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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Thursday 1 February 2018

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

The Secretary of State was asked—

Regulatory Equivalence

1. **Mr Alister Jack** (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): If he will make an assessment of the potential merits of seeking regulatory equivalence with the EU. [903661]

18. **Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What comparative assessment he has made of the potential merits of regulatory (a) alignment with and (b) divergence from the EU. [903684]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): We are fully focused on making the UK's exit from the EU and our new trading relationship with the world a success. We have set out proposals for an ambitious future relationship with the EU that minimises regulatory barriers for goods and services. Our partnership should be underpinned by high standards, a practical approach to regulation, trust in one another's institutions and a shared spirit of co-operation.

Mr Jack: Does my hon. Friend agree that regulatory equivalence, as opposed to regulatory alignment, should be a red line in our negotiations with the EU if we want to do trade deals with other countries around the world?

Mr Walker: Regulatory equivalence is about pursuing the same objectives, and as the Prime Minister outlined in her Florence speech, that could mean achieving the same goals by the same means or achieving the same goals by different means. It does not mean that we have to harmonise our rules with those of the EU. It is not a binary choice; we are proposing a bespoke, bold and ambitious free trade agreement between the UK and the EU, and we want to secure trade with Europe and with the wider world.

Mike Amesbury: By more than 2:1, members of the Institute of Directors would prefer the UK to maintain regulatory alignment with the single market rules for goods and services, rather than actively seeking to diverge after Brexit. Is that the Government's aim as well?

Mr Walker: The Government have been talking to a wide range of industry groups and representative bodies of business, and we recognise that there are benefits in some areas of maintaining regulatory alignment and ensuring that we have the most frictionless access to European markets. Of course we are entering the negotiations on the future partnership, and we want to take the best opportunities to trade with Europe and the wider world.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Is it true that Michel Barnier has basically offered us the Canada model, agreement on which could be reached this year, thus negating the need for any transition period?

Mr Walker: The Government's policy is that we are pursuing a bespoke trade agreement, not an off-the-shelf model. We believe that it will be in the interests of both sides in this negotiation to secure an implementation period.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The European Union has clearly and firmly set out its views on the options for these negotiations. Ministers so far have signally failed to provide any coherent response because they cannot agree among one another, and the Minister's answers today underline that—whether the answer is regulatory equivalence or something different, we just do not know. How long will it be before the British Government have a coherent position to set out in these negotiations?

Mr Walker: The Prime Minister has repeatedly set out a coherent position with regard to the future partnership we seek with the European Union. There was the Florence speech. My Secretary of State has been making speeches and the Chancellor has been making speeches, clearly setting out the UK's objectives for these negotiations, and we look forward to achieving those objectives in the months to come.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The Minister will know that legal text has now been looked at in terms of the progress report in December and that the issue of regulatory alignment came up with that document. Can we be assured that nothing will be put into legal text that prejudices our interpretation—the Government's interpretation—in relation to regulatory alignment?

Mr Walker: Absolutely; I can give that assurance. It is very important that we do secure the agreement based on the joint report and that that secures the position on the territorial integrity of the United Kingdom.

Customs Union

2. **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU customs union on the economy. [903662]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Suella Fernandes): The Government conduct an extremely broad range of work on EU exit issues and will continue to do so, which means that all decisions, including those on the EU customs union, are supported by many analyses. Leaving the customs

union liberates the UK to establish new and fruitful trade deals with the rest of the world, as well as pursuing a new trading relationship with the EU that retains as frictionless a trade as possible in goods.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck: From that answer, it is clear that no assessment has been made. We have had it confirmed again this week that the north-east retail and manufacturing sector will be hardest hit in all scenarios. It is clear—is it not?—that nearly 200,000 workers in my region who work in these sectors are facing grim futures because of this Government's inability to get their act together.

Suella Fernandes: One advantage—although there are many—of leaving the customs union is that Britain can be a champion for global free trade again for the first time in 40 years. Free trade through mutually beneficial partnerships has historically ushered in productivity, innovation, consumer choice, growth and prosperity—something I hope that the hon. Lady will encourage.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I very warmly welcome my hon. Friend to her place. It is great to see a ray of sunshine, optimism and positivity from the Front Bench. What a shame that we do not see the same from the Opposition Benches. Is she surprised, as I am, that we are still discussing the customs union? The EU has ruled it out. The Prime Minister has ruled it out. The Leader of the Opposition—if not quite the shadow Secretary of State—has ruled it out. Why are we still talking about it?

Suella Fernandes: My hon. Friend raises a very prescient point. The British people voted to leave the EU in their historic decision in 2016. In doing so, they instructed this Parliament to take us out of the EU customs union. That is exactly what the Prime Minister and this Government are doing.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Blaenau Gwent has just been boosted by the arrival of the car company, TVR. Does the Minister agree that we need a customs union with the European Union for such ventures to survive and thrive?

Suella Fernandes: The UK is the second largest market for cars in Europe, so it is clearly in both our interests to continue this partnership between our industries. Is it not encouraging that companies such as Jaguar Land Rover, Nissan, Toyota and McLaren have made significant investment decisions in the UK since the referendum? I am committed, with this Government, to ensuring as frictionless trade as possible, so that we can continue this fruitful arrangement and support this vital sector of our economy.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): It may be that the Minister is not aware that, in fact, car production went down for the first time since 2009 and that investment in the industry has also gone down by £500 million. When will the Government confirm exactly what their plans are in relation to the customs union, so that companies that manufacture here know that their components can get safely into the United Kingdom and not get stuck in a traffic jam at Calais?

Suella Fernandes: We are seeing a rise in manufacturing and in exports, and UK foreign direct investment is at a record high. The economy is doing very well, and there have been encouraging signs and votes of confidence in the UK economy since Brexit. As we enter the next phase of the negotiations, we want to ensure that the automotive sector benefits from any arrangement. That will be a priority for the Government.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): We now know—no thanks to the Government—that all the analysis that the Government have done to date shows that Brexit is bad news. We know that the Prime Minister was shown that analysis a few days ago, and we know that the first thing she did was to jump on a plane to China. Will the Minister confirm the accuracy of the reports yesterday that the Government's analysis also shows that their obsession with cutting EU migration will be seriously bad for the British economy?

Suella Fernandes: We are in the middle of the negotiations, but when it comes to migration, it is clear that the UK will be committed to designing its own immigration policy, which is determined by skills, talent and brains. That is what will drive our economy forward, and that is what will create jobs and growth.

Peter Grant: My question was whether yesterday's report was correct. I take it from the Minister's attempt to dodge the question that that report, like the previous ones, was entirely accurate. Given that the Government's own analysis shows that leaving the European Union is bad news, leaving the customs union is bad news and leaving the single market is bad news—and now that we know that cutting immigration from the European Union is bad news—do the Government have any plans, at any time before Brexit day, to adopt a strategy that is based on facts and evidence, rather than on blind ideology?

Suella Fernandes: The document to which the hon. Gentleman refers is not Government policy. It comes with significant caveats and is limited in nature. It is clear that there are significant benefits from our departure from the EU and the customs union. First, we have the chance to pursue our independent global trade policy and foster growing economic ties with fast-growing economies for the first time in 40 years. Secondly, we will be free from the common external tariff, which could lead to a drop in consumer prices for British citizens. Lastly, we have the golden opportunity to build a new customs arrangement with the EU that is world-leading and enables prosperity, jobs and growth.

Negotiation Outcomes

3. **Antoinette Sandbach** (Eddisbury) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to plan for different outcomes in the negotiations on the UK leaving the EU. [903663]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): Across the Government, we are planning for all outcomes, including the unlikely scenario in which no mutually satisfactory agreement can be reached. Given the success that we have had in securing an agreement in the first phase of negotiations, we are confident that we will go on to reach a swift agreement on an implementation period

and a mutually beneficial future partnership with the EU. We approach the negotiations anticipating success and a good deal for both the UK and the EU.

Antoinette Sandbach: Given DExEU's propensity to rubbish the Government's own research, will the Minister commission the independent Office for Budget Responsibility to model the budgetary and economic impacts of the four departure options—World Trade Organisation rules, a Canada-style deal, the Government's free trade agreement proposal and joining the European Free Trade Association—and then release this modelling to Parliament?

Mr Baker: As my hon. Friend knows, the OBR's responsibilities are set out in legislation, and we do not have any plans to change them. I am glad that she mentions EFTA. A number of colleagues have raised EFTA with me. It would be important to have a further debate on EFTA if she would like to table one, because I would like to hear from colleagues what problems they believe that EFTA would solve in relation to our relations with the European Union, given that Swiss bilaterals have been ruled out and we are looking for our own bilateral relationships. We do not propose to join the European Economic Area, which would be a bad deal for the UK.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I know that the Secretary of State is an early riser, but did any of the other Ministers listen to the former Chancellor, George Osborne, on Radio 4 this morning? What are they going to say about what he says about the fact that this country, especially the manufacturing sector, is doomed outside the European Union?

Mr Baker: I do not accept the premise of the hon. Gentleman's question. Unfortunately, I did not have the opportunity to listen to the former Chancellor on Radio 4 this morning. *[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State says that he did. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for reminding me fondly of the time that I did listen to the former Chancellor on Radio 4, before I went on after him at the height of the campaign.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Does the Minister agree that it is important that we keep our skies as open as possible post Brexit? Can he provide any reassurance that he is engaging with the aviation sector to make sure that this industry can continue to thrive under any and all post-Brexit scenarios?

Mr Baker: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. It is in all our mutual interests to ensure that aviation continues to be open and liberal. The Secretary of State for Transport is well apprised of the issues and is pursuing them.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): The BuzzFeed papers tell us that the regions most damaged by a no-deal Brexit would be the west midlands, Northern Ireland, and the north-east. The people of these regions deserve better. Will the Minister take the opportunity to make it clear to certain colleagues sitting behind him that they are wrong and irresponsible to be talking up or wishing for a no-deal outcome?

Mr Baker: To answer the hon. Lady very directly on her last point, as I said earlier, it is our policy to seek a mutually beneficial, deep and special partnership with the European Union, embracing an economic partnership, among other things, and we are optimistic about achieving that outcome.

Jenny Chapman: The Minister will not say it, but I will: they are wrong and they are irresponsible to be doing so.

As well as certain regions being hit hardest, certain sectors are threatened severely by a no-deal Brexit. For example, the food and drink industry exported £9.8 billion-worth of goods to the EU last year. Once and for all, will the Minister rule out a no-deal outcome, commit to a transition on current terms and give industry the certainty it needs?

Mr Baker: I find the hon. Lady's question peculiar. She seems to be suggesting that I would adopt something other than Government policy. It is the Government's policy to secure an implementation period on current terms; it is the Government's policy to secure an economic partnership; and of course it is the Government's policy to be responsible and prepare to exit the European Union under whatever circumstances may prove necessary.

Non-UK EU Nationals

4. **Emma Dent Coad** (Kensington) (Lab): What steps he is taking to maintain the rights of non-UK EU nationals resident in the UK after the UK leaves the EU. [903664]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): As the Prime Minister made clear in her open letter to EU citizens, we highly value the contributions they make to the UK's economic, social and cultural fabric. Safeguarding the rights of EU citizens living in the UK and UK nationals living in the EU was a first priority for negotiations. This is a commitment we have delivered on. The agreement reached in December in the joint report gives those covered certainty not only about residency but healthcare, pensions and other benefits.

Emma Dent Coad: The 2011 census stated that 20% of Kensington and Chelsea's population were EU nationals. In Kensington, we have three schools for Spanish and for French students. Families are living in fear of the uncertainty. With the discussions on EU citizens' rights opening next week, will the Minister reassure my existing EU constituents that they will retain all their rights once we leave the European Union?

Mr Walker: The hon. Lady should welcome the fact that we reached in the joint report agreement on the wide range of rights that I just described, and that does provide certainty. We want to work with colleagues at the Home Office to ensure there is a streamlined process for the new settled status that will come in under UK law, to secure those rights in the long term.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Is the Minister not concerned that the Prime Minister's reported comments about the more limited access to rights that those arriving during transition will have may have a

chilling effect on drawing the skills and talent to the UK that his colleague spoke of a minute ago, to meet the labour market gaps that we urgently need to fill in many sectors?

Mr Walker: We have been clear that during the implementation period, EU citizens should be able to continue to visit, live and work in the UK as they do now, and we will use that period to prepare for the future partnership. There will be a new registration scheme for EU nationals in preparation for our future immigration system. The citizens' rights agreement reached in December, set out in the joint report, gives certainty about the rights of EU citizens already here going forward, but the agreement does not cover those arriving after we leave the EU.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Ah, yes, a Dorset knight.

Sir Christopher Chope: Can my hon. Friend confirm that during the implementation period, all foreigners, including those in the European Union, will be treated equally in having access to our country?

Mr Walker: We will remain an open and tolerant country that recognises the valuable contribution of those with the skills and expertise to make our society better, but we will also control the overall number of migrants who come to the UK. As we leave the EU, we are seeking to form new ambitious trade deals around the world with trading partners anew. We will have control of our borders, and free movement as it has worked during our EU membership will end when we leave the EU.

European Court of Justice

5. **Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): Whether he plans for the UK to be subject to rulings of the European Court of Justice during the transition period. [903666]

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): In Florence five months ago, the Prime Minister set out a proposal for the implementation period under current terms, utilising the existing structure of European Union rules and regulations, including the European Court, for that time-limited period. That is necessary so that there is only one set of changes for businesses and people and minimum disruption. We are also clear that our priority will be getting the right arrangements for Britain's relationship with the EU in the long term, out of the single market, out of the customs union and without direct jurisdiction of the European Court.

Chris Bryant: So the European Court will be deciding on issues in this country, and if British businesses want to continue doing trade with the rest of Europe, they will have to abide by all the rules of the single market, and British citizens will have fewer rights in the rest of Europe than they have now. In essence, the Government are turning us from being a proud partner with European colleagues into a vassal state. Will the Secretary of State propose that we hand them over some Danegeld as well?

Mr Davis: I think that is the first time I have seen the hon. Gentleman in alliance with my hon. Friend the Member for the 19th century.

15. [903679] **Mr David Jones** (Clwyd West) (Con): If the Government were regrettably to accept the EU's negotiating guidelines, so that the United Kingdom remains subject to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice during any implementation period, what arrangements would be put in place to safeguard Britain's interests, given that there will be no British judges?

Mr Davis: As my right hon. Friend well knows, we are going into negotiation on this matter almost as we speak. During that period, my primary concern is any new laws coming into effect over which we have had no say, and we will aim to set up arrangements to ensure that they do not harm the United Kingdom.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): After the Prime Minister's Florence speech, the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Fareham (Suella Fernandes), who I welcome to the Front Bench, co-ordinated a letter from the European Research Group describing the Government's policy on the transitional period as staying in the EU "by stealth". She has not yet replied to my letter of 14 January, offering her the opportunity to retract that view. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is these divisions at the heart of the Government that jeopardise our negotiations? Will he confirm that all his Ministers support Government policy on the transition?

Mr Davis: It is almost *sine qua non* that all my Ministers support Government policy, which is more than I can say for Opposition Front Benchers.

International Business Community

6. **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure the Government engage with the international business community during negotiations for the UK to leave the EU. [903668]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Suella Fernandes): Ministers from across the Government have carried out extensive engagement on EU exit, in both the UK and the EU, with businesses and industry bodies from all sectors of the economy. Those include international businesses with a footprint in the UK and British businesses with interests in the EU. The Prime Minister chairs a quarterly business advisory council to hear directly from senior business leaders on the key issues across EU exit and the wider economy.

Mark Pawsey: Coming from Coventry, which is the home of the UK motor industry, I have been delighted by the industry's resurgence in recent years. Last year, however, it did see a fall in output of 3%, which was attributed by the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders to the need for clarity on Brexit transition. Given the importance of car manufacturing and its supply chain to the west midlands economy, what reassurance has the Minister been able to give the industry about the future relationship with our European partners?

Suella Fernandes: I, too, am delighted about the resurgence to which my hon. Friend refers. It is precisely because of such requests and the result of such engagement with businesses that the Government's proposals for an implementation period—promising the clarity needed to plan ahead—have been welcomed by various sectors of our economy. We and the EU want to agree the detail of the implementation by the end of March, making good as swiftly as possible on our promise of certainty. We are seeking a bold and ambitious economic partnership with the EU, with the greatest possible tariff and barrier-free trade arrangement with our European neighbours.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Businesses that I speak to in the north-east tell me of international investments that have been put on hold while companies try to work out what kind of Brexit this Government are actually going for. They do not want to make that public, so will the Minister tell me how she is engaging with international business to assess the impact of that on our economy, and indeed—because I forget what the story is today—whether such an assessment is going on?

Suella Fernandes: I hope the hon. Lady listened to the Secretary of State's very detailed presentation and speech on Friday in which he set out the terms of an implementation period and addressed exactly the issues that she raises now. The implementation period will provide a bridge and a platform for businesses to enable them to plan for the future, to give them the time that they need, and to enable them to plan on that basis for a prosperous future outside.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The services sector is of course the largest part of the British economy, and while the single market in services may not be complete, it is the deepest market in services anywhere on the globe. Will the Minister confirm that it is our intention that the full services sector will be included in our deep and special partnership?

Suella Fernandes: My hon. Friend brings to the House her experience of the European Parliament, which we all value. As 80% of the UK economy is services-based, it is absolutely vital that we incorporate provisions relating to services in any new arrangement with the EU.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I was astonished to read in yesterday's National Audit Office report on the equipment plan that the Ministry of Defence's inability to hedge effectively against sterling fluctuations could cost up to £5 billion. Will the Minister advise us what DExEU is doing to support other Departments that are struggling with Brexit as they engage with the international community?

Suella Fernandes: As I have said, there is considerable engagement with the international business community. The Prime Minister herself chairs a business advisory council to hear directly from senior business leaders on key issues. On cross-departmental engagement, there is considerable work and engagement across all Whitehall Departments to prepare for all outcomes from these negotiations.

Farmers

7. Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on support for farmers after the UK leaves the EU. [903670]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): We have been working closely with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on support for farmers. The Government will provide the same cash total in funds for farm support until the end of the Parliament. We of course continue to work closely with a range of stakeholders across the farming industry and beyond, as well as with the devolved Administrations.

Colin Clark: EU rules on farming have been “one size fits all”. Does my hon. Friend agree that after Brexit we will be able to create farming policy, regulations and frameworks that work better for all parts of the United Kingdom?

Mr Baker: Yes. Once we have left the EU, we will be able to redesign our agriculture policy so that farmers are competitive, productive and profitable, and our environment is protected for future generations. My right hon. Friend the Environment Secretary eloquently sets out the flaws in the common agricultural policy and how the UK Government can do so much better outside the EU.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister further outline how he intends to secure subsidies for the average UK farm of 160 acres—such farms are classified as small farms—and how does he believe that small farmers will be able to survive post Brexit?

Mr Baker: We believe in the importance of small farms and their contribution to the rural community, and the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will bring forward his policy in due course.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): The Minister referred to us leaving the common agricultural policy. Can he clarify when farmers will no longer be subject to it, and when our fishing industry will no longer be subject to the common fisheries policy? Will it be when we leave the EU next March, or is it more likely to be at the end of a transition period?

Mr Baker: My hon. Friend raises an important point. I know from meeting fishermen and women that in some cases they are very impatient indeed to leave the common fisheries policy—rightly so. It is a matter for negotiations, and we hope and expect to achieve clarity very soon.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Securing favourable trading conditions will be just as important for the future of our farmers, including those who reflect distinct characteristics of the industry across the UK. Will the Minister confirm what role the devolved Administrations will play in formulating our position?

Mr Baker: They will play an important role, and we will continue to engage with the hon. Gentleman. I am very conscious of agricultural tariffs—the common external

tariff and tariffs around the world. It is in all our interests to ensure tariff-free access to and from European markets as we reach our deep and special partnership.

Customs Union: Free Trade Agreements

8. **Mr Simon Clarke** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect of remaining in the EU customs union on the ability of the UK to seek free trade agreements with non-EU countries. [903671]

14. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect of remaining in the EU customs union on the ability of the UK to seek free trade agreements with non-EU countries. [903678]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Suella Fernandes): Remaining in the customs union would prevent the UK from striking new free trade deals and setting new tariffs on goods from countries outside the EU. By leaving the customs union and building a new customs arrangement with the EU, we will be able to forge new trade arrangements with our partners around the world while ensuring that trade in goods between the UK and the EU is as frictionless as possible.

Mr Clarke: One of the most exciting opportunities that will become available when we leave the customs union is that of establishing a free port at Teesport, as the Secretary of State and the Minister saw for themselves last week. Will the Minister confirm that the Government will give serious consideration to this excellent idea, which will put rocket boosters under my local economy?

Suella Fernandes: I thank my hon. Friend and the Mayor of Tees Valley for welcoming the Secretary of State and me to Teesport last Friday. My hon. Friend has been an indefatigable voice for his constituents since his election to Parliament last year. It was a pleasure to meet some of the 100 business representatives who were present when the Secretary of State made his speech last Friday. Teesport is an opportunity for global Britain, and a gateway to the world—an example of our forward-thinking, independent trade policy. When we leave the EU customs union, we will have the opportunity to create our own trading policy to benefit Teesport and other areas. I sincerely hope that the free port proposal on the table will be one of the options explored.

Bob Blackman: As my hon. Friend will know well, in Harrow, we have a thriving Indian diaspora, whose members are desperate to encourage trade between the UK and India. Will she ensure that, during the negotiations, they will not be held back from improving trade between India and the UK by artificial trade barriers between those countries?

Suella Fernandes: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his lifelong advocacy for the British Asian community, not least in the 1990s when he encouraged my mother to stand as a local councillor—you could say, Mr Speaker, that my hon. Friend is to blame for my being here today.

Leaving the EU offers us the opportunity to forge a new role for ourselves in the world. The Prime Minister's first bilateral visit outside Europe was to India, which is

very telling. It was encouraging that the Indian Finance Minister visited the UK for the year of culture launch in February last year. I am optimistic about the opportunities that leaving the customs union and the EU presents for UK-India relations.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs is launching a new customs declaration service, which is due to go live in January 2019. Has it been designed to deal with the fourfold increase in customs declarations that will be required post Brexit?

Suella Fernandes: The customs infrastructure is going through the upgrade that the hon. Gentleman mentions, and that is on track and on target. I am looking forward to the opportunity to build on our customs regimes so that we have a customs and excise framework that sets the standard for the world.

Phase 2 Negotiations

9. **Ged Killen** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): Whether the Government plan to accept the EU's guidelines for phase 2 of the negotiations for the UK leaving the EU. [903673]

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): It is not for the UK to accept or reject the European Union's directives. This is its mandate for negotiations, and we have our own set of objectives. In my speech last Friday, I set out our position on what we would like to see in the implementation period, and we look forward to continuing the discussion with our European Union counterparts. Let me be clear: that work has not stopped. Following the declaration of insufficient progress in December, officials have continued technical discussions on separation issues, Northern Ireland and governance arrangements. I will shortly meet Mr Barnier to continue to the process.

Ged Killen: For workers who arrive during the transition period under existing freedom of movement rules, what arrangements will the Government make to ensure that workers who are crucial to industries in Scotland, such as fisheries, social care and hospitality, and who do not meet tier 2 visa requirements, are not simply sent home at the end of the transition period?

Mr Davis: We will be discussing in some detail with the European Union the treatment of people after our actual departure from the Union. The hon. Gentleman must take it as read, as I have said several times, that they will be treated properly, that we will not do anything to undermine our economy, and that we will do everything possible to ensure that the industries he talked about are supported.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Secretary of State and his junior Ministers keep saying that they want a bespoke deal. When are they going to set out what that actually means? When are they going to tell us what the elements of that bespoke deal will be, and when will they cost the bespoke deal's implications for the economies of these islands? When?

Mr Davis: There can be few policies that have been talked about more by Prime Ministers than this one. There have been two major speeches—Lancaster House and Florence—and two White Papers, and something like 15 Bills will be going through this House over the course of the Parliament, so the House will not be unaware of all aspects of the bespoke deal. We have also made very plain what we see as different in what we are seeking from other deals. For example, we are aiming for the free trade agreement to be comprehensive and tariff-free. On the customs agreement, we are aiming for the most frictionless one possible—we have a variety of proposals that we talked about in front of the Select Committee on that—and the House will be kept fully informed. On the costing, as we have said, I think on Monday, we will of course release all the information necessary once it is no longer sensitive to the negotiations, but before the House makes a decision.

“Scotland’s Place in Europe”

10. **Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the Scottish Government’s paper on “Scotland’s place in Europe: People, Jobs and Investment”, published on 15 January 2018. [903674]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): I have seen the report that the question refers to, and I know that the Secretary of State for Scotland discusses the Scottish Government’s priorities with them regularly at the Joint Ministerial Committee (EU Negotiations). There is considerable common ground between us on what we want to get out of the process, such as making sure that Scottish universities and business have access to the best of European talent, but it is disappointing that the report does not take the threat of a second independence referendum off the table, as doing so would be in the interests of Scotland.

Hannah Bardell: The Minister will be aware that the figures in “Scotland’s Place in Europe” very much mirror those that were leaked earlier this week. In Scotland, the difference is that the Scottish National party Government do proper analysis and publish it. The analysis says that there will be a hit to GDP of 8.5% and that £2,300 a year will be lost for each person in Scotland. How many jobs have to be lost or under threat before this Government realise that they must back membership of the single market and the customs union?

Mr Walker: The Government are seeking a successful deal for the whole UK, including Scotland. Four times as much of Scotland’s business is with the UK as with the rest of Europe. The worst thing for Scottish jobs and businesses would be to split up our United Kingdom.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Last week, the Scotch Whisky Association expressed concerns at the SNP policy of keeping Scotland in the single market. What assurances can my hon. Friend give to companies and people in my constituency that we are trying to get access to the single market, but that we will also have the right to do deals elsewhere in the world so that we take forward Scotland’s economy, rather than holding it back like Opposition Members?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point in speaking up for his constituents and the businesses within it. I have met the Scotch Whisky Association on a number of occasions to discuss the global opportunities for Scotch whisky. We must ensure that we have the flexibility to take them.

Customs Union: Automotive Sector

11. **Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What recent assessment the Government have made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU customs union on the automotive sector. [903675]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): The Government have been conducting a broad overall programme of work on EU exit issues and will continue to do so. That means that all decisions, including those relating to the customs union and the automotive sector, are supported by a range of analytical work. We want our deep and special partnership with the EU to include the automotive industry. We want to ensure that trade is as free and frictionless as possible, with minimum disruption to the industry. The UK remains the second-largest market for cars in Europe, so it is in both our interests to continue the partnership between our industries. I know that the Vauxhall car plant in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency is extremely important, and I look forward to visiting it soon.

Justin Madders: As the Minister knows, the Vauxhall plant in my constituency is fighting for its survival. Vauxhall’s parent company, PSA, has said that it is not prepared to make any long-term investment decisions until there is clarity about the final trading arrangements, and, having heard what Ministers have said this morning, I am not sure we will get that any time soon. Can the Minister at least guarantee that the trading arrangements for the automotive sector will be no less favourable than they are now?

Mr Baker: The Government understand that Vauxhall’s decision was a commercial one, taken as a result of challenging European market conditions. Vauxhall has made it clear that the decision was made to safeguard the competitiveness of the plant. The Government maintain close ongoing dialogue with Vauxhall and its parent group, PSA, as they make their joint plans for the future, including potential investments. Ministers have met senior management representatives of PSA and Vauxhall regularly throughout the process, and will continue to do so.

I hope and expect that as we progress through our negotiations, agree on an implementation period and then move on to our economic partnership, the hon. Gentleman will find that an accelerating degree of certainty emerges.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The port of Immingham in my constituency is vital to the automotive sector. Further to the answer given by the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Fareham (Suella Fernandes), about Teesport and free ports, may I ask whether the Minister is prepared to meet me to discuss the possibility of Immingham’s becoming a free port post Brexit?

Mr Baker: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that suggestion. Of course I will meet him and other colleagues to discuss it, but I should add that as this conversation has proceeded, certain misgivings have been expressed about free ports. We must ensure that any free port proposal is capable of giving the country the security that it needs.

Fundamental Rights

12. **Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): What assessment the Government have made of the potential effect of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill on the protection of fundamental rights. [903676]

16. **Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): What assessment the Government have made of the potential effect of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill on the protection of fundamental rights. [903680]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): The “Right by Right” memorandum clarifies the way in which human rights will continue to be protected in domestic law after the UK has exited the EU. Under both the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill and existing domestic law, all substantive rights reaffirmed in the charter of fundamental rights will continue to be protected after exit. The Government’s assessment is that, in itself, not incorporating the charter in UK law should not affect the substantive rights from which people in the UK already benefit.

Afzal Khan: The paper leaked to BuzzFeed reportedly suggests that “deregulating in areas such as the environment, product standards, and employment law” could provide an opportunity for the UK. Is that part of the Government’s economic strategy?

Mr Baker: The Government have repeated again and again our commitment to ensuring that we improve the environment and leave it in a better condition for the next generation, and our commitments on workers’ rights have also been repeated time and again.

Paula Sherriff: The Brexit Secretary has labelled employment regulations as “crippling”, the Foreign Secretary has described them as “back-breaking”, and the International Trade Secretary has said that rules on maximum working hours are a “burden”. Will the Minister tell us why the Government are so readily prepared to undermine the promise to enhance workers’ rights as we leave the EU?

Mr Baker: The Government’s policy has been set out time and again. We will ensure not only that workers’ rights are preserved, but that they are enhanced and keep pace with the new working environment.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): During our consideration of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill in Committee, concerns were repeatedly raised that critical environmental rights and protections could be cast aside as we exit the EU. If the Government are serious about raising, not lowering, those rights and protections after Brexit, why have they so far failed to introduce an ambitious new environment Bill, but are instead, as we now know from the leaked papers, commissioning analysis suggesting that Brexit could present an opportunity to deregulate in such areas?

Mr Baker: The purpose of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill is to preserve the effect of EU law on the day after exit day, so far as that is possible. Its purpose is to provide certainty, continuity and control rather than policy changes. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has laid out his policy clearly, and I look forward to his presenting a Bill in due course.

Transition Period

13. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What factors the Government plan to take into account in determining their position on the length of the transition period in negotiations for the UK to leave the EU. [903677]

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): As I have said before, the duration of the implementation period should be in the region of two years, and the Commission’s position indicates a period of similar length: so far it has talked about 21 months. The aim on both sides is to give individuals, businesses and Governments time to plan and initiate the changes that must be made to allow a smooth and orderly transition, and to secure the best possible outcome for the United Kingdom.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Could it be shorter?

Mr Davis: If I simply accept the European Commission proposal, then yes.

Mr Speaker: Unlike the question from the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), which was commendably pithy—and again I exhort him to issue his textbook for the benefit of all colleagues.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I will do my best, Mr Speaker.

The EU has made it clear that EU citizens coming to the UK during the transition period should be eligible for settled status; the Prime Minister says they will not be eligible. Is that a red line, or are the Government willing to compromise on that? I thought nothing was agreed until everything was agreed.

Mr Davis: The hon. Gentleman is right that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed, but in the joint report that we concluded and got agreement on in December the EU agreed that the transition date, or end date for ongoing permanent residence rights—not possibilities, but rights—will be March 2019.

