effects on the rates of reoffending, the Lanarkshire Airborne Initiative was controversially wound up by the Scottish Executive in 2004. I became involved personally in the project when Sir Jim called me and asked for my help, which I was more than happy to give. Sir Jim had decided to pilot the scheme at the young offenders institution HMP Portland, using all the experience gained in Scotland. He wanted to establish a course that would be an alternative to custody, as opposed to a pre-release course. However, unlike in the Scottish scheme, the Prison Service, along with volunteers, would run the course and provide the instructors, with serving members of the Parachute Regiment in support as often as resources permitted.

The new initiative was greatly helped by the generous donation of the use of the Duchy of Cornwall's Dartmoor base, through Prince Charles's capacity as colonel-in-chief of the Parachute Regiment. The Airborne Initiative is also extremely fortunate to have had two serving paratroopers assigned to each of its last seven courses. The carefully selected young paratroopers are generally a few years older than the participants, although closer in age and experience to the participants than most of those in authority with whom they have to deal. The extra guidance and support that the young soldiers provide, together with their obvious professionalism and resourcefulness, act as a powerful example of alternative life choices. I am told that the feedback from candidates is very positive.

I saw a before-and-after video of, if I recall correctly, one of the first courses in HMP Portland. Six or seven young men were interviewed before they went on the course, and again a week later, after they had attended the course. In the first interview, I saw what we would all expect. Regrettably, I saw the stereotypical image that is all too frequently associated with young men in prison: lack of inspiration, complete lack of interest, an "all about them" attitude, and no life aspiration at all. Probably there were lots of very complicated reasons for that—reasons that many of us here could not understand, not least home break-up.

Off they went. Then the governor said, "Now, look at this." Then I saw the film after they had all come back. After only a week, their body language was completely different. They sat up straight. They talked to their instructors. They spoke to one another. One young man

turned to the others and said, "I'm very sorry I got you lost for hours on end." I said, "Hold the movie just there. That young man has just apologised to his colleagues for getting lost." After six days, a tiny light had come on in that young man's mind about responsibility, camaraderie and friendship.

Enduring the outdoors can be tough, not least on Dartmoor. I should know, having walked across it enough times. It is purpose-built to capture young men and women—although, as I say, no women have been on the course yet—who are slightly lost for many complicated reasons. All that comes at very little cost to the Government. Airborne Initiative is a charity, and one that is proving very effective. I was impressed, and the video reaffirmed in my mind that supporting this noble endeavour was the right thing to do. I very much hope that the Minister will respond to my speech positively and reassure me and our guests, who work so hard for this cause, that there is a way forward in the Prison Service to expand it further or, if not, to give the existing set-up the resources to do the job properly.

Today, YOI Portland has evolved into a resettlement prison, with fewer youths available for Airborne Initiative exercises, and the beneficiaries of that are the young men at YOI Feltham and Brinsford. The project is ably managed by the new course instructors: Keith Potter, who is with us today, Gavin Raines at Feltham and Lee Edwards and Rob Cowley at Brinsford. Each course caters for 15 to 22 young people, who are usually aged between 18 and 21, with candidates carefully chosen by governors, prison officers and other youth workers. According to a recent instructor's report, a typical course includes dawn starts, circuit training, caving, swimming in the River Dart before breakfast—and why not?—and then a good hike, orienteering, hill walking, ice baths to repair aching muscles, cooking and obstacle courses, all complemented by fireside chats in which emotive topics are tackled.

All of us—I am sure that includes the Minister, beside whose endeavours and adventures mine, frankly, pale into insignificance—have sat round a campfire and talked to people from many backgrounds. I assure you, Mr Howarth, there is no better time to have a chat about life than when you are sitting there wrapped up warm, ideally with a whisky in your hand, and pouring out your woes—or not—to those around you. It engenders a very rare sense of camaraderie.

The course activities are all aimed at learning about leadership, responsibility and team-building skills. Obviously, it is challenging in places and tests an individual's stamina, determination and physical and mental strength. Young men are taken out of their comfort zones and must learn to react positively to the environment they find themselves in.

In another experiment that I witnessed—this time, as a journalist with the BBC—I was asked to go to the New Forest to observe a two-day project run by volunteers from the fire service, the police and the ambulance service. There were 12 young people divided into three teams of four: the baddies, the not so bad and those who were there because they had been quite good and deserved a break. That was quite a range of individuals. I soon spotted the baddies, who were all too easy to spot. They were dressed in their tracksuits, and, again, their body language was: "not interested". The phones were on, and they were not listening.

The first task, given by an ex-Royal Marine sergeant-major who was built like a tank—not a man to mess with—was to erect a tent to keep them warm at night. It was one of those dreadful tents with lots of bits, not one of the modern ones that go "pfting!" and the whole thing pops up. The instructors said to the 12 people, "You'd better make some cover for the night," and they started to build their tent. After about an hour, it got to a certain height, but no way was it going to provide the cover necessary.

The staff all went over, gathered the young men and women around and said, "Okay. What lessons have you learned?" There was a pause, and there were grunts and groans, and then one asked, "How do we actually do it?" The sergeant-major said, "Young man, that is the very first question you have got right. How do you do it? We will show you." The staff got the tent and showed them how to do it. They all joined in and the tent was erected.

The young people were given various tasks to do. The two troublesome young men were intentionally sent on an assault course with two of the girls on the course. It was not very difficult, but the point was to see how the young men would cope with the young girls. The young boys thought they were tough and they were going to win at all costs, but as soon as they got on to the assault course and the girls started lagging behind, they had a choice: plough on or go back. Both went back and, by the end of the assault course, the girls were being encouraged and helped—"come on, come on, let's do it"—and they got to the end, and they won. The change on those young people's faces! The sergeant-major turned to me and said, "Richard, tell that to the do-gooders. Show this to the do-gooders."

The point of my story is that it takes so little to turn these young people around, whether they are young men or women in prison or the younger generation that might, sadly, end up in prison. We can get to them. The answers are not complicated.

The Airborne Initiative boosts self-esteem while teaching self-discipline and the value of the group. It creates a strong work ethic and challenges the young participants to achieve their own personal successes; so often, they have, sadly, achieved none. So far, 331 youngsters have benefited from the beauty of Dartmoor and all it can teach. Each individual has a report sent to their probation officer regarding their individual performance and specific achievements. Measuring outcomes is, of course, a longer process. Successful completion of the course triggers work opportunities, helps to build a CV and enables successful candidates to gain valuable life skills.

For the country at large, the benefits are manifest. The current reoffending rates for prisoners in the first year after leaving prison is 65%, which is a horrendous figure. Over the past four years, more than 200 young offenders have been through the course and reoffending rates have dropped dramatically. A fifth have gone into further education, training or work.

The Airborne Initiative has already held more than 30 courses on Dartmoor. Another seven are planned each year, with up to 22 participants taking part in each course. The initiative is working with the police and probation service, and courses are now included as part of an offender's community service. In South Dorset,

[Richard Drax]

we are justifiably proud of our role in developing the project. Former YOI governor Russ Trent, a big supporter of the initiative when he was at the helm, said:

“I have personally seen young men grow in confidence and build trust with people in authority during the Airborne Initiative. It’s a great programme that brings different parts of the criminal justice system together.”

There appears to be no downside to the initiative. With its success in cutting re-offending and helping young people to evade criminality, it should be cherished and promoted. That is the crux. For an enlightened scheme such as the Airborne Initiative to thrive and survive, it needs the participation of all parts of the criminal justice system, from governors to prison officers, the young offenders themselves, the probation service and all the other organisations associated with prison life. Regrettably, and to everyone’s detriment, the current situation in our prisons is becoming so difficult that even the most enthusiastic governors are unable to release prison officers to accompany their charges on the course.

Bill Wiggin: In my constituency, Monty Don, the television celebrity, led a team of young people. They gardened and kept some pigs and there was a huge improvement in their behaviour. A lot of them were drug addicts and drug dealers.

Any sort of interaction of any kind is a good thing, because cutting reoffending rates must be the Government’s No. 1 priority. Will my hon. Friend elaborate? We know that 20% of participants went into higher education, but is there anything further to say about the reoffending rate? Perhaps the Minister will elaborate. It would be the icing on the cake.

Richard Drax: I am not at liberty to give the exact figure on the reoffending rate, because the participants are still being monitored. There is a figure, but as the organisation is a charity it needs the support of an organisation such as the justice system to confirm its own figures and say, “Yes, you are absolutely right—it is x%”. All I can tell my hon. Friend, from the evidence I have, is that it is dramatic.

One issue that I want gently to bang home is release on temporary licence. I understand from the experts that the rules were changed in 2015. I have had dealings with governors at both the YOI and The Verne, which was a prison and is going to be one again shortly, and they say that they are unable to release prisoners because the criteria are so strict and inflexible.

The point that General Sir Rupert Smith made to me today was to compare a young man on a moor and a young man in a city centre maintaining someone’s garden or whatever. It is highly unlikely, if not impossible, that the young man on the moor will wander off and do damage, whereas the young man in an urban environment could slip away, thump somebody or commit another crime. The system does not allow that sort of flexibility. That is the plea of all three people sitting behind me in the Public Gallery. I know from the governors I have spoken to that ROTL needs to be looked at urgently.

I know that the Minister agrees that we need to hand back power to governors—I have heard the Government and the Minister say that. Let us do a little more than

suggest it; let us do it. Let us say to governors, “It’s up to you,” rather than mollicoddling or health-and-safetying—whatever the right word is nowadays. I believe that, if someone is in charge of something, they are ultimately responsible—that is their job. If something goes wrong in the police, the chief constable gets it in the neck. If something goes wrong in a prison, the governor gets it in the neck. If a Minister makes a total mess, he or she resigns.

There is no point in having something else to protect the person because that will negate the thing or create inflexibility, and they will be so terrified about letting prisoners out that they will just not do it. Let us be confident. The men and women running our prisons are professionals. Let them say, “Okay, Bob, Jack and Robert, you can go, but you three certainly can’t because you are too much of a risk. That is the assessment I have made. Off you go.” That is my plea, and if the Minister can respond to that point we will all be extremely grateful.

Several times recently, participants’ places on courses have been cancelled at the last minute. The last course in June, which was set up for 22 candidates, eventually ran with only 15 due to staff shortages and crises requiring manpower elsewhere in the Prison Service. For the Airborne Initiative, that is not cost-effective; for the young men who missed out, it is a tragedy.

As I come to the end of my speech, I want to touch on an issue that I feel passionately about. Buffy Sacher and everybody else will agree with me about what is going on in our Prison Service. What I am about to say highlights my concern. The most recent Independent Monitoring Board report on the YOI in South Dorset, dated September 2017, makes pretty grim reading, unfortunately. It describes

“a broad picture of things worsening and intractable problems persisting”,

and lists serious disturbances and cell damage. The number of staff assaults is rising and the number of prisoners with mental health issues is increasing—and they certainly should not be at a resettlement prison and YOI. Medical facilities are being overwhelmed. The lead member of the safer custody unit has resigned, and the flow of legal highs, such as Spice—I know the Minister is aware of this—is increasing. The report says that access to mobile phones creates

“debt, self-isolation, self-harm, gang activity, violence” and “disruption”.

I inquired a bit further about mobile phones, because I was staggered that prisoners are allowed them. I can see that they are valuable tools for hardened prisoners who operate with their bad colleagues outside. Large debts are incurred for drugs or whatever else the prisoner is given by the gang member in the prison, who is also a prisoner, and then of course demands are made for the debt to be paid. Prisoners end up being bullied and family members outside are threatened; it is very harmful.

I am just a simple ex-soldier—I say take the phones away. Give prisoners access to a phone on the wall once a day, like they used to have. I personally do not understand why they have mobile phones. The IMB also reports

“grave concerns about staffing levels in the prison”,

which, although up to benchmark quotas, are

“unrealistic, given the difficulty of the prison population”.

I invite the Minister to visit the YOI in Portland. We would very much like him to. It is an old building on various landings. It is not a modern prison, which could be managed much more easily. The staff are divided into perhaps two prison officers per landing. If there is a conflict or a disruption on another landing, they are dropped down. They have no choice but to lock the doors—lock the prisoners in. There are not enough officers to manage that old-style prison. I have heard that complaint frequently in my many visits to the prison and the conversations I have had with members of the POA, none of whom are militant—they are all utterly charming and speak to me and the governor in a perfectly reasonable way. Those men and women have an honest gripe, which needs to be looked at.

The IMB report says that prison officers are frequently required to escort prisoners to hospital after drug overdoses, and the remaining prisoners are left in lockdown and are unable to attend educational classes. That means that the sparing of two extra officers to accompany participants to Dartmoor is virtually out of the question.

The Government are well aware of those problems, and I know they are moving swiftly to tackle prisoner officer numbers and pay levels, which is to be welcomed. That cannot come swiftly enough for what I term the forgotten army of prison officers, one of whom described conditions in Portland to the IMB as “Hell”—the “worst it’s been for 20 years”.

The report is not good reading. There have been other instances. A pretty grim report along the same lines was published the other day about a prison in, I think, Liverpool. Until we sort out Portland prison—the YOI is both adult and young offender, with a majority of adults—we cannot hope to get this initiative off the ground, because the prison officers are tied up looking after the prisoners.