Transition Arrangements

17. **Mr Pat McFadden** (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Commissioner Barnier on the transition arrangements for the UK after March 2019. [903683]

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): At the General Affairs Council on Monday the European Council agreed its negotiating directives on the implementation period. Now that the Commission has a clear negotiating mandate we hope to move quickly to begin detailed discussions on the

implementation period. Given the alignment in our positions we are confident we can reach political agreement by March. There remain a number of areas that we now need to discuss with the EU to ensure the period operates smoothly. We look forward to progressing substantive discussions.

Mr McFadden: When it came to the divorce bill, after a lot of huffing and puffing and wasted time the Government simply signed on the dotted line. What will be different in the transition period we are negotiating compared with the EU guidelines issued this week?

Mr Davis: As to the right hon. Gentleman's opening remark, as he is an intelligent and well-informed person it is amazing that he does not differentiate between a £100 billion demand and a £35 billion outcome; that seems to have been a somewhat useful exercise by the Government.

As for the next stage, there is a negotiation to be undertaken. There is a variety of important areas, but the primary area for me is the question of our right to sign trade deals during the implementation period so we can bring them into force immediately after we leave. That is a massive advantage for the United Kingdom to have.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Businesses in my constituency tell me that continued membership of the single market and customs union during the transition period will help them safeguard jobs, yet the Prime Minister on 18 December ruled this out. What have the Prime Minister and Secretary of State got against the employment of people in Bristol West?

Mr Davis: With the greatest respect to the hon. Lady, the purpose of the implementation period, which was asked for by just about every business organisation, is to ensure they face stability in the couple of years in the run-up to the conclusion of the future relationship. That is what is going to happen, and that is why companies and the CBI and others welcomed it when we announced it.

Topical Questions

T1. [903686] **Heidi Alexander** (Lewisham East) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): As we accelerate the pace of our negotiations with the European Union, I gave a speech last Friday to lay out the terms of the implementation period for our new relationship. This period, a bridge to the future, will be strictly time-limited and see a continuation of existing structures and rules. We will no longer be a member of the EU, which is a legal requirement for signing a new trade treaty, while still ensuring the continuity of our businesses and their trading relationships. We will use this period to ensure we are best placed to grasp the opportunities of Brexit, and that will mean signing new free trade deals with countries around the world.

Heidi Alexander: Given reports today of a huge gap between the UK and the EU on how financial services will be able to be traded freely in a post-Brexit environment,

can the Secretary of State set out exactly how he sees this trade operating successfully in future, and exactly how he plans to protect the jobs of the 1.1 million people in the UK who work in this sector?

Mr Davis: First, not only have we not yet engaged in the future relationship negotiation, but the EU has not yet decided its own negotiating guidelines. They will, we expect, be laid down by the March Council on 22 March, and to that end I am talking to every member state that I can in order to ensure that we are at the same place on this issue, rather than having, as the hon. Lady terms it, "a huge gap". Indeed, at the end of these questions I am going to Luxembourg for specifically that issue.

T2. [903687] **Mr Simon Clarke** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): Can the Secretary of State confirm that we will find a way, during the implementation period, to negotiate a way to address the consequences of any EU legislation that is deemed contrary to our national interest?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): The duration of the implementation period should be around two years. Only when the UK is no longer a member state can we take advantage of our status as an independent trading nation. As such, the UK will negotiate our own free trade agreements but not bring them into effect until after the implementation period has concluded. For this period, we will agree a process for discussing laws that might be brought in, on which we have not had our say. This will give us the means to remedy any issues through dialogue as soon as possible.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): There have been lots of questions this week about the leaked EU exit analysis Whitehall briefings, but this is the first chance I have had to ask the Secretary of State about it directly, so I will choose my words carefully. Can the Secretary of State confirm when he first knew that economic modelling work on Brexit scenarios was being undertaken across Whitehall?

Mr David Davis: Actually, the right hon. and learned Gentleman does not have to ask me; he should read the book. In addressing the Select Committee on 6 December last year, I said in terms:

"We will at some stage—and some of this has been initiated—do the best we can to quantify the effect of different negotiating outcomes as we come up to them. Bear in mind that we have not started phase 2 yet. In particular, we will try to assess, in bigger categories, the effect of various outcomes in financial services and in terms of the overarching manufacturing industry, agriculture and so on. We will do that a little closer to the negotiating timetable."

I say that because I read with great interest in *Hansard* and elsewhere this morning various reports about my being traduced, so I thought that I should tell the House that actually I told the Select Committee that this work was under way last December.

Keir Starmer: I think it follows that in December the Secretary of State knew that this modelling was going on. Can he confirm when he was first talked through the economic modelling of the Brexit scenarios by his Department—not when he told others, but when he was talked through it?

Mr Davis: Let me say something on that as well. One of the things that the right hon. and learned Gentleman has been trying to pretend over the course of the last few days is that somehow my colleagues have been critical of the civil servants doing this job, because the outcome is as yet a work in progress—*[Interruption.]* That is what it is: a work in progress. I say that because we are trying to do something that is incredibly difficult. Every institution that has tried it has failed—*[Hon. MEMBERS: “Answer the question!”]* I am going to answer the question. Every forecast that has been made about the period post-referendum has been wrong. As I told the Select Committee, the Bank of England—the best forecasting organisation in the business—forecast for 2017 a reduction in exports, but there was growth of 8.3%. It also forecast a reduction of 2% in business investment, but it grew by 1.7%. It forecast a reduction in housing investment, flat employment growth, and growth of 0.5% versus 1.1% being the outcome. What has been going on is an attempt to find a way of getting a better outcome. In those terms, I talked to my own Department and the cross-departmental group in early January on this matter.

T3. [903688] **Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): The Nord Stream 2 pipeline—the undersea oil and gas pipeline that Germany intends to build directly to Russia—has been condemned by the American Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, as a threat to the security of countries in central and eastern Europe. Does the Minister agree with that sentiment?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): This is an important issue. We need to ensure that Europe continues to protect its security and diversity of supply, and that is something on which we will continue to work with colleagues at the Foreign Office and at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

T5. [903692] **Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): The UK’s civil aerospace companies are leading the world in the development of future technologies, but everyone from the chief executive of Airbus to the Unite reps at Rolls-Royce says that a hard Brexit threatens that success. Why is the continued membership of the customs union and the single market not on the table to protect the UK’s engineering manufacturing sector?

Mr Baker: As a chartered aerospace engineer, this subject is close to my heart. Aviation is crucial to the UK’s economy, and we are committed to getting the best deal possible for the UK. We are focused on securing the right arrangements for the future, so that our aviation and aerospace industries can continue to thrive, that passengers can have opportunity and choice, and that businesses can be profitable. We will seek the right customs arrangements between the UK and the EU to ensure that trade is free and frictionless and that businesses can succeed.

T4. [903689] **Edward Argar** (Charnwood) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that while the manner of our leaving the EU is rightly a matter for debate and negotiation to secure the best deal for the UK, the fact that we are leaving the EU was decided beyond doubt in June 2016 by the British people?

Mr David Davis: I am happy to reassure my hon. Friend on that point. The British people voted to leave the EU—17.5 million of them—in the biggest mandate in our history, and we are committed to respecting the result of the referendum. The Government have undertaken a wide range of ongoing analysis to ensure that we get the best deal for the British people in our EU exit negotiations, but whichever outcome we choose to negotiate for—most of that has been chosen—it will involve leaving the EU and respecting that democratic mandate.

T7. [903694] **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): The independent “Preparing for Brexit” report commissioned by the Mayor of London found that a hard Brexit will lead to the loss of 56,500 more jobs in London alone than if the UK remains in the single market and customs union. Does the Minister agree that that is clear evidence that a hard Brexit will be catastrophic for jobs?

Mr Davis: No, I do not. As I explained earlier, one of the great difficulties with such forecasts is that they have proved to be entirely wrong at every turn so far, and that is not just the view of a politician. The smartest and most innovative economist in the country is probably the deputy Governor of the Bank of England, Andrew Haldane, who referred to the forecasts as having faced a “Michael Fish” moment—in other words, they must find out why they did not work. A forecast is not evidence to be relied upon. It may be an opinion, but it is not evidence.

T6. [903693] **Priti Patel** (Witham) (Con): Over the last 45 years, British taxpayers have had far too much of their money taken from them to go to the EU. Now that we are leaving, can the Secretary of State give an indication of the value of our share of EU assets and what will happen to the share that we have contributed? Is he negotiating to get it all back?

Mr Davis: My right hon. Friend picks up on an important point. It is a component of the negotiations that brought the public claim down from £100 billion to £35 billion—part of that was offset by our assets.

T8. [903695] **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): The chemicals industry is the largest sectoral employer in the Grangemouth area of my constituency. It exports 60% of its goods to the EU and imports 75% of them from the EU, and it is rightly concerned about frictionless and tariff-free trade coming to an end. Will Ministers tell us what the EU exit analysis projects for that sector?

Mr Baker: We have met representatives of the chemicals industry on several occasions. At the most recent meeting, we had constructive conversations that ended positively. We will ensure that we carry through the positions that we have set out, particularly in relation to goods on the market, and we hope to preserve continued registration of chemicals under REACH. We will of course seek to ensure that our deep and special partnership covers the chemicals industry, so that it can flourish after we leave the EU.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that it is possible for non-EU countries to access only three of the single market’s four freedoms, specifically the free movement of goods, capital

and services, without being required to accept freedom of movement, as can be seen with the association agreement countries? Is the Department currently looking at that type of arrangement?

Mr Baker: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. Trade continues all around the world on a free and fair basis, particularly under free trade agreements. It is our expectation and intention to secure a free trade agreement of unprecedented scope and ambition, which should meet just the criteria that she sets out.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), told the House yesterday that the document that I hope will shortly be handed over to the Exiting the European Union Committee “does not yet reflect this Government’s policy approaches”—[*Official Report*, 31 January 2018; Vol. 635, c. 834.]

Given that the Secretary of State has just claimed from the Dispatch Box that everybody knows what the Government’s position is, will the Minister explain why lots of analysis has been done of the options that the Government do not want when apparently no analysis has yet been done of the option that the Government do want?

Mr Baker: As I said when I answered the urgent question on Tuesday, the Government cannot control the timing of leaks. The preliminary analysis is a work in progress that does not yet reflect the Government’s policy. Once the analysis has been carried through, I am sure that it will do.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Poor old George Osborne, not mentioned at all.

Mr Speaker: Order. I was about to say that the hon. Gentleman chunters from a sedentary position, but he almost yells from a sedentary position his expression of sympathy for the former Chancellor of the Exchequer. I am sure the former Chancellor of the Exchequer will bear with stoicism and fortitude not being directly referenced by the representatives of the Treasury Bench.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Will the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), confirm that he heard from Charles Grant of the Centre for European Research that officials in the Treasury have deliberately developed a model to show that all options other than staying in the customs union are bad, and that officials intend to use the model to influence policy? If that is correct, does he share my view that it goes against the spirit of the Northcote-Trevelyan reforms that underpin our independent civil service?

Mr Baker: I am sorry to say that my hon. Friend’s account is essentially correct. At the time I considered it implausible because my direct experience is that civil servants are extraordinarily careful to uphold the impartiality of the civil service. We must proceed with great caution in this matter, but I have heard him raise the issue. We need to be very careful not to take this forward in an inappropriate way, but he has reminded

me of something that I heard. It would be quite extraordinary if it turned out that such a thing had happened.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): You said it was correct.

Mr Baker: I did not say it was correct. I said that the account that it was put to me is correct. It was put to me, and I considered it an extraordinary allegation—I still consider it an extraordinary allegation. [*Interruption.*] To be absolutely clear, I said it was correct that the allegation was put to me. I did not in any way seek to confirm the truth of it. What I would say is that we need to proceed with great caution, because it is essential that we continue to uphold and support the impartiality of the civil service.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): Every day hundreds of trucks criss-cross the channel carrying vital components for the British car industry’s highly integrated supply chain. What assessment has the Minister made of the impact on that travel of customs delays, tariffs and extra bureaucracy if we come out of the customs union?

Mr Robin Walker: We are seeking frictionless access to the European market for our automotive industry. We want to make sure that we continue to maintain the benefits of the complex supply chain, which benefits businesses both in the UK and in the EU.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): Can the Minister reassure me that upcoming negotiations with the EU on future migration arrangements will prioritise the needs of UK science and research, allowing the two-way flow of talent that is vital for our top universities, such as York University in my constituency?

Mr Walker: I am happy to give my hon. Friend that reassurance. We have been having some very useful meetings with the science and universities sector to talk about its needs in that respect. We want to ensure that the UK continues to be able to attract the brightest and the best from around Europe and around the world.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I just want to hear from the two colleagues who have not contributed to these exchanges since 9.34 am, or thereabouts.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): On 11 January Lord Callanan visited Bristol, and he made a promise to Hartcliffe residents in my constituency that there would be more jobs after Brexit. Had he been briefed by the Department on the true state of the modelling analysis when he made that promise to those people?

Mr David Davis: As I told the House earlier, every forecasting model of the post-referendum performance of the British economy by every major organisation—the banks, Government organisations and, indeed, international organisations—has proven wrong. One of the ways they have been proven wrong is because employment in this country has grown, despite all the forecasts, to record levels today. We will be seeking to do the best we can to ensure that that growth record is maintained.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. If the hon. Gentleman's second inquiry is a single sentence of fewer than 20 words, I will hear it. If it isn't, I won't.

Bob Blackman: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that we will be able to implement decisions during the transition period and not wait until the end to implement everything that is agreed?

Mr Davis: We will be able to do some of them, for example, our proposal to put in place a registration

scheme and so on. We will also be able to sign trade deals, but not bring them into force.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): How are the Government working with the UK steel industry to make sure it prospers post-Brexit?

Mr Davis: We have had meetings. My Department alone has had meetings with 350 companies, not all in steel, but in all the user industries. We have a regular meeting between the Chancellor, the Business Secretary, myself and leading business representative organisations, and of course we talk directly to the individual companies.

Capita

10.35 am

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to make a statement on the risk to public finances and public services as a result of the serious financial concerns at Capita, and on the Government's contingency plans.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): I have been asked to comment on the stock market update issued by Capita plc yesterday and its impact on the delivery of public services. I completely understand that this is a matter of significant interest to many in the House following the recent failure of Carillion, but I can assure Members that this company is in a very different situation. To be clear, this announcement was primarily a balance sheet strengthening exercise, not purely a profit warning. As has been widely reported, the company has significant cash reserves on its balance sheet. We do not believe that Capita is in any way in a comparable position to Carillion. Furthermore, Capita has a very different business model, and if the House will allow me, I will give an update on that.

The issues that led to the insolvency of Carillion will come out in due course, but our current assessment is that they primarily flowed from difficulties in construction contracts, including those overseas. By contrast, Capita is primarily a services business, and 92% of its revenues come from within the UK. As Members would expect, we regularly monitor the financial stability of all our strategic suppliers, including Capita. As I said, we do not believe any of them are in a comparable position to Carillion. The measures Capita has announced are designed to strengthen its balance sheet, reduce its pension deficit and invest in core elements of its business. Arguably, those are exactly the measures that could have prevented Carillion from getting into the difficulties it did. Of course, the impact of these measures has been to reduce dividends and shareholder returns in favour of others, so this is further evidence of shareholders and not the taxpayer taking the burden on this.

As I have said, my officials met senior Capita executives yesterday to discuss the impact of the announcement. We continue to work closely with the company to monitor the execution of its plan and to ensure the continued delivery of public services. We continue to engage with all our strategic suppliers and make continuing assessments of our contingency plans, where necessary. It would not be appropriate for me to comment in any further detail on the specifics of those contingency plans, given their commercial sensitivity. But let me reiterate that the priority of this Government, and the reason why we contract with these companies, is to deliver public services, and our priority is the continued delivery of those services. As Members will have seen in respect of the collapse of Carillion, whatever the shortcomings there public services continue to be delivered, and we are confident that public services will continue to be delivered as provided by Capita.

Rachel Reeves: I thank the Minister for his response, but I cannot help but conclude that the Government's thinking on this is both muddled and complacent. He has told us that the situations at Capita and Carillion are completely different, but let us look in more detail at

the circumstances of both companies: both have debts of more than £1 billion and pensions deficits in the hundreds of millions; both paid out dividends of more than £1 billion in the past five years; both rely on the public purse for half of their contracts; both were audited by KPMG; and both grew through acquisition and not through organic growth. It seems there are more similarities than differences between these two companies.

I join the Minister in welcoming the decision by the new Capita chief executive officer to face up to some of these problems with a rights issue and the suspension of dividends. But can the Minister honestly say that Capita could not come to the same fate that Carillion did just two weeks ago, that people working for Capita have nothing to fear, and that those saving prudently for a pension with Capita can rely on that pension paying out fully on retirement? Can he say to people who rely on Capita to carry out basic public services, such as the electronic tagging of offenders or the billion-pound contract with the NHS, that they can count on it to fulfil its contractual obligations for the life of those contracts?

I have some specific questions about what happens now. What is the contingency planning? Do the Government have representatives in the business, including a Crown representative? How long have the Government been aware of the problems at Capita, and how many contracts have been issued to it since then? What specific risk assessment have the Government made of other large outsourcing firms? Capita is currently bidding for the Defence Fire Risk Management Organisation contract. Will the Government now review that process and reconsider the decision to outsource that and other services they are currently looking to offload?

Will the Government commit to urgently reviewing what looks like a cosy and complicit relationship between the big accountancy firms, the Financial Reporting Council and the corporates they are supposed to be auditing? Is it not now time to split up the big accountancy firms and stop auditors being paid for other consultancy work at the firms they are supposed to be auditing? Capita has announced a fire sale of assets. Will the Minister confirm that Capita is in consultation with the trade unions and its workforce about redundancies and TUPE arrangements in the event that services are sold off?

Jobs, pensions, small businesses and vital public services now depend on these outsourcing companies, but it is time we rethought the whole strategy for public service provision. How many more warning signs do the Government need?

Oliver Dowden: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions. I know she takes a close interest in this important issue. She has raised a large number of questions, and I shall seek to address as many of them as I can. I am pleased that she has acknowledged that Capita is facing up to its problems. Indeed, that creates a contrast with Carillion. She talked about the financial situation of Carillion versus Capita. The chief executive of Capita has faced up to this and strengthened its balance sheet—it has been widely reported that Capita has more than £1 billion on its balance sheet—which shows that the situation is significantly different from that at Carillion and gives us confidence in its ability to continue to deliver services.

[*Oliver Dowden*]

The hon. Lady talked about dividends. Again, as a result of this announcement, Capita will not be issuing dividends, which means that money can go back into the pension scheme, allowing £200 million extra to be spent on the company's core services, rather than dividends. That is evidence that the chief executive has understood the position and is creating a different situation from that which pertained to Carillion. She raised an important point about the major accountancy firms, such as KPMG, involved in this market. The Financial Reporting Council is looking into this matter. We expect to hear from it in about six months, and we will, of course, respond as appropriate. On her question about a Crown representative, I can assure her that there is one in Capita.

I explained in my original answer the role of the Cabinet Office and the Government and the reason that we contract with private companies. The previous Labour Government and other Governments did the same. As has been reported many times, a third of Carillion's live contracts were agreed by the last Labour Government, a third by the coalition and a third by the current Government. Governments do this to deliver public services. Our role, as a Government, is to ensure the continued delivery of those public services, and the test for me and my colleagues and officials in the Department is this: is the company capable of delivering those public services, and if there is a problem with the company, will those public services continue to be delivered? In respect of Carillion, Members will have seen that all those public services have continued to be delivered, and I am confident that they will continue to be delivered.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Will my hon. Friend look at the total contempt that the Labour party has for the private sector today? Will he take the time to publish, in due course, a full list of all the contracts with the private sector that were entered into between 1997 and 2010? That will provide a fine example of how the Labour party of today is nothing like the Labour party of that period when they were in government.

Oliver Dowden: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. This Government, and the previous Government, have engaged with private sector companies for the delivery of public services. Gordon Brown, Labour's last successful Prime Minister—[*Interruption.*] Well, he was the last Labour Member to hold the office. May I take the opportunity to correct the record on that, Mr Speaker? Gordon Brown said:

"It simply would not have been possible to build or refurbish such a number of schools and hospitals without using the PFI model."—[*Official Report*, 14 November 2007; Vol. 467, c. 665.]

Why is it that we use these contractors? Because we know that they can deliver. Labour's position is slightly confused. Is it honestly now Labour's position that we should not use the private sector at all? Is the state going to start building roads again? Where does Labour draw the line? It is complete confusion.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am keen to accommodate the substantial interest in this matter, but may I remind the House that there is the business question to follow, and

thereafter two debates to take place under the auspices of the Backbench Business Committee? I am anxious that time for those debates should not be artificially truncated, so pithy questions and pithy answers, please, and we will make progress.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): I will take your advice, Mr Speaker.

Only two weeks ago, I warned that there was a danger that this whole outsourcing problem would become a set of dominoes, with one falling after another. I believe the House will conclude that the Government's behaviour in response, and the Minister's response today, has been marked by indifference to corporate mismanagement, incompetence in office and complacency in the face of a crisis.

The Minister will not tell the House, but I will: Capita was given 154 Government contracts last year. Only last week, Carillion contracts were being re-brokered to Capita, yet the company was clearly in trouble. Share values were plummeting and profit warnings were being issued. There was short selling on the stock market and allegations against Capita of fraud in the handling of public contracts. Yesterday, Capita's total value on the exchange was barely much more than its total debt. The company is in serious trouble. It is a familiar tale of woe, with strong echoes of Carillion.

We want to know that the Government's contingency plans in relation to Capita will assure jobs for current employees and protect the pensions of those employees and the pensions of the public sector workers that the company is managing. Will the Minister confirm that the public services that Capita manages will be protected in the event of a corporate disaster? Does the Government's contingency plan allow for that? What will be the common impact of the problems at Carillion, and now Capita, on the spiralling costs of HS2? Does the Minister agree with the Opposition that not a single penny should be used to prop up badly managed outsourcing companies?

The Government are blind to the corporate greed of these outsourcing companies. Does the Minister agree that it is clear that, as the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee), said only the other day, the Government should be driven by the "evidence, not dogma" on outsourcing?

Oliver Dowden: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions, the core of which was about support for outsourcing companies. He said we should not provide a penny more to prop up badly managed outsourcing companies. Indeed, that is exactly what we did in respect of Carillion. We took the decision that this was a private company and should bear the loss. That is why shareholders in Carillion are unlikely to get more than a few pennies in the pound back for their investment. The private sector has taken the risk, but the job of the Government is to ensure the continued delivery of those public services—to ensure that the dinner ladies get paid, that the hospitals get cleaned, and that the railways continue to be built. That is exactly what we did in respect of Carillion and it is exactly what our contingencies involve for all our strategic suppliers. That is the test for the Government: can we ensure the continued delivery of those public services, and can those public services continue to be delivered?

The hon. Gentleman made a point about pensions. The fact that Capita has embarked on this course of restructuring means that it is effectively choosing to switch resources away from the continued payment of dividends and towards pension funds. That should give pensioners confidence in respect of that pension fund. He also asked about jobs, and again, the restructuring can give confidence about the continuing delivery of those jobs.

I keep coming back to the same point. This is a private company and the interest of the Government is to ensure the continued delivery of those public services, and those public services continue to be delivered. That takes me back to Labour's position. What Labour seems to be suggesting is that the private sector has no role in public life, and that the level of small and medium-sized businesses working for the Government should be zero. If that is not Labour Members' position, are they going to tell us where they choose to draw the line? Labour has gone from pumping billions of pounds into private companies for the delivery of public services when Gordon Brown and Tony Blair were Prime Minister, to saying that they should not have a penny. Some clarity would be helpful, because otherwise people may draw the conclusion that there is more than an element of opportunism here.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be irresponsible of this Government to cancel private companies' contracts simply on the basis of a single profit update?

Oliver Dowden: I thank my hon. Friend for that question, and this is an important point about profit warnings. A profit warning does not mean that a company is imminently going to collapse. A profit warning is a warning to the markets that its results will not be in line with what it had previously thought. If every time that a company issued a profit warning, we as a Government said that we would cease to contract with them, there would be very few companies we could contract with. I will not name leading companies, because I do not want to influence their market value, but I could name a huge list of FTSE 100 companies that routinely issue profit warnings. That does not mean that they are about to disappear.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): For the second time in two weeks, we are discussing a private firm, responsible for the delivery of vital services, that has caught us cold with a profit warning. Will the Minister now acknowledge that there is a role for a proper public sector? Will the Government now start to roll back on the privatisation agenda that they and the previous Labour Government obsessed about? Can we look forward to a proper plan for taking public services back into the public sector? And will he now acknowledge that public sector employees should deliver public services?

Oliver Dowden: Of course we acknowledge that there is a proper role for the public sector. That is why, for example, this Government committed at the last election to providing £8 billion more for the NHS and a further £6 billion more for the NHS. To go to the core of the hon. Lady's argument, the reason that successive Governments of all political persuasions have chosen to engage with the private sector for the delivery of services

is that those companies have a speciality in it. They have a speciality in delivering such services, so they can deliver them more efficiently. That means there are savings for the taxpayer. If the Scottish National party position is seriously that we should not have any outsourcing, they need to explain to taxpayers why, instead of ploughing those efficiency savings back into our schools and hospitals, they are choosing to use them to pay for less efficient ways of delivering public services.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the biggest risk to jobs, the biggest risk to pensions and the biggest risk to the delivery of public services would be to withdraw support for Capita on the basis of a reactionary announcement to this profit warning?

Oliver Dowden: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. If we were to choose overnight, in the face of one profit warning, to stop contracting with that company, there would be a significant risk of the delivery of public services falling over. As I have said, the objective of the Government is the continued delivery of public services, and we have continued to pay the cleaners, continued to have the dinners served and continued to ensure that what the people out there in the country care about, which is that their public services are delivered, continues to be delivered.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Yesterday, the chief executive of Capita said that his organisation was "far too complex". If the chief executive finds it difficult to understand how his own organisation works, how do the Government monitor the stability and performance of these very large, complex outsourcing companies, such as Capita, Serco, Atos and G4S?

Oliver Dowden: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about what the chief executive said, and that is the reason why that chief executive has embarked on this restructuring; it is precisely because of that complexity. I well remember working with the right hon. Gentleman when I was an adviser in Downing Street and he was Business Secretary in the coalition, so he will have knowledge of that. In fact, a third of the contracts from Carillion were agreed by the coalition. The process that we had then, and that we have continued to strengthen, is twofold. First, we look at the published results of these companies and use third parties to understand them properly and verify them. Secondly, we continue to engage on a one-on-one basis with each of those companies through the Cabinet Office, to understand their financial position in order to ensure that we deliver on what the public expect—the continued delivery of public services.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): The hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), in the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, has rightly raised concerns about the failure of regulation from the Financial Reporting Council and KPMG. Does the Minister agree that the answer to this dilemma is not to nationalise those companies, but to make sure that those bodies do their job for the taxpayer and the public service user?

Oliver Dowden: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely correct. That is why I, and we as a Government, welcome the fact that the FRC is looking into the four major accountancy firms and seeing what lessons we need to learn. Of course we will respond to that and act appropriately.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): May I bring the Minister back to the core issue, which is that there are two separate but linked problems: the business model and the performance of these companies? Like Carillion, Capita seems to be part of the over-concentrated, over-leveraged, dividend-and-bonus-exploiting culture that relies on the state to bail out failure. Capita incompetence is only too clear from its lamentable performance on the recruitment contract for the armed services. When will this Government finally get a grip?

Oliver Dowden: Behind the right hon. Gentleman's question is an important point about the diversity of suppliers in this market. We do need to look to diversify further. That is why, for example, we have set a target that 33% of all our Government contracting should be with small and medium-sized enterprises—precisely to ensure that we have that greater diversity. On his point about state bail-out, we have done precisely the opposite of a state bail-out. Carillion went into liquidation, so its shareholders paid the price; because Capita has decided to stop paying dividends, its shareholders are paying the price. Therefore, it is not correct to say that the state is bailing them out in this situation.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Is not the Government's role to continue to act as a prudent customer and to continue to monitor their suppliers and the services provided? Right now, the best thing that the Government can do is to allow the company to get on with its plans to restructure its business.

Oliver Dowden: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. Capita and its executive and shareholders are responsible for Capita. Our responsibility as a Government is for the continued delivery of public services—to make sure that the services on which the public rely continue to be delivered. That is exactly what we did in respect of Carillion, and that is exactly what we are ensuring in relation to contingency plans for all our strategic suppliers, including Capita.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister said that Capita has a positive record of delivery, but it has been responsible for the £1 billion contract for the delivery of NHS England's primary care support services since 2015. From the outset, both GPs and local medical committees identified serious issues with the service, including patient safety, GP workload and an effect on GP finances. Although some progress has been made, two and a half years on the service falls far short of what is acceptable, and there is still an urgent need to resolve these issues to give practices and GPs across the country confidence in it. What are the Minister and the Government doing to improve the quality of services provided by Capita?

Oliver Dowden: The Government contract with a company to deliver the individual services, and that is done through each Department. In respect of health services, that is done by the Department of Health,

which has to ensure that Capita or any other contractor delivers on what it has promised. The function of the Cabinet Office in this respect is to ensure that overall public services continue to be delivered if there is a failure of the company.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): If I understand the Minister correctly, this company is raising funds from its shareholders in order to strengthen its balance sheet, enhance its pension fund and invest money in its core business. These corporate actions should be welcomed on both sides of the House. Does he share my frustration that the attitude of the Opposition towards the private sector seems to be, "You're damned if you do and you're damned if you don't"?

Oliver Dowden: Yes, my hon. Friend is precisely right. As I said, it would have been helpful if Carillion had considered these actions; perhaps then it would not have got into this position. Members cannot say that somehow the Government are bankrolling these companies, while simultaneously saying that we are allowing the companies to go bust if things go wrong with them and shareholders pay the price. They cannot make those two propositions at once.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that, with Carillion and now Capita, the outsourcing of our services has failed? Instead of expensive bail-outs, they should be brought back into public ownership.

Oliver Dowden: The Government have not bailed out a single supplier. It is the shareholders who have paid the price. It is the shareholders of Carillion who will not receive back the money they invested—or, at least, they will receive a very small proportion of the money, depending on the outcome of the liquidation. The hon. Lady's characterisation of the situation is simply not correct.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Will the Minister assure the House that the combatant steps that the Government have taken to date regarding Carillion have protected services and ensured that there is minimal disruption to citizens? Will he also assure us that they are taking a similar combatant approach to the Capita situation so that we can protect services such as the NHS admin that is so important to us all?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Our focus has been to ensure the continued delivery of public services. In respect of all the key strategic suppliers, we ensure that we are confident that public services will continue to be delivered if there is an interruption to those companies. That is what the House saw in respect of Carillion, and it is exactly what we prepare for all the time with regards to all our strategic suppliers.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): This is a very worrying time for Carillion employees in Wales, including the hundreds employed at the call centre in Bangor in my constituency. It is also a very worrying time for disabled people, as all personal independence payment assessments in Wales are carried out by the company. Will the Minister give these people a cast-iron guarantee that their jobs are safe, and that their benefits assessments will be carried out properly and accurately?

Oliver Dowden: I believe that the hon. Gentleman is referring to Capita, not to Carillion.

Hywel Williams *indicated assent.*

Oliver Dowden: I assure the hon. Gentleman that it is the priority of the Government—this is what we are working on—to ensure that there will be no interruption to the very important public services that he outlined, no matter what happens to their delivery. That is what happened with Carillion. On the very day it was announced that Carillion was going into liquidation—the announcement was made at 7 o'clock in the morning—we ensured that the people delivering public services could continue to turn up to work and to be paid, and that the public services they delivered could continue to be delivered.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Before any new Government contracts are awarded to Capita, will the Government seek fresh assurances in respect of existing and future pension obligations to its employees?