Tough love—that is what I call it—has a proven track record. Where it is succeeding, let us back it. I ask the Minister, for whom I have a huge amount of respect, to look seriously at the Airborne Initiative and give it resources and backing at a ministerial and Government level to expand faster and further. There are many organisations providing services to our prisons from the charitable sector, the voluntary sector and the private sector. In my experience some work, and some do not.

My criticism of the whole system is that there is not someone to sieve it all and say, “That’s good; that’s not good. We’ll have that, but we don’t want that. Let’s roll out that; let’s not roll out that.” It is a bit disjointed. This initiative is proving to be good and effective, and is cutting reoffending and giving young men a chance. God forbid, the alternative is years more in jail, which costs us about £40,000 a year for the rest of their lives. That is a fee that none of us wants to pay out of our taxes. This initiative really is worth pursuing, and I am fascinated to hear what the Minister says. I sincerely hope, from my perspective and from that of my three guests, that we have his support.

2.58 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to speak in debates such as this. I congratulate the hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) on bringing this issue to us today. When I saw this debate announced last week, I said to myself, “Here is a scheme that I am interested in.” This year, in just the past few weeks,

we have initiated a similar scheme in Northern Ireland through the Department of Justice, which has responsibility for prisoners. I want to use this opportunity to explain how that scheme works and to support the hon. Gentleman’s proposal.

After hearing the hon. Gentleman’s speech, I will say something quickly that is not directly relevant to this debate, although the analogy could be considered so. In 2016, I read about a survey of 2,000 parents of five to 12-year-olds in a nationally representative sample, which found that 74% of the children spent less than 16 minutes playing outside each day. The UN guidelines on the treatment of prisoners require at least one hour of suitable exercise in the open air daily. The headline read, “Prisoners receive more exercise than children”, which is the media doing what they always do—looking for a headline that skews what the issue is. That is for another day’s debate, but it is worth highlighting in this one to flag up that we need a sea change when it comes to the physical activity of our children. We also need it for prisoners and those in prison.

We all know the saying, “If you do the crime, you do the time”, and we understand that. At the same time, however, we can rehabilitate prisoners to grow away from their past and go to their future, where they will have learned, been trained and be associating themselves with new opportunities, not going back to the past they once had. We are all familiar with TV programmes about prisons—this week, the Piers Morgan one comes to mind—and in the USA prisoners might be indoors for 23 out of 24 hours, in a lockdown. The impact of that is great, as it would be here back at home. Another TV programme—again, not one I often watch, but I see the previews—is that one on Channel 4: “Hunted”. Some people go on the run by choice and other people try to catch them. I am very aware of some of the analogies in the world outside.

I turn directly to the debate. We have recently had a pilot of outdoor activity for prisoners at Magilligan Prison in Northern Ireland—perhaps the Minister and the shadow Minister are aware of it. Those prisoners were the first in Northern Ireland to take part in what was called the “parkrun behind bars”. I saw it on the TV news a few weeks ago, on 6 January or thereabouts, and thought, “What’s this about?” The scheme illustrates well what can be done.

The UK-wide parkrun initiative was piloted at Magilligan on 6 January, with 15 inmates and 12 staff out on a five-kilometre run. That was possible there because of the nature of Magilligan. Perhaps it is not for other prisons—I cannot speak for everyone because I do not have that knowledge—but at Magilligan it is possible to have the parkrun within the walls of the prison. In an intervention on the hon. Member for South Dorset, the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin), who has just left the Chamber, mentioned the notion of people going on a run outside the prison—but in this case they were not: they were on a run physically within the walls of Magilligan.

The pilot was set within the confines of that low-security prison. The scheme, barring any issues, could be a regular way of inmates getting exercise in controlled settings and yet outdoors. I have no doubt that the ability to enjoy the fresh air and perhaps have a bit of freedom readies prisoners’ mindset for what they would rather be doing when they are eventually released and get outside prison.

[*Jim Shannon*]

The news reports were that up to 412 prisoners could get involved as two-kilometre walkers, as runners in the five-kilometre race or as volunteer organisers.

People from outside were brought in to participate, which brings a certain level of normality into the project. The parkrun scheme helps with not only the physical needs of inmates but—this is so important—their mental health, which we need to focus on. It is well known that those who exercise regularly are better equipped to deal with high-stress situations; I am sure that every MP is very athletic, because they deal with high-stress situations each and every day.

The organiser of the parkrun, Matt Shields, said:

“We believe prisoners have a lot to gain from parkrun, not only because of the obvious benefits of physical activity and volunteering, but also because of the ties it will foster with their families on the outside.”

A certain mindset is needed, which is the focus of the parkrun strategy and what it is trying to achieve. I do not know this scheme intimately, as others might, but from watching the TV and news excerpts, it seems to me that it is an opportunity to do just what the hon. Member for South Dorset was talking about in Dorset and elsewhere, as well as in Northern Ireland. Perhaps the Minister and the shadow Minister will comment on the scheme. I am sure that the Minister will do so.

Matt Shields went on:

“They can share experiences by taking part in parkruns simultaneously, meaning families can share results weekly and compare improvement and feel part of a common activity.”

So while prisoners are practising and training inside, their families and those outside can be doing similar things, which is almost an interactivity between two different locations, bringing people together. Parkruns have other things apart from physical activity—lessening mental stress and keeping focused mind-wise and body-wise for the outside.

As an activity that prisoners and staff can do together, parkruns also break down barriers and build cohesion among the prison warders and prison officers and the inmates. We are all aware of some places where conflict and aggression happen sometimes because of where people are, but this is a way we can do things better. I again quote parkrun organiser Matt Shields:

“For everyone involved we feel this is a win, win”.

That is surely a win, win, and one that could be replicated across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The parkrun at Magilligan is certainly a start, and other parkruns are being looked at, including in other prison settings.

To conclude, I certainly support a scheme that may—not even may, but does—help to provide benefit to the rehabilitation and mental health of prisoners in a low-risk category, such as category D, which many of those prisoners are, as long as there is no chance of putting the public into danger or harm’s way. Let us remember that we have a responsibility for the general public and to ensure that their safety is in place—that is our paramount opportunity and responsibility. However, we also have a duty of care even to those who have done wrong and are repaying their debt to society—I believe that in my heart—and there is a safer and better way for them to do that than with weights in a gym.

3.7 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) on securing today’s debate. When I saw its title, I immediately wanted to get involved, because it was about activity and prison. I lead an active lifestyle because I am a football referee, and many of the spectators who watch me say that my decisions are so criminal I should be locked up for them, so that is where I thought I would go with the debate. Then I realised we were talking about something totally different.

My remarks are initially from a Scottish perspective, because the scheme originated in Scotland in 1994. I looked at some of the figures from and studies of the Airborne scheme, which, sadly, only lasted a decade. I found out that 58% of the offenders who started the scheme successfully completed it, and only the ones at the high end and those involved with drugs struggled. Crucially, among those who participated in the Airborne scheme in Scotland, reconviction rates were reduced by 21% in comparison with people who had been offered alternative actions during their time in prison. That was a crucial point—it was a successful scheme. Other things have happened in Scotland, but I can see why that one was taken on board south of the border and why we are having this debate to explain its merits.

Given my limited knowledge of the debate from the title, I sought a briefing on it from the House of Commons Library. I was very disappointed that the Library staff said, “We can’t give you a briefing, because we know absolutely nothing about it.” That is why the debate is important and why it is right for my hon. Friend to take the matter forward. We must get the message of that successful scheme out there and encourage its extension, if required, to ensure that its benefits are felt far further afield.

I also want to speak about exercise within the prison population. As I was looking for other things to discuss in this debate, I spoke to one of our researchers, David Robertson, who works for another Scottish Conservative MP. I told him I was going to speak about endurance activity and prison, and he said to mention John McAvoy.

I had not heard of John McAvoy until about an hour ago, but he is a fantastic and inspirational character who spent 10 years behind bars. At the age of 16 he owned a sawn-off shotgun and robbed security vans. At 18, he was sentenced to five years in prison for armed robbery. He got out two years later, and he was immediately re-arrested in a flying squad operation and sentenced to life imprisonment in Belmarsh Prison. On his very first day he wondered why there were so few people in the exercise yard with him. Then he noticed that one of the people with him was Abu Hamza, and it suddenly dawned on him the type of people he had been incarcerated with.

John McAvoy spent some time feeling bitter about being in prison, but decided to get fitter. He had a fitness regime of 1,000 press-ups, 1,000 push-ups and 1,000 sit-ups every day. He then became an amazing rower, broke the British record for rowing a marathon and smashed the world record for distance rowing in 24 hours. He did all that because he decided not to waste his time in prison, but to get involved in endurance sport and to carve out a career in it. He decided that his life was no longer going to be around the crime family

that he was brought up in and that had led him to spend a decade behind bars, but that he would use his time in prison to get fitter and become an international athlete.

John McAvoy has written a book called “Redemption”, which is about how he took part in the London to Brighton footrace. I was gripped by the opening pages, which I read before I came here today. He tells us how he and No. 76 ran along and completed the race, and at the end of his opening remarks he describes how he went home, fell asleep on the couch and the next day returned to prison. So he did all that endurance racing while he was still a prisoner.

Now John McAvoy is a motivational speaker who goes out and encourages people who have been in prison, and who are ashamed of what they have done and do not want to be labelled with it in their future. He describes how he got involved in the local rowing clubs in London, and how people there were not ashamed to be associated with him, but wanted to help him. For me, that exemplifies how sport can be a great bridge for some people, and a great leveller. People can use it to overcome their past problems and look to a far better future.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset for securing this debate, which has allowed me to look into a small story that tells us about the opportunities that some people have. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned mental health. I was involved in the justice system in Scotland when I was a Member of the Scottish Parliament. An estimated 80% of the prison population in Scotland have mental health issues, which shows how significant the problem is in our prisons across the country. When four out of five prisoners in a country the size of Scotland are affected by mental health problems, anything we can do to improve their general health, wellbeing and mental health has to be worked on and recognised.

I looked up the World Health Organisation, which the hon. Member for Strangford mentioned. It set up a European network for promoting health in prisons:

“The aim of the network is to promote health, in its broadest sense, within the prison community. It is built on a recognition that while imprisonment results in a loss of personal freedom, the negative effects of custody on health should be reduced to a minimum. It also endorses the principle that time spent in custody can be used positively to aid the prevention of disease and, as far as possible, to promote health.”

We have heard in this debate that the Airborne scheme, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset has explained, does exactly that. I support any measures that can advance such commendable aims.

3.14 pm

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) on securing this debate, which gives us an opportunity to air issues about purposeful activity in prison. I welcome what he said about the Airborne Initiative and the fact that he has brought it to a wider audience. I welcome his comments in promoting the scheme. He is absolutely right about purposeful activity and investment, and about giving young people and more established prisoners the opportunity to receive education, feel self-worth, contribute in a positive way to a task, develop new skills, work as a team, show respect for peer groups, and show and learn respect for prison officers. I join him in praising the work of the Prison Service and the very difficult work that prison officers do.

Any investment in building skills, confidence and trust; showing people that there is a life outside prison; and encouraging people to learn new skills is extremely positive. The scheme—a public sector partnership with the voluntary sector—is a very positive model, and the hon. Gentleman has made a very strong case for it to be looked at.

I came to the debate because I wanted to hear what the hon. Gentleman said. Having done so, I think there are two challenges: one for him and perhaps more than one for the Minister. I want to talk about those challenges and how we can build on the laudable objectives that the hon. Gentleman set out. In making the case for the expansion of such initiatives, it would help if he clarified, now or later, some of the key issues that he touched on, which need fleshing out. First, it is important to look at the value and the reoffending rates. He was absolutely right about the figures. Reoffending rates of between 60% and 65%—perhaps averaging 65%—are simply unacceptable.

The purpose of prisons and young offender institutions must be punishment—that means deprivation of liberty, being away from family and not being able to do the things that we wish to do in society—but there also has to be reform. Reform is about employment, housing, training, the removal of drugs and alcohol and the problems associated with them, tackling mental health issues, promoting self-worth and dealing with all the issues the hon. Gentleman mentioned. It would help his case if he could establish in detail from the Airborne Initiative what the reoffending rates were. He touched on them, but the details would establish whether we could attribute the reoffending rates to the initiatives that were taken.

Also, we need to know the costs per place in the scheme. The hon. Gentleman mentioned two prison officers having to accompany prisoners, which represents a cost. Are there additional costs that the Prison Service has to cover, and does the Airborne Initiative require public sector support in addition to its voluntary activity? Did the hon. Gentleman look at completion rates? I did not get a sense of how many people started and completed the courses. We need to know about not only reoffending rates, but the impact one or two years down the line. I know from my own school life, private life and business life, that I can point to certain things in my life and say, “That two weeks, six weeks or four days made a real difference to my life” when I look back on them two years later. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will undertake such an evaluation.

Richard Drax: I am listening carefully to the right hon. Gentleman’s excellent speech, and he is raising perfectly fair points. A point I would add—this is for the Minister, too—is that, as I said in my speech, the effect of the scheme began to be monitored carefully only quite recently. The charity now needs the Government’s help to monitor the effect even more carefully, and to do all the things the right hon. Gentleman suggests. There is work afoot to do that, but we need help from the Government if we are finally to get all the statistics, costs and figures that he has mentioned.