Oliver Dowden: I can assure my hon. Friend that in fact officials from my Department met Capita only yesterday. This is an ongoing process of engagement with all the strategic suppliers, asking exactly those sorts of questions to ensure that we have public services delivered. Of course, we are very cognisant of things like the pension fund as well.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): One of the real issues that comes through with both Carillion and Capita is that the enormous growth of the conglomerate structure means that these corporations are vulnerable when any part begins to fail, and that of course puts at risk the whole. Where is the risk assessment that the Minister and his team have done that guarantees that we will not see failure in Capita and in other public service providers?

Oliver Dowden: As I said, there is a continuing process of engagement. Over the years, the Government Commercial Function has been beefed up. We have brought in people with expertise who understand these companies and are engaging with them on a day-to-day basis to understand their business models. The purpose of doing that is to understand those business models to ensure that we are confident that we can continue to deliver these public services.

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): Will my hon. Friend confirm that what matters to this Government is what delivers the best public service outcomes to our constituents in terms of quality and value for money—exactly the same considerations that motivated Labour when, in government, it let so many public service delivery contracts to private companies?

Oliver Dowden: Yes, Labour let lots of contracts to private companies, because it believed that they had the expertise to deliver them, and that is exactly what we are doing. Interestingly, since the surge in the use of PFIs that took place under the Labour Chancellor before last, Mr Gordon Brown, we have tightened up the terms of PFI. We are learning the lessons from some of the

excessive PFI contracts that we saw, which had underneath them ludicrous service fees for some of the services provided.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Capita is a significant employer in Huddersfield in its shared transport business. It has a very important role in gas safety for the Health and Safety Executive. It is a very important company. Nobody on the Labour Benches wants to see it fail; like all businesses, we want to it to succeed. There is nothing wrong with a public-private partnership: what is important is getting the contract and the relationship right. What went wrong in many PFIs was rotten contracts that still bedevil local hospitals and local schools.

Oliver Dowden: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. He is precisely right. There is nothing wrong, *per se*, with engaging with the private sector for the delivery of services, but we must ensure that there is rigour in the contracts. Many contracts in the past have not been properly negotiated and have not delivered value for the public sector, and they will continue to burden us for many decades to come. However, that is not an invalidation of the model; it is about problems with specific contractual negotiations.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is clear that Capita is unique because it grew out of outsourcing from the public sector, but as it grew the structures outstripped its proper corporate responsibility. It is also clear that we need to argue the case for the benefits to the public sector of outsourcing. Will the Minister therefore set out the benefits of outsourcing and give one or two examples of where it has been a success and delivered better public service?

Oliver Dowden: I am very happy to do so. This is precisely why private sector companies use outsourcing. Every company engages in outsourcing because it recognises that there are some areas where there is greater expertise than can be delivered by that company. It is exactly the same for the public sector. We focus on what actually works—what delivers for the public sector and what delivers the best price and the best value. Over 4,500 projects have been delivered since 2010; over a quarter of a trillion pounds has been invested in infrastructure; and over 70% of our 175 long-term priority projects and programmes identified are now complete, under construction, or part of a programme being delivered. This is delivering the public services that people want.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): Capita employs 450 people in my constituency, who are principally engaged in administering public sector pensions. When the Minister has met Capita, what discussions has he had about the pensions function and the Darlington site specifically? Will he meet me to discuss that?

Oliver Dowden: I would be very happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss all those points.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Will the Minister tell the House the size of the pension deficit and what arrangements the Government are putting in place to cover that black hole?

Oliver Dowden: Capita is a private company, responsible for the running of its business. If the hon. Gentleman looks at the announcement made yesterday by Capita, he will see that it has chosen not to issue a dividend, which has released more cash and means that it can shore up its pension fund. It is a positive announcement in that respect.

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): Will the Government review all major outsourced contracts as a matter of urgency, and in particular the contracts awarded to Capita for assessing personal independence payments for disabled people? It has been subject to justified heavy criticism for the way it treats disabled people during that process.

Oliver Dowden: The Government routinely publish all significant outsourcing contracts, and I would be happy to provide the hon. Lady with a link to the website so that she can get a full list of those. That is the process for doing it.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Is it not time that private companies providing public services were subject to the same rules of openness and transparency as the public sector, so that they can no longer hide behind the cloak of commercial confidentiality?

Oliver Dowden: Of course there are lessons to be learned from this. Indeed, that is exactly what bodies such as the Select Committee on Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs are looking into. However, there is a distinction between a private company and a public body. I do not think it would be appropriate to extend the full FOI provisions to all private companies.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): If the Minister is serious about getting the best value for the public, will he commit to learning from the Scottish Government? The Scottish Futures Trust's latest independently audited benefits statement shows more than £1 billion in savings since it was established.

Oliver Dowden: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's question. Of course we will learn those lessons, but it is worth noting that the Scottish Government gave a contract to Capita in 2015. Capita was appointed by the Scottish Public Pensions Agency to deliver its integrated pensions IT software solutions, which is another example of Governments choosing to use the expertise of the private sector.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): There are echoes of Corporal Jones from "Dad's Army" in the Minister's response this morning—"Don't panic! It's all okay." Why does he think that Barnet Council—a flagship Tory council, known as "easy council" because of its extreme outsourcing—has put in place contingency plans based on the possible failure of this company?

Oliver Dowden: I can assure the hon. Lady that we are not in any way complacent. That is why we continue to ensure—I believe Barnet Council will be doing exactly the same—that there are contingency plans in place. Indeed, those contingency plans have worked in respect of the one collapse of a company we have seen: Carillion. Those public services continue to be delivered.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Capita has a £1 billion contract in the primary care sector of the NHS. The Minister has sought to minimise the necessity of declaring any kind of contingency plans to the House. Does he not think that the House and the general public deserve to know exactly what plans the Government have in the event that Capita is unable to provide those essential services to the public?

Oliver Dowden: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I have given that reassurance, and I can reassure the House again that in respect of all our strategic suppliers, including Capita, we are understanding their financial position and taking appropriate contingency measures. I hope she will understand that lots of these things are commercially sensitive, and it would not be helpful to go into excessive detail on that.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Capita's stock has dropped 84% since its 2015 peak. Are there plans for a ministerial taskforce to grip this situation should it worsen?

Oliver Dowden: It is worth noting that a large chunk of the drop in the share price came yesterday in respect of the restructuring of the business—it was a consequence, for example, of the rights issue—but we are of course engaging in such a way. I and the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths), who has responsibility for small businesses, have established a taskforce for Carillion. We are ensuring that we provide all the support we can for the private sector side of Carillion's delivery of services. For example, we are ensuring that HMRC is showing flexibility in relation to payments, and that banks are showing some flexibility. Should the need arise, we would do exactly the same for Capita.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Poor service delivery is often an early warning sign of future financial difficulties. GP practices in my constituency have been complaining for at least two years about the poor quality of service they are receiving. We know that the contract for assessments for personal independence payments has been failing, and this morning we have heard examples of many other service delivery failures. Rather than leaving this to individual Departments to manage, should not the Cabinet Office have a central overview of where service performance is failing as an early warning of future difficulties?

Oliver Dowden: Yes, we should, and we do exactly that. We of course take an overall view of the delivery of public services, the financial position and contingency. The specifics of public service delivery clearly have to be contracted by the relevant Department, because the relevant Department has a deeper understanding of the need. For example, for health and education, the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Education are in a better position to negotiate such contracts.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Last year, a Press Association investigation revealed that Capita received £200 million more than originally planned from the Department for Work and Pensions for PIP

assessments, so there is a clear trail of the Government rewarding failed performance. Will the Minister assure me that the Government will not also be rewarding corporate recklessness?

Oliver Dowden: No, the Government certainly will not be rewarding corporate recklessness. Carillion shareholders paid the price for the failures of Carillion in that they will not receive back their initial investment, which is precisely correct. The role of the Government is to ensure that those public services continue to be delivered, and the private sector bears the risk.

Business of the House

11.17 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for next week will include:

MONDAY 5 FEBRUARY—Motions relating to the draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2018 and the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2018, followed by the remaining stages of the Smart Meters Bill.

TUESDAY 6 FEBRUARY—Remaining stages of the Space Industry Bill [*Lords*], followed by a debate on housing, planning and the green belt. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

WEDNESDAY 7 FEBRUARY—Motions relating to the police grant and local government finance reports.

THURSDAY 8 FEBRUARY—Debate on a motion on community bank closures, followed by a debate on matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 9 FEBRUARY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 19 February will include:

MONDAY 19 FEBRUARY—The House will not be sitting.

TUESDAY 20 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill [*Lords*].

Yesterday evening, the House took an historic decision to choose action to restore and renew the Palace of Westminster, and I want to congratulate all right hon. and hon. Members across the House on their attention to this debate and their contributions to it. As the Leader of the House, I will now be taking forward the decision of this House, following a debate that is to take place in the other place as soon as one can be arranged.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for setting out next week's business.

A robin in the Chamber, a blue blood moon and Roger Federer winning the Australian open—but I will not mention the thing that you were not very happy about, Mr Speaker: Swansea beating Arsenal. Oh dear.

I thank the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), the Backbench Business Committee and other Members for suggesting that a debate on restoration and renewal take place today. If the Committee had not agreed to that debate, the Government would not have been pushed into having it yesterday. As the Leader of the House rightly said, a decision has been made. I, too, thank everyone who took part in and signed the amendments for such an excellent debate; it was well-tempered, and people made their points.

The Leader of the House mentioned the pre-recess Adjournment debate. I hope that she gets her deputy very soon, because she has her hands full with restoration and renewal. She has been assiduous in trying to engage Members, particularly on the northern estate programme. I know that she will do the same with restoration and renewal. May I press her, though, on the date for the summer recess? It is only one date, so I hope that she will be able to give it to us very soon.

[Valerie Vaz]

The Leader of the House mentioned the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill, which provisionally comes to the House for debate on 20 February. It started in the other place, so will she confirm whether there are plans for any Brexit Bills to start in the other place? The Bill was published on the same day that it had its First Reading. Will she reassure the House that that will not be the case for the other 15 Brexit Bills?

On Brexit, it is a year since the Lancaster House speech on the Government's negotiating objectives for exiting the EU, but the Government appear to have abandoned the financial sector. They have shelved a position paper setting out their trade goals for financial services after Brexit. Is the Leader of the House aware that the policy chair at the City of London corporation says that the sector had been counting on the paper to clarify Government policy, and that

"the City is left in the dark"?

And so say all of us. When can we expect publication of the position paper on financial services, which will affect 1 million people?

It seems that the Government have annoyed the City; they have also annoyed the shadow Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and all the Opposition. The Government have said that the "EU Exit Analysis—Cross Whitehall Briefing" will be published. Will the Leader of the House say exactly when it will be provided to the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union and to Members but not on a restricted basis?

The Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), said that civil servants who do their work are "always wrong". He appears to have a bizarre understanding of what civil servants do. They are independent; they follow Government instructions and Government policy. Could we have an apology from the Minister to the civil service?

Next week, there will be debate on a motion on the police grant. Quarterly police figures show a 14% rise in recorded crime in England and Wales. Domestic burglary is up 32%. That is mirrored exactly in my constituency: a young couple who just got married had their wedding jewellery stolen, and another constituent gave me a video of a gang entering a home and marching people upstairs to rob them. There is only one police station in my constituency, in Darlaston, and that is closing, despite having been upgraded. It is not fair to say that the Government are protecting the police budget. May we have an urgent debate—perhaps a Minister could make a statement—on how much more money will be given to local councils to protect local services? When it comes to taxes, it is not right or fair for the Government to shift the burden on to local councils.

Mr Speaker, you allowed an urgent question on Capita earlier, but I want the Leader of the House's reassurance that the Government's jobseeker's allowance helpline and the helpline that administers the teachers' pension scheme will be protected. I would also like a statement on how much the Government have outsourced to Capita.

Finally, we are celebrating the centenary of the Representation of the People Act 1918, which gave 6 million women the right to vote. We still have to put

up with men-only clubs. The test should be: would the Prime Minister be invited? Was she invited to the Presidents Club? The answer is no, but she has been invited to give a speech on Tuesday in Westminster Hall. I encourage all Members to celebrate this landmark in the UK's history between 6.30 pm and 7.30 pm on that day. The event will launch Parliament's Vote 100 programme for 2018. Women have moved from their place behind the grille at the back of the Chamber to its Floor. As we celebrate that, let us all think of those unseen men and women who speak out and fight every day for equality for all.

Andrea Leadsom: I share the hon. Lady's excitement about the centenary of the Representation of the People Act next Tuesday. One hundred years later, our Head of State is a woman. We have our second female Prime Minister. The First Minister in Scotland is a woman, as is our Home Secretary. The Leaders and shadow Leaders of the House of Commons and the House of Lords are women, and the Metropolitan Police Commissioner is a woman—I could go on. There have been some changes for the better, but there is so much more to do to make sure that women play an equal part in every aspect of our society, both in the United Kingdom and around the world. I share the hon. Lady's commitment to doing whatever we can to make sure that comes to pass.

The hon. Lady asks for a summer recess date. That will be provided as soon as we can. I absolutely accept that hon. Members want to get on and think about what else they might like to do with their lives other than sit here, and I share that enthusiasm.

The hon. Lady asks about Brexit Bills being introduced in the other place. As she will appreciate, in my role as chairman of the Parliamentary Business and Legislation Committee, I have to ensure that Bills are ready to be introduced. We then have to look at the parliamentary timetable to see what else is going on in either House and make decisions based on the volume of business that is available to go. It is not possible to say with certainty at any one time, "It'll be this one; it'll be that one," but in due course, through the usual channels, we will always give as much notice as possible.

The hon. Lady talks specifically about the financial sector. In fact, there are not 1 million people, but 2 million, if we include all the professional services around the financial services sector—ranging from Edinburgh to Bournemouth, to Birmingham, to Manchester, and of course, to the City of London. It is a vast and very successful sector for this country, and we were recently declared to have extended our pre-eminence over all the other financial services sectors in the world. It is absolutely vital to the United Kingdom. Positional work will be going on and it will be announced in due course, when the moment is right.

The hon. Lady asks me to confirm that the Government will comply with the terms of the Humble Address, and I am happy to do so. She asked about economic forecasts. All I can say is that if hon. Members want to ask the Bank of England how many times its economic forecasts are right, that will demonstrate that forecasting is not an exact science. It is an art, and it is not a criticism of the civil service to say that economic forecasts are rarely correct. Indeed, pre-referendum, certain forecasts presumed that our economy would be around 6% smaller than it is today, so those forecasts were also wrong.

The hon. Lady asks about the police grant. Real-terms overall police spending has increased since 2015-16 by over £475 million, including increased investment in transformation and technology. In this settlement, we propose to increase the total investment in the police system by a further £450 million year on year in 2018-19, if police and crime commissioners maximise their local precepts. She is absolutely right, however, to point out the very concerning rise in particularly high-impact crimes, such as knife crime. I hope that she welcomes Operation Sceptre, which many police forces are joining to try to tackle this appalling crime, which has such a terrible impact on victims and their families.

Finally, the hon. Lady asks for reassurance about Capita. There has just been an urgent question, in which the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden) answered a number of points about Capita and Carillion. A web page has been set up by the Insolvency Service for those who are affected and seeking advice about the failure of Carillion. In the context of Carillion, there is a dedicated website set up by the special managers, PricewaterhouseCoopers, as well as a dedicated helpline. Jobcentre Plus, through its rapid response service, is available for advice and support for those whose jobs may be affected. In the case of Capita, however, as my hon. Friend pointed out, the Government closely monitor all the firms to which they outsource contracts, and they do not believe that Capita is in anything like a similar situation to Carillion.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): In this centenary year of some women gaining the right to vote, does my right hon. Friend agree that there should be a debate in Government time to mark International Women's Day on 8 March, perhaps to demonstrate the respect that the Government have for the immense contribution that women have made to this place over the past 100 years?

Andrea Leadsom: I commend my right hon. Friend for all that she does to advance the cause of women and equality. She is a real champion of women's rights, and I agree with her that the centenary of women's suffrage should ensure that we mark International Women's Day. As she knows, time for such debates is traditionally provided by the Backbench Business Committee, but I have raised with the Chief Whip the view expressed on both sides of the House that it would be good to have an appropriate opportunity to mark that important day, and I am optimistic.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of this crumbling House for announcing the business for next week—and what a week! There may or may not be enough Conservative Back Benchers to trigger a leadership challenge, and the party civil war that is now raging in the Conservative ranks would put the cavaliers and roundheads to shame. Could we perhaps have a debate on peace, love and understanding, so that the rest of us could wish all the best to our Conservative friends in their current difficulties?

Having secured yet another Humble Address defeat, the Government will once again go through the whole business of trying to defy the will of the House by revealing as little as possible about the latest disastrous

Brexit papers. After debasing our Opposition day debates and refusing to be held to account, they are now making a mockery of Humble Addresses.

If we cannot get the Government to vote on Humble Addresses, how about getting them to try to change Standing Orders? One issue that unites the House against the Government is opposition to the procedure known as “English votes for English laws”, which is as useless as it is divisive. No other party in the House will support it, and Scottish Conservative Members would look singularly stupid if they voted for a procedure that continues to emasculate them in the House. We may not be able to secure time for a debate, but the Labour party has loads of time available. Why do not Labour Members join us and help us to defeat the Government and get rid of this divisive procedure?

Lastly, is it not delicious watching all the Brexiteers rage about the unelected House of Lords as it chews up their precious hard Brexit? People who would have no second thoughts about donning the ermine if it were offered and who have ignored all our calls for the House of Lords to be abolished are now starting to rail against it. You couldn't make it up.

Andrea Leadsom: It is just as well that I genuinely like the hon. Gentleman, because I have to suspend my disbelief when it comes to some of the remarks that he makes. Let me gently correct him: the House is not crumbling. The infrastructure within it is the problem. The House, as he will see, is beautiful, and it is not crumbling. As for his recommendation for lessons on peace, love and understanding, I am sure that you, Mr Speaker, would like to see more of that in this place. I entirely share the hon. Gentleman's desire for us all to work together, and as Leader of the House, I do all that I can to ensure that we show each other that love and understanding.

The hon. Gentleman talks about Opposition day debates. We issued a clear proposal that when an Opposition motion was approved by the House, a Minister would make a statement within 12 weeks to inform the House of exactly what steps had been taken to address the issues raised, and that continues to be the case.

The hon. Gentleman talks about EVEL—English votes for English laws—which is indeed designed to stop Scottish votes for English laws. It is important for Members on both sides of the House to recognise that it is a consequence of devolution, when a number of the nations that make up the United Kingdom were rightly keen to be able to manage their own affairs more closely. It is right that Members who come to this place from those nations should not be able to vote on laws that affect only England, or England and Wales.

The hon. Gentleman laughs at those who are frustrated by the House of Lords, but surely he recognises its role as a revising House with very useful expertise that often improves legislation and makes a genuine contribution to the work of the House of Commons.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): If there is to be a decant, it is vital for it to be as short as possible. On that, we are all agreed. I personally believe that the builders should work triple shifts and not do what builders traditionally do, which is to stay as long as

[Sir Edward Leigh]

possible. Is it my right hon. Friend's opinion that, when we set up the legislation, only the MPs and peers on the sponsor body should vote, so that we can get a grip on this?

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, because he has been a passionate advocate for the restoration and renewal of this place, and I am sorry, as he will no doubt be disappointed by yesterday's decision. While that decision confirms action, it is not action along the lines that he would wish to see, and I am very sympathetic to his personal view that in staying in this place we could do the job more efficiently and effectively. In direct response to his question about how the sponsor body will be set up, it will have a majority of parliamentarians, and their role will be to reflect the range of views across both Houses on precisely what the delivery authority should be tasked with delivering.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement and for announcing that the business for 6 February will include a debate on housing, planning and the green belt, which is sponsored by the Backbench Business Committee. We know that proceedings on the Space Industry Bill are unlikely to go the distance, but we do not yet know how many Government statements or urgent questions may be granted by Mr Speaker, so may we ask for protected time for that debate so that it may last for 90 minutes or until 7 o'clock, whichever is the later, so that we are guaranteed that it will get a good airing?

Secondly, may I bring all Members' attention to page 15 of today's Order Paper under the heading "Applications for Backbench Business Committee debates on the estimates". Members will have to submit applications by Friday 16 February, which is during the recess. I draw Members' attention to that so they will be able to debate in full the estimates debates of their choosing.

Lastly, I have another plea. The Backbench Business Committee is effectively now down to five members. We have one member out on a Bill Committee, and we have lost two other members due to promotions to the Government. We are effectively down to five members, but we have a quorum of four, so it is getting very tight. I therefore ask for a relaxation of the quorum, or quick appointments to replace those who have been promoted.

Andrea Leadsom: I hear that, and the hon. Gentleman and I will certainly take that up to see how we can support what sounds like a very real practical problem. I urge all colleagues to look at page 15 of today's Order Paper. It is important that all colleagues set out their applications for Backbench Business Committee debates on the estimates. The hon. Gentleman is right that the deadline is during the recess, so it would be helpful for all colleagues to look at that. I will also take away his request for protected time for the Backbench Business Committee debate that he mentioned.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): My right hon. Friend will have seen early-day motion 783 on scrapping hospital car parking charges.

[That this House is disappointed that following the publication of Government guidance on hospital car parking in August 2014, 47 per cent of hospitals have increased their parking charges for a one hour stay; notes that there continues to be discrepancies in parking charges across

England, with three hospitals in London charging almost £400 per week to park; believes that these charges have serious implications, not only for patients and those visiting their loved ones, but specifically for parents of premature babies, cancer patients, dialysis patients and those receiving treatment for tumours; considers these charges a stealth tax on drivers using NHS services; and therefore asks the Government to consider ending car parking charges at hospitals in England.]

My right hon. Friend will also know about the motion that stands in my name and that of other Members. If the House passes that motion, which will be debated this afternoon, will my right hon. Friend arrange for a Minister to make a statement to the House about how the Government will scrap hospital car parking charges?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has been a strong champion for resolving the issue of hospital car parking charges for a long time. I wish him well with his debate this afternoon, and I assure him that I will write to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to put forward his request.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): The all-party group on suicide and self-harm prevention heard a harrowing presentation this week from Professors Nav Kapur and Keith Hawton from the multicentre study of self-harm in England. We learned that there are 200,000 hospital presentations a year in England for self-harm and almost the same number to community health facilities, particularly of 12 to 17-year-olds. One in 100 of those will die by suicide a year after their presentation, and 50% of those dying by suicide have been involved in self-harm. This is an epidemic that is hitting this country. May we have a statement from the Government expressing how they intend to deal with the major risk of self-harm presentation in our hospitals?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady sets out harrowing evidence about the extent of self-harming, and the Government are incredibly concerned about this, particularly about the need for more support for those with mental health issues. We are investing a record £1.4 billion into children's and young people's mental health, and there are now a record 1,440 children's mental health beds. Also, importantly, by this time next year, we will have trained 2,000 secondary school staff in mental health first aid to try to provide support to young people, and by 2021, 70,000 additional children and young people each year will be accessing NHS specialist mental health services.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): In the village of Oulton in my constituency, a company that owns 70 rented homes has put in for planning permission to demolish them and replace them with private dwellings. On Friday, I met some of my constituents who could soon be receiving eviction notices and would therefore require new homes. May we have a statement from the Housing Minister on the power that Leeds City Council may or may not have to purchase those homes, instead of—I kid you not, Mr Speaker—wanting to build a lighthouse in the middle of the landlocked city of Leeds?

Andrea Leadsom: That is an extraordinary tale. Whether the council is planning for floods is anyone's guess. My hon. Friend is a strong champion for his community,

and he raises an important issue. I recommend that he seeks an Adjournment debate so that a Minister can answer his specific concerns.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Barry Sheerman.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you so much, Mr Speaker. You took me by surprise. In the old and less enlightened days when I was at primary school, we could have a good old pinch and a punch for the first day of the month—

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Queen Victoria didn't like it.

Mr Sheerman: No, it was not in Queen Victoria's time.

May we have an early debate so that many of us can give a good pinch and a punch to the private sector partnerships that benight so many hospitals in our land? So many of us want a new deal for our hospitals and health sector, but we are being dragged down by private finance initiatives that were badly negotiated many years ago. Let's have a debate on this, please!

Andrea Leadsom: I encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek a debate on that. When I was on the Treasury Committee about five years ago, my hon. Friend the Member for—Jesse Norman—

Mr Speaker: Hereford and South Herefordshire.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker. I had a momentary mental blank there.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman) and the Treasury Committee held an inquiry into PFI, and it was quite clear that in many of those deals the private sector saw the public sector coming, and that those deals have not been in the best interests of the taxpayer or the patient. Of course, the hon. Gentleman must reflect that those PFI deals were signed under Labour Governments. Labour agreed to them—[*Interruption.*] Well, John Major did a few of them, but the vast majority were done under Labour. Now, under private finance 2, there is a much better track record of ensuring that the interests of the taxpayer are better cared for. However, I agree with the hon. Gentleman that a debate would be a good way to raise this issue again.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Mr Speaker, I would like to share some good news with you and the good people of Taunton Deane. We have just heard this morning that the bid to the housing infrastructure fund for £7.2 million to build the spine road in Staplegrove in Taunton has been successful. That will make the building of 1,600 houses in that area viable. Will the Leader of the House join me in welcoming this announcement, which demonstrates the fact that this Government realise that if we are to make the delivery of much-needed housing viable, we must have the right infrastructure?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a fantastic champion for her constituency, and it is good news that houses are being built. We are committed to building homes so that everyone can afford a safe, decent place to live, and today an extra £866 million has been confirmed for

local housing projects to unlock the potential of 200,000 new homes. I am delighted that the Staplegrove spine road in her constituency will be one of the beneficiaries.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Seventy-seven per cent. of the public, 98 MPs on both sides of the House, and more than 20 national charities back my Bill to measure food insecurity. Figures released this week show that one in eight adults has gone a whole day without food, and the UN estimate of UK food insecurity stands at a staggering 8 million people. Will the Government make a statement to explain why their position on this heartbreaking reality is for so many one of total silence?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an issue that is of concern right across the House. Food insecurity is a major challenge, but the Government have ensured that more people get to keep more of their hard-earned cash, raising the personal allowance so that a basic rate taxpayer is £1,000 better off and raising the national living wage to ensure that people are thousands of pounds better off than they were in 2010. It is vital that the Government do everything we can to ensure that people can afford to live well.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): I want to bring something that affects my constituency to the attention of the Leader of the House. In Taunton Deane, about which we have just heard, the borough council has borrowed a fortune to do up its headquarters. Not only has it not signed a contract, which I think is illegal and pretty silly, but the headquarters will be valued at only half of what was borrowed. It is not a good council, so may we please have a debate on borough councils in the United Kingdom?

Mr Speaker: Order. Did the hon. Gentleman consult his hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) in advance of asking this question? If he did, so be it, but if he did not, it is rather unseemly.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: I did, Mr Speaker. I sent an email.

Mr Speaker: Yes. I am not sure that that is very collegiate, but I will have to leave Members on the same side of the House to try to sort out such matters. I gently say to the hon. Gentleman, who is quite an experienced Member of the House, that there is a genuine unseemliness about continued references to another Member's constituency. In the politest possible way, I exhort the hon. Gentleman, who I am sure has a fertile mind and wide range of potential political interests, to focus perhaps on other interests, rather than on those that might affect his constituency—I do not dispute that and do not have authoritative knowledge of the matter—but which most certainly affect that of his hon. Friend.

Andrea Leadsom: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I encourage my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) to take the matter up with the Housing, Communities and Local Government Ministers.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): My constituent "S" was trafficked to the UK as a child and forced to work in a cannabis factory, but the Home Office wants to send him back to Vietnam. May we please have a debate on the interaction between the protection of victims of modern slavery, and the asylum and immigration system?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises what sounds like a concerning case. As constituency MPs, we all raise particular cases with the Home Office, and I am sure that it will be happy to look again at this one. If she emails me about it, I can take it up with the Home Office on her behalf.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The Community Security Trust's annual report shows a growth in anti-Semitic attacks in this country amidst a pernicious increase in anti-Semitism more generally. At the same time, the chief inspector of schools is making a speech today about the growth of religious extremism in our schools. May we have a debate in the Chamber in Government time on how to combat religious extremism and pernicious attacks on people's religions?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a worrying story. All of us will have read in the press about the rise in anti-Semitic attacks and the use of words that can be extremely hurtful. He is right to suggest a debate, and I encourage him to talk to the Backbench Business Committee about securing such a debate so that all Members can share their views.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): The Government have expressed their support for women's refuges, and their funding is currently being reviewed. I fear, though, that time is running out for many refuges, including Jane's Place in my constituency. Will the Leader of the House please allow some Government time so that we can assess what urgent steps can be taken to avoid any closures?

Andrea Leadsom: We have committed £40 million until 2020, and we have delivered support to 80 domestic abuse projects across England. The hon. Lady raises an issue that is absolutely at the heart of Government priorities, which is why we have committed to introducing a draft domestic violence and abuse Bill. We have created two new stalking offences and we will introduce a new stalking protection order. It is important that the Government are taking action, and we will continue to do so.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Next Tuesday is Safer Internet Day, and on Monday I will be visiting Eastlands Primary School in my constituency to meet its eCadets and to find out more about their role in promoting safe internet use among their fellow pupils. There is real concern about what is happening online, so could we have a debate to consider what measures we can take to keep our young people safe?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate my hon. Friend on raising such an important issue. I hope that he enjoys his school visit. The Government fully support Safer Internet Day. This year, nearly 700 schools will take part, and they will be joined by charities, Government officials, businesses, football clubs and police forces. Safer Internet Day is marked in 100 countries worldwide to help children everywhere to remain safe online.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I am sure that the Leader of the House will be aware of the hearings on equal pay for women working at the BBC. Will she now take a lead on equal pensions for women,

especially women born in the early 1950s who have been denied them? She could certainly make a name for herself—she would be up there with Emmeline Pankhurst if she did something about it.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an issue that has been discussed in this House many, many times. Conservatives in government have committed more than £1 billion to supporting those affected so that no one will see their pension age change by more than 18 months. The new state pension will be much more generous for many women. By 2030, more than 3 million women stand to gain, on average, £550 extra a year.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I am sure my right hon. Friend will share my concern about yesterday's sad news in Redditch that our local Marks & Spencer is closing. I am delighted that the employees will find alternative jobs, but nevertheless it is sad because Marks & Spencer is the last food shop in our town centre, and it is sadly needed. Can we have a debate on how we can work together with our local council colleagues to create vibrant town centres that are communities for everyone to enjoy, and in which to live and work?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a huge champion for her constituency, and she has her own vision for a sustainable and thriving town centre in Redditch. I share her concern, and it is always a great shame when a much loved and much used shop closes in a town centre. I encourage her to do all she can to revitalise the town.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Unfortunately, Nottingham was not selected as one of Sport England's pilot cities for new models of physical activity. The House will know, however, that Nottingham people have developed lots of good ideas and, with our typical fortitude, will be making those ideas happen anyway in any way we can. Will the Leader of the House support us in that venture by accommodating a discussion in Government time?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the innovative efforts to increase sporting activity in Nottingham and on his desire for a debate in Government time. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate, in which a sports Minister might be able to give him some specific tips.