David Hanson: I think that would be valuable, because we are, like it or not, in a time of tight resources, particularly in the Prison Service. There are many strains on the whole prison system. If it can be proven that the

[David Hanson]

scheme has the value that the hon. Gentleman evidently believes it has, it would be a useful addition, for the reasons I have mentioned.

My argument now moves to the Minister. The hon. Member for South Dorset made some valid points about the challenges of operating a voluntary sector-funded scheme that aims to build self-confidence, education and self-worth at a time of challenge in the Prison Service. Perhaps I might outline the challenge for the Minister, who is new. I welcome him to his position and wish him well in a difficult and challenging job. He will have constructive support from the Opposition and from the Justice Committee, on which I sit. We wish him well, but in the past seven years we have lost 7,500 prison officers. I know that there is a move to bring back 2,000-ish, but we will still be 5,000 short of the number that we had before.

The hon. Member for South Dorset said that one of the challenges was releasing prison officers for the activity. Self-harm incidents, drug abuse, deaths from self-harm, and assaults—both on prison officers, and prisoner on prisoner—are at record levels. The Minister knows from last week's report from Liverpool about the difficulties and challenges of broken window syndrome in the prison system. To make possible schemes such as the one that the hon. Member for South Dorset wants to make progress with, those issues need to be realistically addressed; I hope that that is constructive. We shall welcome the Minister's remarks today, but his challenge, as long as he is in his present job, is to make an impact on the situation.

This is not just a matter of prisoner officer numbers; it is about attitude. I met Russ Trent last week at HMP Berwyn—which the hon. Member for South Dorset pronounced perfectly. Russ was at HMP Portland, which I visited perhaps nine years ago when I had the privilege of doing the job that the Minister now does. I know that there is good work to do, and it is partly about leadership, understanding, and giving governors and prison staff the time to invest in education, self-worth, respect, positive attitudes and teamwork. Unless the Minister addresses some of the structural issues, there will be less opportunity to support valuable schemes.

I have two final points, the first of which is about governor autonomy. The plea of the hon. Member for South Dorset was to roll the scheme out more widely and organise it. I am still not clear what that means with respect to the Minister's central Department and governor autonomy. Perhaps that can be answered today, or perhaps it is for another day. Does the Minister have confidence in governors to make local decisions about deploying prisoners and prison officers to support such schemes? Where does accountability lie? The Minister can help today by taking on that question.

That leads to my other central point, on which I am pleased the hon. Member for South Dorset touched—release on temporary licence. If there is governor accountability and autonomy, if risk is managed locally, if governors have the resources to determine that x, y or z prisoner can benefit from the course and if the governor determines that the risk can be taken to release on temporary licence, I hope that the Minister will give the decision his backing. If governor autonomy means anything, it is allowing those decisions to be made at the

local level. If the Minister does not know now, he will learn in the next few weeks about the restricted nature of ROTL, which the hon. Member for South Dorset pointed out. The risk is transferred to the Ministry of Justice, and governors' ability to make judgments at a local level is restricted, so there is a lack of participation in the type of scheme so ably promoted by the hon. Gentleman.

My challenge to the hon. Member for South Dorset is to get clarity about the worth of the scheme. I wish him well in doing that, because if it works, it will work well. My challenge to the Minister is to tell him that the scheme will not work, and will not be supported, unless he gets the basics right. I know that he is focused on that, but a series of prisons Ministers has presided over a reduction in staff and increases in incidents, self-harm, attacks and prisoner-on-prisoner violence. Those problems have not allowed good work to thrive. It is impossible to undertake such good work while dealing with drugs, attacks, self-harm and the problems that the hon. Member for South Dorset raised. I wish the Minister well, in the context of the need to do better overall.

3.25 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I thank the hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) for obtaining the debate. He made a convincing and eloquent case, highlighting the benefits and positives of outdoor endurance activities. I join him in thanking all those who work in the prison system, who are doing a very difficult job.

I know that the hon. Gentleman has a keen interest in the prison system, particularly in the challenges faced by prison officers, but also in programmes designed to help young offenders. One of those is of course the Airborne Initiative, which he has spoken highly of, and he displays great passion in supporting it. It is a breath of fresh air to hear success stories from the criminal justice system, and the Airborne Initiative clearly is one. That is not to say that we must not talk about the challenges faced in prisons. The present situation is an emergency, which bleeds through to outdoor endurance activities, including those that the hon. Gentleman promotes.

I thank all the hon. Members who have taken part in the debate on an issue that deserves attention for the clear benefits associated with it. Some Members have mentioned similar schemes with benefits. The hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) talked about someone who went to prison for serious offences and was effectively rehabilitated and experienced positive effects while he was there; when he came out he spoke to warn others of the risks of offending. I have had the benefit of working on a similar scheme in my district, where rehabilitated offenders worked, in partnership with the police, fire service, local authority and others, with young people at risk of falling over the cliff edge into a life of crime. The message was a simple one, from someone who had served time in prison and was telling young people about the risks and dangers, and what prison life is really like. Unfortunately—tragically—a life of crime is sometimes glamorised for young people, and shown in a “blingy” way. That is just one project, and clearly there are massive advantages to be gained.

Being outdoors can have a significant impact on wellbeing. That cannot be overlooked. However, extended and endurance activities can help to improve mental

health and reduce reoffending rates. Young offenders have often lacked such opportunities. Many have never have been part of a team on a 50-plus-mile hike over several days, and they feel the benefits even more keenly. Anything that can improve mental health in prisons must be seized with two hands because there is an epidemic of mental health issues within prison walls. Accurate figures do not exist because the Government do not collect them, but even optimistic estimates give the number of prisoners with a mental health issue as one in three—higher than in the general population. Many of them have serious mental illnesses, but many others have milder conditions, where exercise and meaningful activity can have a positive impact. Both the NHS and the Royal College of Psychiatrists endorse that. I do not profess that exercise and outdoor endurance activities are some kind of silver bullet for mental health issues; clearly they are not. They are a useful tool as part of a wider arsenal, as they can help to provide offenders with motivation to get their lives back on track and reduce reoffending.

Poor mental health and low self-esteem among prisoners increase their chances of reoffending, so it is only logical that positive mental health should reduce it. The impact on mental health of outdoor activity reduces reoffending rates, as do the Airborne Initiative and the Duke of Edinburgh Award, which cannot be encouraged enough in young offender institutions. In these programmes, offenders are exposed to a wealth of transferable skills such as manual work, navigation, planning and teamwork, among others that the hon. Member for South Dorset highlighted. All those skills can be used to build a CV and increase employability, or to light and develop a passion for activities that can be pursued through education.

It does not matter whether work or education is chosen; both reduce dire reoffending rates—almost half of adult and more than half of young offenders reoffend within a year. We also have to tackle the issue of reoffending to address the wider challenge of overcrowding, which leads to prisoners doubling up in single-occupancy cells and being locked up for most of the day. Outdoor endurance activities can have a positive impact on the prison estate as a whole among the offenders who are able to participate. As I mentioned, the effect of these activities on young offenders is even stronger, so programmes such as the Airborne Initiative are best targeted on them.

Young people who go to prison are some of the most vulnerable individuals in the country, and also the most neglected. They experience difficult upbringings and challenging circumstances that crush their self-esteem, sometimes leading to their becoming offenders in the first place. No one is born an offender; there is no genetic predisposition to committing a crime. It is purely down to an individual's environment lacking support mechanisms or role models, both of which are provided by outdoor endurance activities and similar programmes. Instructors and supervisors give young offenders someone positive who they can look up to, and who can help build their self-confidence.

The positive impacts are there for all to see, but why are they not implemented on a wide scale across the country? Surely the Government recognise their impact. We should be doing everything that we can to improve the life chances of offenders, to prevent them from coming back and costing the Government the £13 billion

that reoffending costs. Unfortunately, unless the Government address seriously their underfunding of the prison system, wider adoption of any outdoor endurance activities remains a pipe dream. Their potential is constrained by the consequences of policies that prevent offenders from doing any outdoor activity at all, let alone week-long residential trips. Offenders are locked up for most of the day because of the increasing violence that has become all too common in our prison system, which a number of hon. Members have referenced.

That violence is the consequence of the huge reduction in prison officers towards which the Government have actively contributed, with measly pay offers and pressure piled on remaining officers. The dwindling prison officer numbers are the reason why prisoners cannot be let out of their cells, and why any initiatives to get prisoners into the great outdoors for the Airborne Initiative or other schemes cannot be adopted wholesale and rolled out nationwide. There are not enough prison officers to supervise them while they are away from prison, and there are not enough officers to escort them there in the first place.

The Government clearly do not grasp the benefits that outdoor activities can provide for offenders. If they did, they would not force local authorities to cut the youth services that provide the same development of skills and teamwork as outdoor endurance activities, and that provide the same reduction in reoffending rates among young people. Between 2010 and 2016, almost £400 million was cut from youth services, leading to a loss of nearly 140,000 places and the closure of 600 youth centres. The Government are now being asked to put the cart before the horse: to support services that combat reoffending among young offenders, but they should have been providing those same services that deliver the same benefits to young people before they go on to commit a first offence.

It is all very well and good to put these ideas forward; we should be looking at both new and proven ways to reduce reoffending and increase the wellbeing of offenders, but because of the Government's policies, that sadly cannot happen to the extent that it needs to. Offenders are locked up for too long even to do basic outdoor activities, and prison officers are not present in the numbers needed to escort and supervise offenders safely. Although the Minister is new, I am very keen to hear his views not only on outdoor activities, but on some of the broader issues that have been raised in the debate.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): I am sure that the Minister needs no reminding before I call him to speak, but it is customary to leave time at the end of the debate for the Member moving the motion to briefly respond. I call the Minister.

3.36 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I begin by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) for bringing the debate. It was fantastic to see the energy that he put into it. His interests as an ex-soldier and as the Member of Parliament for South Dorset came through. It is great that an initiative partly pioneered in the first place by a Member of Parliament is now being pioneered again and promoted by another Member of Parliament.

[Rory Stewart]

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made some characteristically powerful comments, reflecting on some of the practicalities of the subject and some of the moral and philosophical background when it comes to balancing the protection of the public with our obligations towards prisoners. My hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) provided a good example in John McAvoy of exactly the kind of transformation that can happen for somebody who would, by definition, have been considered one of the most at-risk prisoners most likely to reoffend. He has come through an extraordinary personal journey and transformation.

The right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson) was almost the longest serving prisons Minister in British parliamentary history, I think, so he is quite an intimidating man to have opposite. He made, I think, more than 67 separate visits to prisons; he has a deep understanding of the whole system, and I will not attempt to quibble with him on any of the things that he said. Indeed, he and the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) pointed out very powerfully that there is no point in simply looking at this thing in isolation.

For any of these schemes to work, we need to think much more broadly about who these people are, who they were before they got into prison, as the hon. Member for Bradford East pointed out, what kind of resources exist—how much money there is, how many prison officers there are—and what kind of routines are run in prisons. In addition, there were practical issues raised by my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset, which extend all the way from relief on temporary licence conditions to conditions in relation to drugs.

I do not want to expand on this subject too much or trespass too much on your time, Mr Howarth, but clearly the challenge that we face is very remarkable. We are all aware of fantastic initiatives—the Airborne Initiative is one of the most powerful and admirable—and we have been aware of them as they have been run for some time. The right hon. Member for Delyn will be aware of many such initiatives that he will have seen when he was the prisons Minister.

The tragic truth is that, although there have been incredibly powerful initiatives for many decades around the country, and although each of these programmes points to fantastic improvements, reoffending rates in general have barely moved. That has been true with more resources and fewer resources; the reoffending rates were roughly the same when the right hon. Member for Delyn was the prisons Minister as they are today. That is partly for some of the reasons that were mentioned.

This is a very difficult cohort to deal with. As hon. Members know, nearly half the people entering prison are almost functionally illiterate. Nearly 60% or 70% come in with pre-existing behaviour issues and particularly drug use problems. Nearly 90% are reporting different ranges of mental health issues. There is an incredibly high homelessness rate among people who leave prison, and they have many problems getting employment. Even the Airborne Initiative, a successful scheme, touches only the percentage of people—it is in the mid-20s—who get into education or employment. These are terrifyingly difficult issues to deal with and to turn around.

That is why the hon. Member for Bradford East and my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset were absolutely correct to pay tribute to the Prison Service. At the centre of a lot of this is the dedicated, tailored work of prison officers. We have tried, by having a keyworker programme where one prison officer is assigned to six prisoners and through some of our work with physical education instructors, to ensure that we build up tailored relationships. Having 2,500 more prison officers is important, because it will begin to make that possible, but each prisoner is different—that leads to the question of empowerment—and each prison is different. One of the reasons why we need governor empowerment is that the kinds of education and activities provided for young, short-term prisoners will be quite different from those provided in a category C prison, let alone in the high-security estate. Governors need to be able to adjust.

Balancing the power of the centre with empowered governors is more of an art than a science. Obviously, in any organisation, we need to trust people and empower them. They need to feel that they are in charge, that they have the necessary levers and, in the end, that the buck stops with them. To take an extreme military analogy, the captain of a ship needs to feel to some extent that, if the ship crashes, it is his fault. Equally, of course, he operates in the huge system of a navy, where there are many other reasons why a ship might crash that might not be entirely down to the captain. Getting that balance right, setting decent national standards and holding people like me to account will be critical.

I expect to be held to account on some of the basic standards issues that were raised. Frankly, I should be able to come back here in 11 months' time and show that we have significantly reduced the number of people testing positive for drugs in our 30 worst prisons. I would like to come back and present cleaner prisons and prisons with fewer broken windows, and I would like to be judged on some of the basic issues around education provision. If I am not judged on those things, I am not doing my job.

Richard Drax: As always, the Minister is making an eloquent and powerful speech. On his point about reoffending rates staying the same, the Airborne Initiative is aimed at the young. If we stop those people—all right, 20% is not 50%, but it is better than nil—moving on to category C, B and A prisons, we surely will be achieving. If the scheme works and we stop young people from going up the chain to more serious crime and longer prison terms, that surely will be another reason why it is particularly brilliant and different.

Rory Stewart: One hundred per cent! Any scheme that dramatically reduces reoffending does an incredible amount for the individual young person, because it gives them a chance to have a life that is not in prison, and for the public, who would be the victims of the crime that that person would go on to commit. It also, of course, makes a huge difference to the Prison Service and the prison population, because it means there are fewer people in prison and there is less pressure on the whole system. For all those reasons, reducing reoffending has to be at the centre of this issue.

Reducing reoffending is partly about the Airborne Initiative, but it is about many other things, too: ensuring that people have accommodation to go to when they leave prison and trying to ensure that they have jobs to

go to as well. A lot of that is not in the gift of my Department. We need to get together a taskforce with all the other bits of the Government and ensure that local authorities have houses to provide, that employers are really reaching out and so on.

There are brilliant ways of doing this. To take one example, there is a fantastic scheme being led by Liverpool Altcourse prison, where prisoners are being trained on metal welding and metal painting, and are connected directly with a company that employs metal welders at the other end. The same is happening with recycling machinery: prisoners make huge recycling trucks inside the prison and are connected with the recycling company for a job as soon as they leave the prison gate. They get some income—that can go into an escrow account, which provides them with some money when they leave—and a vocational qualification, and they get a job at the end.

The Football Association is leading a fantastic programme to pair every premier league club with a local prison. Two people from the club are paired with 16 prisoners, who train for level 1 coaching qualifications with the aim of filling a gap—we need 4,400 coaches in the British system. Leeds Rhinos rugby league team makes fantastic use of its facilities to develop a connection whereby prisoners can use all the community facilities and all the club's contacts once they leave prison. That is what I want to try to get to.

The Airborne Initiative has three brilliant elements. The first is the military element. We have seen everything that that means. It is shared by initiatives such as the 3 Pillars initiative in London, which emphasises exercise, employment and, above all, a military ethos—the sense of courage, pride, honour and self-confidence that is hugely important for pushing people forward into the world.

The second element is the benefits of the outdoors—we heard about those from the hon. Member for Strangford—and all they mean for everything from someone's endorphins to their health, their love of nature and, after coming through ice baths and freezing rivers, their sense of resilience. Crossing the River Dart and orienteering alone through the night must be challenging experiences. The third critical element is everything that people get in the evenings. These are residential courses that give people the ability to reflect on their character, their future and their life.

However, we could be doing more to take these schemes to the next stage. First, we should work with the incredibly dedicated and impressive PE professionals in prisons to ensure that they feel absolutely central to these programmes. They should not feel replaced—the voluntary sector is not a replacement for them—but they should feel that they bolt in as role models and mentors. That applies both to these programmes and to other things: PE staff can be central to helping people wean themselves off drugs and to guiding people through nutrition. We now provide much more nutritious food in prisons. Proper nutritious meals have an extraordinary impact—a nearly 30% reduction—on violence and behavioural issues.

We should think not just about young people but about older people. There is no reason why older people cannot go on these courses. We should think about what outdoor activities and sport we can use to reach out to older people. We should embrace sport as a way

of doing education—mathematics, for example—as a leveller and as a way of including people who may have struggled at school. We should think about diversity. The Airborne Initiative may be ideal for one cohort but, in another context, something like the Clink restaurant in Brixton may be ideal for someone who wants to go into catering.

Above all, we should stick with courses. We do not want short, shiny, high-quality courses that are delivered for very short periods. That is deeply depressing for prisoners. They turn up, get a terrific package that runs for about three or four weeks, have their fantastic role model and feel their life is turning around, but then that person vanishes and we never hear from them again. Prisoners really want through-mentoring. They want people meeting them at the gate. Clink restaurant is a good example. It meets prisoners at the gate, takes them out, connects them with a catering company and stays with them. Fulham football club is another great example. It meets prisoners at the gate, takes them out and tries to involve them in activities outside the prison. None of this stuff is a silver bullet, but it is all stuff that we need to lean into, facilitate and make easier.

Let me set out the action points that I want to take away from the debate. We clearly need to work out exactly what the problems are with getting prisoners into the Airborne Initiative and to solve them. I will contact governors so that, next time the course is run, we do everything we can to ensure that prisoners are available to go on it. We will have to deal with the deeper structural issues in the next debate, but the basic philosophy is absolutely central: if PE instructors in prisons, prison officers and the voluntary sector work on outdoor education and sport and think about how to connect those things together, that can transform prisoners' lives, transform reoffending and protect the public.

Along with everything I am talking about in terms of back to basics—the stuff with drugs, cleaning up prisons, fixing broken windows, having basic standards and getting 2,500 prison officers back in—Britain, with its astonishing love of sport and the outdoors and the commitment of soldiers from the Parachute Regiment, MPs and everyone in the Chamber—can make a huge difference to vulnerable lives, and ultimately to public safety.

3.50 pm

Richard Drax: I will not keep everyone waiting for long. I thank the Minister for that most helpful reply. The only point he did not mention, I think, was about meeting the three guests afterwards to discuss ROTL and the problems governors have. If he could, they would much appreciate that. I thank all who participated in and supported the debate from all parts of the House. We had an eloquent speech from the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson), whose experience came through in buckets.

I entirely agree that through-mentoring is essential, and yes, as we discussed before we came into the debate, it could be extended to adults. The only comment to make about that is, "Let's get it right for the young first and really get it going." I thank the Minister for getting hold of the governor and saying, "When this comes up, we want the 22 places filled." Let us get that working and, as has been suggested, get the facts, statistics and costs in black and white. Then, if it really is working, there will be even more evidence to push it out.

[Richard Drax]

Finally, as the Minister said, the key is those who run the organisations, systems and initiatives. These young people get five days or six days of brilliance with an ex-regimental sergeant-major, a footballer or whoever it may be, who inspires them to say, “Oh, my goodness gracious—I have never met this before,” but then, oomph, back into prison they go. Through-mentoring will be key to ensure that, when they go back into prison, someone is there with the next initiative, or whatever it may be. I absolutely concur.

Thank you for listening to me for so long, Mr Howarth, and I thank all those who contributed. I also thank the Minister very much for his helpful reply.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Perhaps I will abuse the privilege of the Chair—unusually for me—and say that it was a privilege to chair a debate in which everyone who took part made thoughtful contributions. Taken as a whole, it was a constructive debate—even down to the Minister’s response, in which he set himself some rather big targets.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered outdoors endurance activities for prisoners.

3.52 pm

Sitting suspended.

A75 Euro Route: Upgrade

[MR CLIVE BETTS *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the upgrade of the A75 Euro route in Scotland.

It is a pleasure to lead my first Westminster Hall debate under your chairmanship, Mr Betts.

I was elected to this place last June. In my manifesto, I pledged to campaign for more investment in Dumfries and Galloway’s infrastructure, with a particular focus on our roads. No road is more in need of urgent attention than the A75 Euro route, a 95-mile-long stretch of road from Stranraer to Gretna that links the south-west of Scotland to the M74 and M6 and thereby the rest of the United Kingdom. This trunk road is a key artery of Dumfries and Galloway’s local economy, and I fear that if we do not see a sustained programme of upgrades to the A75 in the near future it will have a detrimental social and economic effect, something my constituency can ill afford.

In addition to its critical importance to the economy of Dumfries and Galloway, the A75 is of serious concern to businesses in Northern Ireland, given that 45% of Northern Ireland’s trade with the rest of the United Kingdom transits through Loch Ryan in the west of my constituency. Halfway up Loch Ryan is the port of Cairnryan, home to two international ferry companies that operate ferries to and from Belfast and Larne. It is a route of strategic economic importance and a major hub for freight and tourism, with over 9,000 sailings per annum carrying 1.7 million passengers, 415,000 cars and 410,000 freight units.

Depending on their destination, vehicles will use either the A77 or the A75 when ferries dock, and because of the road conditions that can often cause frustration for convoys and drivers—something I can attest to.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): My hon. Friend mentioned the ports in Loch Ryan, of which there are two. They are extremely busy and getting busier year on year, but does he agree that there has been little or no investment in the road infrastructure leaving those ports? The road infrastructure in general is badly neglected, but the A75, an extremely busy route for the ferry ports, needs investment and has been neglected over the past 10 or 20 years.

Mr Jack: The A77 Euro route to the north of Cairnryan runs through my hon. Friend’s constituency. I both agree and disagree with him: I completely agree that those roads need a lot more money spent on them, but I disagree that they are getting busier. Part of the problem is that they are not getting busier because, as I will come on to in my speech, we are losing hauliers’ business down to Dublin and across to Holyhead and other ports.

Going back to my point about frustration for convoys and drivers, being stuck behind a fleet of lorries on the A75 is not a pleasant experience. The A75 is predominantly a single carriageway road with very limited overtaking opportunities. Poor roads to and from the ports are putting them at an extreme disadvantage and in turn threatening jobs and livelihoods that depend on those

ports. Last November, I met representatives from Stena Line, which has invested over £100 million to provide Scotland with a first-class new port facility at Cairnryan. P&O has also invested a lot in its terminal and in its vessels. The investment those companies have made has not been matched with vital road and rail development to help the ports remain attractive and competitive. Frankly, if such private investment is not supported, that is a disincentive for future investment.

The message could not be clearer. If we continue on the current trajectory of neglecting the A75, the consequences could be grave. The warning signs are already in place. Unfortunately for us, while we continue to talk among ourselves about the need to act, Northern Ireland has stepped up a gear and ensured that its road connections are keeping pace with economic development. That has resulted in a growing number of Northern Irish hauliers diverting their traffic flows to sail from Dublin; in all honesty, who can blame them?

Other UK ports, such as Heysham, Holyhead and Liverpool, are gearing up for the future and the increasing traffic flows of freight and tourism resulting from investment in the surrounding roads, whereas Cairnryan is in clear danger of being left behind. An easy, quick win would be for the Scottish Government to increase the speed for vehicles over 7.5 tonnes on the A75. At the moment they are restricted to 40 mph, but that could be lifted to 50 mph, which in turn would shorten the travel times that hauliers have to face.

However, it is not only ferry companies, visitors and hauliers on whom the condition of the A75 is having an effect. Local people in my constituency who travel the road on a regular basis are just as, if not more, frustrated. I commend the efforts of those involved with campaigning to improve the roads. Both Dual the A75 and the A77 Action Group, which is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), have been active campaigners on the issue and have argued their case strongly at every opportunity.

It would be remiss of me not to recognise that there have been some improvements to the A75 in recent years, and they are welcome, but they have not gone far enough and they are just a sticking-plaster solution to a much wider problem. Since 2007, more money has been spent on maintenance issues than on capital investment.

I am pleased that the Scottish Government have commissioned a study to look at the rationale for improving road, rail, public transport and active travel on key strategic corridors in Scotland, including the A75. I look forward to the initial findings of that study being published later this year, and I understand that the outcomes will be fed into a second strategic transport projects review. The Scottish Government have said they recognise the importance of the A75 to the strategic transport network, to the economy of south-west Scotland and to the rest of the country, and I hope they come up with the money to demonstrate it, starting with bypasses for Springholm and Crocketford. Those two villages have been making the case to be bypassed for years, and they are in desperate need of it.

As seems de rigueur in this place at the moment, Mr Betts, I am going to bring the debate on to the subject of Brexit—but, you will be relieved to hear, only briefly. As preparations continue for Britain to leave the European Union, it is important that our economy is firing on all cylinders and ready to embrace the

opportunities and rise to the challenges that we will face. It is more important than ever that our road network is able to cope with the demands of a post-Brexit economy, and that means investing in every region of our country. In Dumfries and Galloway, I want an A75 that is not only fit for the future, but one that makes the port of Cairnryan the most attractive port for the transport of goods to and from Northern Ireland, a vital partner in trade and tourism.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I apologise for my late arrival due to the fact that I was at another meeting. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate and on his efforts to highlight this important issue. He knows that, for our part in Northern Ireland, we regard it as an extremely important issue for the Northern Irish economy. We have had a number of meetings recently and our party leader is meeting representatives from the hon. Gentleman's constituency and other constituencies in Scotland to discuss the matter further. He has our full support, both in his own constituency in Scotland and from a Northern Ireland perspective.

Mr Jack: The right hon. Gentleman's support is very much appreciated.