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): Consideration was given in Westminster Hall yesterday to the terrible situation facing disabled people in North West Durham and across the UK when being assessed for their personal independence payment. Many Members were not called to speak in that debate because demand was so high. They had important issues that they needed to press, so will the Leader of the House advise us on how we can have the urgent situation facing disabled people debated in Government time?

Andrea Leadsom: I understood there was a very well-attended debate yesterday, and it is right that there was. The hon. Lady should welcome the fact that almost 600,000 more disabled people have been able to come into the workforce over the past four years, with 3.5 million disabled people now in work. That is good news, and the PIP benefit is designed to give people more power

over how they use their benefits to support their lifestyle and their ability to make the most of all the opportunities they have.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): May we have a debate in Government time on banning the use of plastic straws? Last week, I visited Sunnyside Primary School in the Craigend area of my constituency and met its ocean defenders, who are doing sterling work among local authorities to ban the use of plastic straws. These people will be here a lot longer than we will, so will the Government take action on this issue?

Andrea Leadsom: I share the hon. Gentleman's enthusiasm for doing more to reduce plastics in all the things we use, whether we are talking about recyclable cups or any form of plastics. The Government have taken strong action in banning microbeads in certain cosmetics and body wash products. There is a lot more to do in protecting our marine areas, where 80% of our plastics end up, so this Government will be committed to doing everything we can to defend our environment.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Nairn, Grantown and Aviemore in my constituency are just three of the highland towns that will be negatively affected by the Royal Bank of Scotland's planned branch closures. Given that the UK Government are the major shareholder, in addition to the planned debate may we have a statement on the range of responsibilities the Government have for holding shares on behalf of the public?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Secretary of State for Scotland has raised the House's concerns in his recent meeting with RBS. He will also be aware that, as has been mentioned in this House many times, we have established the Access to Banking standard to make sure there is proper consultation before the closure of any branch. He will also be aware that the Government have invested significantly in the post office network and that about 99% of personal customers will be able to carry out their day-to-day banking at a post office as a result of new agreements facilitated by Government.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): We know it is Government policy to replace sold council houses on a one-for-one basis, but a three-bed semi in my constituency was recently sold for just £27,000 and the council cannot possibly replace a house for that much money—unless, perhaps, it is made of LEGO. We know that across the country only one in five of the council houses that are sold are getting replaced, so may we have a statement from the relevant Minister about how this policy can actually be put in practice?

Andrea Leadsom: It is important that any money raised goes back into social housing and affordable housing. I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that the Government's own investment in social, council and low-cost homes is now more than £9 billion. We have delivered about 350,000 new affordable homes. That number needs to continue to rise, but the Government are committed to ensuring that everybody has a secure and decent home to live in.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Rent-to-own companies such as BrightHouse charge eye-watering interest rates for essential goods. The Financial Conduct Authority has just revealed that the average debt for rent-to-own customers has doubled. May we therefore have a statement and real action from the Government and FCA to keep this sector in check?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very concerning point about the debts people get into by using these high-cost lenders to facilitate the purchase of essential white goods, furniture and so on. I know from my time as City Minister that the FCA takes this incredibly seriously. It has capped the interest rates that such companies are allowed to charge, and it is doing further work to ensure that we protect consumers from the practices of some of those companies.¹

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Now that the House has made the in-principle decision on what we are going to do about restoration and renewal, may I urge the Leader of the House to get together her ministerial colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Department for Work and Pensions to put together a parliamentary skills strategy? We are going to need thousands of people working on this building, with high-tech engineering skills and craft trade skills that currently are not available in this country. This is an opportunity for every constituency in the land to have apprenticeships, with apprentices working here on the building.

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his tenacity and his hon. Friend the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, on succeeding in her amendment yesterday. I am delighted that the House voted to take action. As he rightly points out, there are huge opportunities, and in some cases those are already being fulfilled. For example, as he will know, the repairs to the cast-iron roofs are being carried out in the UK. There will be lots of opportunities for new apprenticeships, however, and I can absolutely assure him that as Leader of the House I will be taking every opportunity to create jobs for young people in the UK.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Can we have a statement on the unfair distribution of the tampon tax fund? With £15 million available in year 1, Scottish organisations were given just two weeks' notice before the fund closed. In addition, Sport Relief invited 45 organisations to a funding meeting, but only three of those organisations delivered services in Scotland. With the year 3 criteria making it virtually impossible for Scottish organisations to apply, is it not time for this fund, while it exists, to be devolved?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. If he would like to email me with details, I shall certainly write to the Department on his behalf.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Almost three months ago, on 3 November, I wrote to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government about the Preesall gas storage facility plans in my constituency. I am still waiting on a reply. Will the Leader of the House look into this on my behalf?

1. [Official Report, 6 February 2018, Vol. 635, c. 6MC.]

Andrea Leadsom: Yes, I will certainly do so.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Today, BT Openreach announced plans to roll out fibre broadband to 3 million homes by 2020. Far too often, however, new announcements are followed by slow action. This is an issue of growing urgency, and not just outside London; pockets of my constituency, including Cranford, suffer from very slow broadband speeds. I would like to thank Mohammad Chaudhry and residents of my constituency for raising this issue, which is having a huge impact on businesses and students and pupils wanting to study at home. Could we have an urgent debate in Government time on how to move from announcements to outcomes that will hugely impact on the prosperity, wellbeing and quality of life of all our constituents?

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly share the hon. Lady's concern about pockets with no broadband. It is devastating for people who work or study from home. It is extremely difficult. I must say, however, that superfast broadband is now available to over 95% of UK homes and businesses, which is up from 45% coverage in 2010, so it is not a case of announcements with no action; there is real action behind it. There is more to do, however, and there is a plan. That said, I share her frustration. She may wish to seek an Adjournment debate to hear at first hand the prospects for her constituents.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): Residents of the town of Llangollen in my constituency are concerned that there is no Department for Work and Pensions or Careers Wales presence in that town. This means that residents must travel some considerable distance. This is not just a problem for Llangollen; it is a problem for many of our rural communities and small towns across the UK. Will the Leader of the House provide time for a debate in which we might seek to persuade the Minister of our case?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an important point for her constituents. In my constituency, there are often online opportunities, in libraries and town councils, to gain support from the DWP, but if she wants to write to me with her specific concerns, I can take it up with the Department, or she might want to seek an Adjournment debate.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On 19 January, the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), told the House that the Government were launching local pilot schemes to combat holiday hunger among our poorest children. As proposed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), using a small fraction of the £520 million that the Treasury expects to raise from April from the sugary drinks levy

would be an excellent use of this money in places such as my constituency. Given the obvious merits of getting pilots under way as quickly as possible for this summer's long holidays, may we please have a statement from the Department on how to apply for these pilots?

Andrea Leadsom: Members from all parties will be delighted to hear of those pilot schemes. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) for his commitment to making progress in that policy area. I will certainly ask the Department for Education the hon. Lady's question and see whether it can provide a further update to the House.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): A case has arisen in Bristol of restaurant owners charging their waiters and waitresses to work by demanding that those staff pay a percentage of the total price of the orders they sell to customers, regardless of tips received. This employer's tax on working is then being used to pay staff wages. Remarkably, I am told that this is legal. May we have a debate to decide whether that needs to change?

Andrea Leadsom: That sounds quite extraordinary. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to take up that issue with the Home Office to find out whether it is actually legal. It seems to me to be extraordinary.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a great privilege for me to represent one of Britain's great cities in this House, as many Members do, but I was alarmed to read in a recent report on the *New Statesman's* CityMetric site that Britain's great regional cities, such as Manchester, Glasgow, Birmingham and Leeds, are lagging significantly behind our European peers in respect of productivity, which is in some cases half the rate of that of equivalent European cities such as Munich, Seville or Barcelona. Will the Leader of the House consider scheduling a debate on what the Government are doing to address the major problem of unbalanced economic growth and to ensure that our great regional cities are competing effectively with their European peers?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. He will no doubt be pleased that at the Budget we announced a £1.7 billion investment in the Transforming Cities fund, specifically to build transport infrastructure, which is so strongly linked to productivity. He may be aware that since 2010 the north-east and Scotland have both seen faster productivity growth than London. There is a long way to go, but it is clear that through initiatives such as the northern powerhouse, we are committed to ensuring that we see growth and a reduction in the imbalances between all regions of the United Kingdom.

UK Diplomacy in Europe

FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): We now come to the Select Committee statement. The hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) will speak on his subject for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and call Mr Tugendhat to respond to them in turn. Members can expect to be called only once. Interventions should be questions and should be brief. Front Benchers may take part in questioning.

12.7 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker, for this, my second opportunity to report back on the work that the House has charged the Foreign Affairs Committee to do. I am pleased that in this report the Committee has begun to tackle one of the most important questions facing us today: our bilateral relations following our departure from the European Union. The House will know that 1,000 years of history and, indeed, simple geography make clear the importance of these connections in our diplomatic outreach.

As part of the Government's stated policy of pursuing a global agenda, the Committee believes that relations with European states are an important node in the network of our international future. In some areas, that may mean connections to and co-operation with the European Union, as the member states have decided to work together through that structure. On other occasions, it may mean direct bilateral conversations or, indeed, new structures. That poses a question for Her Majesty's Government: how should we aim to shape this relationship to the benefit of the United Kingdom, our allies and others to achieve the deep and special partnership we hear spoken of so often?

The first answer was reinforced yesterday at a meeting I attended with Baltic partners. I was asked specifically whether the United Kingdom is still intending to invest in defence and play an international role as a nuclear power and a UN Security Council member state. The Committee members present were able to reassure our important allies in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania that, on the 100th anniversary of those countries' foundation as modern states, our commitment to the defence of Europe and, indeed, to the defence of the Baltic states was undimmed. Nevertheless, their question reflected an uncertainty that the Committee calls on Her Majesty's Government to do their utmost to dispel. To achieve that, the Committee feels that a vision for our European policy needs to be set out. As one of Europe's leading foreign policy actors, whatever the precise contours of our future relationship with the European Union it will always be in the interests of the United Kingdom to co-operate with the European Union and its member states on foreign policy, defence and security.

Working together will help us to protect and project our shared values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and will underpin the international rules-based order. Indeed, the Foreign Secretary has told us that he

intends to do that, but he has not yet decided what level of access to ask for as regards co-operation with the European Union on foreign, security and defence policy making, and he has not clarified the intent of the United Kingdom to work bilaterally with other member states. The Committee believes that this requires clarification soon, as Lord Bridges warned only the other day in the other place.

The Committee discussed many options and, I am glad to say, unanimously agreed that the ultimate goal should be to secure automatic and institutionalised collaboration that respects the decision-making autonomy of the United Kingdom, the member states and other European nations as they work together. This should include, as Lord Hague suggested, a status on the European Union's Political and Security Committee that allows the United Kingdom to have a representative in meetings with speaking—if obviously not voting—rights, and a UK-EU strategic partnership to facilitate enhanced dialogue on foreign, defence and security policy. The importance of being, as Lord Hague and Lord Ricketts put it, “in the room” should not be undervalued in order to secure our interests in our nearest neighbourhood.

Now that we are leaving the European Union and surrendering our veto on closer defence integration among the other 27, we must also find a way to support European capability development and ensure that it complements the work of NATO and does not undermine it. To achieve this, the Committee calls on the Government to consider the possibility of participation in some EU defence integration measures, as the United Kingdom already does with the United States and other nations around the world, on the understanding that national sovereignty over force deployment is preserved and that the UK's ability to co-operate with non-European Union states is unconstrained. The UK would, of course, participate only in programmes as an equal partner with other nations.

The Committee was given mixed messages about the FCO's role in the Brexit process and beyond and, to clarify the position, the Committee calls on the FCO to publish a paper outlining the overall goals and the specific priorities of UK foreign policy in Europe after Brexit. This would allow the House to debate the priorities set out and to discuss the resources available to meet the objective.

Although we welcome the Minister for Europe's success in securing additional resources, the Committee is concerned that they are being drawn from the wider network, possibly weakening the Government's stated policy that we are to become a genuinely global Britain. That would be a grave mistake. Since Lord Hague, the Foreign Office has been opening missions around the world to extend the influence that the UK seeks in foreign affairs. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and now with a vital national interest in extending our diplomatic influence, it would be an error to reduce the resources available to achieve that. If leaving the EU meant that the UK were to reduce its international outreach, that would be a reversal of the aim stated by Ministers in recent months and would cause great concern to the whole Committee, and no doubt to the whole House.

The Committee remains concerned that the Foreign Office is not adequately resourced, and relations with Ireland are one example. The Republic of Ireland is the

[Tom Tugendhat]

United Kingdom's closest foreign partner. It is vital to the United Kingdom's national interest that the relationship between Westminster and Dublin is as close as possible. Indeed, it is essential to the prosperity of both. That is why our first overseas visit as a Committee was to Dublin and to Cavan, on the border with Northern Ireland. We were hugely grateful for the warm welcome we received, particularly from my honourable friend the Member for Cavan-Monaghan and the Chair of our sister Committee in the Oireachtas, Brendan Smith. We saw first-hand the complications at the border, the importance of the bilateral relationship and the importance of strengthening it throughout this Parliament. We therefore welcome the Government's commitment to preserving the progress that has been made in UK-Ireland relations in recent years, and regret that recent tensions appear to endanger the hard-won positive momentum.

We welcome the progress made thus far in negotiations, but also recognise that much more needs to be done. That is why the Committee calls on the Foreign Office to increase its diplomatic presence in Ireland and to produce an analysis of the UK-Ireland bilateral relationship, containing recommendations to improve it and options to revitalise existing, or indeed create new, bilateral institutions.

The opportunity for the United Kingdom is in an internationally engaged, networked world. We are uniquely placed to achieve this due to history, alliances and geography, but in order to do so we need both investment and energy, and the Foreign Office, most of all, must set out its vision, its strategy for achieving that, and the resources required to make it possible. The Committee remains concerned by the silence on many areas and the confusion in others.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): I obviously declare an interest as a member of the Committee that produced this unanimous report. If we leave the European Union, we inevitably lose influence. Does my friend the Chairman of the Committee believe that the Government have confronted the issue sufficiently and made proposals to remedy and ameliorate the loss of influence that will inevitably arise within Europe and European institutions?

Tom Tugendhat: The hon. Gentleman is more than aware of the debates we have had behind closed doors on this. I will start by saying that when we leave the European Union the nature of Britain's influence will change, and does not need to diminish as long as Britain takes the opportunity to invest properly in global power. That is why the Committee was so concerned about the possibility that we are stripping off resources from parts of the world such as Asia and South America to reinforce where we will no longer be in the room in Brussels among the EU27. As my dear and honourable Friend knows very well, that is why we need more resources for the Foreign Office in order to make this possible. We need extra commitment, extra drive and extra energy and, to bind it together, we need the vision that, sadly, have not yet seen.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on this very important report. Does he not agree that, given that we are leaving the European

Union, we should redouble our diplomatic, economic and educational links with countries such as Serbia, Poland, Hungary and other countries in eastern Europe that are great friends of the United Kingdom, and that, given the significant number of Polish residents here, we should teach children the positive contribution that Polish people have made to Britain and the world?

Tom Tugendhat: I absolutely welcome my hon. Friend's comments. Britain's relationship with eastern Europe, particularly the Visegrad Four, was summed up in my conversation with our Baltic partners only yesterday. Britain's role in assisting at the liberation of those countries from communism and in defending them at other points in history is one that many of them look at with fondness and affection. We should absolutely recognise and invest in that, and I pay huge tribute to our missions and embassies in those countries and the efforts they are making with the resources they have available. All I would add is: imagine what they could do with more resources. Imagine how many more people they could help to persuade of the benefits of thinking along those lines.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the Committee on the report. Disrupting modern slavery supply chains across Europe requires high-quality diplomatic skill on our part. What assessment has the Foreign Affairs Committee made of our future diplomatic capacity in this area to disrupt this blight?

Tom Tugendhat: The hon. Gentleman asks a fair question, and this is one area where we need to consider not just bilateral relations but relations with the European Union as an organisation. We must recognise that if that is how 27 member states choose to work, our option for working with them is through the organisation that they choose. That is simply a fact. Seeing how we can plug into that organisation is essential, which is why we call on the Foreign Office to consider very hard the bilateral nature of that relationship, and perhaps to look at it in a different way. When we look at the mission in Washington, for example, and the way that the British embassy there plugs across an entire network, that may be a model for how we look into the European Union. Some of us—I speak personally here, not for the Committee—are attracted by the idea of having a Minister resident in Europe, not only to promote Britain's interests, but to make sure that our European partners and friends see the importance that we place on that relationship.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): My hon. and gallant Friend reminds me that, when I was first elected, half the Whips Office were colonels.

The Committee has done well. There is a reference to the British-Irish Council and to the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. I hope that the Government will be asked by this House and by the Committee to make sure that our membership of the Council of Europe, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe get more attention than perhaps they have had in the past, and that there are regular meetings between their members and Government, and debates in this House.

The question for us is how we can all contribute and gain, because that is the best way to maintain Britain's interests as the status of our relationship with the European Union changes. As a last point, may I say that, as normal, most of these reports have three blank pages? It might be helpful for those who do not want to read the whole report to have a glossary somewhere, so that the alphabet soup can be understood by those to whom some of these things are strange.

Tom Tugendhat: Perhaps I can pick up on the last point first. I have just smiled at my excellent Committee Clerk, who was so essential to producing this report, and I am sure that she has noted that.

On the other bodies that my hon. Friend mentioned, I am absolutely in agreement with him that the investment that we must make now in different forms of bilateralism and different forms of multinationalism is absolutely essential to achieving the aims of the United Kingdom. This island is not moving anywhere. We are still going to remain 20 miles or so off the coast of France, and we are still going to have our closest relationships, in many ways, with European nations. How we engage in them is essential, and that will require resourcing and time.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Unquestionably, leaving the European Union means that we must redouble our efforts with our European partners, but surely that cannot come at the expense of manpower or money being siphoned away from other parts of the world. Does the Chair of the Select Committee share my concerns that the Foreign Office does not have enough resources to put the investment that we will need into Europe?

Tom Tugendhat: I absolutely share my hon. Friend's concerns. He will be aware that the recent sale of an embassy in Thailand, which admittedly raised an awful lot of money to address some of the holes in the capital spending of the Foreign Office, will inherently have diminished our presence in some way. These symbolic buildings, these iconic places, are essential to getting people through the door—and, of course, what is the purpose of a diplomatic mission but to get people in to talk to us? Although these palaces may look glorious, and none more so than our embassy in Paris, the work that our ambassador, the right hon. Lord Llewellyn, is putting into that building—not into the bricks and mortar, but into it as a living body, as an embodiment of Britain in Paris—is essential to ensuring that our network is increased, that our reach is augmented, and indeed that our economy is promoted. That is only possible when we resource it correctly, which is why I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that we do need to increase the resources available for the Foreign Office in order to promote the United Kingdom and to get better return for this country on the investment that we are making.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): On page 26, my hon. Friend's Committee looks at the issue of NATO and the new EU defence pillar. He encourages participation in some EU defence integration measures. On behalf of my constituents in Kettering, may I caution his Committee against that as a slippery slope, because NATO is the main pillar of western defence and will always remain as such? The EU is in great danger of undermining that, and we should not go down that slippery slope, because it would not be in our national interest.

Tom Tugendhat: I thank my hon. Friend, whose points on this area have been important and well made over many years, and I welcome his intervention now. This report was passed unanimously, despite such points, because of the evidence that we heard. The reality is that non-NATO EU states—countries like Sweden—are looking to integrate more closely now that we have gone with other European nations on defence. We have a choice. If we wish to work with northern allies like Sweden in defence of the high north and in projecting Britain's influence in the Arctic, we need to think, what is the most appropriate organisation, and what is the most appropriate structure through which to operate? I am entirely in agreement with him that the EU would not be the best structure and that NATO is, but the problem is that we have lost our veto in the European Union, the other 27 are pursuing that, and we therefore have a choice either to work with them at some level or not to be part of it at all. Given Scotland's position and given our position as a nation with interests in the high north, I would urge us to work with others who have interests there and, on occasion and cautiously and carefully, to work with some EU defence structures.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I commend the hon. Gentleman and the members of his Committee for a sobering but very, very useful report. Given the number of quite serious concerns that it raises—for example, the fact that it appears that three different witnesses for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office gave three different understandings as to what their role in the Brexit process was—can he advise the House on what arrangements the Committee intends to make to ensure that Foreign Office Ministers are held to account for the recommendations? In particular, would it be appropriate to ask the Foreign Secretary to make a statement to the House at an early date, so that the House can scrutinise in more detail some of the concerns that the report has raised?

Tom Tugendhat: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. One thing that we are finding, as the Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), who is in his place today will know, is that at times there is a little resistance in the Foreign Office to answering some questions. Indeed, I had to write to the Foreign Secretary about it yesterday. The Minister is one of the most open and helpful people in his Department, so there is absolutely no criticism either of him or his area of responsibility, but there are other areas in which we are finding it hard to get answers.

For example, we have asked how the Foreign Office envisions the meaning of global Britain. So far, it has declined to answer. I find it somewhat unusual that a Government Department should refuse or decline to answer questions from the assembled people in this Parliament; I find that an unusual position to take. Therefore, we are asking the Foreign Office to think again. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we need to hold the various Ministers to account. The Foreign Secretary will be answering Foreign Office questions here in this House, and we have asked all Ministers to appear twice a year before the Committee, because we feel that six months is a reasonable time lag between visits. The hon. Gentleman is well within his rights to call for a more urgent response if there is something that he sees as more urgently requiring it.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): I commend the Chairman and the members of the Committee for producing this excellent report. Will he confirm that, in relation to intelligence and security, a permanent official should be appointed to ensure that the relationship that we have with Europe at the moment continues?

Tom Tugendhat: Madam Deputy Speaker, if you will forgive me wearing another hat as the member of the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, I will tell the hon. Gentleman that I was privileged to hear from two of our former chiefs of intelligence and two other senior diplomatic officials recently about the sharing of intelligence and the importance placed on it by all nations in the European continent. I am not concerned about it not continuing. The one concern is that we must have influence over data sharing and data holding regulations, because European decisions on that could well affect United Kingdom companies and interests.

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): It is my role simply to say thank you to the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee for his presentation and to thank colleagues for their contributions. I have obviously listened very carefully to all the exchanges and will draw them to the attention of both the Foreign Secretary and the Minister for Europe. There will be a formal Foreign Office response in due course, but it is also an opportunity to thank the Committee for its work. I certainly look forward to appearing before it again in the future. Finally, happy birthday, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Thank you very much, Minister. No numbers are to be mentioned.

Point of Order

12.29 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I also wish you a happy birthday?

In an oral statement on social care on 7 December 2017, the then Care Minister, the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), replied to a question I asked about the Government abandoning the carers strategy that had been due to be published in summer 2017—a strategy that has been dragging on for so long, in fact, that the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) was associated with that piece of work when he was in his former role. The then Minister said, about the thousands of carers who had responded to a consultation and then been left waiting:

“We have listened to them, and we will consider what they have said in bringing forward the Green Paper. In the meantime, it is very important to pull together exactly what support there is at present and then respond to that, and we will publish our action plan in January.”—[*Official Report*, 7 December 2017; Vol. 632, c. 1238-1239.]

It is now February. Not only have we no longer any prospect of a carers strategy from the Government, but they have not met their own target to publish an action plan. This is a shabby way to treat carers. Madam Deputy Speaker, do you have any indication that the new Care Minister plans to come to this House to update us on what, if anything, the Government propose to do to support carers?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Lady, first for her good wishes and secondly for drawing the attention of the House to a matter about which she has concern. As she knows, I have no power or authority to require the Minister to come to the House, but there are other methods that the hon. Lady can use to attempt to require the Minister to come to the Dispatch Box and answer her questions. Mr Speaker has made it very clear in the past—of course, I agree with him—that when a Minister has given an undertaking that something will be done, it ought to be done. I am quite sure that the hon. Lady’s point will have been noted by those on the Treasury Bench.

Backbench Business

Baby Leave for Members of Parliament

12.31 pm

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House believes that it would be to the benefit of the functioning of parliamentary democracy that honourable Members who have had a baby or adopted a child should for a period of time be entitled, but not required, to discharge their responsibilities to vote in this House by proxy.

May I join others, Madam Deputy Speaker, in wishing you a happy birthday? You honestly do not need to worry about numbers. I am 67 and I have discovered, as I get older, that I know a lot more things that I did not know when I was younger. There is nothing wrong with getting older.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) and the other members of the Backbench Business Committee, which he chairs, for agreeing to the subject of the motion. As the Backbench Business Committee was introduced when I was Leader of the House, I was very glad that its members did not turn me down when I went before them to ask for this debate.

The right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) is in her place. I thank her for all her work on this issue. This has very much been a joint enterprise between her and me. I really cannot speak highly enough of her work as the Chair of the excellent Women and Equalities Committee. I do not usually say good things about people who have been in the Cabinet in Tory Governments, but she is really very important to us all in her role.

I thank the 52 hon. Members from all parties who supported the application for this motion, including right hon. and hon. Friends in the Labour party, so many of whom are here today; I thank them so much for attending. Members of the Scottish National party have been active and supportive co-workers on this issue, as have the Liberal Democrats and many hon. Members on the Tory Benches. This is very much a cross-party issue.

I am pleased to see that the Leader of the House is in her place and that, in a week that has not been unbusy for her, she will be responding to this debate personally. She has been prepared to give me her time and talk about the issue, and she is here to respond to the motion. That is testament to her commitment to the issue, along with the shadow Leader of the House, who is also present. Mr Speaker's Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion has also looked at this subject.

This motion asks the House for its in-principle agreement to make arrangements for when a Member has a baby or adopts a child. At the moment, we have no such arrangements. In this House, we set the rules for parents outside the House having babies or adopting a child, and we do so because we think that it is important for the child and for the parents. We do it because we want new parents not to have to ask for favours, but to be clear about where they stand. But there is no such system for Members of this House.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for bringing forward this important debate. Does she agree that, as we set the

rules for people outside the House to take maternity, paternity and shared parental leave, we ourselves have a system that makes this place less family-friendly than most workplaces in the UK?

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. No one in this House wants us to give ourselves better conditions than people outside, but we are now actually lagging a long way behind and are in danger of setting a bad example in that respect.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Ms Harman: I give way to my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour.

Helen Hayes: I pay tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend and constituency neighbour for tabling this motion, and for her work over more than 30 years to advance equality for women in this place and in the wider world. Last week, I visited a girls' secondary school in my constituency, where students asked me what it is like being a woman in the House of Commons. There were gasps in the room when I mentioned that there is no maternity leave for women Members. Does she agree that we owe it to a generation of young women who are now thinking about their future to make this place somewhere where they feel welcome and have the same rights as every other woman in workplaces across the country?

Ms Harman: Absolutely; my hon. Friend is spot on.

"Erskine May", our parliamentary rules bible, says absolutely nothing about pregnancy, which is no surprise at all. It used to be the case that the overwhelming majority of Members were men. It was not that those men were not parents; it was just that they regarded a baby as the sole responsibility of their wives. There were hardly any women in this House then, and those who were here were mostly older women whose children had grown up or who had no children. That was certainly the case when I had my three children as a young Member of this House. I was the only woman in the House having babies at that time. Things have now changed, and the sight of growing pregnant bumps in our Division Lobby is commonplace and celebrated on both sides of the House.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): On that point, will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Ms Harman: Speaking of pregnant bumps, I give way to my hon. Friend.

Cat Smith: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for making an excellent speech, and declare my interest as one of those Members with a growing bump. Does she agree that that highlights the urgency with which we have to address the issue? I am not the only Member of the House who is currently pregnant. Does she agree that we are working to a deadline? Babies do not wait; it is not going to stay in there forever.

Ms Harman: I certainly do agree and I congratulate my hon. Friend. I am looking forward to meeting the new arrival.

[*Ms Harman*]

The reason we are proposing this change now is that the House has changed profoundly in its attitudes and its membership. Now, many men want and expect to play their part with a new baby.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): In 1993, when I informed the Chief Whip that my wife was going into hospital and that I intended to be at the birth, I was told, “That’s alright, as long as you’re here on Monday night to vote on Maastricht matters.” As it turned out, my daughter was born on the Sunday, and I was able to leave the hospital, come in and stay until 2.30 am. The dilemma applies to men as well as to women.

Ms Harman: It really does. It was unacceptable then and it is even more unacceptable now.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that it is a crying shame that, even though the last Labour Government introduced shared parental leave, only around 5% of fathers take it? I do not think there is really any provision in this House for new dads to do that.

Ms Harman: Absolutely. Having talked to colleagues in all parts of the House, I know that fathers feel as strongly as mothers about this issue. That is a real change. It is really gratifying to me to see younger men who are determined to be not only excellent Members of this House but sharing parents and responsible fathers who do not see their baby just as their wife’s business. Most wives now work, and their husbands in this House want to support them in that.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I am sorry not to be able to stay for long, partly because of the problem with my leg. I congratulate the right hon. and learned Lady on a motion that mentions not men or women but Members—that is a plus. When my wife was elected, our youngest child was two, so we did not actually have a birth when we were both Members. We have talked about slippery slopes, but we should also talk about a staircase. At some stage, if this goes through, we ought to consider what happens to people who are hospitalised, or have to take time off to care for an elderly parent or another member of their family in some extreme emergency.

Ms Harman: That might well be the case in future, but for the moment we are talking about maternity, paternity and adoption, and we should focus on that.

I never thought I would see the day when the sons of the women’s movement arrived in this House—but they are here. They want and expect that they should play their part with a new baby. All credit to them, and let us change the rules to recognise that. The hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) told me:

“My wife and I had our son Patrick just 2 weeks before the General Election last year who was a welcome addition to our family and a loved brother for our daughter Mhairi who is 3. My wife is and remains a star who, like other MPs’ partners, has to put up with so much because of this job, its challenging hours and need to be away from home. I wish I could have had some paternity leave when Patrick arrived so at least just after he was born I could have been a greater help than I have been. My wife

has never complained and like others got on with it but she deserved more support than I was able to give her and I hope that we can fix this for other MPs.”

I hope that that is what we will do.

There are more women Members than ever before, in all parts of the House—over 200—and younger women as well. It is a democratic imperative that we have women in this House as well as men to make the House representative of this country, and it is a biological inevitability that young women will have babies. There have already been 17 babies born to women Members since 2010.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. and learned Lady on the amazing work that she has done on this issue, and on her speech. Does she agree that given that we are apparently by definition the gayest Parliament in the world and have many LGBT Members, there will be many young gay male Members and female Members, like me, who may at some point want to have children, and it is important that this motion supports them as well, whether in adoption or biological birth?

Ms Harman: I thank the hon. Lady, who has been unstinting in her support. We have worked together on this. She is absolutely right. That is why I called it baby leave rather than maternity and paternity leave, and why I refer to parents and their children.

As I say, there have been 17 babies born to women—and countless born to male Members of Parliament but which we do not know about. In the absence of any official recognition of these babies being born to Members, the way things work currently is that women MPs who are giving birth, or men MPs who want time with their baby, ask the Whips for a pair, and their Whips then make an arrangement with the Whips on the other side of the House. The situation in relation to the Whips is nothing like it was when I was having the first of our three children 34 years ago and I had to ask for a few weeks off from the Whips Office when most of them thought that a woman, let alone a pregnant woman, should not be in the House of Commons. I know that attitudes in the Whips Office are now completely different, but each Member still has to make a request. We would not agree to that happening in any other workplace. Furthermore, it is in the discretion of not just one Whips Office but two, because both Whips Offices have to agree.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I speak as an SNP Whip. Our party does not take part in pairing. I very much commend this proposal because I am really uncomfortable with the fact that we would have to go for a pairing arrangement, as is currently the case. I very much support what the right hon. and learned Lady is saying, particularly in the context of those of us who do not do pairing.