To conclude, it could be argued that this is a matter for the Scottish Government, since transport is devolved, but at a UK level it is an important arterial Euro route that connects my constituency to the rest of the United Kingdom. Furthermore, as we continue discussions on the exciting borderlands growth deal initiative, I hope that investment in the A75 forms part of the final terms of that agreement. That is something I will continue to call for.

I am delighted that the Transport Secretary has accepted my invitation to visit Dumfries and Galloway to travel the A75 himself later this year. That is also an invitation I extend to the Secretary of State for Scotland. The road in question runs through part of his constituency, and I know that he, like me, is all too familiar with the issues that I have raised.

I should also put on the record the fact that I appreciate the support of our neighbours across the water. As one Northern Irish politician put it, "Scotland's loss is our loss too". If we were to lose those ports at Cairnryan because they cannot compete with those to the south, that would be a great loss for all of us.

I want all businesses to have the greatest opportunity to make a positive contribution to UK plc as we leave the EU, but I fear that the deficit of investment in the A75 Euroroute, and the port of Cairnryan's difficulties with that, will mean that it becomes more and more marginalised as an even greater volume of freight is lost to the central corridor ports. We cannot and must not let that happen. There is an urgent need for upgrades to the A75, and I look forward to hearing what the UK Government can offer.

4.10 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Stuart Andrew): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I have had a double whammy of introductions today, answering my first session of oral questions in the Chamber and replying to my first debate as Minister in Westminster Hall. It has been a busy old day.

[Stuart Andrew]

I begin by thanking and praising my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack) for securing the debate to fight for this road in his constituency. He has clearly been a great advocate for his constituency in his short time in the House, and I know that this debate is important to him and his constituents. He is clearly at the beginning of a campaign that he put in his manifesto for election to the House, so I have no doubt that we are going to hear a lot more about this in future.

I recognise that the A75 is a vital economic artery that runs the length of my hon. Friend's constituency of Dumfries and Galloway, from the historic town of Dumfries in the east to the town of Stranraer in the west. Transport links are important in all our constituencies, but they are absolutely key in rural areas, underpinning local economies and communities. Those links support important sectors, such as agriculture and fisheries, which are the foundation of Scotland's thriving food and drinks industry. I am sure we have all enjoyed the tastes and drinks of that great nation. They are also the lifeblood of the vibrant tourism industry in south-west Scotland. Many of my constituents enjoy great holidays in that area, although they often complain about the time it takes to get there.

Those links also make it possible for hard-working people to access job opportunities across a wide region, which is crucial if we are to be successful in rebalancing the economy, as the Government are keen to do. My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) is therefore quite right to talk about the amount of investment that may or may not have happened over the past 10 or 20 years. Those links also link vital transport infrastructure, such as our coastal ports, to Scotland's main road network.

With all that in mind, I am grateful for the chance to respond to the debate regarding the upgrading of the A75 in Scotland. I know that that is a priority issue for my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway, and he has previously raised it with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport. He is of course right to recognise the importance of trunk roads like the A75 and, indeed, the A77, which runs down from Glasgow, through his constituency and by the ferry terminals of Cairnryan.

I am aware of recent calls from the Freight Transport Association for the Government to prioritise infrastructure investment in that area, which it reports handles about 45% of Northern Ireland's trade with the rest of the UK. The contribution from the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) brought that to our attention.

Research carried out in 2016 estimated that the Scottish trunk road network as a whole contributes around £1.38 billion in gross value added to the Scottish economy. The same research estimated that the network also generates employment for 31,000 people, which is no

mean feat. That is certainly recognised by stakeholders in my hon. Friend's constituency and across the borderlands region.

As a result of the work of the Scotland Office on the borderlands growth deal, proposals for upgrade work for strategic road connections, such as the A75, are among the key asks. I am aware of safety concerns raised by many local groups, such as Dual the A75, which has petitioned the Scottish Parliament on the issue. That is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland has tasked the local government partners to that growth deal to consult and engage further with all local stakeholders across the region to develop the projects. We are expecting significant progress on that by April.

The UK Government fully recognise the social and economic importance of improving connectivity and enabling investment across all parts of the country. Our investment and support for schemes such as UK city deals in Scotland, as well as the UK Government's industrial strategy, demonstrate our commitment to help to support the Scottish economy and deliver for people in all parts of Scotland.

Ultimately, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway has mentioned, road investment in Scotland is a devolved matter, and the need to regenerate the A75 is something the Scottish Government will need to deliver on. The A75 is the responsibility of Scottish Government Ministers and is managed by Transport Scotland, and its maintenance is carried out by Scotland Transerv. I am sure Scottish Government Ministers will note the points made today.

I was pleased to hear that my hon. Friend's invitation for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport to visit his constituency was accepted; there is nothing more effective in getting investment for a piece of road than getting the Secretary of State to travel along it. I wish him well with that. I will most certainly pass on his invitation to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland to visit and see the issues for himself.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend. He is clearly fighting passionately for his constituency. He made a strong case on the importance of this road and the investment that it needs. If we are to secure those decent links, particularly between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, especially as we start to leave the European Union, this is something that really needs to be addressed. I sincerely hope that Scottish Government Ministers listen to the points that my hon. Friend made. I know he will be vociferous in making sure that they continue to be made in future.

Question put and agreed to.

4.17 pm

Sitting suspended.

People with Autism: Public Building Access

4.30 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the accessibility of public buildings for people with autism.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts.

Imagine what Parliament would be like if there was less information—less information at once, anyway. Imagine if we all agreed that there could only ever be one voice speaking in our debating Chambers and Committee Rooms. I will admit that I am not completely perfect in that regard, but just imagine what that would be like. Imagine if we redesigned the atrium of Portcullis House so that it was less of a goldfish bowl of sights and cacophony of sounds. Imagine if there were quiet areas where Members, staff and members of the public could retreat if there was simply too much going on and they needed to calm their minds.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I ask the hon. Lady to give way on a point of whimsy, really. If she wants to know what it would be like to have just one voice at a time in the Chamber, she should come to the Council of Europe, where we are obliged to speak for three minutes without interruption.

Thangam Debbonaire: The hon. Gentleman's intervention makes me hopeful that we might one day achieve what I desire, even though it would require a lot of self-restraint on my part.

Imagine if we had routes through the parliamentary estate that steered people logically from one place to the next with predictable and straightforward signs, few distractions and gentle lighting.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and for securing this important debate. I noticed with interest at the launch of the autism and education report this afternoon that there was a designated quiet space. While I would not necessarily suggest that we always need that as MPs, what a great idea for any future public events that there is somewhere for people to go if they feel slightly overwhelmed by the number of people, the noises or the visual effects in the room. Does she agree?

Thangam Debbonaire: Yes, I do agree; but I also slightly disagree, in that it might not hurt some of us as MPs to seek a place of quiet every now and then and still our minds, because there is so much going on for us.

If we did all that I just said, we would remove many barriers to people with autism using our public spaces. Would it not make a better place for all of us to run the country from? I argue that it would. Are these changes too much for us to contemplate? As hon. Members debate the restoration and renewal—hereafter referred to as R and R—of the parliamentary estate right now in the Chamber, would it be so difficult for us to consider taking the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that R and R presents to make Parliament a place of greater sensory clarity, reducing the sensory overload not just for people with autism but for everyone?

Are these changes too much for custodians of other public buildings to contemplate? I argue that they are not too much, and would benefit us all. They would benefit people with autism as users of public buildings and as employees and potential employees; but they would benefit everyone else, and there are so many other organisations doing so that we no longer have any justification for not doing so in our public buildings.

Fifteen years ago, several children with autism came into my life. Friends and family had young children on the autistic spectrum and my now husband, then partner, Kevin, started working with children with autism, as he still does, in a school that he runs. I am grateful to my friends, family, husband, his colleagues, particularly Paulla Keen, and my own staff member who takes a lead on autism in my team, Councillor Mike Davies, for what they have taught me about autism and about how bringing down barriers for people with autism can help us all. Like 99.5% of the public as surveyed by YouGov in 2016, I had heard of autism before; but in those 15 years my life has been immeasurably enriched by people with autism.

Paula Sherriff: Will my hon. Friend join me in thanking organisations such as Sainsbury's, which is now operating an autism-friendly hour? That takes place about once a month, and is designed to educate staff and shoppers so that if a child is having a difficult moment it is not necessarily a naughty child having a tantrum, but it may have become overwhelmed by noises and things going on in the store. I have done a pro forma letter that can be sent out to attractions in my constituency, so perhaps we can encourage other organisations to do the same.

Thangam Debbonaire: I happily agree with my hon. Friend. Of course, other supermarkets are available, but I encourage those supermarkets to do likewise and believe that some of them are. Indeed, I will go on to talk a bit more about how we can encourage other organisations to do that.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Following on from the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), is it not important to note that this is not just about children? It is also about adults with autism and providing the kind of atmosphere and location that they can benefit from.

Thangam Debbonaire: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is not just about children; it is about adults. I want to reiterate what I was saying: my life has been immeasurably enriched by children and adults on the autistic spectrum who have insights and illuminating ways of looking at the world that I have personally benefited from and would hate to feel were being denied to our public life.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on her speech. I, too, have seen local businesses, such as the Trafford Centre in my constituency, make tremendous efforts to train their staff and alter some of their business practices to welcome people with autism and to make the centre a safe space for shopping and leisure. They have found that it is not just people with autism, but people with dementia, learning difficulties or other sensory impairments, who have benefited as a result. Does she agree that what is good for autistic people may in fact be good for all of us?

Thangam Debonnaire: I absolutely agree. Indeed, that is the top and bottom of my speech: what is good for people on the spectrum is good for us all. Private businesses and shopping centres have sometimes led the way, and public buildings need to follow suit because doing so would benefit us all.

I am sad to learn from the National Autistic Society report “Too Much Information”, which was also published in 2016, that only 16% of people with autism and their families think that the public understands autism in any meaningful way. The consequence of people’s lack of meaningful understanding is that autistic people and their families are often effectively excluded from many public spaces. Half of autistic people and their families told the NAS in that survey that they sometimes do not go out because they are worried about the public’s reaction to their autism. Some 28% have been asked to leave a public space because of behaviour associated with their autism, and 79% of autistic people reported feeling isolated. It does not have to be this way. I reiterate, along with my hon. Friends, that it is not good for anybody—people on the spectrum or the rest of us—for autistic people to feel excluded.

Although I am far from being an expert, I am going to share some of what I have learned about autism and making institutions accessible. First, I have a very technical definition, so bear with me. The “International Classification of Diseases”, 10th edition—ICD-10—is the most commonly used diagnostic manual in the UK. It defines autism profiles as:

“A group of disorders characterized by qualitative abnormalities in reciprocal social interactions and in patterns of communication, and by a restricted, stereotyped, repetitive repertoire of interests and activities. These qualitative abnormalities are a pervasive feature of the individual’s functioning in all situations.”

I apologise to colleagues for using a technical definition, but over the past few months and years I have felt that sometimes people think they know what autism is but may confuse it with a mental health problem or a learning difficulty. Although some people with autism do have one or other or both, those are not defining characteristics. A revised edition of the ICD is expected this year and is likely to align closely with the latest edition of the American diagnostic and statistical manual. I refer colleagues to that definition for further information, but it includes sensory difficulties and has clearer criteria.

When my cousin Sunitha, who lives in Chennai, India, found out that her young son Ricky was on the autistic spectrum, it was not a surprise. She had known that something was not right. Ricky was not speaking at age three, and there were other things that meant she knew that he understood social interaction in a different way from other people. It was a difficult adjustment at first, but I am proud of how my cousin Suni and her family—her beautiful daughter Rachael and everyone else in it—have changed how they interact with one another and with Ricky, and how they support Ricky’s interaction with the world. Their experiences in India illustrate much of what needs to and can change in public buildings in the UK and beyond.

As with many, but not all, people on the autistic spectrum, Ricky does not speak much, although he is no longer non-verbal. He has outstanding skills in listening, reading and writing in several Indian languages, but his lack of fluent speech—and that of many autistic people—could come across as stand-offish. It might

make it harder for him to get information about how to use a public building. Although some of his skills are far beyond most of us, they are not typical. Making a public building accessible needs to include giving clear information visually and logically as well as a non-verbal means of gaining that information.

Again, as with many but not all people on the spectrum, Ricky likes routines and sometimes has trouble adjusting to change. Some people may ask, “Does that make me a little bit autistic? I like routines and I don’t like change.” The National Autistic Society mentions the myth that “we’re all a bit autistic” on its website, but that is a myth about autism that I am keen to scotch—no, we are not. My routines help me to organise my day. Ricky’s help to prevent him from experiencing sensory overload and to soothe him when he does.

Ricky wants to take the same route to school each day, which is fairly straightforward, but when he goes on holiday—as he does when my mum, my husband and I visit India—some experiences can be tricky for him, such as a very noisy and chaotic queue for a zoo, which we quickly left. That is an example of something we did to accommodate Ricky but which benefited us too—I did not like the queue either.

We have been able to enjoy holidays mostly because his amazing mum and the rest of the family are brilliant at facilitating what Ricky needs to be comfortable, including certain books, access to certain things on his mum’s phone and certain foods. We are all pretty much in agreement about avoiding noisy, chaotic experiences that would cause him sensory overload. We have all realised that we like spending gentle time together doing familiar things. It works for me, and it means that Suni and the family can have a holiday.