Ms Harman: That is a really important point. I hope that we can think of some arrangements that can be made to deal with the issue of SNP Members until such time as we zoom this process through.

Granting or withholding a pair is an important role for the Opposition Whips Office. No one can accuse me of not knowing the importance of fighting in opposition,

because, tragically, that is what I have been doing for 20 years of my parliamentary life, but a woman giving birth should not be a matter of wrangling between Whips Offices or an opportunity to take advantage of the Government, however much they may deserve it.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend on securing this really important debate. Does she agree that Professor Childs was absolutely right to argue in her “The Good Parliament” report of 2016 that

“to become a truly inclusive institution the House of Commons must accommodate and facilitate both the pregnant woman Member and co-parenting and caring MP”;

that the current informal arrangements lead to misunderstandings about the effectiveness of MPs, particularly women; and that the change that is being sought is long overdue?

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. “The Good Parliament” report also reports on all the other Parliaments around the world that have sought, in their own way, to deal with this.

This is not just a matter of the wishes of parents. It is also about the rights of our constituents, because when an MP is paired, *Hansard* simply records that they have not voted—that the vote to which their constituency is entitled is not cast.

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): The negotiation between Whips is important in other circumstances. However, I am sure that many women in this House who take time off to be with their baby in the first few weeks want to practise the act of democracy that is voting so that they are representing their constituents while being a new mother, and it should not be suggested that they simply have not voted.

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Why should a constituency lose the right for a vote to be cast in its name because its MP is having a baby? You cannot be voting when you are in a birthing pool, Madam Deputy Speaker, but your constituency has a right to have its voice heard.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for her excellent speech. She is making an important point about mothers—and fathers—who are not able to be here when they are looking after their infants. The website TheyWorkForYou.com currently registers the fact that I have voted in just 16.51% of votes in the past year. I have, though, been in Parliament, but have just gone home to look after my child at the end of the day. Does she concur that this should be rectified not only in *Hansard* but on that website to reflect the fact that parents who are not here are looking after their children?

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. We need to do this for defensive reasons, because women who are off having babies or men who are off with a newborn baby are criticised, and that is wrong. But it is even more important than that—our constituents should have the right to have their voice heard, and we want to protect that right even though their MP is off at certain times with babies.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for her powerful speech and for all the work that she has done over the years on these important issues. I am responsible for two of the 17 babies who have been born since 2010. When my first child was born almost five years ago, one of the campaigning organisations that email constituents about votes emailed my constituents to say that I had not bothered to turn up to a vote. I would very much have liked to turn up to vote on all the issues, but with a very young baby it simply was not possible. That needs to be rectified as well, because in the minds of constituents we are not here and not representing them, but we are doing very important work at home.

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That chimes very much with what my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) says. As a mother of four, she thinks that

“just because women having babies are based in their constituencies in the weeks and months following giving birth that should not mean that their constituents are not represented by their MP casting their vote.”

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Frith) had a new son, Bobby James, who was only 35 years old when we had a crucial vote on Brexit—[HON. MEMBERS: “Days!”] Sorry. He was only 35 hours old when we had the crucial Brexit vote. My hon. Friend’s wife, Nikki, had an early induction because her pregnancy was high-risk. He says that with the fixed vote coming up, and his wife in labour, his fundamental role as an MP was pitted against his fundamental role as a man, dad and husband in support of who he describes as his amazing wife. He says it brought an edge to the delivery room that was frankly unhealthy, and that it is surely

“easier to move Parliament than hold back the majestic and existential forces of the arrival of new life.”

Let us show that we can manage to move Parliament.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) said, the trouble is that, even when an MP is paired, people outside the House do not understand pairing. They just see that their MP has not voted. Social media campaigns, which my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) mentioned, criticise MPs who have not voted on important issues, unaware that they are paired because of childbirth. They get criticised in newspapers that run voting league tables. My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), who we all know is one of the most hyperactive MPs in the House, featured at number two in *The Sun*’s list of Britain’s laziest MPs. We cannot go on like this.

Emma Reynolds: I apologise for intervening again, but I think I am responsible for the latest addition to the 17 babies. He was born on Good Friday last year. I was criticised by a Sunday newspaper. I will not name it, because although I should not have had to ask, when I got in touch with the political editor, he kindly took my name off a story that rated me as the second worst MP in this Parliament, without mentioning that I had been on maternity leave since the election.

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend needs to be able to cast her constituents’ vote by proxy while being in her constituency, with the lovely Theo. That is what the proposal before the House would enable.

[*Ms Harman*]

The proposal puts to the House that we should agree in principle that Members should be allowed to choose another Member to vote by proxy for them in the Division Lobby when they have had a new baby or adopted a child. If there is agreement to that in principle, many issues of implementation would have to be considered further by the Select Committee on Procedure. As “The Good Parliament” report made clear, other Parliaments have made arrangements for baby leave, but we would need to do it in a way that fits with our culture and our processes.

I know Members are always rightly concerned that any change might have unintended consequences or be the thin end of a wedge. We rightly jealously guard the rules of our democracy. I want to reassure Members on a number of matters. The resolution before the House is not that a Member would be required to apply for a proxy vote, but that they would be able to do so if they chose. Those who want to take no leave or to ask for a pair would be perfectly free to do so, as they are now.

It would not affect pay, which is a matter for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority. IPSA has assured me in writing that how we vote in the House is a matter for us, not for it, and it would not regard any change in voting as a matter that would affect pay in any way, so that is just not an issue. It would not be open to abuse because whether someone has had a baby or adopted a child is not a subjective judgment; it is a matter of fact.

It will be evident to hon. Members that I am not moving this motion out of self-interest. It is too late for that—30 years too late. My children are already grown up, but I want this for the younger Members and future parents in the House.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I am grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend for giving way, and I wish you a happy birthday, Madam Deputy Speaker—I will not give you the bumps.

My right hon. and learned Friend talked about her own experiences, and she was very fortunate to have our hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) by her side. She also talked about pairing. In personal life, not everyone is paired. I speak as chair of the new all-party parliamentary group on single-parent families. Is she aware of the figures from Gingerbread that point out that single-parent families are an increasingly common family form? The figure is 51% in some London constituencies, and there are 3,649 in mine. These problems are exacerbated for single parents. Will she encourage people to join my APPG, which was registered only this week?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before the right hon. and learned Lady responds to the intervention, I should add that I have no wish whatsoever to curtail this excellent debate on a very important subject. However, I draw to her attention that while she is absolutely correct to take lots of interventions, because there is much to be said about this, I have a note of a great many people who wish to speak, and we do not have a huge amount of time.

Ms Harman: I will draw my comments to a close.

In this centenary year, 100 years after women first won the right to stand for Parliament, I hope that we will agree to the motion and that the Procedure Committee will look at the matter expeditiously. We do not have all the time in the world. At least two more parliamentary babies are in the pipeline. The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) is awaiting her second baby, and my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) is also expecting. While we talk, nature is taking its course, so let us agree this and get on with it.

12.56 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): May I echo Members’ good wishes to you on your birthday, Madam Deputy Speaker? Of course, you have a great deal of first-hand knowledge of this issue. Although I know that you are not able to participate in the debate, I am sure you are sitting there thinking fondly of your own experiences of being a pregnant Member of Parliament and your wonderful son, who I have had the pleasure of meeting on a number of occasions.

It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman). She characterised this as a joint enterprise. I am not sure whether it is the sort of joint enterprise that we have talked about in the Chamber in a legal sense, because that is a crime in which more than one person is involved, but I understand the point she makes, because this has to be a joint enterprise if it is going to be successful. I sense from the good will we have heard today that that joint enterprise will be a very positive thing. I pay tribute to her as Mother of the House. She has done so much to set the tone on these issues over many years.

I also pay tribute to those who have rolled the pitch for this and made it easier for us to bring the debate forward. Professor Sarah Childs has been mentioned. Her work has been a foundation of much of the modernisation we are talking about. I would thank Mr Speaker as well, if he were here, because he has helped to set the tone.

I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, who is doing a sterling job of ensuring that this is a modern place for us all to work in. That is important for not only our staff, but Members. The Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion, the Select Committee on Women and Equalities, which I have the pleasure of chairing, and others have been instrumental in slowly sowing the seeds of change.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Speaking as another member of the Speaker’s Commons Reference Group, I want to say how important this debate is. It is rooted in real and new evidence about Members’ experiences. By bringing the House into line with the policies of other workplaces, we will set the right tone and precedent for the future, particularly in this week, when we will be celebrating 100 years since women got the vote.

Mrs Miller: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Through the Commons Reference Group, we are not only uncovering some important ways in which this place is changing, but identifying ways in which it needs to change. It is a great pleasure to work alongside her on that group.

Being a Member of Parliament is a unique position, a unique honour and a unique responsibility that requires complete commitment, but that cannot mean that only those without caring responsibilities can apply. Indeed, the experience we have as carers can make us much better Members of Parliament, and that is why I wholeheartedly support the motion.

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) on securing the debate.

The right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) is talking about this place, but I want to raise another issue. I chaired the Fawcett Society's inquiry on the representation of women in local government, and it was shocking to discover that only 2% of local authorities have maternity leave policies, and that a number of women councillors who had babies were then sacked from their jobs as cabinet members. Does she agree that while what we are debating is hugely important, all of us as politicians from political parties ought to engage with our colleagues in local government to secure the necessary changes there that will ensure the proper representation of women?

Mrs Miller: The right hon. Lady is absolutely right: we need more women at every level of our democratic process. I must say that I have a phenomenal team of women in my Basingstoke constituency. Nine of the 14 councillors are women, and that is even more astonishing given that a number of them are young women with very young children. Others should look at what is happening in councils such as mine to encourage more young women to come forward, and to prevent doing so being seen as incompatible with having a young family.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Miller: I will of course give way, but I will then make some progress.

Ruth Cadbury: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and the right hon. Lady for securing this debate. The right hon. Lady makes an important point about local government. I gave birth 23 and 25 years ago, while I was a senior councillor in Hounslow. Although that was difficult, there are two fundamental differences between being in this place and being in local government. In local government, people are near to home, and the times they have to vote, and to be recorded as voting, are measured and occasional. This place is very different for both those reasons.

Mrs Miller: The hon. Lady used to be a member of my Committee, and I have worked with her and know her well. She makes a point to which I will return, because although the motion is really important, we need to think about other aspects of this place if we are to make it work for everybody, regardless of their caring responsibilities. I will now try to make a great deal of progress, Madam Deputy Speaker, so that you do not have to remind me that we are short of time.

I wholeheartedly support the motion in its own right, because a new addition to the family—a new baby or a newly adopted child—is a wonderful thing, but a huge change as well. When the rules and conventions of this place were established, women had no place here and men had little or no role in their children's lives. The rules and conventions were not established on the basis of any research or facts, but reflected the way in which men lived their lives many years ago. Men's lives have changed, and women's lives have changed. Women can now become MPs and our lives have changed, but the demands of having a child have not changed. Allowing MPs to decide to take some time away from this place, without disenfranchising their electorate in the process, is an important step in its own right, and one that I fully support.

The proposal is, however, just one small step. I speak as the mum of three kids. When I entered the House, my youngest was three, and for me the transition was very easy. I had worked full time before, and I had the best childcare in the world—grandparents, who were there to look after my children—but not every Member of Parliament has that built in and not every Member of Parliament is as lucky as I was. That is why I believe this is just one small step.

This is one small step in a change to Parliament's workplace culture that is long overdue. We recognise the importance of workplace culture for the people we represent, whether it is the culture at the BBC that has allowed women to be underpaid, or the culture in Hollywood and the entertainment industry that has allowed the likes of Harvey Weinstein to thrive and to abuse the people around them. When we scrutinise the effectiveness of laws, we often conclude that culture needs to change so that those laws work better. We have heard about the example of shared parental leave, which was introduced by the coalition Government, and about the right to request flexible working. They are all things that people want, but when we do the research, we find that the uptake is low, because the culture in the workplace has not changed to reflect changes in the law.

We have a duty not only to pass laws, but to influence culture. That is why it is so important that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House is bringing forward a new disciplinary process on sexual harassment, and it is why we also need to show that culture change in relation to families is also important. This should apply not only to MPs with new children, but to MPs with a wide range of caring responsibilities, such as for older children, for older family members—I have such responsibilities—or, indeed, for disabled family members.

As we consider the motion—I hope we will agree it—I hope not only that we will take this small step, but that other steps will follow. I want to give the particular example of the importance of predictability in working life. Before I entered this place, I was a director of an advertising agency. It was a very difficult and challenging job, but I could do it, because I could determine how to make my working life work for me. It is very difficult to have such a level of predictability here, particularly in relation to votes. Following the motion, I advocate our looking at a voting hour to create more predictability in how this place works so that people with caring responsibilities can better work them around their overwhelmingly important responsibilities here.

[Mrs Miller]

To those who say that introducing baby leave is the thin end of the wedge, I have to say that they are right if that will mean that we can show compassion to a colleague who is fighting cancer, or to a colleague who has to attend the funeral of a close relative, rather than disenfranchising their constituents while they are being human beings. We need to make this change so that we can allow people to get the balance in their lives that, sadly, is so lacking at some points in the parliamentary calendar at the moment.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech and I absolutely support the motion. I agree with her in very much hoping that this is the thin end of the wedge, because on the centenary of the Representation of the People Act 1918, we must do more to fix the pipeline problem here so that we encourage more women at a younger age to think about putting themselves forward to become Members of Parliament.

Mrs Miller: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention because, 100 years since the first woman sat in this place, it still feels for many of us as though we are operating in an 18th-century model of work, and that really needs to change.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I cannot be alone in being a man in this House whose partner has an extremely important job of her own. She sits as a supreme court judge in France, and that takes her away from home, so I have childcare responsibilities, too. Indeed, I have a one-year-old baby—funnily enough, she does not look after herself. When we are talking about equality, I absolutely understand the emphasis on women's rights—of course I do—but this is actually a human right. It is about not men or women, but about anybody who has responsibility for caring for a child—or, indeed, for caring for an adult. If we are thinking about equality, we could be talking about someone with religious obligations that might keep them away for various reasons.

Mrs Miller: My hon. Friend makes a very powerful point. It is important to recognise the way in which many family lives have changed over the years, and that was why it was important to frame the motion in terms of MPs or parents, not men and women. Any of us may have caring responsibilities; they are not now the sole preserve of one gender.

It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the extraordinary way in which the Whips department has evolved during my time in this place. When I remember some of my conversations with the Whips when I first arrived in 2005, I shudder a little, because they did not reflect my previous 20-year working life. As I look in particular at my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), who is sitting on the Front Bench, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), both of whom were members of my Select Committee, I know that the Whips Office is in extraordinarily good hands.

We cannot leave this to chance. We need better rules to give people certainty about what they can expect. MPs have a duty to keep our democracy healthy. I do

not believe that MPs can ever be treated as employees. Our role means that we will never really be subject to an Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority contract; our contract is with the people whom we represent, and they demonstrate their views each time there is an election.

We can modernise the culture of this place—for our employees, of course, for Members today, and for those who will come after us—so that it reflects the 21st century, not the 18th century, and to make it an attractive place for a more diverse range of people who will want to become Members of Parliament. Today is one small step to allow new parents some time away from this place so that they can cope with the demands of a new family member. The change is long overdue, but following this debate, we will need to press forward further with modernisation, particularly around scheduling in this place. The lack of consistency and certainty has been raised with me, because that makes us less productive and less able to balance our family life.

I respectfully disagree with people who think this change is wrong. The health of our democracy depends on the strength of the House of Commons, and we are strengthened if we are truly representative of the communities that make up this United Kingdom. Introducing baby leave for Members of Parliament who need and want it is just one small step in opening up membership of this place to more people, and in ensuring that fewer people choose to leave before their time because their life as an MP is incompatible with the responsibility of being a parent. I hope that the motion gets the full agreement of the House today and, above all, that the Procedure Committee looks at the matter swiftly so that Members with imminent arrivals can look forward to their births without a question as to how they will deal with their Whips.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The debate has to finish just before 3 o'clock, so we will have a time limit of about eight minutes. Sorry, not "about"; the debate has to finish at about 3 o'clock, and the time limit is exactly eight minutes. I had in my mind the terror that I felt the day I told the Chief Whip that I was going to have a baby—something that had happened only once before in the Conservative party. It was causing palpitations again. I call Emma Reynolds.

1.13 pm

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will keep to exactly eight minutes. I thank the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for her contribution, which I found incredibly thoughtful; I agreed with every word she said. I pay particular, special tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), not only for bringing forward these proposals and doing so much work on the issue, but for all the work she has done since joining the House many years ago—I do not know how many, but she is the Mother of the House—to ensure greater gender equality in our country and our Parliament. We have made huge progress in the time that she has been an MP, thanks to her work, but as the motion demonstrates, we still have quite a way to go.

I want to recount what happened in 2017. My husband and I were expecting a baby in April, and we were hoping for a quiet year on the work front. We thought, “This is great. Theo—” well, he was “the bump” at the time—“will be around three at the next election,” because the Prime Minister seemed absolutely determined to stay in place and respect the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011. I gave birth at 2 o’clock in the morning on Good Friday. As those hon. Members who have been there will know, it is a very physically demanding and tiring process. Four days later, I was lying on my bed at home in the morning, breastfeeding baby Theo, when my mother used a few expletives while looking at her phone. I asked, “What’s happened?”. She said, “The Prime Minister has called an election.” I said, “No, that can’t be right. She was adamant that she wasn’t going to do that.” Some hon. Members had noticed that there was no writing on the podium, but I had not even known that she was making a statement.

My husband came in, and my mum said, “Richard, there’s going to be an election.” He said, “Emma, you have to check this straight away. I don’t believe it.” We were in a state of disbelief for quite some hours, days and weeks. We wondered how on earth we were going to cope with a newborn—this brand new little person we had in our lives, who we were already struggling to cope with during the night, because he was up most of it. We had to do that and organise an election campaign. It was a busy time. I thank the vast majority of my constituents, who were so supportive. I lost count of the number of messages and cards, and the number of people who, when we were on the doorstep, asked how I was, and how baby Theo was getting on.

A small handful of people said to me that once the election was called, they assumed that I would not stand again. I politely said to them, “Would you ask the same question if my husband was the MP?”. No answer came back, because it was obvious: of course they would not.

New mums and new dads in this place should have the same rights that we have legislated to give men and women across our country. In a way, I cannot believe that we are dragging our feet on this, given that we have legislated for such marked improvements in the past few years.

David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I have really enjoyed listening to the hon. Lady’s experiences. I have just joined the Procedure Committee, and attended it yesterday for the first time. It is on our agenda to have an investigation and report on this very important issue. I thought I would put that on record.

Emma Reynolds: I thank the right hon. Gentleman, and I urge him to do that quickly, because as we have discussed, various colleagues have a very tight deadline, which the Committee should work to.

I want to put on record my thanks to my husband’s employer. As Members of this House will know, new dads have a right to shared parental leave, but they have to give several weeks’ notice of their intention to take it. It happens to be eight weeks’ notice, which is about the same time as an election campaign. Thankfully, his employer agreed to bring his parental leave forward. I am not sure that we would have been able to cope if he had been working full time while I was running the campaign, so I am grateful to his employer for doing

that. I encourage new dads to take up this right, because it is a crying shame, as I said in an intervention, that only 5% do.

We got through the election campaign. A week after I gave birth, Richard Angell, whom some hon. Members will know, brought a whole group of people to come and help. The local paper sent a snapper, and one of the Sunday papers also sent a photographer. They came to my office. I had given birth literally a week before. Baby Theo was there; he peed everywhere. One of my party members said, “Yeah, that’s called the hosepipe trick,” and I said, “Oh right, I hadn’t heard of that before,” but now I am experienced in it. I was having this meeting to gee up my members. The photographers got a photo of me and baby Theo. I was feeling pretty exhausted, but they insisted on joining me on the campaign trail. Little did they know that I did not really want to go on the campaign trail, because I was still pretty tired. If I did it again, I would now have the experience to say, “No. I came to do the members’ meeting and gee everybody up, and I’m going home,” but I did not, and I went out campaigning seven days after giving birth—and I suffered for it physically. Then I had a rest.

We had all these deadlines; people will know that even before the short campaign—and this was such a short campaign—there are deadlines for letters, leaflets and as much stuff as we can get out.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What my hon. Friend has said makes me feel so uncomfortable, because it is actually illegal to work for two weeks after giving birth. The situation that she describes is intolerable. We really have to do something about this.

Emma Reynolds: I admit that I broke the law, and I should not have. The motion before us today would not have helped me, and other Members present were in the same situation—three of us, in fact, were new mums when the election was called. I suspect that nothing can be done when that happens. We were very unlucky with the timing, but something can be done afterwards, which is what I will come to next.

We had the election and I managed to retain my seat, but in the weeks after polling day, I was required to come in to swear in—otherwise, I would not be paid—and to vote on the Queen’s Speech. I was also asked to come in to vote on the Select Committee Chairs and I really wanted to, because they usually endure for five years—let us see what happens—but I did not have a say on that. In fact, I emailed Mr Speaker, who was very sympathetic, but there was not much he could do, because none of these provisions are in place.

As so many hon. Members have said in this debate, it is only right that our constituents are represented in this place. We should have the choice as to whether to appoint a colleague to vote on our behalf. I know that some colleagues are uncomfortable with that, because they would want to be the ones voting. That is why it should be a choice and an option, and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham has taken that on board. If someone becomes a new mum or dad, they should be able to appoint a proxy for the time that they are on leave.

I am hugely grateful to the Whips Offices, and particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami). He has been so brilliantly flexible, not

[*Emma Reynolds*]

only after the election, when I had given birth, but when I was pregnant. I say this to colleagues: bobbing in this place is very tiring when you are really big. It was a great pleasure to come back in January and be able to bob without the bump. In all seriousness, a huge amount of progress has been made in the Whips Offices. I have spoken to many colleagues who had babies 10 or 20 years ago—as you did, Madam Deputy Speaker, when you did not really have the kind of leave that we have been granted. However, as my right hon. and learned Friend said, we should not have to ask for it. This should be our right and in other workplaces, people do not have to ask; they have the right to it. We are dragging our feet.

I echo what my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) said earlier about the website, TheyWorkForYou. I emailed them just before going on maternity leave to see whether the website would reflect that I would be on leave. They fobbed me off, frankly, saying that they would have a look at it. We pestered them but nothing came back. They should consider qualifying it on their website, because many of us have been criticised by national newspapers, and that is not right. It is reputationally damaging. Whether they publish an apology later on or not, it is damaging to someone's reputation and we should not be put in that position.

In conclusion, I pay tribute to all the right hon. and hon. Members who have gone before me, and I want to single out a few people, as well as you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham. I pay tribute to and thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), who was the first Minister to give birth in office. I have since been inspired by many other colleagues, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), who had two babies while she was in the shadow Cabinet.

Juggling family life and being an MP is really tough, but I love both of them. I say to young women out there: do not be deterred. Come in and do it.

1.23 pm

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I warmly welcome this debate, which my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) secured. She famously fought a by-election back in 1982 while expecting a child and served as one of the first MPs in this House with young children—a real example to us all. I congratulate her on her work to secure this debate and on her marvellous speech.

We have made steady, but glacially slow, progress towards becoming a child-friendly workplace. We now have an on-site nursery—I was working in that building when it was created—on a site where a bar once existed. It is a much improved replacement. However, as we have heard in many eloquent speeches in this debate, so many further, modernising reforms are desperately needed. We need more baby-friendly spaces, more facilities for buggies, nappy bins, and places for women to breastfeed and express. We also need to recognise not only that Members may also be mums and dads, with all the joys and pressures that that entails, but the opportunity that this presents for the diversity of this Chamber and for us to set an example to the rest of the country.

It is fitting to discuss this issue today because, as some Members will know, it is Time to Talk Day. Since the last Time to Talk Day, I have had a baby, and as a new mum, I have been acutely aware of the need for pregnant women and new mums to keep a close watch on their mental health. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds), my baby was—if not a few days old—just four weeks old when the election was called. I had had a C-section, and as she said, it was an incredibly stressful period.

During pregnancy and the year after birth, many women will experience common mental health problems, including anxiety disorders and depression, and dads will too. Further, the risk of developing a severe mental health condition, such as postpartum psychosis, schizophrenia, severe depression or bipolar disorder, increases after childbirth. For women, it is the time that we are most likely to experience those conditions.

One trigger for mental ill health is stress and anxiety in the workplace. That is especially true when a mum or dad returns to work after the birth of their child. These issues affect parents not just inside, but outside this House, and that is why this debate is so important. Like many new parents here, I face two very strong priorities: the desire to be there for my child and the desire to do everything I can to speak up and stand up for my constituents, with the privilege and responsibility that I have as the Member of Parliament for Liverpool, Wavertree.

Although I could keep on top of constituency casework from my home in Liverpool, last June I had to leave my constituency and travel the 200-plus miles down to London, to Parliament. First, I had to swear in, and although I am also very grateful to the Whips, I was then asked to vote on a couple of occasions—back in June, when my baby was just three months old, and again in September, when there were some important votes when she was five months old. In September, I was in the Tea Room with my baby until after 10 o'clock at night. I can see Members bobbing their heads—arguably, that was not the right place for her at that time of night. As a breastfeeding mum, on all those occasions my baby came into the House with me.

As colleagues will know, looking after a tiny human is a massive responsibility. I share with the House that I was a slummy mummy. As any parent out there with a newborn will know, it is a challenge on some days just to take a shower—let alone to be able to get out of the house, get to the station, change the baby on a Pendolino train moving at 125 miles an hour, apologise to passengers for the projectile vomit and the crying, get on a tube, often using the escalators and stairs because there is no lift, and to ensure that no piece of important kit is forgotten for an important overnight trip. For some babies, that will be the first time they are outside the homes and places that they are used to. It can be quite traumatic for them.

Proxy voting, the specific measure in today's votable motion, is a simple means to count a Member's vote without them having to physically pass through the Division Lobby. It will mean that the representative role of any MP can continue without disruption. This is an issue of fairness not only for new parents, but for our constituents. As with all the representations that we make in this House, our work on campaigns, and the contributions that we make for the country—on improving the first 1,001 days of a child's life, on giving children

the best start in life, on highlighting the importance of attachment, on addressing the woeful breastfeeding rates in this country, on promoting parenting, and on doing everything possible to reduce adverse childhood experience—we need to lead by example and give the children of MPs the best start, too.

Some might say that this is a dangerous leap into modernity—unfortunately, I have heard people say that—but we should be grateful to the Clerk of the House for reminding us in his very helpful memorandum that in past centuries, proxy voting was known in Westminster. We have heard about what “Erskine May” does not say, but it records that until 1868, Lords who were not present could vote by proxy. Since then, no attempt has been made to suspend House of Lords Standing Order No. 60 to allow the revival of

“the ancient practice of calling for proxies”.

In the House of Commons, proxies were allowed in the medieval Parliament. So this is not a leap in the dark, but the unearthing of a fine old parliamentary tradition.

To deny our constituents a voice because of the House’s inability to modernise is an affront to those who put us here. Enabling new parents to register a vote via a proxy would ensure that our constituents could still be heard. We know that the physical arrangements of our parliamentary democracy are about to undergo huge changes, but no matter how and where we assemble as a Parliament, our work continues and our democracy endures. I hope that as we contemplate those changes following yesterday’s votes on the refurbishment of the Palace of Westminster, we will focus on the ways in which we can become even more child-friendly and more welcoming.

Today we are discussing small but significant changes, and people in every workplace should do the same. In every factory, office or other place of work, there are practical ways of helping when parents return to work after having a baby or adopting a child. I think that through these small changes many stressful situations could be averted, and if we are serious about improving our nation’s mental health, they would be an important factor in that.

For more than 35 years my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham has fought for equality and fairness, both here at Westminster and in the country as a whole. I think that proxy voting would be another valuable way of honouring the continuing contribution of the Mother of our Parliament to our public life. I sincerely hope that the House will approve this measure, and that Mr Speaker will move towards adopting a system of proxy voting without delay.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

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

1.31 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Some years ago, Madam Deputy Speaker, you and I had to work out how to handle pregnancy in Parliament at similar times. It is lovely to see you in the Chair.

Let me begin by paying tribute to the brilliant speeches made by my hon. Friends the Members for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) and for Wolverhampton North

East (Emma Reynolds). Their speeches alone ought to persuade everyone that the motion should be not only passed, but dealt with very swiftly by the Procedure Committee. It is surely a no-brainer. It is embarrassing that, 100 years after women were given the vote, Parliament does not have the system for maternity and paternity leave that was described by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman).

If other organisations can do this, why can we not do it as well? Shops do it, factories do it, businesses do it, doctors’ surgeries do it, police forces do it, schools do it: every other organisation manages to find a way of doing it. Why on earth can we not do it, especially given that ours is the organisation that has supposedly told so many of those other organisations that they must do it? We tell them that they must have arrangements for leave, but somehow we cannot sort that out for ourselves.

I personally think that this country’s maternity and paternity arrangements are not strong enough. I think that there is not enough provision. I think that culture changes are still needed. I think that too many unnecessary obstacles are put in people’s way. I also think that maternity discrimination is a serious problem. The law is not enforced, and arguably is not strong enough, to ensure that women do not find themselves being made redundant, being demoted or losing responsibilities when they take maternity leave. Similarly, men feel that they cannot take paternity leave, for fear that any of those things will happen. How can we, as Members of Parliament, challenge errant employers who say, “It is too difficult,” or, “We are too special in our particular workplace: we cannot possibly provide for people having babies,” if we do not sort this out ourselves?

I pay tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham, who has pioneered so many of these debates and has led the way for so many of us to follow. It was certainly much easier for me to take maternity leave—both as an MP and as a Minister—because of not just the leadership but the personal support of my right hon. and learned Friend, and it is hugely important that she is still doing the same for each generation of women and, indeed, each generation of men. I also pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and the work that she has done on the Women and Equalities Committee to support and promote this reform. I agree with her, too, that there should be wider reforms, not just in Parliament but throughout the country. I know that other parties support that as well.

Having a baby is normal. It is so normal that it is why we are all here. Parliament ought to be able to cope with what is normal, and Parliament ought to show leadership by making it possible. Of course it will always be a challenge, and there will always be chaos. For me, much of that chaos involved travelling to and fro with small children, and not just with a baby. I was a dab hand at changing nappies on a fast-moving train, but the potty training was a little bit more challenging. We had a few sticky moments with a portable potty with a lid on it when I put it on a shelf on one of those fast-moving trains.

Having small children and being a Member of Parliament will always involve some complexities. It is an honour to be a Member of Parliament and to represent our constituents, but it ought to be made possible to manage

[Yvette Cooper]

both, as all too often it is not. A former hon. Friend of ours, who has since left the House, was asked to come in for votes when her baby was very small. At that time, we were not even allowed to take babies through the voting Lobbies. We ended up in a mad “baby relay”: we took it in turns to vote and to carry the baby while she went to vote. That was great for us, because we had the chance to cuddle a tiny little baby, but the truth is that neither she nor the baby should have been here. They were here because it was a tight vote, and there was pressure on Members to come in.

As many Members have said, this should not depend on favours. It should not depend on special deals and arrangements. It should not depend on the Whips. It should just be a very sensible, practical arrangement. Given that we come up with practical arrangements for all sorts of other organisations throughout the country, it should not be beyond the wit of the House to come up with one that works here.

The truth is that for any working mum—and often for working parents—there is always a sense of guilt and conflicting responsibilities. MPs who are mothers feel guilt towards the newborn because they are trying to do their constituency casework at the same time, and a sense of guilt towards their constituents because they should actually be in Parliament or at a meeting. They have a sense of responsibility towards Parliament, towards constituents, towards the baby, towards the family, but also towards so many other women who might be finding it hard to take maternity leave. We feel that we have a responsibility to show that it is possible—that we do not have to pretend to be superwomen and to be able to do it all at once because otherwise it means that we are not doing our job properly. We want people in all walks of life to be able to combine parenthood and employment, because that is normal. It is what we do. We should end the muddling through and put the proper arrangements in place.

Finally, I ask Ministers to have another look at the arrangements for ministerial maternity leave. I first took ministerial maternity leave 16 years ago. We were muddling through then as well; we later attempted to introduce more formal arrangements, but they then disappeared. They need to be brought back, but they also need to be revised.

It is the 100th anniversary of women getting the vote. What better time could there be not just to get this sorted, but to get it sorted really, really fast? That would be our next step, not just towards equality for people in this House, but to enable us to continue to be confident pioneers for equality throughout the country.

1.38 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): It is a massive honour to follow all those who have spoken so far, and I feel that we are hon. Friends across the House today. I suppose that I should register not an interest, but a total disinterest in ever having another child, so this measure would not benefit me in the slightest. I could not be more disinterested.

I found the testimony of my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) incredibly moving. It put me right back at that moment when I was 22 and a new mum, and I was terrified that I

was going to break that little thing. I will not put you through it, Mr Deputy Speaker, but some of the things that happen to a woman's body immediately after she has had a baby are terrifying, and you do not expect them. I thought my internal organs were falling out. [Interruption.] The thought that I would have had to get up and go to a meeting—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): May I just say that it is not me that is worried, but I am very worried about the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith)?

Jess Phillips: Forewarned is forearmed is what I think in these situations: “You're not dying,” is what I would say to my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), but we all thought that we were.

The idea that I would have had to get up at that moment, terrified, suffering real fear for the first time, and go to a constituency party members' meeting is absolutely horrifying. The thought of my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East doing that is absolutely terrifying to me—so massive, massive credit to all the women who have had babies while they were MPs.

Because I quite like a row, I want to head off at the pass some of the things I have heard in this place about why what is proposed in the motion cannot happen. I think we are pretty much all here to support it today, but I have heard quite a lot of mutterings—and they are mutterings, because they sound like this: “Mutter, mutter, mutter, amazing idea, mutter”—and I want to address them. Some of them have been from women in this House; I have heard squeamishness about asking for a right, because we as MPs are criticised for talking about ourselves and accused of being insular. We all know about the fake news on the internet when sites show a busy Chamber when we are supposedly talking about our salary and an empty Chamber when we are talking about something else—which are, I say just for the public outside, all a total lie. The idea that we should be asking for a right for ourselves is totally and utterly acceptable.

I am chair of the women's parliamentary Labour party and I have had to talk to women and say that I will not feel afraid about asking for rights for the people in this building. When I worked at Women's Aid, I fought for the rights of the women at Women's Aid to better parental leave. No matter where I worked, I would be fighting for the women there to have better rights, and we should not be embarrassed about fighting for them here, either. So I want to put to bed the idea that this is somehow selfish. It is not; it is a right that we should be entitled to.

The other chuntering I have heard is about the proposals being the thin end of the wedge: “Where will this lead?” It will lead to being exactly like every other employer in the country. As the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) said, the big end of the wedge is that we are kind and nice employers; the big end of the wedge is decency and humanity. I am all right with the proposals being the thin end of the wedge, but the reality in this situation is that we are asking for something for a very specific reason.

Some people say to me, “You can't have other people voting for you!” as if we have the divine right of kings when we come into this place and our vote is handed to

us by God and is so special that nobody else could say how we might feel about, say, fisheries industries. That is, frankly, ridiculous. The idea that people feel they are so special that nobody could ever cast their vote for them, because they have never followed the Whip and are always deciding exactly what they will vote for all by their little selves, I find highly unlikely. The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) might be the only person who could say that.

Seema Malhotra: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Does she agree that the thin end of the wedge is not a thin end of erosion of our democracy, but a thin end of how we balance work and family life when circumstances might be unpredictable? Two months ago my mother had a stroke. While she is a lot better now, I was in a position of having to put in place, with my sisters and brother, 24-hour care for someone we were used to having caring for us. While I know and understand the issues there will be with parents, for those in that position to have to struggle for the flexibility to manage that alongside being a Member of Parliament is something I would want to see us change, and have the courage to change.

Jess Phillips: I could not agree more. As someone who cared for my own mother when she was dying, I know how much pressure gets put on, and it is largely the women in society who are in the middle, and are caring for children and for dying or very sick relatives. As a nation, we have got to get better at dealing with that. Why not start here?

I went for lunch with a gentleman yesterday—my husband is listening; it was not him. That gentleman told me that he had intended to take the shared parental leave that other colleagues have spoken about. He said, “As soon as I had said, ‘Okay, I am going to take three months off,’ it started to creep in: what if my clients get given to somebody else, and what if people judge me for leaving?” I thought, “Oh, really! My heart bleeds for you, here’s my tiny violin, because that is what we have all had to put up with forever.” I do feel total sympathy with what he was saying, because I have lived that life.

The truth of the matter is that we have got to make sure that when we make these changes, it is not only the women in this building who take this leave, and that the men in this building take it, too. Frankly, given some of the backtalk I have heard when I have talked about this, I think some of the men in this building should be ashamed of bragging about being here at the moment when their babies were born, and of standing up and saying in Committees, “Point of order: my wife just had a baby.” I say in response, “Point of order: I would divorce you if you were my husband.” There is one place a man should be when their baby is born, and that is by the side of their partner.

This is not about the women in this place getting something better; it is about the parents getting something better. We have got to lead by example. I know, not just from my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East but from the opposite side of the Chamber, that there are husbands in this building who are starting to take that leave, and we have got to stand as an example of that. So, basically, I say to the men in this House, “When this comes in, I am coming for you, to make sure that you take it.”

1.47 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I thank my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) for calling this important debate. It is important for me to be here, because I had a baby a year and a half ago as a sitting MP. I will not go into details about what happened to my insides, but I will talk a little about the impact of pregnancy and birth.

I will not go into the exact details, but I will say that I had a 40-hour long labour which resulted in an emergency C-section, after which I caught an infection and so did the baby. The Royal Free Hospital in my constituency, which is amazing, looked after us for nine days, but even in those nine days while I was in the hospital bed I had to handle emails and sign things off from my office simply because there was no one else to do it and I could not nominate someone to take care of crucial matters—and certain crucial matters did come up, which I will elaborate on in a minute.

I am not describing these details because I want sympathy; I am describing them because before I had a child I had never quite realised the physical impact pregnancy has on the body. I was quite old when my younger sister was born, so I had been around babies and children, but I still did not realise quite what would happen to my body going through a 40-hour ordeal and an emergency C-section. I could not move from the bed and had to ask everyone for help, which was definitely not easy, as I am used to doing things for myself.

I represent a marginal seat—the lady I took over from had won the seat by only 42 votes, and I had won by only just over 1,000 votes—and did not feel that I could neglect my constituents, so I came back to work very quickly. As a result, because my body had not recovered, I developed a serious case of mastitis. Anyone who has had that will know what it does to their body. When I went to the GP, they made it very clear that I had got it because I was overworked and exhausted and because I had gone back to work very early.

During that time, in my sleep-deprived state, I knew that I had to do something, so I tabled an early-day motion asking whether we could change the way the voting system worked. I was getting emails saying, “Why didn’t you turned up for this vote?” even during the six weeks that I had taken off following my emergency C-section. I was being asked why I had not voted in a certain way or why I had not turned up for a certain meeting. Anyone who knows the constituents of Hampstead and Kilburn will know that they look up their Member’s voting record to see whether they have turned up to vote or not. In tabling the early-day motion, I wanted to make it clear that we have to change the voting system, and this is the time to do it, now that more women Members of Parliament are having children than ever before.

I also want to point out how our position here in Parliament lags behind that of other countries in the world. In Sweden, Denmark and Slovenia, Members of Parliament may be granted leave of up to 12 months in the case of pregnancy, childbirth or adoption. The situation is the same in Estonia, Finland and Latvia. In Belgium, Portugal, Croatia and the Netherlands, there is no formal maternity leave, but a Member of the House of Representatives who is on maternity leave can be replaced by another Member from the same political group, so that they are not penalised for their absence.

[*Tulip Siddiq*]

The fact that our attitude to parental leave lags behind those countries is compounded by our attitude to our parliamentary voting system. Scotland, India, Ireland, Israel and the European Union—to name but a few—all have electronic voting, which is not only time efficient but accommodating for members.

Rachel Reeves: My hon. Friend is making an incredibly powerful speech. Does she agree that, by the time we are done with this, we should match if not better the best Parliaments in the world? Also, may I just say that, physically, having the second child is harder?

Tulip Siddiq: I thank my hon. Friend for that note of confidence. I absolutely agree with what she says: we have to do even better if we want to make Parliament a more welcoming place for female representatives and if we want to act in the way that my constituency Labour party did when I stood for election. One after another, its members stated categorically that they wanted more women in Parliament and wanted an all-women shortlist. The constituency had had a female MP for 23 years in the form of Glenda Jackson, and they wanted another one. That is what we should all be encouraging in the House of Commons.

Hannah Bardell: The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech. She mentioned Scotland, and I did not want to miss the opportunity to jump in. We have debated these matters before, and she mentioned electronic voting. In the Scottish Parliament, we have a seat for every Member. She will know that one of the arguments against proxy and electronic voting is that Members need to be here in the Chamber to listen to the debate. The irony is that we cannot fit even half the Members of this House into this Chamber. We all have modern technology, and we can all watch the debates at home, so does she agree that there is no reason not to introduce such voting methods?

Tulip Siddiq: Absolutely. The hon. Lady and I have had discussions about this matter, and we agree that Parliament needs to become more modern and that we need to encourage e-voting. Perhaps that will be next on the agenda.

As I have mentioned, I had a lot of support from my constituency Labour party when I ran to be an MP. As I was a young woman, they thought that there was a chance I would have children. Questions were raised about that, but the chairman—David Queen, who sadly died a few weeks ago—was a real feminist. He said, “What is the problem if we have MPs who have children? It is good for the constituency.” He said that politicians with children apparently got more votes, although I do not know if that is true.

I also want to take this opportunity to mention the support I have received in Parliament. The staff in the nursery here were really fantastic when I first took my child in, and I want to pay tribute to them. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), who was in the Chamber earlier, is my neighbouring MP. Right at the beginning, when I had morning sickness, he was the first to ring and say that he was happy to cover any meetings that I needed him to cover, because his wife had gone through the same thing.

On a trip to Paris, my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) carried my suitcase up and down the stairs at the Gare du Nord and St Pancras International because I physically could not lift it. On that same trip to Paris to explore how we tackle anti-Semitism, the former MP for Brentwood and Ongar, Eric Pickles, told me that he would be happy to be godfather to my child and asked whether I wanted to name my daughter Erica, after him. I declined his offer. The hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) gave me a wristband to monitor the number of times my baby kicked. I developed a real spirit with Members on the other side—including the hon. Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith)—who I would often talk to about what it was like for us to be young women with children who also wanted to be good MPs for their constituencies. The Speaker and the Deputy Speaker both noticed my ever-growing bump—when you are 4 foot 11, your bump really stands out—and told me that I did not need to bob up and down, and that I could just wave my Order Paper if I wanted to be selected to speak. That was a real privilege at the time; I wish I could still do it.

Perhaps the memory that stands out most is when I received an urgent call from my office right after I had had the baby. A constituent, Richard Ratcliffe, had called my office because his wife had been in Iran and she and their small child had been detained by the Iranian authorities. I had just had my baby, but obviously I had to meet him because there was no one I could delegate that responsibility to. When I spoke to Richard on the phone, he said, “Why don’t I pop over to your house?” I said, “That’s a good idea. Let’s have a meeting.” He then said, “Is there any chance that the leader of the Labour party could meet me as well?” I rang my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) and told him, “I’ve just had a baby, but I have a really urgent case. Is there anything we can do about this? He will have to meet me at my flat because I am breastfeeding.” My right hon. Friend said, “Why don’t I come over to your flat and we’ll all have the meeting there?”

So I had the meeting—with a tiny baby in my arms—with Richard Ratcliffe, whose wife had just been detained in Iran, and with the leader of the Labour party in the room. While I breastfed the baby, we discussed the Iranian authorities and the revolutionary guards, and talked about how we could get my constituent back into the country. At one point, my baby was very unsettled but I had to take some important notes, so I said to my right hon. Friend, “Could you hold the baby for a bit while I write these notes?” The baby had been quite unsettled, but for some reason, as soon as I handed her to him, she settled down and went to sleep. Perhaps there might be a kinder, gentler cuddling, which she preferred; I do not know what it was.

That was a defining moment for me and my motherhood. Both the men in that room demonstrated a serious comradely spirit to me. They took the time to come to my house because I did not feel that I could leave it, and they did not bat an eyelid while I breastfed. That is the kind of ethos that we need to bring into this House, to show people that a female MP who has an urgent case involving a woman being detained in Iran can still fulfil her duties. There are ways to make provisions. If it can be done in my flat in north London, it can be done in

this place. I sit on the Women and Equalities Committee. We scrutinise legislation on other people's maternity and paternity leave. If we cannot lead by example, we should not be sitting here. I commend the motion to the House.

1.57 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I am not sure how to follow that entertaining speech from the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq). It is an honour to take part in this debate. I pay tribute to the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for securing it. For me, this is what we at home like to call a wee treat. About 20 years ago, I interviewed the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham, who had just become a member of the new Labour Government. I asked her how she planned to change the working landscape for families in this country. I had just finished my maternity leave at the BBC, and I have to say that the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) is right: even back in those dark distant days of the past, the BBC was still able to put out news bulletins even though I was no longer there. Employers will find a way.

The working landscape for families has changed remarkably since 1997. Children who were born then and who are now becoming parents can benefit from a whole raft of legislation that makes it easier for them to be with their partner and their child and to bond as a family immediately after the child is born—except of course if they are a Member of Parliament. It seems ridiculous that we in this place should be so far behind the very people that we are here to represent and to help. I have to say that, like the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), I have no intention of having another child. I have found this debate moving and entertaining at times, but it is also been frankly horrifying, and if I was in any doubt before, I am now certain that I will be not be having another.

The gender balance in this House has changed completely and, as we have heard, there are now 200 women MPs. Many of them are young enough to be starting or expanding their family, and many of our male colleagues are doing the same. For the many of us who have constituencies many hundreds of miles away, we must bear in mind that that will not mean being at home for an hour or two late at night or travelling by high-speed train with a small child, although that must be difficult; it will mean being away for a week at a time and being separated from a child at the most important time of their life. We cannot be there to help our partners through the sort of ordeals that we have heard about today, which some of the younger male Members have already been through. We should not be asking parents to choose between voting and providing that support when an alternative is already there. In fact, as we have heard, it was there in the 19th century. It is there every time we go to the ballot box in the form of a proxy vote—someone can go to exercise our democratic right for us—and we should not exclude ourselves from that possibility.

All the changes that have come about in the past 20 to 30 years—the Maternity and Parental Leave etc. Regulations 1999, the Work and Families Act 2006, the

Children and Families Act 2014, the Equality Act 2010—had the aim of creating a level playing field, so that young women are not judged when going for a job on whether they might be going on maternity leave, and young men, who would not present the same problem, can also take baby leave. However, we do not seem to have taken it into account that local parties might face the same dilemma when selecting candidates for this House. If local party members choose the young women, who is perhaps married and about to start a family, they will lose her from the House. If they choose the young man, they may think that they would not. We are making it difficult for ourselves to pursue the stated goal of making this place more representative of the country.

We need more young women and young men. We need more people from every section of society. By making a simple change, we can make it easier to encourage young people who are about to start families to think that becoming an MP might just be possible and that they will be able to continue to represent the people whom they want to represent. They will be able to say, “When I have my child, I can have someone else vote for me,” or, “When my partner has a child or when we adopt a child, someone else can vote for me.” It is the simplest thing, and yet we have not done it.

If we are to be truly representative, we have to represent all our constituents, but we are falling short of that. We have the opportunity to put that last piece of the jigsaw in place and make it possible to vote by proxy. It seems ridiculous that that could be done in the 19th century and that, in the 21st century, we are even asking the question.

2.3 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) on securing this important debate, and I thank other right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. I also thank Mr Speaker, who I understand has made quite good progress over the past few years on this matter.

As a new Member, I had no idea that the day nursery used to be a wine bar, so the position of the nursery seems perfectly normal to me, which is good progress in itself. I declare an interest as the father of eight-week-old Ophelia and husband to my wife, Lucy. Ophelia was able to join me here for the first time to vote against the Third Reading of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. Although there are those who have concerns about Members taking babies through a voting Lobby, I pay tribute to the Clerks, who astutely did not count Ophelia's vote when I walked through—quite rightly so, given that I have no idea of her views on the Government's Brexit strategy.

I support this important motion. When I went on paternity leave—a little earlier than expected—in the run-up to Christmas, as a Back-Bench MP, I was able to clear my diary fairly easily, and my constituents were supportive, but of course I needed to be here to vote, and there were some important matters that I wanted to vote on. We should consider the use of proxy voting. I see that the Clerks use iPads when we vote, so—dare I say it—perhaps we could use an app. If we could vote without having to nod through the Lobby, that would

[Darren Jones]

be welcome progress. In those early days, as my hon. Friends have said, my duty as a husband and a father was to be at home to help in any way that I can, but I had to leave for many hours to come and vote here, so it would have been helpful if I had been able to vote from home or via a proxy. Formalising the process would also be helpful, because while the Whips were accommodating, the presumption was that I would be here for all votes apart from those that I had negotiated not to attend. I would rather that that was the other way around. When there are crunch votes, such as the Brexit ones, when I am sure that Ophelia would have said that I should be here if she could, I would come to vote, but the presumption needs switching.

It is important that we set the tone in this place. We should be doing the same thing that we have legislated for in the country, which seems perfectly sensible, but we also need to set the tone. Parenting is not a gender issue—at least it should not be—and I am of the firm view that a family friendly and gender-balanced economy not just is the right thing to seek, but would be good for economic growth and wellbeing.

The House may not be surprised to hear that I think that my wife is a remarkable and talented woman—

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): She is very fortunate.

Darren Jones: Thank you. I say that about my wife not least because during the snap election, when we were two months pregnant, I made it clear that I stood no chance of winning and that I would be able to apply for shared parental leave in my previous job as a lawyer. To make things worse, having actually won the election when I said that I was not going to—I am honoured to be here, of course—the local BBC news team had noticed a slight bump and announced our pregnancy to 1.3 million people in the region without checking first. When we received all these text messages saying, “Congratulations!”, we thought that they were about the election, but we suddenly realised that they were about Ophelia. We had not yet had the three-month scan, so we wondered how on earth everybody knew. My wife therefore had a bit of a bumpy road on the way to becoming a mum involved with a parliamentarian.

My wife is also my constituent, and she has said that it is okay for me to share her experiences over the past year, which have been quite distressing. It has been quite difficult for me to support her. She was the director of public policy at an energy company called Open Energi, which receives Government funding, and doing very well in that senior role. After the announcement of her pregnancy, she was told that her role was no longer needed and that she was being made redundant. Having worked so hard to achieve what she had, that was very distressing for her, but she is a formidable woman, so she decided to take her employer to a tribunal.

As a litigant in person, while pregnant, she cross-examined her former employers in front of a judge, who said that since the Supreme Court had decided that fees were illegal for employment tribunals, his time was increasingly being taken up by “these type” of cases. Can Members imagine the environment and the atmosphere? As one of only two women among 10 people in the tribunal room—there is no gender balance in

employment tribunal hearings or sexual discrimination cases—the experience was clearly distressing, and I have now taken up that matter with the president of the employment tribunals. My wife sadly lost that case, so perhaps we need a debate about the application of burden of proof rules in this country, because it is down to women to establish a burden of proof that discrimination could have taken place, but employers can bring forward witnesses and documents to show that it did not take place—at the time, it was said that documents did not exist—and that makes it difficult for women to bring such claims.

As a father and a husband, it is perfectly sensible for me to want to lean in. It is normal for dads to want to lean in. I want my wife to achieve her aspirations as much as possible, and we want to give our children the best upbringing together. I support the motion not just because Parliament should be in line with what is happening in the rest of the country, but because it gives us the opportunity to set the tone for what we expect in a modern Britain. We should look at reforms for companies that receive Government money and at the judiciary—perhaps at even having a gender balance—and then we could achieve change in the wider economy, too. I commend the motion to the House and look forward to supporting in any way that I can.

2.9 pm

Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): If you do not mind my saying so, Mr Deputy Speaker, I am glad to see you in the Chair for this debate. I guess that might be bittersweet on some levels, but it reminds us very strongly that there are some fantastic parents here in Parliament. There are those of us who have grappled with the experience of being the custodian of a child and being a parent. In all honesty, I have met few finer examples of such people than those I work alongside here in Westminster, and we have already heard some of those stories today.

I will not rehearse the points that have already been made, but I pay tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for securing this debate. We have been discussing this issue for some time, and it is one small change that might make life a little easier in what is an incredibly hard and difficult job.

I do not believe that we should be exempt, or that we should not acknowledge the freedoms and flexibilities of a job for which we are well paid and which we love. It should be hard and it should cost us something, but if we can make small, incremental improvements that improve the lives of people here, not only us but the whole of our society will benefit.

Last night we discussed the renewal of Parliament, and today we are discussing our own arrangements. It can perhaps seem a little indulgent for parliamentarians to spend their time talking about themselves, but we are the only ones who can have this conversation. We are the ones who determine our working practices here, and rightly so.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) referred to the famous internet meme in which MPs are packed into the Chamber to talk about their own conditions, but absolutely absent when a

serious issue comes along, and she rightly pointed out that the meme is untrue. It would be nice to see people using the image of us talking about our conditions today. It is not a criticism to say that the attendance today is relatively sparse and that everyone is taking one position. I have spoken to many young fathers who have told me that they really want this change.

Mrs Miller: The hon. Gentleman, who is a colleague on the Women and Equalities Committee, says that we are voicing one view. He is right, but surely if anyone had a differing view, they would be here.

Mr Shuker: I could not agree more, which is why I feel confident that the motion will be approved. We should take confidence from that and encourage the Procedure Committee to consider the matter swiftly. I know that the Committee has already done some preliminary work on how such a system could work.

The model of care for a child in the first year of life is split between two parents, and that sets the pattern for child rearing all the way through the child's life. All the studies seem to show that. If we want people to live up to the expectation of being present for their children, we should try to reflect that in our practice, too.

I have a four-year-old daughter, and I have always juggled life in Parliament with making the most of the flexibility that is offered on votes so that I can try to be present in her life. We all make it work, whatever our way of life, whether it means using some time on a Monday, getting back for the school run on a Thursday, or shifting days around at the weekend. We might take a day out in the middle of the week, but turn up for the votes later.

I have never had a formal conversation with my Whips Office about the implications of my having a child. I have never sat down and said, "Here are my working patterns." Until now, I have never really broadcast what that looks like, and that is because of two fears, which probably play on the minds of young fathers as well as of young mothers.

The first fear is whether I might be open to criticism for not being hard at work. When I added up my time over my first year in Parliament, excluding the commuting, I was working a 70 or 80-hour week. That has eased off as I have got better at the job, but that fear should not be a legitimate concern. There is no shortage of work, and we are all doing it—it is fairly obvious when we are not.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I apologise for not being here for the full debate and for intervening now. I thank the hon. Gentleman for enabling me to spend a lot more time with my children after he won Luton South in 2010, which left me with another five years before I got into Parliament.

The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Our constituents should expect us to work very hard but, at the same time, we have to put processes in place so that things are not unnecessarily difficult, as is the case at the moment. We have some ridiculous processes that make things unnecessarily difficult, whereas the rest of the country has moved on.

Mr Shuker: The hon. Gentleman was generous to me in 2010, and he is generous to me now.

The second reason why I have never had a formal conversation with the Whips Office is because of the worry that this might look like a lack of professionalism or a lack of hunger. It is true that, having made the choice to support my family, it is much harder to have sharp elbows and to force my way to the front. I have been fortunate in being able to structure my work time so that I can be present for my daughter, but most people's experience of having children while being in this place is of being completely frazzled all the time, and of trying to find a way to make it work.

Very sadly, my relationship with my daughter's mum broke down during this Parliament. I take full responsibility for that but, equally, we need to be honest about the working practices of this place and their implications. The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) told me that among my intake, a quarter of marriages broke down in the 2010 to 2015 Parliament. We have to be honest about the implications of this place and its effects.

There are real issues with the current informal arrangements. For example, it is not just difficult but impossible to exercise shared parental leave, because we do not have a formal employment relationship. We make reasonable accommodations in all sorts of ways for Members with other issues. I do not believe we should dial down our parenthood to be representatives in this place; I think we should amplify it. By talking about it and normalising it, we might be able to get to a fairer society in which we close the gender pay gap, in which women's roles in society are properly recognised and in which we approach all sorts of other issues through the lens of saying that normal life happens and it is an anomaly that we exist in this way.

Finally, there are currently procedures whereby we informally work with our Whips Offices to enable, in my case, two weeks off after the birth of my daughter, or longer periods, given the physical constraints, for many women who have had children. Again, however, there is pressure to come in, to be present and to vote.

From the other side, our pairing arrangements start from the basis that we know that certain Members will just not be around for long periods of time. That has a direct effect on those of us who need to pair so that work can proceed. For example, a Select Committee visit might not go ahead because we have already paired out what we can to cover illness or childcare. This is not a brag, but I have never requested to be let off the Whip for personal circumstances. I have never missed a vote because I have been ill—I have certainly been ill, but I have been present to vote—and I do not think people abuse the system, but there are restrictions.

Making these arrangements would not take power away from or give power to the Whips Offices. Whatever our standpoint on what would be a good outcome, this change would professionalise the House and make it much easier to plan for such eventualities. As a member of the parliamentary Labour party, I foresee no problems or restrictions in my party's standing orders if I were to sign over my proxy vote to the Chief Whip so that I could take paternity leave or baby care leave. I am comfortable with that. There are ways around this situation, and it should not be something that is hung on a straw man.

[Mr Shuker]

Overall, this change is required, and it will have a profound impact on the way we work. It is the thin end of the wedge, although we should be clear that today we are just talking about the principle. We need to become better at looking after ourselves and looking after each other, because we do not want to cause unnecessary strain.

This job should be hard. Public leadership and public sacrifice should be just that—they should be sacrificial—but putting in place artificial barriers not only holds back women in this place, but holds back men, too.

2.19 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I was a co-signatory of the motion, but by a quirk of parliamentary procedure the fact I am leading in the debate for the Scottish National party means my name had to come off. I pay a huge tribute to the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), two women in this place I hold in the highest regard. Today's debate has been completely consensual, as it should be on this issue, not just in this place, but across society. I am moved to quote the words of Emmeline Pankhurst, who said:

"We are here, not because we are law-breakers; we are here in our efforts to become law-makers."

So getting to speak today and be part of bringing about new regulations and legislation in this place is very important, because, as one London Member said—I have forgotten her constituency—we have to reflect society but we also have to lead it. One hundred years on from women getting the vote, that is hugely important.

When I was thinking about standing for election, I thought carefully about whether I could do this, and there were two reasons for that. First, I knew I needed to come out and deal with my sexuality. Secondly, I wanted to have children. Those two things were somewhat interlinked, and there are some technical challenges that I have as a gay women that my straight counterparts do not. Regardless of that, being able to know that there are Members from across this place who support this process means that, we hope, the next generation of parliamentarians, be they male, female, from the black, Asian and minority ethnic community, and whatever their disability or ability, and whatever their sexuality, will look at this place and other Parliaments across the UK and think, "That is something I can and want to be part of." This has therefore been an incredible debate.

As we look across the world, we see the Prime Minister in New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern, is about to have a baby with her partner, and she is very open about that. We are taking steps forward. Testimonies have been read out, including by the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham, who mentioned my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins). I wish also to refer to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who received an interesting email during the 2015 election. I am just going to read out the question and the answer she gave, because this typifies the debate and her excellent response shows how far we still have to go. The email to her read:

"Dear Alison

I am in favour of many of the SNP's policies but am a little worried to find that you are mother of a (very) young family.

I can see how this could work with a seat at Holyrood but Westminster membership must pose a harder challenge.

It would help to know your solution before polling day."

I emphasise the words "your solution". It is incredible that anybody would write to a potential candidate and see the fact that they have children as a problem. An excellent "Channel 4 News" programme recently had the rapper Professor Green on it, and he spoke about why we need more people in politics who have been the subject of Government policy and are from different backgrounds and have different experiences.

My hon. Friend's response to the email was as follows:

"Thank you very much for your email. I apologise for the delay in replying, but I wanted to give you a more considered response to your enquiry and give you some background as to why I'm standing.

I am certainly not alone among male and female candidates across the country in this election in being lucky enough to have a family; indeed the male Labour incumbent in this seat also has a young family.

The outgoing House of Commons was 22% female, and the average age of an MP was 50. More than 400 MPs, 62% of the total, are white men aged over 40. I think that Westminster ought to be a good deal more representative of the people it serves, and that can't be achieved without more women."

Inequality affects policy and it affects governance. I firmly believe that, with its poor gender balance, Westminster has made deficient policies in areas which affect families such as cuts in areas of child and maternity benefits. By contrast, with a slightly better gender balance Holyrood has taken on a great deal of issues in its remit which disproportionately affect women, such as free personal care, expansion of nursery education, and making law the right to breastfeed in public."

She then went on to talk about how she had been a councillor over the previous five years and the challenges she had faced. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) was also a councillor in Aberdeen when she had small children. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central finishes her email by saying:

"I will cross whatever other bridges require to be crossed after the votes are cast and counted on the 7th of May."

That is an excellent response.

Luciana Berger: I welcome the strong contribution the hon. Lady is making. She makes a point about the opposition candidates may face at the time of an election if they are a new parent, and I reflect on the abuse I got as a candidate from someone from a different political party who stood against me. He took to Twitter to criticise me for not attending an evening debate during that election period, accusing me of being timid for my refusal to attend. I told him that I had not refused to do any debates, but that with a newborn baby evening events are near impossible, and that I would gladly take him on any day. He responded by saying that he did not realise we were still in the 1950s, when only a woman could look after a child, and that he thought the Labour party believed in shared paternity. Let me take this opportunity to tell him strongly that the Labour party most certainly believes in shared paternity and champions it. My final response was to remind him that we had not been expecting a general election; that he did not know my personal circumstances; and that, as far as I was aware, men still could not breastfeed. I also suggested

he might want to stop digging, but I left it at that. The point I am seeking to share with the House in telling that little anecdote is that the issue we are discussing today pertains to what happens in this House, but the point the hon. Lady is making about what happens at election time and how candidates treat other candidates, particularly on this issue, is still relevant. It shows that in 2018 we still have an issue to address.