We have built up to several days’ holiday each year because we have found certain places, such as the Green Hotel in Mysore, where Ricky knows what to expect and where the staff show great understanding, without any special training, by being thoughtful and by responding to specific requests from one of us, which can help.

Although visiting a public building for the first time could be a new and upsetting experience, an organisation can help. It can provide information in advance on a website, or on arrival in a leaflet, with matching, visually clear and logical information in the building. Even without training or an explanation of autism—I do not think the staff at the Green Hotel know what Ricky’s condition is—staff can be encouraged to accept different ways of communicating, and see them as a bonus to us all rather than a limitation.

When Ricky is experiencing sensory overload, he will sometimes use repetitive movements, sounds or actions to try to bring some order and method to a stressful situation. That could be profoundly misunderstood and seen as weird, disruptive or even aggressive. The response of staff to that behaviour in autistic people may make being in a public building unwelcoming. Indeed, in the 2016 National Autistic Society survey, 28% of autistic people and their families said that they have been asked to leave a public space, which upsets me terribly.

Some people with autism have different ways of understanding non-verbal social communication from neurotypical people. They may be very literal in their interpretation of what someone says and jokes and sarcasm may not work, or may work in a different way.

Again, that may be seen as weird, irritating or difficult and our responses might make a public building unwelcoming.

If people in public buildings are given clear information about autism—how it might present and what might contribute to that sensory overload—they can learn to adjust their responses to people who behave in ways they do not expect, without necessarily knowing that that person is on the autistic spectrum. Some people's autism will not be noticeable, and other people may have no idea what is going on, but that does not mean that they are coping with an over-stimulating environment, sensory overload, disruption or noise.

Autism is a difference, not a disease. Understanding that difference helps people who work in public buildings to make adjustments or to change how they present the building so that even if they do not know that someone is autistic, the building and organisation are more accessible.

I have chosen to focus on public buildings because we should all have access to them as users and as potential employees. The ability of people with autism to do great work and to flourish could be even better if buildings were more accessible to them. My relationships with people with autism are a privilege. Their different interpretations of the world around us are insightful and illuminating. Making public buildings more accessible would bring those insights into public life to the benefit of us all.

Since launching the autism-friendly award in 2016, the National Autistic Society has supported over 40 public and private venues to become autism-friendly. Each organisation took steps to improve staff understanding, introduced pre-visit information, adapted its premises, consulted with autistic people and their families, and encouraged wider public awareness of autism, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) mentioned.

With help from the NAS, over 1,000 sites will be autism-friendly in 2019. That is fantastic and it would be great for us to be one of them. The parliamentary estate already has part of the autism award, but I would like us to go further. The NAS works with a large banking group that has more than 800 sites, so clearly there are businesses that understand the benefits of making their buildings autism-friendly to their excellent employees, potential employees, and customers who are on the spectrum. It benefits business and it benefits public space.

Public buildings and the organisations in them have no reason not to do the same. Local authorities should take a lead—hence bringing the debate to the Department's attention—but schools, health services, the police and other public bodies should make the most of what the NAS and other autism organisations can provide.

In my own constituency, the NAS and the Bristol Autism Spectrum Service helped me to provide a more autism-accessible service and worked with me to hold what we believe was the country's first autism-specific constituency surgery. I strongly encourage other hon. Members to do the same. We can and should lead by example in this place. In summer 2017, the Houses of Parliament received the National Autistic Society's autism-friendly award, joining the Welsh Assembly, the Scottish Parliament and Stormont, but as I walk around I can see plenty more to do.

Restoration and renewal is an opportunity. Under the Equality Act 2010, businesses and public spaces are not allowed to discriminate against an autistic person because of their disability. I am sure that staff here and in restaurants and council buildings alike would not dream of telling someone, "You're autistic. You must leave", but a lack of understanding could mean that they react unhelpfully to what seems like odd behaviour. That could lead to a situation that causes them to ask the autistic person to leave, in effect, because of their autism. My experience with Ricky at the Green Hotel in Mysore shows that staff in public spaces do not need to discriminate in that way, however unintentionally.

Businesses and public bodies have an anticipatory duty under the Act to make reasonable adjustments, which means thinking in advance. In October 2017, over 5,000 restaurants, shopping centres and other venues across the UK took part in autism hour, which my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) has mentioned. For 60 minutes, they took simple steps to make their premises autism-friendly by dimming lights, reducing noise and carrying out autism-awareness activities.

John Howell: The hon. Lady is being generous with her time. I like the stress that she puts on the information available for people with autism. Does she have any thoughts about whether building regulations for new buildings need to be changed to make them more autism-friendly? How might we physically adapt older buildings to accommodate people with autism?

Thangam Debbonaire: I would love building regulations to be altered to take into account what needs to happen to make buildings not only autism-friendly, but friendly to people with dementia and learning disabilities, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston has said. I hope the Minister will address that important point in her remarks.

In my constituency, local voluntary parents' group SEND a Welcome, which provides mutual support and public-awareness raising for families with children with special needs, including but not confined to autism, has encouraged many local businesses, such as the Boston Tea Party on Gloucester Road, to do similar things. That means that their families can use local shops and businesses, and it is also good for us all.

That work is so promising and so welcome, but all public buildings should have more than an autism hour. We should have autism days, months and years. In fact, we should simply be accessible to the one in 100 people on the autistic spectrum. Everyone present seems to agree that that is in everyone's interest. What is good for people with autism is good for us all. The findings of the NAS's "Too Much Information" research suggest that adjustments are not happening as consistently as they should be. The NAS can help, but it needs to be supported by the Government. I hope the Minister will address that.

Before I draw to a close, I have some questions for the Minister. I am grateful for the commitment that I believe she has to doing better to ensure that autistic people have the right to public spaces. My constituent, "H", is a young woman at a local mainstream state school. She is on the autistic spectrum and has been in touch with me this week and on several previous occasions about the need for greater understanding of autism. When I contacted her about this debate, she said:

[Thangam Debbonaire]

“I would like to ask the Minister whether there will be a campaign to raise autism awareness in schools. I ask this because I recently went on a trip, and became distressed with the noise levels from my fellow students on the coach.”

I know how she feels—I sometimes find that myself—but this is a real problem for students with autism. She adds:

“To prevent this happening again, I would suggest a short course for students in which to learn about the signs and symptoms of autism, and how to help someone in distress due to them.”

I add to H’s question a few others. First, what support will the Minister give to local authorities to ensure that their staff can benefit from training to help them to make the physical space, atmosphere, staffing and—as the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) mentioned—structure of public buildings such that people with autism and their families can use them comfortably?

Secondly, given the high level of social isolation experienced by autistic people, will the Government ensure that their new strategy to tackle loneliness includes a specific focus on making public spaces accessible to people with autism and their families? Thirdly, how else will the Minister encourage more businesses and all public spaces to become autism-friendly? I recognise that business is outside her Department, but good examples can have a knock-on effect.

Fourthly, what steps will she take to ensure that the renovated Parliament meets the access needs of autistic people and their families? I strongly encourage her to consider that issue and discuss it with her colleagues in other Departments. Finally, what steps will she take to ensure that managers of public buildings and organisations are aware of their Equality Act duties in relation to autistic people? I refer to schools, health centres and police stations as well as council buildings. It would be fantastic if she talked to her colleagues about that.

I began my speech by suggesting changes and asking whether they were too much for the custodians of public buildings to contemplate. They are not—and the time to contemplate them is now. Yesterday, we had a very constructive debate in this Chamber on the treatment of adults with autism by the criminal justice system, secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan). Today, the all-party group on autism launched its report on autism and education, based on an inquiry chaired by the hon. Members for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) and for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman). I am grateful to them for their work and to the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) for her leadership of the all-party group. I also praise Mr Speaker for his personal commitment to the issue, which shows great leadership in the place. Many right hon. and hon. Members have demonstrated great commitment to autism awareness.

One in 100 people and their families deserve these changes as a matter of right, so that they can have their equal right to use public space respected. My cousin Sunitha and her family, my husband and his colleagues, the NAS, Bristol Autism Support, the SEND a Welcome parents group in Bishopston, the shopping centres mentioned by my hon. Friends the Members for Stretford and Urmston and for Dewsbury, my assistant Mike—there are so many examples. They and so many others have shown me what can be done in publicly owned buildings, and not out of pity or because being autistic is inherently a struggle.

I really urge colleagues not to refer to autism as a struggle, because being autistic means seeing the world and relationships in it in a different way. It is not a disease. Many people on the autistic spectrum value their identity as neurodiverse. We neurotypical people too often unnecessarily make things a struggle for autistic people; we create barriers where none are needed.

Autistic people are not making special pleading or asking us to feel sorry for them. They are asking for equal rights. They have a right to use public space, and it is time we made that right a reality.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I understand that two Back Benchers wish to speak. To allow time for the winding-up speeches, I ask them to speak for no more than seven minutes each.

4.54 pm

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) on securing this important debate.

Everyone should have the right to easy access to public buildings, and the roughly one in 100 people in the United Kingdom who are on the autistic spectrum are no exception. Although, of course, there is more that can be done, we have made great strides in making public buildings more accessible to people with visible disabilities—take the advances that have been made on wheelchair access. However, it is important that we also make public buildings more accessible to people with invisible disabilities, such as autism. Easier access to public buildings makes it easier to go about one’s daily life and access public services.

People with autism should not have their access compromised because basic, common-sense adjustments have not been made to certain buildings. Accessibility is as much an issue for them as it is for people with more visible disabilities. According to the National Autistic Society, 79% of autistic people and 70% of their families feel socially isolated. It is crucial that public buildings are organised in a way that makes autistic people and their families feel comfortable going to them.

There are a number of simple adjustments that can be made to buildings to make them more accessible to people with autism, such as removing overly bright colours, loud noises and clutter; ensuring that signage is clear and explicit; and making the layout of the building more predictable. It does not take much to make some relatively small adjustments that can really help people with autism and their families.

Likewise, it is important to promote autism awareness among staff. Half of autistic people and their families sometimes do not go out because of concern about people’s reactions to autism. The more we educate staff in public buildings—and the public in general—about autism, the more accessible public spaces will be for people with autism and their families. Encouraging understanding is just as important as making physical adjustments.

It is important that the UK Government, the Scottish Government and local authorities all work together to make public buildings more autism-friendly and more accessible to people with both visible and invisible disabilities. The UK Government have a good record of

encouraging the public sector to be more autism-friendly, and I very much hope that they continue and redouble their efforts in the near future.

We should aim to be an accessible and inclusive society in which access to public spaces is as easy as possible for people with autism and their families, and for people with various disabilities. That will involve building on the progress we have made, which will require impetus from all levels of government. It will require physical adjustments and awareness raising. It is an area in which, for relatively little, we can make a big, tangible, positive difference to the lives of an awful lot of people.

4.57 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) on bringing the issue of autism to Westminster Hall so honestly, compassionately and clearly. No one who listened to her speech could fail to be encouraged and energised by it.

If I may, I would like to offer a Northern Ireland perspective. The hon. Lady referred to what is happening in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, and I would like to give some introductory information about autism in Northern Ireland, as well as about some other matters. Statistical analysis has been carried out on the rate of autism in children in Northern Ireland, and its findings are concerning, to say the least. They suggest that the estimated prevalence of autism in the school-age population in Northern Ireland has increased from 1.2% to 2.5% in less than a decade. There is a significant difference in the estimated prevalence rates of autism between the genders: males are four times more likely to be identified with autism than females, in line with UK-wide and international figures.

The Northern Ireland urban population has a statistically significant higher prevalence rate than the rural population, and we need to try to understand why that is so. Worryingly, using the Northern Ireland multiple deprivation measure ranking, the rate of autism from 2008-09 to 2013-14 was higher in the least deprived decile than in the most deprived. However, by 2016-17, the rate of autism in the most deprived area was 47% higher than in the least deprived area and 42% higher than the Northern Ireland average. Those figures illustrate the problems with autism.

In Northern Ireland, we have had a report by Autism NI and we have done some other work; I say “we”, but the work was done by the Northern Ireland Assembly, in which I served before coming here. Autism NI is a very active group in the Northern Ireland Assembly and it has come forward with some great strategies, visions and ideas for the future. Some of the things that it has put forward—back in my time at the Northern Ireland Assembly and since then—have been very significant.

My introduction to autism has been through interaction with people as a constituency MP, as a Northern Ireland Assembly Member and as a local councillor. I have filled in forms for parents to claim disability living allowance for their children, and I have dealt with other benefit issues, as well as referrals for educational assessment so that schools can get the classroom assistants that they need. Those are the real things that affect people, and engaging with them is how we learn about autism.

An interesting point was made in a separate debate this morning. We come to these debates to add our bit of knowledge, but also to gain knowledge from others. It is good that we will be able to leave this debate with knowledge from Scotland, from the hon. Member for Bristol West, from the shadow Minister, from the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) and, indeed, from the Minister.

The estimated prevalence of autism has increased across all school years. In 2009-10, 74% of children identified as having autism were classified at stage 5 of the special educational needs assessment. I have been directly involved with that assessment, so I understand the issues clearly. However, in 2016-17 the percentage of children identified as having autism and classified at stage 5 of the assessment had fallen to 63%. There was a slight improvement in that time, which is probably down to the autism NI strategy. That strategy has addressed some autism issues, although it will take a while to work out all the figures.

Autism is a massive factor for children and young people in Northern Ireland, but it is not a death sentence by any stretch of the imagination. What is required is to teach communities about tools for people with autism. I loved it when the hon. Member for Bristol West made a comment about a wee boy or girl having autism. As she said, people with autism are the same as the rest of us; they just have a different way of doing things, and it is important that we understand that. As I say, I loved that little comment, because my mind was working in a very similar way. I think that those who deal regularly with people with autism would know what I mean.

One tool that I have come across is the Autism Friendly award, which is provided by the National Autistic Society and helps to teach communities about autism. The award helps businesses to become educated and aware of what they can do to help themselves and the families who use their services. It might be a simple thing, but it can really make a difference, and that is what we want.

According to the National Autistic Society, 79% of autistic people and 70% of families with autistic children feel socially isolated. I have often been involved in cases with a single parent—often a lady—with an autistic child and a couple of other children. The children are all pressing upon her. I see such women in my office and I understand how they can feel socially isolated, because their whole life is focused on looking after their children and doing their best for them.

Half of autistic people and their families sometimes do not go out because of concern about people’s reaction to autism, which goes back to the point that the hon. Member for Bristol West made earlier. We have to be more understanding and not stare, as children sometimes do; sometimes adults stare, too. We need to be aware of these things.

The NAS website states that:

“Even though more than 1 in 100 people in the UK are autistic, many of them and their families still struggle to access essential community spaces, businesses and shops”,

so the Autism Friendly award for business is good. The NAS website continues:

“The National Autistic Society’s Autism Friendly Award champions premises who commit to making sure that autistic visitors receive the same warm welcome as everybody else.

[*Jim Shannon*]

This doesn't mean investing in expensive alterations or training your staff to be autism experts. Small changes can make a massive difference to autistic visitors and just a little understanding can go a long way.

We have worked with everyone from airports, heritage sites to sports arenas, local hairdressers and high street stores. Every customer-facing organisation, whatever their size or business, can benefit from becoming autism-friendly."

That is what the NAS wants to achieve, and we in this House should want to achieve it, too.

I am conscious of your instruction about time, Mr Betts, so I will come to a close. Each venue that achieves the Autism Friendly award will help to make the UK a more autism-friendly place by opening its doors to autistic people and their families, whose lives are affected daily by businesses that do not understand their needs. I fully support initiatives such as the Autism Friendly award. They help to raise awareness and make a positive difference to families with autism, who simply need a little compassion, a little more understanding and—I say this gently—a little more support from the Government. I believe that, as a matter of principle, every single Government-funded building must be autism-aware and autism-friendly.

I look forward to hearing the Minister's response to this debate, and I wish her well in her new position. I should have done that at the very beginning of my speech, and I apologise for not doing so. She and I came into the House at the same time. I know that she is a lady of compassion, so we look forward to a compassionate response.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): The two Opposition spokespersons are next. Five minutes each, please.

5.5 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): It is a pleasure, Mr Betts, to serve under your chairship.

I am grateful to have been able to contribute this week to not one, but two debates on autism. It is great that the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) was able to secure a debate on this important subject, and it is right that this House considers it.

Our understanding of autism has obviously changed greatly over the years and everyone can be grateful that there is now more information and awareness about autism than ever before. So far, there have been contributions from the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), who mentioned the example of Sainsbury's, which, in encouraging other businesses to contribute, is very much valued; from the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), on how raising awareness can benefit everyone, which should be heard in this House; and from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who, as always, provided a valuable contribution and insight from Northern Ireland.

In the limited time that I have, I will take the opportunity to highlight two factors that are, of course, relevant to my constituency. First, there is the Autism Resource Coordination Hub—ARCH—in Hamilton, which supports individuals suffering from autism and their carers. Often, ARCH identifies local campaigns where it can provide advice and guidance on how to improve buildings and their surrounding areas, in order to improve the experience

of those with autism as they live their daily lives, and also to encourage public buildings and spaces to improve their environment so that people can use them freely and accessibly.

Secondly, I will raise the concerns of one of my constituents, Julia Fordyce. Her son, Macoist, has worked with various services over the years. He has finished school and is now a young adult attempting to enter the workplace. However, his experience of entering a Department for Work and Pensions building on various occasions has been less successful than would be expected. I will use not my own words, but those of his mother and main carer, Julia, to tell the Minister about how they were made to feel in a DWP building. I hope that doing so will help to improve the services of all Departments in working with those who have autism.

Julia has said:

"We were greeted by 2 advisers who were sat behind a glass panel, Macoist found the glass panel very unnerving."

She said that it was clear that the advisers had not read about Macoist's disabilities and had no understanding of his claim. She continues:

"Our second appointment with his work coach was even more challenging."

She says that the work coach insisted on moving rooms to recommence part of his assessment, which made Macoist extremely agitated and made the experience far more difficult than it needed to be.

Julia goes on to say that on another occasion her son "had an on-going sick certificate which made no difference at all".

She says the work coach insisted on taking Macoist through the entire process once more, as if he had never read the documents. The work coach then summarised matters and Macoist agreed to a work commitment of two hours a week. However, she says:

"For Macoist any kind of change has a dramatic affect on him mentally"—

that is, on his mental health. She goes on to say that for Macoist, travelling to new places and having new experiences can be stressful enough, but the experience in the DWP building could have been improved. It would have been improved simply if, for example, DWP staff had come to their home beforehand, explained what he might encounter at the Jobcentre and talked him through it.

I understand that it is not always possible for a DWP officer to do that, but I wonder whether that could be considered as part of guidance, or as an example of best practice, to take back to the DWP. Such experiences are very different for every individual, but for those who suffer from autism, they are not great. Macoist was ill-prepared for the changes to the environment that he experienced. That made the experience of working with the DWP less than successful and less enjoyable than it could perhaps have been.

Macoist is ready to engage. He wants to work and is keen to be part of the active workforce. If the Department for Work and Pensions can simply alter its policies and procedures, that would be beneficial. His mum, Julia, said:

"I know as his parent and carer I have found the whole experience extremely stressful and dread the next step of having Macoist assessed because I have very little faith that his disabilities or needs will be recognised and fully expect I will have another challenge on my hands."

I wanted to take this opportunity to give a voice to my constituent. The accessibility of public buildings should not be exclusive to the likes of large chain supermarkets or cinemas; it should also be part of our Government Departments. They should ensure that they provide the best possible service, and that they factor awareness and experience into their own environments. Those who have autism and their carers face the essential challenges of everyday life. We can improve our own service delivery and our Departments' awareness and guidance. I strongly encourage the UK Government to follow the example of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and develop an autism strategy to improve individuals' life experiences.

5.11 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) on securing this debate and on her passionate and inspiring contribution. I agree that quiet spaces and logical ways through the parliamentary estate would benefit us all.

We all aim for an inclusive society, and public places should be for all the public. It is great that 1,000 spaces are now autism-friendly, but that raises the question of how many are not. We have heard some worrying statistics. Some 79% of people with autism and their families feel socially isolated. Last week, I went to a Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness reception at No. 10, where there were many comments about social isolation and loneliness. People mentioned old people and young mums, but there was no mention of autism. I encourage the Government to add people with autism and their families to the strategy and to build them into it.

As we have heard from many Members, these changes can help other people, too. I often think about my mum who, as she got older, did not like going into crowded places with music because she could not hear the conversation over it. Simple adjustments will help many people.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned many things from Northern Ireland. We can learn from across the UK, because there are people with autism in every part of the United Kingdom. The Labour party recognised that isolation and the need to include everyone in society. Our last manifesto had the specific objective of making the whole country autism-friendly. As we heard from the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson), many of the physical adjustments will not be major ones—a lot of it is to do with awareness.

The hon. Member for Strangford talked about children staring and telling them not to. Children will stare, but would it not be great if their parents could explain, "Yes, these people are different, but differences are what makes the world go round"? Being different is not bad, and that is the key point. It is about getting the awareness so that while people may stare, they will react differently and say, "That person is just different."

Some councils and areas are working towards making autism-friendly cities a reality. Liverpool has the ambition of becoming the UK's first autism-friendly city. It is working with businesses and cultural spaces, raising awareness of the condition and celebrating the achievements of those living with autism. There was an exhibition at the Tate of artwork by people with autism recently,

and I think that is a brilliant idea. We should celebrate people's differences and not define them specifically by the characteristic.

In the same way that someone in a wheelchair is not defined by their wheelchair, someone with autism is not defined by their autism. They have different needs—the same as the rest of us. However, their condition means that reasonable adjustments should be made, and the Equality Act 2010 applies. Will the Minister commit to raising awareness among businesses and those who own and operate public spaces of their duties to all under that Act? Too often, we hear, "We are wheelchair-accessible", and that is simply not good enough any more. An autism-friendly city should enable those with autism confidently to access community infrastructure such as shopping centres, tourist attractions and public transport. There is a wealth of information on the noise and the sensory overload of public transport systems, so perhaps we should consider how we can change that.

I want to mention my local authority, Wigan. It has autism champions at the business expo event to talk to businesses and raise awareness of people with autism as customers and employees. Those champions show that only very minor adjustments are needed and that people with autism can be excellent employees. If businesses rule out those people without thinking about it, they are missing out.

This week, we have had a number of events raising awareness of autism, and that is to be celebrated, but words are not enough, just as it is not enough to have an autism hour and then forget about it the rest of the time. We need action to ensure a fully inclusive society and environment. The wonderful example of my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West and her autism-friendly surgery will make many of us think about what we are doing to ensure a truly inclusive Parliament and a democracy in which all can take part.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): If the Minister could allow a couple of minutes at the end for the mover of the debate to come back, that would be helpful.

5.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) on securing this debate on the accessibility of public buildings for autistic people. I know she cares deeply about the issue. I also applaud the work of the all-party parliamentary group on autism and thank other Members who have spoken this afternoon. I will run through the names so that *Hansard* has them. We have had interventions from my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) and the hon. Members for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) and for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff). I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) and the hon. Members for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) and for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) for their contributions.

I am coming to this debate with more of a technical view because I thought it would be helpful if I laid out what has happened so far, what the Government intend to do and how we will take that forward. It might be a bit dry—I apologise—but I wanted to get the technical bits on the record.

[Mrs Heather Wheeler]

Autistic people prosper with the correct diagnosis and the correct support to meet their needs. Degrees of autism mean that some people require lots of support while others need less. I understand autistic people can face challenges in public buildings, particularly with orientation, noise, way-finding and signage, but also with many other things. People perceive an environment in different ways, and we are all on a spectrum of need, whether we are from a neurominority or whether we are neurotypical. My husband will work out which one I am; it is a challenge, but there we go.

We know that care is needed to shape our built environment to work for all. There are more than 600 different recognised neurodiverse conditions. Making buildings suit all is a complex issue. There are no recognised or accepted industry standards for designing buildings to meet the needs of people with neurodiverse conditions, although work is under way that I will describe.

It might help if I explain the current requirements for access to buildings, including public buildings. New buildings have to meet the access requirements, as set out in part M of schedule 1 to the Building Regulations 2010. The requirements are supported by detailed practical guidance in what are called approved documents. Volume 2 of “Approved Document M” covers non-domestic buildings and includes guidance relating specifically to public buildings. The guidance helps public building owners to comply with the regulations. It aims to encourage an inclusive design approach that includes everyone. To put the mind of the hon. Member for Bristol West at rest, we have been undertaking research into the effectiveness of the guidance, and I hope we will be able to publish that shortly.

Building owners are also covered by the requirements of the Equality Act 2010. In particular, that requires providers of services and facilities to members of the public to make reasonable adjustments so that people with disabilities are not placed at a substantial disadvantage compared with people without a disability. The duty can relate to physical features and how services and public functions are accessed and delivered. I will come back to the issue of the Department for Work and Pensions raised by the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East.

Statutory guidance does not stand alone; other sources of independent guidance can help. Many people turn to the British standard BS 8300, which describes accessibility and inclusive design for buildings. Inclusive design should address all forms of neurodiversity, including special considerations specific to autistic people. The British standard in that area, known as BS 8300-2, was published very recently, on 11 January 2018. Part 2 of the standard gives recommendations for the design of buildings in order to accommodate users with the widest range of characteristics and capabilities. It is applicable to the entrances of buildings, including outward-opening doors and windows, and to the interiors of buildings, such as entrances and reception facilities, and it covers much more besides.

Nevertheless, it is recognised that more needs to be done in the design of buildings to address the needs of neurodiverse people. Last year, to address a known gap in guidance on how to cater for neurodiversity, the British

Standards Institution sponsored the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design to carry out a survey called “Design for the Mind”. Officials from the Department took part, and spread the word to generate participation among networks of design professionals. Perhaps later on the House authorities might like to look into that matter very deeply.