Hannah Bardell: I thank the hon. Lady for that and completely agree with the point she makes. This vote on this issue is not just about the technicality of how we cast our votes, although that is very important. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) mentioned the thin end of the wedge and I agree with what she said on that. My hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) has highlighted to me the issue of proximity and how he sometimes faces significant challenges with weather and geography. This is also about the discourse and narrative we have in politics with each other, and that the press have with us. Members have spoken about TheyWorkForYou and the digital environment, how our votes are recorded, and how all the systems and processes around politics and how we do it need to be more transparent and reflective. If we have a system whereby the vote is recorded for our constituency, it will be much, much more positive.

I wish briefly to pay tribute to my MSP colleagues, Angela Constance and Fiona Hyslop, both of whom are Cabinet Secretaries in a gender-balanced Cabinet and both of whom have had children while in office, as Ministers and as MSPs. They have paved the way and inspired me to stand. The Scottish Parliament made clear from the outset its commitment to inclusive and family-friendly workplace practices. As I have said, there is a seat for everyone; voting takes but a few seconds; and in its planning phase best practices from Parliaments across Europe were drawn up to ensure that in establishing the new legislature we could learn from some of the mistakes and successes from Parliaments across the world. We have a crèche in the Scottish Parliament, and not the stricter nursery system that is in place here. I pay tribute to the work the Speaker has done on that, but my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) has highlighted to me some of the challenges he has faced. His wife has had a child very recently and he has faced challenges in bringing children to this place, as the family room is sometimes misused by other Members or is used for meetings. He has had a great deal of support on that, but we need to look at such aspects of this as well. The Corporate Body in the Scottish Parliament has set out many inclusive practices, which include how business is done—finishing at five o'clock.

I do not want to talk too much about the place. Instead, I wish to focus on some of the other experiences here. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North talks about how she travels to Westminster by plane. Most airlines do not let women who are more than 36 weeks pregnant fly; for Flybe, it is 34 weeks. After having a baby, women cannot fly for at least a week and probably for more like a fortnight. As other hon. Members have mentioned, a woman who has had a C-section may not be able to fly for six weeks. So what happens if my hon. Friend has another baby? She has said she had no intentions of having any further children, so although

we might not have put women off standing for election, we might have perhaps put them off having children, although I remain undeterred—I declare an interest as someone who aspires to be a parent. My hon. Friend says that being away from Westminster purely because she cannot travel here would be very unfair to her constituents and mean they would be unrepresented. My hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts said his wife was lucky to have their son during a recess, and that he had fantastic staff who assisted and ensured that everything was covered in the constituency, but that these matters needed to be formalised.

It seems incredible that 100 years after women got the vote we are debating the fact that they cannot take part fully on behalf of their constituents and in debates. We know that parliamentary work is not just about walking through the Lobbies and voting; it is about being in the constituency. Having an open and accessible Parliament, in whatever part of the UK, will ensure that people, from whatever walk of life, but particularly women, parents and aspiring parents, feel able to take part in democracy by standing for election, and it will make the life of those women, particularly those parliamentarians due to have children very soon, significantly easier. I hope that the House and the public are listening carefully to the testimonies today.

2.30 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I associate myself with the remarks made by my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker), Mr Deputy Speaker. It is good to see you in your place. I say to my hon. Friend: that is what a feminist looks like. I also thank my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) for co-sponsoring this debate, along with the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller). My right hon. and learned Friend was a formidable role model when she was pregnant—with Harry, I think—and stood for election. It is fitting that, as Mother of the House, she should bring forward this debate. It is right for Members to debate this subject and for the Backbench Business Committee to have given time for it.

The right hon. Member for Basingstoke is always raising important equalities issues on her Committee, and I am sure that she, together with other members of the Committee, including my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South, will monitor what the Procedure Committee comes up with. Hon. Members will remember that the former Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, when they took paternity, were actually celebrated, whereas my hon. Friends the Members for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) and for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds), when they took maternity leave, suffered abuse. My right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) was a Minister surrounded by gurgles and red boxes. They are all formidable campaigners.

The fact that women have suffered abuse and accusations of being lazy is unacceptable. Constituents want Parliament to be representative of society, as the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) pointed out. There are no implications for pay, as women are not away from work; they just want to cast their vote on behalf of their constituents, but sometimes they cannot physically be here, and it is right that we should consider this

[Valerie Vaz]

proposal, in addition to the process of nodding through in certain circumstances. I say also to my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) that Ophelia is lucky to have a hands-on dad.

I want to raise a few points that have been raised with me. It would not be compulsory to request this provision, but in my view there is a compelling case. Proxy voting will obviously have to be in line with party policy, and it does not equate to a free vote. The motion does not ask to widen proxy voting to other circumstances; only that it apply where a Member cannot attend a vote owing to caring responsibilities. All the motion does is enable women MPs to balance giving birth and looking after a baby with their work as an MP. All my hon. Friends who have given birth while MPs have carried on with their work in their constituencies and the House. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) and other hon. Members have pointed out, they know that in the 21st century they have to respond to emails—and they do so all the time.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) says she does not want to have any more children, but I have to break it to her: she is going to be a mum forever, even when they are older and have children of their own.

In October 2017, the Clerk of the House resubmitted to the Procedure Committee a memorandum on proxy voting in the House of Commons. The Clerk identified Members with caring responsibilities—limited to mothers of infants—as a category of Member that might qualify for a proxy vote. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham is right that this should be considered by the appropriate Committee, and more work should be done, following the motion, together with the work of Professor Sarah Childs and her report, “The Good Parliament”. This is going to be more of an issue as women MPs take their place and we move towards parity.

Debating this issue, as we women take our rightful place in the House, is a lovely way to celebrate the Representation of the People Act 1918, which gave 6 million women over the age of 30 the right to vote. My right hon. and learned Friend and the right hon. Member for Basingstoke, the co-sponsors, and all the Members who have spoken in this debate are wonderful role models. The parents of Ophelia, Azalea, Amélie, Theo and Ruby—all the wonderful little babies born to Members during my time in the House—have today, along with other Members, pushed the boundaries towards a good and more equal Parliament.

2.35 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): It is a huge pleasure to see you in your place, Mr Deputy Speaker.

We have heard some excellent, personal and informative speeches today—they certainly took me back to the horrors of those early days. I opened yesterday’s debate by describing it as a debate that should have taken place 40 years ago. I say again: this is a debate that should have taken place 40 years ago. I pay tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) for the way she opened the

debate. She has been a consistent champion of these issues throughout her career, and it is certainly fitting that she, as Mother of the House, should have secured this debate today. I also want to recognise the total commitment of my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, who has supported and promoted so many issues that affect women and equalities in this House. I absolutely agree with all Members here that it is essential that we address the issue of baby leave.

The motion before the House presents two issues for consideration. The first is the need for Members of Parliament to take baby leave. I think we can all agree that new parents must spend time with their babies and be enabled to do that. The second issue concerns how we reconcile that with the question of how and whether Members should be able to vote in the House of Commons during any such leave. I thank the all-party group on women in Parliament, until recently chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), now by my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), for its hard work in this place promoting equality for women, and also the Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion, chaired by Mr Speaker, which is tasked with following and implementing, where possible, the recommendations made in Professor Sarah Childs’ “The Good Parliament” report. I want to put on the record my thanks for the important work that those groups have been taking forward.

As the House might be aware, I have championed secure early attachment for many years and have worked with charities on this vital issue. I was for nine years chairman and trustee of OxPIP—the Oxford Parent Infant Project—a charity that helps parents struggling to form a secure bond with their babies, and when I became MP for South Northamptonshire, I set up NorPIP—the Northamptonshire Parent Infant Partnership—to provide help to all those new parents struggling across the county. I even persuaded my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) to become a founding trustee.

Now, through the national charity I set up, PIPUK, five further parent infant partnerships have been set up around the country. I am delighted that more families can seek support for the earliest and probably the most important relationship we ever have—because a baby’s lifelong emotional health is profoundly impacted by his or her earliest experiences in the 1,001 critical days of the perinatal period. I was proud to hear the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) mention the cross-party 1001 Critical Days campaign that I set up in 2011, and which commands support from across the House.

The mental health White Paper published just before Christmas states that there is a need to commission research into interventions that support better attachment and improve the understanding among professionals of the importance of low-stress, healthy pregnancies and secure attachment.

Like the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham and my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke, my children are now a bit older than babies—my eldest is 22—but the excellent speeches today did take me back to my early experiences, when I was not in this place. I had, I think, a 46-hour delivery.

I had just been promoted to senior executive at the bank for which I worked and was required to be back after 11 weeks. Following that, I also had a good dose of postnatal depression to deal with. So, I totally empathise with all those Members who have spoken about their experiences here. I am very committed to ensuring that those who come after us do not have to suffer those same problems.

My hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) sat next to me during the first part of this debate. He was telling me that his brother, who works for the civil service, is looking forward to six months' shared parental leave. My hon. Friend is himself expecting a baby with his wife; he is asking nicely for two weeks' leave. To his brother I say: how's that?

Mrs Miller: I do not know whether my right hon. Friend remembers, but she was pregnant the first time we met. That is a few years ago now. I think we were on the selection trail together as well. Does she agree that, as important as it is, this debate is a first step in our efforts to make this place a much easier place not only to be a parent but to be somebody who cares for their broader family?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is exactly right. There is a lot more to life than this place. That may seem extraordinary to all of us, but we are all human beings. We are parents, we are daughters and sons, and we have responsibilities. This debate is timely as we seek to support these matters in this House and continue to break down the barriers that could discourage women and men from pursuing a career in Parliament.

The motion suggests that the way to resolve the issue of baby leave is through the introduction of proxy voting. Although I absolutely support the need to make the House more accessible for new parents, it is also important that we recognise the possible consequences of any reforms. With that in mind, in November last year I wrote to the Chair of the Procedure Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), copying in the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke. I asked the Procedure Committee to consider the matter of baby leave and proxy voting, and for the Committee to set out its views to the House.

I also wrote to every member of the Cabinet, and I can tell Members that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister replied to me and agrees that this is an important matter. She wrote:

"Being a member of Parliament is a demanding job, and it is important that we give due consideration to the impact that this can have on work-life balance, childcare and baby leave".

So she has made clear her support.

Following my letter to the Procedure Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne said to me that, should the motion be agreed today, the Committee will undertake an inquiry into proxy voting. I welcome that, as it is clear from the debate that a number of important questions need to be considered, some of which I shall now set out briefly.

Giving Members of Parliament the right to baby leave raises a number of potential questions about the duties of Members and the rules by which they are regulated. As colleagues will know, Members of Parliament are appointed representatives of their constituencies and are not regulated by the same employment rules

that apply to other members of the workforce. Introducing baby leave might lead some to suggest that MPs should be treated as employees, which could of course have wider implications.

The introduction of proxy voting would also mark a departure from conventional voting practices in the House in several ways. For example, when Members vote in a Division, it is expected that they do so having had the opportunity to attend the Chamber. I think we can all agree that television and 24-hour reporting—let alone Skype, Twitter and everything else—gives Members the opportunity to follow business from further afield, but any change will need to be carefully considered, and we would need to decide who would act as a proxy and how the system would be regulated.

It is important to note that Members of Parliament are elected by their constituencies as individuals, so it is implied upon their election that their votes cannot be transferred to another MP. The appointment of a proxy voter could be perceived as a reduction of personal accountability. Any changes will therefore need to ensure that personal accountability is maintained.

In addition to those questions, and as I said in my letter to the Procedure Committee, a number of alternative suggestions have been made, aimed at addressing the needs of new parents who are undertaking the duties of an MP, while also making sure that their constituents have adequate representation in Parliament. One such example is that all political parties represented in the House could agree a memorandum of understanding and agree to the same terms, which would allow their MPs to take parental leave and formalise "pairing" arrangements across all parties.

Mr Shaker: I appreciate the thoughtful way in which the Leader of the House is approaching this matter from first principles and setting out some of the issues mentioned by Members. Will she go slightly further and acknowledge that there is a reputational issue around Members of Parliament not being present to vote and thereby being reported as absent, when actually they are taking up the responsibilities that she has said are vital?

Andrea Leadsom: I am certainly not advocating one route over another; I am merely pointing out to the House that these issues need careful consideration, which is why I wrote to the Procedure Committee and why I am delighted that it will hold an inquiry.

The Clerk of the House has prepared a helpful memorandum on proxy voting, which is available on the Procedure Committee's website and which I encourage Members to read. It explores some important issues, including by looking at the approach in other Parliaments and, as has been alluded to, our own medieval tradition of allowing voting by proxy. I am sure that not many pregnant women were involved in those days, but still, they found a way. Should the Procedure Committee launch an inquiry—I am told that it will—I would encourage all colleagues to submit their views. I have no doubt that the many insightful contributions today will be of great value to the Committee.

This is an important debate, which has really caught the attention of Parliament in recent months. As Leader of the House, I want to make it absolutely clear that if we can agree the way forward on baby leave, I will drive it forward with my total commitment.

2.46 pm

Ms Harman: I warmly welcome you back to the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker; it is great to see you here with us.

This has been a really important debate and I thank all Government and Opposition Members who have contributed. People have spoken in deeply personal terms about profoundly constitutional issues. They have shown passion for their families and for their constituents. Nobody has spoken against the motion, so this has been an important debate to shape the Procedure Committee's proceedings. The Committee needs to take the matter forward with focus, clarity and expedition. After a debate such as today's, we do not want this issue to go rustling off into the long grass. That will not be acceptable.

I thank all Members who spoke in the debate. We must all be an alliance for progress on this issue. All of us who are in the Chamber must make sure that this actually happens, and that the issue does not disappear for decades more. I am sure that we can have that purpose and intent. I would like to apologise for the fact that I had not thought about the situation of SNP Members, who do not even have pairing. I feel embarrassed about that and, even for the very short time before the Procedure Committee comes forward with a rule to shape how we do proxy voting, we must make some arrangements that reflect the situation for the SNP right away.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House believes that it would be to the benefit of the functioning of parliamentary democracy that honourable Members who have had a baby or adopted a child should for a period of time be entitled, but not required, to discharge their responsibilities to vote in this House by proxy.

Hospital Car Parking Charges

2.48 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House calls on the Government to undertake a consultation to identify the most efficient means of abolishing car parking charges at NHS hospitals in England for patients, staff and visitors and to provide the timescale for its implementation.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for accepting the application for this vital debate. I especially thank my colleagues who have supported me in securing it, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan), the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) and the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker). I also thank the various charities and organisations that have actively supported the campaign through their own research and on social media, such as CLIC Sargent, Bliss and Scope, and organisations representing drivers, such as FairFuelUK and the RAC. Those are just a few of the bodies offering their help and support to bring an end to the extortionate car parking charges found at many hospitals in England.

We all know that being a patient or visitor can be a stressful time. The last thing that anyone should be worried about is whether they have change for a car park or whether they can afford the rates that are charged. I started this campaign for free hospital car parking in 2014, after finding out that hospitals in England were charging staff and visitors up to £500 a week to use on-site parking facilities. As a result, in the same year, the Government published guidance urging hospitals to cut their parking fees. They said:

"Concessions, including free or reduced charges or caps should be available for staff working unsociable shifts, blue badge holders and visitors of gravely ill relatives."

Although some weekly charges have fallen since 2014, I was shocked to discover last year when we carried out further research that 47% of hospitals have increased the hourly parking charges and nearly half of hospitals charge blue badge holders to park. The average cost to park for a week at a hospital in England is £53.41 and people pay on average £1.98 for one hour stay.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The right hon. Gentleman is a fantastic campaigner on such issues and I congratulate him on bringing the issue to the House of Commons. In my constituency, Kingston Hospital just announced with no consultation that it will impose parking charges on blue badge holders, citing that people are doing it everywhere else in the NHS and that it is an NHS-wide issue. Does he therefore not agree with me that it is up to the Government to give a clear lead and, at the very least, get rid of parking charges for blue badge holders?

Robert Halfon: The right hon. Gentleman is exactly right. Too often, these charges are imposed without any consultation, or without fair consultation, and they hit the most vulnerable. He will hear later in my remarks that I completely agree with him.

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

Robert Halfon: I will not take too many interventions, but I would be honoured to take one from the hon. Gentleman.

Mr Cunningham: I agree with the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey). A lot of the hospital charges are part of private finance initiatives, and he is right that the Secretary of State or the Minister responsible should now be looking at eliminating those charges. We could argue that they are a tax on illness.

Robert Halfon: That is the sad thing. Many private companies are making profits from the taxpayer and the most vulnerable people in our society. That must stop. The PFI things that have happened under Governments of both main parties have caused huge amounts of problems to many people, particularly when they park at hospitals up and down the country.

There is still a postcode lottery on car parking charges; different hospital trusts set wildly different fees. The core principle of the NHS is to provide free healthcare for all at the point of access but the charges are a stealth tax on drivers using the health service. The parking charges are the bane of people's lives. No one goes to hospital out of choice; they go because they have to. No one chooses to be ill, and we rely on our doctors and nurses to look after us. I urge the Health Secretary and the Minister to take urgent action to end this social injustice once and for all, and to introduce substantive legislation to ensure hospitals scrap their parking charges.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con) *rose—*

Robert Halfon: Mindful of the advice from the Chair, I shall give way one last time.

Julian Knight: My right hon. Friend is being most generous. I should declare that I am the joint chair of the all-party parliamentary group for fair fuel for UK motorists and UK hauliers. I have tremendous sympathy with my right hon. Friend in this respect and have campaigned hard on hospital parking charges in my own constituency. However, one difficulty I have in squaring the circle is the fact that my hospital is located right in the town centre and, if it is free, people use it as a base to go off shopping. That has happened in the past. Does my right hon. Friend have any solutions or ideas to deal with that?

Robert Halfon: I am very proud to have worked with my hon. Friend on the FairFuelUK campaign to keep fuel duty low. The point he has just made is very broad, so if he could wait a few minutes, I hope to be able to address the concerns that he has expressed.

I mentioned earlier that, in 2014, the Government had offered guidelines on concessions for patients and visitors. I welcomed that, as it was a sign that the Government were aware of the extortionate costs facing hospital users, but the problem with the guidance is that none of it is mandatory. In fact, the guidance encourages the postcode lottery. The guidelines state that charges should be reasonable for the area. Trusts are free to set their own fees, which means that patients and staff living in London and the south-east are charged the most. I have asked the Government on a number of occasions what constitutes a reasonable charge, and I consistently receive responses along the following lines: first, that hospital car parking charges are a matter for

individual NHS trusts; secondly, that local NHS trusts are expected to follow the published guidance; and thirdly, that the Department of Health and Social Care has not discussed car parking charges with local NHS trusts.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Robert Halfon: I will give way one last time, as I want to be fair to Mr Deputy Speaker who spoke to me before the debate started.

Sandy Martin: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that the national health service is not best placed for administering car parks, and that if we take car parking charges away from it we should also take away the whole provision of car parking from it and ensure that it does not lose out financially as a result?

Robert Halfon: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. The crucial thing is that the NHS does not lose out financially. I think that that is the substance of what he is saying.

Sadly, the guidance is superficial. I have been unable to work out what constitutes a reasonable charge. The Government are not able or willing to keep local trusts in check. Since 2013, the campaign to scrap hospital car parking charges has gained speed, with more and more leading UK charities and associations representing drivers carrying out research into the negative effects of the charges on different groups of patients and drivers.

The sick and vulnerable are disproportionately hit by the charges, particularly those with long-term or severe illnesses who require repeated or lengthy stays in hospital. Research has shown that cancer patients and parents of premature babies face the greatest financial consequences. CLIC Sargent, a wonderful charity supporting young people with cancer, found that families were paying an average of £37 in car parking charges every month, with some families paying up to £10 per day. It also says that more than one in four parents of a child with cancer—29%—are not offered a reduction in parking costs by their NHS trust.

Macmillan Cancer Support mirrors that sentiment, saying that cancer patients in England are paying extortionate hospital car parking charges. Bliss is another very special charity for families with premature babies. Although some babies stay in the neonatal unit only for a few days, some parents will have to pay more than £250 if their baby stays in the neonatal unit for eight weeks. The charity says that many parents cannot even afford to go to see their premature baby because of the cost of hospital car parking.

I have a quote from the charity, Headway, which really sums up the whole debate. Headway does an incredible amount of work with brain injury. This is what it said:

“Recently, we supported a family who had spent more than £1,500 in parking charges in only 15 weeks. They needed to be at the bedside of their son who was fighting for his life after sustaining brain injury. What parent wouldn't want to be there, day and night? Yet they were faced with a huge bill. These charges are driving families into debt and despair at a time when they already have more than enough to cope with.”

[Robert Halfon]

Kidney Care, another charity, told me that dialysis patients have to go to hospital three times a week, and each appointment takes four hours, with the average cost of four hours of parking estimated to be £3.28. Members can imagine how the costs stack up. The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) mentioned disabled car parking. It is extraordinary that, despite the Government guidance, almost half of hospitals inexplicably charge disabled drivers. They do not go to hospital out of choice. It is harder for them to use public transport, yet they have to pay significant charges. Even the hospitals that allow free parking attach a lot of conditions to that provision. Scope, the charity supporting disabled people, shares the sentiment, widely noting that disabled people

“have on average £108,000 fewer savings and assets than non-disabled people”.

It is not just charities that do valuable work. The RAC and FairFuelUK have also supported the campaign to scrap hospital car parking charges. I have worked with Howard Cox at FairFuelUK for a number of years in order to freeze fuel duty. The organisation held a poll last year with almost 9,000 respondents, 95.5% of whom wanted hospital parking scrapped or set at a maximum of £1. The RAC carried out a serious survey of more than 1,000 motorists. Two thirds of them named hospitals as the location where they most disliked having to pay for parking, and 41% said that the Government should scrap hospital parking charges immediately. It is clear that support is growing for the campaign to scrap hospital car parking charges, not only from the charities representing the most vulnerable—often with long-term and life-threatening illnesses—but from the two major organisations representing millions of motorists in the United Kingdom.

The support for an end to hospital car parking for patients and their visitors is clear, but we must not forget our incredibly hard-working NHS staff, some of whom are charged to go to work. Other public sector workers such as police officers and teachers are, for the most part, rightly able to park for free on their work premises, whether at a police station or a school. The Government guidance suggests that concessions should be available to all hospital staff—nurses, porters, cleaners, occupational therapists and doctors—working shifts that make public transport use difficult, but so much of the hospital workforce cannot rely on public transport to get to work.

Let us take the example of a hospital worker living in Pocklington in Yorkshire. He or she would either have to make the 15-mile drive to work at York Hospital and pay £2 to park during the shift, or spend more than an hour on two buses to get to work. If staff are working shifts at unsociable hours—as, of course, many do in the health service—they have no choice but to use hospital car parks.

Although all hospitals seem to offer a discounted parking scheme based on pay band or salary, or by allocating a limited number of discounted staff spaces, NHS staff are charged to work unsociable hours. The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) was told by hospital staff that they cannot afford the charges at hospital car parks, so they have to park on unlit nearby streets, which leaves them vulnerable when leaving the workplace at night.

Interestingly, staff car parking charges are a nuisance not just for hard-working NHS staff, but for residents too. I was recently contacted by a resident of Scarborough. This person was delighted to hear of the campaign, but came from a rather different angle. Staff park in the residential roads around Scarborough General Hospital to avoid being charged to go to work. The influx of cars every day means that driveways are blocked, there is more traffic on the road and residents are unable to go about their daily business.

I realise that hospital parking charges can be a source of income for hospitals. They are certainly a goldmine for some private companies, but the Government have previously stated:

“Providing free car parking at NHS hospitals would result in some £200 million per year being taken from clinical care budgets to make up the shortfall.”

I have a number of things to say about that. When considered in the context of the £120 billion-plus to be spent on running the NHS, the figure of £200 million is put into perspective. Going on the assumption that free hospital car parking would cost £200 million a year, I think that there are a number of funding options that would not leave hospitals out of pocket or affect clinical care budgets. The Government themselves have published a report saying that better procurement in national health service hospitals would bring in more than £1 billion a year. I am just asking for £200 million to scrap hospital car parking charges.

The Department of Health financial accounts for 2016-17 suggest that the Department underspent its revenue budget by £563 million, which is about 0.5% of the total budget. Could some of this money not go towards covering the parking costs of patients and hospital staff? It might also be time to look at other areas of government where we spend a significant amount of money and look at reallocating the very small amount of that money—£200 million—that it would take to scrap hospital car parking charges.

Another concern, raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight), is that free parking at hospitals would be exploited by shoppers. However, this could easily be solved by using parking tokens validated by ward staff. Some NHS hospitals in England do the right thing and provide free parking, including Northamptonshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust and Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust. That shows that it is possible to deliver free parking for patients, visitors and staff while discouraging abuse of the system with tokens or barriers. Having contacted hospitals in Scotland and Wales directly, I know that there are numerous parking solutions to ensure that free parking is not exploited. Alongside the abolition of hospital car parking charges, a system could be introduced whereby a ticket or token is presented to ward staff at the beginning of the visit and validated at the end.

It is time to end the hospital car parking rip-off once and for all. The NHS is supposed to be free at point of access. It was never envisaged that people with cars would have to pay on top of their taxation for the national health service, yet patients and visitors are charged for access to vital services. That causes a huge amount of stress to many. It affects the most vulnerable: parents with sick children, patients suffering from long-term illnesses, and staff without access to public transport. These charges are a cause of major social injustice.

Clearly, the Government guidance is not working. I urge the Government to look into the most efficient way to scrap hospital car parking charges and bring an end to this stealth tax on drivers once and for all.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I am bringing in an eight-minute limit. I call Melanie Onn to continue the debate.

3.6 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I am very grateful to be able to take part in this important debate. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), and my neighbour, the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), on securing it.

Diana, Princess of Wales Hospital in my constituency provides a range of helpful wellbeing services. The site has an A&E, a dialysis unit, a child development unit, a nursery, an eating disorder unit, and health education spaces. It covers a huge range of services that deliver to a very wide community. There are two main areas that I want to address: first, the difficulties and challenges for patients caused by ever-increasing parking tariffs; and, secondly, car parking issues for staff, which have been raised with me on a number of occasions when I have been at Grimsby's hospital.

In Grimsby, I can go and park in the Iceland car park, in the centre of our town, for £1 an hour. If I need to park for more than two hours, I might go to the Abbey Walk multi-storey, again in the centre of town, and pay £3.50 for the privilege of four hours' parking. Having worked in places like York, I know that I should be very grateful for the seemingly small amounts that it costs to park in the centre of our town, so I count my blessings. When those smaller amounts are set against what people are expected to pay in hospital parking charges, it feels very much to my constituents as though the NHS is over-inflating the expense and putting an unnecessary burden on patients and families.

The charge for an hour's parking at Diana, Princess of Wales Hospital has recently increased to £2.10—£1.10 more than in the centre of our town. If I go to the hospital to pick up a prescription, it might take—on a good day, admittedly—just a few minutes to collect the prescription, but on top of the prescription cost, I am paying another £2.10 to do so. Last week, I went for a blood test. I walked in, got my ticket, checked on the screen, and saw that there was a wait of about 68 minutes. It took me a matter of minutes to get the blood test, but the sitting in the waiting room lasted about 68 minutes. The cost of that visit was therefore £3.50. I am not bemoaning the cost to my personal pocket. I can afford it, but many in my constituency cannot, and the cost is prohibitive.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that, as well as the issues that have been raised powerfully so far, the example she gives shows the opportunity for greater flexibility? In Hounslow, for example, free half-hour parking has been introduced to support local businesses. It is the same for

leisure centres. We need to be proportionate as we consider the overall issue, and that is what we can do today.

Melanie Onn: My hon. Friend raises an important point. There is room for flexibility, and all trusts should be looking at what they can do to make parking less prohibitive so that people are not put off.

It is galling for my constituents to know that parking charges are much lower in other areas of the town. Local authority car parks, shops and private parking companies all have the same issues of maintenance, lighting and security, albeit to different degrees, but they are not charging that high rate. It feels very much like profiteering off the back of people who have no choice but to be at hospital, whether that is for themselves, their friends or their relatives. The trust offers concessions through lower costs for blue badge holders, although they are not exempt from charges, as well as for parents who are staying overnight with poorly children and those having cancer treatment. That is, of course, incredibly welcome. However, when the justification for the charges is that they pay for the maintenance of the site, it really does not stack up, given the costs of other paid parking sites in the town.

An automatic number plate recognition system was recently installed at the Diana, Princess of Wales Hospital, which led to even more frustration and concern for constituents. While that fantastic new automated system was supposed to make the process a lot quicker and easier for people, all it did was to cause additional delays and costs. After spending time in the waiting room, as I had to, people had to come out to try to pay for their parking with the new machines. It caused absolute havoc, and there were queues going around the block, and people ended up tripping over into the next pay band and paying even more. The process caused an extraordinary amount of frustration and reflected very poorly on the trust, which is a real shame.

The knock-on effect of the charges is that surrounding streets, such as Second Avenue, Edge Avenue and Limetree Avenue, which are all residential streets with limited on-street parking, get filled with the cars of patients, staff and people attending the hospital. I know that there is nothing illegal about that. There is nothing wrong with people parking in those residential streets, but it really irritates residents if a parked car crosses a dropped kerb or impinges on people's driveways. That is not only incredibly frustrating, but it gives rise to increased concerns about road safety, especially in school hours.

The right hon. Member for Harlow addressed very well the broader point that people with disabilities or long-term illnesses are generally financially worse off than the rest of the population. The additional cost represents a significant inconvenience and potential hardship for people who can least afford it.

Hospital staff have increasingly been talking to me about this issue. There have been discussions with staff about increasing the amount that they already pay to go to work. An increase has been postponed for now, but the opportunity for it to be brought back next year is, I understand, very much on the table, and the increase will be significant. As the right hon. Gentleman indicated, the people affected will be not just consultants or senior executives who might be earning a very good wage. We are also talking about porters, healthcare assistants and

[Melanie Onn]

medical secretaries—all the people behind the scenes who keep the hospital going—being expected to pay even more.

The frustrations for staff are immense. They say that they already struggle to get a parking space, not least because some shifts overrun. The likelihood that someone might do an eight-hour shift in the NHS at the moment is frankly negligible. Most people, through their own good will, are giving more to the NHS and working beyond their shift. They do not want to leave their patients in the middle of an incident. The number of parking spaces available is therefore reduced, and people are leaving home an awful lot earlier—an hour to an hour and a half earlier—than their shift starts, which increases their working day immensely.

Most of this is not just about travel time. I know that the roads are congested around the Diana, Princess of Wales Hospital, but that is not the only issue. There is also the problem that people are driving around car parks trying to find a space. It is incredibly frustrating that people are paying for a space at work and cannot get one, and sometimes that is even making them late for work.

Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): The hon. Lady makes a very good point about congestion, with people trying to find parking spaces and there not being enough. Would a compromise be for hospitals to charge a reasonable flat rate, rather than abolishing charges completely, which would exacerbate the very situation she is describing?

Melanie Onn: That is certainly worth looking at. We need a system that does not put people off attending their appointments, and that certainly does not prohibit people going to work or cause them to arrive late. Any suggestions that would allow us to reach a sensible solution would be very welcome.

Finally, I will conclude by saying that all car parking charges should be set in the context of a long-term transportation plan that includes park and ride systems, as well as increasing people's ability to use public transport, cycles and everything else. The reality is that not enough has been done on any of those things to enable people to use alternative methods of transport that will get them to work at the time they need to be there, or to appointments at the time they need them, so it has all been for nothing. The charges are incredibly prohibitive because no other methods of easy, regular transport suit the patients and the staff.