Researchers spoke with many designers, architects, access consultants, autistic people, carers and specialists with experience in the field to draw up some basic design principles for making better buildings. The survey sought to understand how to cater for the needs of neurodivergent people. The report published in February 2017 identified 11 common themes, important for the design of environments. The themes address issues such as clarity, which means making things easier to understand; sensory loads, that is to say, making the most of the senses while avoiding sensory overload; layout, including having familiar layouts and providing a preview of what is ahead or beyond before someone enters a space; flooring; decoration; signage; acoustics; and lighting.

Some people felt that the most important consideration for design of an environment for autistic people was taking advice from autistic people. The survey identifies a gap so that others can take up the baton. The republished British standard BS8200-2 stops short on neurodiversity because it lacks evidence to back up more focused advice. The Government are considering a request from the British Standards Institution to match-fund a new, publicly available specification, known as a PAS, in the broader field of neurodiversity, which would include autism. I expect that we will reach a decision on that shortly, so I am delighted that the hon. Member for Bristol West has introduced such a timely debate.

As well as legislation and standards, we want to encourage the industry to strengthen inclusive design, including consideration of neurodiversity, through better education and training. In recent years, the Department has provided significant support for a number of initiatives to promote inclusive design, including work with the Design Council/Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment to develop high-quality, cross-disciplinary, continuous professional development modules on delivering inclusive design, and the development of a web-based hub for sharing knowledge, research and best practice in inclusive design. We are also supporting the Built Environment Professional Education project, which aims to ensure that newly qualified built environment professionals have the knowledge, skills and attitude to deliver accessible and inclusive buildings—not just buildings fit for the future but designers fit for the future.

Last autumn, the then Housing Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), launched a design quality symposium at the Royal Institute of British Architects, where 45 industry and local government representatives met to discuss how to improve design quality, which includes how effective quality and inclusion are integrated into the places and buildings that we plan and build. There will also be a national design conference this spring to raise the bar even higher.

Today’s debate has been an important one, and we welcome interest in autism and the built environment, and how that environment is perceived and used by autistic people. I again congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol West on raising the issue, and celebrate the

valuable progress that the “Design for the Mind” project and the British Standards Institution have done to date to develop design and guidance.

I will try to answer some of the questions that hon. Members raised, particularly the question that H asked. The answer that my boffins have come up with is that helping children and young people to understand autism can be the key to peer acceptance. Raising awareness among teachers and other school staff will, in turn, help to increase their awareness and understanding. Since 2012, more than 150,000 people have been trained to deliver autism awareness training in education. That includes not just teachers and teaching assistants, but support staff, receptionists, dining hall staff and caretakers—everybody who is involved with pupils, including people who go on coach trips. We are currently in discussions about, with a bit of luck, extending the contract with the Department to do more on that. I hope that H will be happy with that answer.

The autism strategy commits to increasing the understanding of autism and building communities that are more accessible to autistic people by approving autism awareness training for frontline public staff, in line with the needs of their job. To answer the question from the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East, I would add that the information will now be sent to the DWP to make sure that it can also take part in the process. I hope that the hon. Lady is happy with that answer.

Work has begun on developing a cross-Government strategy on loneliness in England—sorry, but Lanarkshire are doing their own thing up there, and in Northern Ireland. The strategy will bring together Government, local government, public services, voluntary and community organisations and build more integrated and resilient communities. We have also announced that the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government now has a designated Minister for Loneliness—the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak).

My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South wanted to know what we were going to do. Building regulations and British Standards are for all people, whether they are wheelchair users or someone with an invisible disability. Work to improve standards requires research, which is why we have commissioned the research about part M to fill in those aims and include everybody. As I said, the research will be published very shortly.

To conclude, this is about raising standards and improving the built environment for autistic and neurodiverse people. I look forward to working with everybody on the issue, particularly my friend the hon. Member for Bristol West and everybody who has spoken today. We want to continue the important work.

5.27 pm

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. I am grateful to my hon. Friends the Members for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) and for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), and the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) for their interventions, and, of course, to the hon. Members for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) and to my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) for their speeches.

I am pleased that the Minister was able to give us such detailed information about the built environment, and the concept of inclusive built design. Although I talked a great deal about different aspects of making buildings welcoming that were non-physical, it is the physical that can set the tone for so many of these things. I am really grateful that she has taken the time to give so much information. I will follow up with her on some of the specifics. I am grateful to her for answering all of my questions, particularly on behalf of H—I thank her very much for that. I will write to her about some of the progress that might need to be made, and how I can measure and follow it.

I am grateful to all hon. Members for taking part in today’s debate. It matters to me a great deal that we think about access in a way that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield said, does not just mean that we are wheelchair accessible, and that allows us, as other hon. Members also said, to see making buildings and organisations autism-friendly as something that benefits us all.

I long for the day we have more quiet spaces on the estate for everybody’s benefit, but I think that that is part of thinking about how building regulations might be amended in some quite simple but straightforward ways—such as the ways in which we have thought about bicycle racks and wheelchair accessibility. We can make some determinations about simple, specific things. Not every building can have those quiet spaces, but many could. For public space to be truly accessible would be a remarkable achievement, and everybody here could feel that they have played a part in that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the accessibility of public buildings for people with autism.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 31 January 2018

ATTORNEY GENERAL

Serious Fraud Office: Contingencies Fund Advance

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): I would like to inform the House that a cash advance from the Contingencies Fund has been sought for the Serious Fraud Office (SFO).

In line with the current arrangement for SFO funding agreed with HM Treasury, the SFO will be submitting a reserve claim as part of the supplementary estimate process for 2017-18.

The advance is required to meet a current cash requirement on existing services pending Parliamentary approval of the 2017-18 supplementary estimate. The supplementary estimate will seek an increase in both the resource departmental expenditure limit and the net cash requirement in order to cover the cost of significant investigations.

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £9,500,000 will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Serious Fraud Office. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £9,500,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

The advance will be repaid upon Royal Assent of the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill.

[HCWS437]

TREASURY

Double Taxation Convention Protocol: Uzbekistan

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): A protocol to the double taxation convention with Uzbekistan was signed on 24 January 2018. The text of the protocol is available on HM Revenue and Customs' pages of the gov.uk website and will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses. The text will be scheduled to a draft Order in Council and laid before the House of Commons in due course.

[HCWS438]

DEFENCE

Defence Equipment Plan

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Guto Bebb): I am pleased to place in the Library of the House this year's financial summary of the defence equipment plan. This is the sixth consecutive annual publication of the equipment plan summary, and demonstrates the Ministry of Defence's investment and the need to continue progress in driving improvements, reform and efficiency, with a plan to spend £180 billion

on equipment and support over the decade out to 2026-27 which will provide our armed forces with the capability they need.

The Government remain committed to the defence budget increasing by 0.5% above inflation each year and the Department is focusing on where best to invest across the entire defence programme in order to remain on top of an ever-changing and increasing threat environment. However, it was evident following the 2016 annual planning cycle that both uncertainty and risk had increased in the equipment plan. It did not, unfortunately, prove possible to address these issues satisfactorily in the 2017 annual budget cycle (ABC17) as a result of which, the equipment plan emerging from ABC17 contains a high level of financial risk and an imbalance between cost and budget.

These risks have informed the Department's work on the national security capability review and associated work in the 2018 annual budget cycle. The Department recently launched the modernising defence programme. We aim to use this work to deliver better military capability and value for money in a sustainable and affordable way, and to ensure that defence capabilities complement other national security capabilities in the most effective way.

[HCWS436]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

FCO Global Estate Update

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): I announce today the planned move of the Bangkok Embassy in Thailand. The new embassy building will be based in the AIA Sathorn Tower and will provide a modern, dedicated base from which diplomats can work to promote UK interests in Thailand.

We anticipate moving into the new offices in 2019, until which point we will lease back our existing embassy site to keep disruption to a minimum. Our embassy will continue to provide essential consular services to British holidaymakers and business people, and to work with the Thai authorities on preventing child exploitation, organised crime, money laundering and human trafficking.

Our new and improved embassy will allow us to take this activity to the next level, including by strengthening our trade links, enhancing our strong collaboration on science and innovation, and maintaining our focus on supporting human rights defenders and promoting freedom of expression. The new embassy will demonstrate our long-term commitment to our relationship with Thailand—a key partner for the UK's security and prosperity interests and leading member of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The completion of the sale of the current Bangkok Embassy compound in Thailand is the biggest land deal in Thai history and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's (FCO's) biggest ever sale, raising at least £420 million.

This deal is the result of considerable work by the FCO. The funds released will allow us to begin work on 30 to 40 major long-planned estates projects, and enable us to continue to update and modernise our global estate so that it meets our aspiration to provide a world-class platform for diplomacy.

[HCWS435]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Police Funding

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has today laid before the House “The Police Grant Report (England and Wales) 2018/19” (HC 745) for the approval of the House. The report sets out the Home Secretary’s determination for 2018-19 of the aggregate amount of grant that she proposes to pay under section 46(2) of the Police Act 1996.

Before announcing the Government’s proposals, I visited or spoke with every police force in England and Wales to better understand the demands they face and how these can best be managed. I saw for myself the exceptional attitude and hard work of police officers and staff around the country. I have also carefully considered the responses to the consultation on the provisional police grant report.

The Government are committed to protecting the public and providing the resources necessary for the police to do their critical work. We have listened to the police and recognised the demands they face. That is why I can confirm that the allocations that have been laid before the House today are the same as those proposed in my statement of 19 December 2017, *Official Report*, column 934-936. These proposals increase total investment in the police system by up to £450 million year on year in 2018-19.

In 2018-19, we will provide each police and crime commissioner (PCC) with the same amount of core Government grant funding as in 2017-18. Protecting the police grant means PCCs retain the full benefit from any additional local council tax income.

Alongside this, we are providing flexibility to PCCs in England to increase their band D precept by up to £12 in 2018-19 without the need to call a local referendum, equivalent to up to £1 per month for a typical band D household. These changes give PCCs the flexibility to increase their funding by up to around £270 million next year. Each PCC who uses this flexibility will be able to increase their direct resource funding by at least an estimated 1.6%, maintaining their funding in real terms. Most PCCs are intending to use the new precept flexibility.

We will also increase investment in national policing priorities such as police technology and special grant by around £130 million compared to 2017-18. This reflects our commitment to support the police to deliver a modern digitally enabled workforce, and to manage major events such as the Commonwealth summit and terrorist attacks. We will maintain the size of the police transformation fund at £175 million in order to help drive police reform.

Counter-terrorism police will receive a £50 million (7%) increase in like-for-like funding when compared to 2017-18. This will enable the counter-terrorism budget to increase to at least £757 million, including £29 million for an uplift in armed policing from the police transformation fund. This is a significant additional investment in the vital work of counter-terrorism police officers across the country. PCCs will be notified of force allocations separately. These will not be made public for security reasons.

In addition to the police funding settlement, the Government are taking decisive action to tackle the increasingly sophisticated cyber threat we face through the national cyber-security strategy, which is supported by a £1.9 billion programme of transformational investment from 2016 to 2021. The law enforcement response to tackling cyber-crime is an essential element of our national strategy, with the Home Office investing £30 million of national cyber-security programme funding in 2017-18 to support and develop the law enforcement response at the national, regional and local level. We will continue to invest in law enforcement capability throughout the lifetime of the programme.

As I set out in my statement of 19 December, the increase in funding to PCCs in 2018-19 must be matched by a serious commitment from PCCs and chief constables to reform by improving productivity and efficiency to deliver a better, more transparent service to the public. Since that statement, I have written to the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners and the National Police Chiefs Council seeking their proposals to deliver further efficiencies. Following these proposals, we will agree appropriate milestones for delivery in 2018. If the police deliver clear and substantial progress against the agreed milestones on productivity and efficiency in 2018, then the Government intend to maintain the protection of a broadly flat police grant in 2019-20 and repeat the same flexibility of the precept, i.e. allowing PCCs to increase their band D precept by a further up to £12 in 2019-20. This approach gives policing the opportunity to make major improvements in efficiency, and use those gains to improve services to the public.

Since December, the Home Office has continued to work with the police to identify potential procurement savings. We have identified a further £20 million of potential procurement savings starting in 2018-19, taking the total to over £120 million.

In December I highlighted the opportunity for policing to save up to 1 hour per officer shift through mobile digital working, potentially releasing the equivalent of 11,000 police officers who can be deployed to meet changing demands. Since December I have established a small team who will work with the police through 2018 to audit the level of opportunity from mobile working, identify which approaches work best, highlight best practice, and help forces and the Home Office take the right decisions to maximise the gains from the use of mobile digital working.

We are also today publishing comparable national information on the financial reserves held by PCCs to assist the public in holding PCCs to account. As at March 2017, PCCs held usable resource reserves of over £1.6 billion. This compares to £1.4 billion in 2011. Current reserves held represent 15% of annual police funding to PCCs. There are wide variations between forces with Gwent for example holding 42% and Northumbria holding close to 7%. This is public money and the public are entitled to more information around police plans for reserves and how those plans will support more effective policing. So I am also today writing to PCCs setting out new guidance requiring them to publish their reserves strategies in plain English, with a clear justification for each reserve held.

I have set out in a separate document, available as an online attachment, the tables illustrating how we propose to allocate the police funding settlement between the different funding streams and between police and crime commissioners for 2018-19. These documents are intended to be read together.

Attachments can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2018-01-31/HCWS439/>

[HCWS439]

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