3.16 pm

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), who made a very thoughtful and engaging speech on this important issue. I am very glad that so many Members are in the Chamber to take part in the debate.

I particularly congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) on steadfastly championing this issue in Parliament for many years. He is much admired across the House for taking up issues that not everybody chooses to champion, but his work on such issues so often makes the lives of the

people he and I represent much better, so I thank him for it. Indeed, I was inspired by his efforts in this area when, before I became an MP, I campaigned in my constituency of Telford on the whole issue of parking charges after they went up by 75% at our Princess Royal Hospital, creating a great deal of local upset.

My constituents, like my right hon. Friend's, raise their concerns about this issue frequently. During the time I have campaigned on it, I have received over 5,000 letters—letters, not emails—on this specific issue. In Telford, we really care about this, and that is why I am here today. I was supposed to giving a speech at Thomas Telford School's ethical debating society but, unfortunately, I have had to cancel at short notice so that I can be here, because this matters so much. I apologise to the students at Thomas Telford School.

I was told by my hospital trust in 2014 that it was not possible to change the existing arrangement because of the long-term nature of the trust's legally binding contract with CP Plus, a parking contractor. Even poorly negotiated long-term contracts eventually expire, so we must look forward to what we will put in place when they do. It is not acceptable for those who can effect change simply to stand back and wait for onerous contracts with parking contractors to be renewed.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): As my hon. Friend says, part of the problem is that so many hospital trusts are locked into long-term PFI contracts. Many of them were negotiated in the late 1990s or early 2000s and will shortly be coming up for renewal or expiry. Does she agree that now is the time to look at what provisions we can put in place to ensure that, as the contracts are renewed, they do not contain exploitative provisions that allow hospital trusts to take patients, as well as their families and visitors, for mugs by overcharging them for parking?

Lucy Allan: My hon. Friend eloquently makes a very important point, and I am very glad that he has raised it. The debate is timely, and it is important for us to be here to make this case.

Sadly, my local hospital trust has continued to increase hospital parking charges in a way that some feel thoughtless and has been described to me as cavalier. Following the rises in 2017, it is cheaper to park in Southwater shopping centre in Telford than to go to hospital to visit a sick relative. There is clearly something wrong with a model that operates in that way, because, as many hon. Members have said, no one chooses to go to hospital.

Telford is a new town, much like the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow. There are problems to do with the way in which many new towns were designed because, rightly or wrongly, they are all about road users. Major roads and roundabout systems are much loved in Telford. Everything is focused on the car, and it was never intended that the pedestrian should be able to walk from A to B. That is one of the problems that makes this such an important issue locally.

We do not have good public transport. We cannot just hop on a bus, jump on a tube or walk to the local hospital, as people might in other areas; instead, we have to take buses, changing a few times. Many people are therefore driven, or drive, to hospital, and they have to pay. My trust gave several reasons why its charges increased, one of which was that they were lower than

those elsewhere in the country. That argument does not have a lot of teeth to it, because London is very different from Telford, in terms of income and accessibility of transport. Trusts need to consider local factors when setting charges.

It is good if concessions are offered, and there are concessions at the Princess Royal in Telford, but they are complicated to administer and operate. People have to prove that they are on benefits, that they have had an appointment and that they have paid their charges. Healthcare staff have to administer that system. They have to cancel charges and give out refunds and concessions, but that is not what they are there for. It is no good saying that if there was more money for hospitals, they would not need to charge for parking, because we all know what happens in many cases. In my local hospital, 50% of the revenue goes to CP Plus, the parking contractor, which has to be wrong.

Another argument that we have heard today is that if there were no parking charges, there would be nowhere for people to park, because anyone who wished to could use the hospital car park. It is argued that charges are a disincentive to parking. My local hospital trust says that without charges, people might stay all day in the hospital cafés, having refreshments, rather than leaving the site. Clearly that is complete nonsense, because even with incredibly high charges, there is nowhere to park. All the spaces—and the grass and concrete—are filled. The argument that everyone is sitting in a café is simply beyond my comprehension. This issue needs to be addressed with careful thought, rather than charges being seen as an instant panacea to a problem, when they clearly are not.

Bizarrely, my hospital trust tried to justify the increase by talking to residents about the number of nurses whom the parking revenue has paid for. I do not like that argument, because nurses are paid for by taxpayers through Government funding, not by parking charges. The increase that it implemented was in the contractual agreement, and nothing whatever to do with the number of nurses whom it employed.

I worry when hospital managers think that the charge is not that big a deal because parking is cheaper than somewhere else; that transport is not really their problem; and that if people are spending too long in cafés, managers need to move them on by putting up the charges. That shows that they probably do not understand the people whom they serve as well as they should.

If we dig a little deeper, we see the reason why it is not possible to park at the Princess Royal is that there has been a huge increase in the number of staff working on the site and therefore parking in the car park. We need to look at ways of helping staff to reduce car park use, as that would free up many spaces for patients to use throughout the day. We need to think imaginatively about how that might be done. Perhaps park and ride schemes specifically tailored to shift times might help. It is a surprise to find that hospitals are not looking at that.

We have heard today that this is a tax on the sick. Most taxes take account of people's ability to pay, as is absolutely right, yet hospital managers and porters pay the same to park at work. It is always the least well-off who are hit the hardest. If the aim is to tax people and then give half the tax revenue to a car parking company—that is a bit senseless in any event—do it through

pay-as-you-earn, and do not get nurses and other healthcare staff involved in the enforcement. It is completely inefficient to operate the system in this way.

Others have touched on the rigmarole that goes with paying for parking. Whether that means people paying with coins, typing in their number plate, or being videoed as they go in or come out, there is a punitive element. When a person is rushing to see someone who is extremely ill, or if they are waiting for an appointment and the consultant is running over time, it all adds to the anxiety, and in this context, it is completely inappropriate.

No one really wants to own this issue, so we all end up accepting it rather than solving it. Too many people say, "It is not our problem, it is too difficult to fix and actually, it is not really that important, because it is only £8 a day." Too often, people in power look at the world through their own eyes and not through the eyes of those whom they serve.

There is little appetite among hospital management to deal with this. It is not a big-ticket issue. It is not exciting. It is not a shiny new hospital. It does not cost £300 million—in Telford, we spend a lot of time talking about our new emergency unit—so that is why I am here today. I want the Government and hospital managers to sit up and take notice. Do not brush this off as a non-issue—it is not. Try to see it through the eyes of others and tackle the issue that is facing everyday users of our hospitals. It can be fixed and it will make a difference to the lives of those who most need hospital services. For that reason, we should all care about it.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow does a great service to his constituents. I thank him for securing this debate and I support him entirely.

3.25 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan). We all know that our NHS is underfunded. The hospital trust in my constituency, the Hull and East Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust, received more than £1.5 million in car parking charges in 2016-17, according to data released under a freedom of information request, so it might seem unusual for me to be calling for the abolition of car parking charges. We know that they can provide an income for hospitals, but I agree with the hon. Lady: much of the money does not go to the hospital, but often to the private operator of the car park.

It is the Government's responsibility to ensure that our NHS has the money it needs and not that of patients, staff or visitors. We should not expect vulnerable people to pay a sickness tax through car parking charges. I also agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) about the impact on residents living in the local area. In Walker Street opposite my hospital, resident permits have had to be introduced to try to stop other people parking on those streets. In effect, the residents who live there have to pay to park their cars, because staff cannot afford to use the car park and park their cars on those streets. The whole system is complete nonsense.

I am incredibly proud that our Labour manifesto pledged to scrap car parking charges. Our suggestion was that any loss in income could come from a hike in the tax on private healthcare insurance. That would meet the £162 million cost of free parking at all NHS hospitals across England.

[Emma Hardy]

The unfairness of the sickness tax, from having car parking charges, must be felt in context. Let me tell the Chamber about a dear friend of mine—a man called Dermot—who has been in hospital for well over 28 days. I am not sure whether hon. Members are aware of this, but a particularly cruel and unfair consequence of him being in hospital for more than 28 days is the ending of his payments for disability living allowance and attendance allowance. If he had been receiving personal independence payment instead of DLA, that would have been stopped as well. His wife's income has also been affected because she is his carer; she has stopped receiving her carer's allowance, because Dermot has lost his DLA.

The nice bit to this story is that friends have rallied round and organised a fundraising concert for Dermot called—I have to make sure I pronounce this carefully—“Folk the 28 Day Rule” to raise money to support him. However, friends should not have to arrange folk night fundraisers to compensate for the welfare system's failure to support people. The dramatic fall in his family's income makes the added travel and car parking costs particularly cruel. They are not the only family facing this situation, but their story highlights the unfairness that many families face in having to park every day to visit loved ones at a time when their income may have dramatically fallen.

We all hate to think what would happen if one of our loved ones ended up staying in hospital for a long time. One of the saddest examples of the sickness tax, as mentioned by the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), is the effect on parents of premature and sick babies. We know that if premature and sick babies are to have the best possible outcomes, they need hands-on care every day. The daily costs of travelling to hospital can present a barrier that prevents parents from being with their babies. Parents surveyed by the charity Bliss said that they spent an average of £32 a week on car parking charges when visiting their babies. That is an unacceptable cost. All new, precious babies have the right to be with their parents—and not just the parents who can afford to pay to park their cars.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I think that this is grossly unacceptable, in the case of people visiting sick babies and, indeed, in the case of men who are waiting for their wives or partners to give birth. How often do people who have paid for three hours find that they require much longer? Then they are stuck. The man is required to stay with the lady—the woman—who is giving birth, but he is worried about paying the flipping parking charge. That is wrong. There must be a way around this one.

Emma Hardy: I completely agree. I have accompanied my parents to hospital appointments. My mum sits there and sets the alarm on her phone, and then starts panicking: “We have to go back to the car park. Have we enough change?” That is not what people want to be thinking about when they are visiting a hospital.

The unfair cost is felt not just by visitors and patients, but by staff. It was during my local “big conversation” event that I became aware of the difficulties experienced by nurses and other NHS professionals in my local hospital. The financial squeeze faced by NHS professionals has been well documented. For example, midwives have

lost an average of £6,000 a year in real terms since 2010, and the additional cost to them of parking their cars seems particularly unfair. An investigation by Unison found that some nurses were having to rush out between appointments to move their cars and avoid fines. That is a ridiculous situation.

Our hospitals are open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, and staff finish their working shifts at different times. We have a duty to keep them safe. When they have just spent a shift caring for us, they should not have to return to cars that are parked in dark and isolated streets because they cannot afford to pay to use the hospital car park.

I urge the Minister to adopt this motion and to take action. As has been clear today, it has cross-party support, and it would make a real, positive difference to so many people's lives.

3.32 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), who represents the other side of the Humber bridge, and it is a particular pleasure to support my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon). He was an asset to the Front Bench, but he has also shown his campaigning skills when dealing with issues such as this on the Back Benches. We are very pleased that he is once more among us. Let us hope that we can be as successful with this campaign as we have been with one or two in the past. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), whom I will call my hon. Friend. On this occasion, I agree with every word that my Member of Parliament has said. That does not always happen.

As with so many financial matters, it is a question of getting the balance right. Should we place an additional burden on patients and their families, especially at a time when they are particularly stressed and perhaps in great distress, or should we place the burden on the very limited NHS resources that our hospital trusts are having to manage? As has already been pointed out, some patients and their families can afford to pay, but if they are visiting, for instance, a parent who is coming to the end of his or her life, they will suffer just as much distress regardless of their financial circumstances.

In 2017, the trust that serves Diana, Princess of Wales Hospital in my constituency had an income of £2.28 million from car parking charges. It tells me that there was a surplus of three quarters of a million pounds which was spent on patient care. That is good news in the sense that that is three quarters of a million pounds that it desperately needs, but it has come out of the pockets of people who are visiting the hospital or patients at particularly difficult times. As the hon. Member for Great Grimsby mentioned, we live in an area with many low-paid jobs and this is a real burden on many hard-working families.

I am not going to detain the House for too long, but I would detain it for a great deal of time if I were to read the 64-page guidance the local trust produces for parking on its hospital sites. It is an appalling burden that we place on organisations, be they in the public or private sector, when they have to go to such trouble as to produce guidance of that length on how they operate their car park. It is complete madness.

I also draw attention to the fact that patients in my constituency and the neighbouring areas in many cases have to travel much further than others for their treatment, specifically across the river to Hull. That is an additional cost; they have the burden of the petrol or of bus fares, although public transport is almost non-existent for many of the rural villages in my constituency and the wider area served by Grimsby's hospital.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a good point: the cost falls disproportionately on those who live in rural areas.

Martin Vickers: I thank my right hon. Friend for emphasising the point I am making. Many patients have to travel for perhaps 15 or 20 miles to get to the hospital, and that is an additional burden that they can well do without.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby mentioned the fact that there is a problem with management, and she mentioned parking in neighbouring streets. I will add the names of a few more of them: Cragston Avenue, St Helens Avenue, Charles Avenue. We know them very well; when I was a councillor for that area people used to complain about cars blocking their streets, and I am sure they complain to their Member of Parliament today.

That is a problem I recognise, and there is also a problem with commuter parking, which has to be dealt with. Tokens have been mentioned, and simple time limits of two or three hours before charges kick in might be another alternative, as well as the flat charge that my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Royston Smith) mentioned.

I urge the Government to tackle this; it needs Government action to resolve it. It is unreasonable to expect trusts—particularly those like Northern Lincolnshire and Goole, which are in special measures and have major challenges of their own—to do so. An extra burden such as this is something they could well do without. As has been said, savings can be made through better procurement procedures, and that is one possible route. I am sure every Member in the House today could identify one particular saving to meet the £200 million-plus the NHS would have to find. But this is a major problem and a burden on our constituents and it could easily be resolved, and I urge the Government to get on with resolving it quickly.

3.38 pm

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) for securing this important debate on one of the many issues facing carers, families and staff who visit our hospitals.

If I parked at the hospital car park in my constituency of Colne Valley, it would cost me a third more than if I parked in a council-owned car park. How is that acceptable? Is this not NHS trusts profiteering from the sick and vulnerable? When people are in a rush taking a sick friend or relative to the hospital, they will not necessarily consider where is cheaper to park; they will park in the closest car park and then sort it out later. Even people who have to attend hospital regularly will not get free parking. At the Huddersfield Royal Infirmary, a two-and-a-half-hour stay, three times a week, 52 weeks a

year will cost £780. That is £780 to support someone who is receiving medical treatment. Even some who are disabled blue badge holders have to pay this.

Bob Stewart: I think I speak on behalf of all of us when I say that I find it iniquitous that anyone with a blue badge should have to pay a penny when they go to a hospital.

Thelma Walker: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman.

How are my constituents meant to afford these excessive costs? Hard-working nurses, doctors, porters, cleaners and receptionists go to work to help people. Those hard-working staff are paying £1,680 a year to support families whose loved ones are dying. They are paying £1,680 a year to work a 12-hour shift caring for people. They are paying £1,680 a year to save lives. How is that acceptable by anyone's standards? How can anyone think it is right that those hard-working professionals are paying nearly £2,000 a year to help and care for people? I can tell the House that it is not.

I appreciate that trusts, including the Calderdale Huddersfield NHS Foundation Trust, are following national guidelines, but patients and staff feel as though they are treating them as cash cows. In 2016-17, my local trust remained nearly £15 million in deficit. In the CHFT annual reports for 2014-15, the trust recorded £1.4 million income from car parking. In 2016-17, that figure rose to £2.7 million. Yes, the extra money that the trust makes helps to plug the hole left by Government underfunding, but it should not have to. Our NHS should be fully funded; it should not have to depend on car parking fees. I urge the Government to consider the comments being made today by Members across the House, and to act swiftly to resolve this issue.

3.42 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): Thank you for calling me to speak, Madam Deputy Speaker. This takes me back a long way, to 2006, when you were a Health Minister and I shadowed you for some four years. The issue of car parking charges was around at that time, and successive Governments have talked about addressing it. This is a regressive tax. It is a tax on everybody, because everybody needs the NHS—that is why it is there. It is even more regressive for NHS staff, who are taxed even more just to go to work their difficult shift patterns. That is completely unacceptable.

I have raised this issue many times before. Members might remember that I used to be a firefighter. Firefighters do not pay to park in the yard at the fire station. Our excellent police do not pay to park their cars. The ambulance service is part of the NHS in my constituency, and its staff do not pay, either. They drive to work and they go to the pound to pick up their ambulance. So why should other emergency workers be charged in this way? It is fundamentally wrong.

This issue has gone back and forth across the Floor of the House, no matter which colour Government we have. Contracts have been signed, by previous Governments and by ours, that have locked us into hugely expensive agreements, particularly the private finance initiatives. We need to do something about that, and I will say more about it in a moment.

Bob Stewart: It seems to me that there should be staff car parks. There should be a set-up in which staff have separate parking arrangements so that they do not block public parking spaces. They should also have guaranteed slots, so that they are not late for their shifts.

Sir Mike Penning: That happens in some parts of the world. For example, that is what they do at the Luton and Dunstable University Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, which looks after part of my constituency. I went there the other day to visit someone who was in palliative care. I did not know how long I was going to be seeing them, or whether I would see them again. The fantastic news is that they are now at home, being looked after by the hospice movement, of which I have been a member for 40 years. That is what the hospice movement is very much for.

Interestingly, I parked and paid in what I thought was a public car park, but I was in the staff car park. So, when I went to try to get out, the barrier would not go up. I pressed the button to talk to someone, and they said, "You've parked illegally." I said, "How have I parked illegally? I've got a ticket." Fortunately, they had no idea who I was, because they probably would have just lifted the barrier to get the MP out of there as fast as possible, which is normally what happens when we visit our hospitals, isn't it—everything is brilliant, rosy and shiny and everything is great. I said to the person, "No. If you're going to fine me, fine me. I'll see you in court, because I have paid in an NHS public car park that you have designated." They eventually just said, "Oh, go away." I have been waiting for the fine to come through—it probably will now—and I will see them in court, but the charging is morally wrong.

The situation is even more difficult for patients. The previous debate was about babies and parenting. Babies come out when they want to, usually, not when we want them to, and not based on how much time is left on a car parking ticket. That is what happens, and yet people are getting fined every day because they have overstayed their time in the car park. How can that be right?

A Member who could not be in the Chamber today because they had to attend another meeting, asked me to mention volunteer drivers. What would we do without them? They are fantastic, but they have to pay to park in some hospital car parks before they take patients home, which they do as volunteers because the patient ambulance service is struggling so much. In some parts of the country—I struggle that it is happening in my area—people are actually asking for patient transport because the car parking facilities are so bad. They are putting more of a burden on patient transport because they cannot find a parking space and they are petrified of being late for their appointment. If they are late for their appointment owing to patient transport, that is okay, but if they cannot find a parking space, they hear, "Oh, you're a bad person." We have heard that people are parking outside hospital car parks. Blue badge holders are being charged to park in a car park when they can park for free on the road, so that is what they do. We know that is happening, and it is really very wrong.

I know that the Minister is a good man, and an honourable man, but when he stands up to reply he will almost certainly say that parking is devolved to NHS trusts, and that it is for them to decide how they run their facilities. But for those of us who are Members of Parliament, NHS trusts are completely unaccountable.

We can moan about this, but they will not listen in the slightest. They will be looking at whether they can get away with it and how much they can raise.

This is not just about money; it is about space. We have heard that if car parks do not charge, they will be full of people from the town centre. When the acute facility at the excellent Hemel Hempstead Hospital was closed, it was moved to the middle of Watford town centre, next to a football stadium. Apparently Watford play there, and a lot of my constituents will be very upset when they hear about me being derogatory about Watford, but they have a huge number of fans. I went to Watford General Hospital on a Saturday morning to visit a constituent, a good friend of mine, and I parked and paid. When I came out, there was a group of parking people around who clearly wanted to give me a ticket. I had paid in the football bit that is designated for use by Watford football club when they are playing at home. What has that got to do with going to see and look after someone at an NHS hospital, or go to that hospital?

Unfortunately, the parking attendants did recognise me, and they were very apologetic, but I do not think that is right. What would have happened if they had not known who I was? The ticket was coming. How on earth can we have a full acute hospital in the middle of a town as big as Watford, next to a football stadium, and then call that a modern NHS hospital? The parking facilities there for staff and patients are frankly almost non-existent, not least because tons of it has been carved off for the football club. I want Watford to be very successful, but what I want in our part of the world is a brand-new hospital, with proper parking facilities, on a greenfield site away from the town centre, so that we do not have any concerns about whether people will park there all day in order to go shopping. At the moment, though, I do not have that.

There is the acute hospital in Watford, which struggles—it has just come out of special measures and I wish it well—and Hemel Hempstead Hospital, which is basically a clinic these days. We have out-patients; we have a few intermediate wards. They charge the staff, and patients with out-patient appointments, to park there. The car park is empty. Hardly anybody parks there because there is nothing on the site any more, but the hospital still insists on charging. That pushes the patients outside, so there is restricted parking outside, which is also an issue. It is cheaper to park in the council car park in the town centre and walk 400 yards up the hill than to park in a car park that is empty because there are so few facilities at the hospital.

This problem has to be sorted out from central Government, and the central Government guidelines have to be enforceable. I was a Minister for many years: Departments can issue as many notices as they like, but nothing will happen if they do not come out with the stick. Could the money be raised in other ways? Could there be savings in the NHS? As we have heard, the amount of money being raised, compared with the overall pot, is peanuts. One of the more recent chief executives of my very small acute trust was on a package of over £300,000 a year. If we want to save money instantly, let us take a look at the salaries of the really top people in the NHS and let us look after the people at the bottom—we certainly should not charge them to park when they go to work.

3.50 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to follow the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning). Much of what he said echoes the complaints that have come to my constituency office.

I thank the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) for securing this debate. This subject is close to my heart because I used to work for the NHS. I well remember when car parking charges were introduced for patients, carers, visitors and staff. I remember the controversy it caused at the time, and it still causes controversy now. This issue has not gone away.

I worked for the NHS as a clinical scientist, but I was also a workplace rep for Unite, the trade union. I remember the resistance that all the health unions put up against the introduction of car parking charges, which we saw then, and still see now, as a tax on staff coming to work and on patients, visitors and carers.

The practice of charging for car parking in my area was started by Central Manchester University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, and the issue of people using the free parking at the hospital and then going elsewhere was the reason for introducing those charges, but once Central Manchester University Hospitals did that, all the other hospitals in Greater Manchester followed suit.

The only reason anyone would go to North Manchester General Hospital, where I worked, is because they work there, because they are getting treatment there or because they are visiting as a friend, a relative or a carer. There is no other reason for someone to visit that hospital, so there was no real reason to start charging people to park there.

The trust claimed that the moneys taken would be put towards improving the car parking facilities, which I admit were absolutely dire. We used to park on unsurfaced, potholed areas, which were eventually improved once the charging system became embedded—that is one positive thing that came out of it.

The trust initially purchased some wheel clamps and threatened to clamp the car of those who did not pay. I worked with some interesting people in the NHS, and one colleague decided to buy his own personal wheel clamp, which he attached to his car when he parked in the morning. The hospital is not in the most salubrious of areas, so the clamp served two purposes: it immobilised his car and kept it secure; and it gave the impression that he had been penalised for not paying to park. Within a few weeks his wheel clamp had paid for itself.

Not everyone was that inventive, however, and gradually the idea of paying to park at the hospital became commonplace, if not accepted, although the trade unions always strongly opposed the practice. The wheel clamps were quickly phased out—rumour had it that the trust had been successfully sued, although we never found out the full facts—and the trust began to impose fines on those deemed to have breached the rules.

The whole issue of car parking fees and fines generated a huge amount of controversy, discussion and debate, not to mention a huge number of visits, phone calls and emails to the trade union office. Anyone who might question the need to give trade union reps facility time to do their job might like to reflect on the massive pressure put upon them by issues such as this. When I left the trust, having been elected to this place, I was

paying £20 per month in car parking charges, which was taken directly out of my salary. That staff fee is now £22.10, which might not sound a lot, but represents an increase of more than 10% over the past three years. That pays scant regard to the fact that NHS staff have had their pay either frozen or capped to a maximum of just 1%—this is completely disproportionate.

As an MP, I have helped many constituents who were sent demands for car parking fines by a company called Civil Enforcement Ltd, which is contracted by my local Pennine Acute Hospitals NHS Trust to pursue those deemed to have breached car parking regulations. I have had constituents aggressively chased for payment when they have parked in a staff parking space by mistake, and the practices of this company do seem to lack the human touch. Most people attending hospital usually have more important matters on their mind and could be forgiven for being slightly distracted while trying to work the myriad instructions posted in a hospital car park prior to visiting sick relatives or going for treatment themselves.

The charges can be prohibitive: £1 for one hour, £4 for 8 hours and £8 for up to 24 hours. As many Members have pointed out, most of the time the patient or visitor does not know how long they will be in the hospital for, so most will err on the side of caution and pay more than they should. The ticket machines also do not take banknotes. When I worked at the hospital, I was regularly asked for change by patients and visitors struggling to feed the machines. I am sure that all those people had more important things to deal with and could have done without that additional stress. I accept that my local trust will provide a weekly ticket for £15 and will make arrangements for those with long-term illness, but that is not immediately clear to patients and visitors, and it requires action on their part at an already stressful time.

The motion calls on the Government to provide a means whereby car parking charges may be abolished and I fully support that, but hand in hand with that has to go an improved public transport system, so that staff, patients, carers and visitors are not as reliant on private cars. Sadly, in my constituency, we have just had a bus service between Rochdale, Middleton and North Manchester General Hospital withdrawn. Retrograde steps such as that do nothing to reduce the demand on hospital car parks, and we absolutely need a comprehensive public transport policy to support the abolition of hospital car parking charges.

The other step we need to take is to reduce NHS trusts' dependence on income from car parking. Department of Health guidelines used to stipulate that income earned from car parking should be spent only on the maintenance and running of car parks, but those guidelines now appear to have been relaxed, and cash-strapped trusts are now using that income for patient care. In fact, when I visited North Manchester General Hospital recently I was disappointed to see that a staff car park that had been in a very poor state when I worked there many years ago had been allowed to deteriorate even further. Clearly, no income had been spent there on improving conditions for staff. The Pennine Acute Hospitals NHS Trust alone made £3 million from car parking charges last year. The NHS underfunding issue must be addressed in any consideration of the abolition of car parking charges.

3.59 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): First, I wish to thank the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) for having secured and initiated such an important debate, which affects so many in my constituency and across our country. For many, attending a hospital is a vulnerable time, whether we are seeking treatment for ourselves or for a loved one. Our hospitals are indeed underfunded and overstretched, but it is not for sick patients, anxious relatives and already hard-pressed NHS staff to be filling the funding gaps.

We have heard that hospital car parking charges raise funds, but many hospital trusts up and down our country have increased their charges without consulting the public—the very people they are there for. Some trusts allow private contractors to manage car parking sites, which is leading to penalties and fines for patients and visitors, as we have heard in this important debate. At a time when the cost of living is increasing and those who work in the public sector have had their pay capped, the rising cost of hospital car parking only increases the financial burden on many in our constituencies.

It is not just the patients who are deterred by higher charges; families and friends might be discouraged from visiting patients at their bedside, which must surely have a negative impact on the mental wellbeing of patients and lead to increased pressure on nursing staff. From personal experience, I know that many patients rely on relatives and friends to act as interpreters or advocates. Such elements are seemingly overlooked when surveys and reports are undertaken, but patient care can be impacted where higher charges deter people from providing such crucial assistance.

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): We have heard a lot about staff and patients and families. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) mentioned volunteers earlier, and the hon. Gentleman is talking about the importance of patient support. Does he agree that it is particularly short-sighted of any hospital trust to seek to charge volunteers, who give of their time, for parking?

Mr Dhesi: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his excellent intervention, and I could not agree more. We have heard previously about volunteer drivers. It is just not fair. It is nonsensical to ask them to dig further into their pockets. It also places an unfair and unnecessary burden on hard-working staff who have gone for years without a decent pay rise. While some hospitals offer free or discounted parking for specific kinds of treatment or for people in receipt of specific benefits, there are significant variations in fees across trusts in the same region. Wexham Park Hospital in my constituency has some of the highest parking charges in the region: £3.30 after the first 15 minutes and an increase, in stages, to £8 over five hours. That is the situation in my constituency, but that trust is only doing what all other trusts are no doubt doing and it is within Government guidelines. I do not want older and vulnerable patients to be deterred from attending hospital. They should be able to get to their appointments in a comfortable, dignified, affordable manner and within a reasonable time.

Most NHS car parking charges have been abolished in Scotland and Wales, and I know that the Government have issued guidance to NHS trusts on the implementation

of car parking charges, including the provision of discounted or free parking. These guidelines are not based in legislation and appear to have had little effect. The Labour Government in 2010 left fully costed plans to phase out charges for in-patients and their visitors, and in 2015 a private Member's Bill on this subject gained cross-party support but was talked out. Clearly, many across the country and the House want an end to hospital car parking charges. Let us send a clear message today that there is another way forward and that this unfair stealth tax on the vulnerable must end.

4.3 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) on his extremely powerful speech and on raising this important issue.

I want to start with an experience that our family recently went through. My daughter started to show signs of acute appendicitis. As any family could imagine, we quickly bundled our daughter, who was in agony, into the car and drove to the hospital—it was not a very calm journey. I am sure that many Members will have had a similar experience. We were panicking and scrambling around for change so that we could park the car, then taking turns to pop out every few hours to move the car or top up the ticket. That was obviously a one-off and bearable, but for many a trip to the hospital is sadly not a one-off experience, and they are forced to take several trips a week because of chronic illness. They are people going through the worst of times, and the cynical approach of charging them to park is unacceptable. It is not anyone's choice to be ill, and they should not be exploited.

New figures show that the money raked in from NHS car parks in England run by private firms has increased to £500,000 every day. The £175 million that was made from hospital car parking charges in 2016-17 is equivalent to only 0.001% of the total health spend, but still, ruthless private car parking firms pocket most of it. It cannot be fair that worried family members who visit their loved ones can end up with eye-watering fines if they arrive late back to their cars. As my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) said, it cannot be fair that NHS staff who have parking charges deducted from their wages are fined for parking in the wrong bay when they cannot find a space in the correct bay.

Some may recommend that regular hospital visitors use public transport, but in my constituency, Batley and Spen, the bus that used to connect Birstall with our local hospital has been cancelled, as have local bus services in many smaller communities. That has forced more people to use a car and thereby incur parking costs. My local hospital, Dewsbury and District Hospital, charges after 20 minutes, so people get 20 minutes for free. There is a reduction for blue badge holders, but they still have to pay. There is a stress-inducing pay-on-exit system, and it is quite complicated to get car parking concessions approved by hospital staff on the day. It is not an ideal situation.

Sir Mike Penning: Does the hon. Lady agree that in the 21st century, means-testing at the point of delivery, which is what we are talking about here, is morally unacceptable in an NHS of which we should be and are proud?

Tracy Brabin: I am so glad that the right hon. Gentleman raised that issue, because the concession that I was talking about is available only to the patient, not to the low-paid person who may have driven the patient to hospital. The poorly person has to go and get the car parking concession. It is absolutely unfair.

A freedom of information request by Unison revealed that some hospitals charge nurses and health professionals who regularly visit hospitals up to £100 a month. As other Members have said, the cost of parking also has wider effects on the surrounding streets. I have been contacted by many constituents living around Dewsbury and District Hospital who complain that those who cannot afford car parking charges, or who think they might have to stay for several hours, park on residential streets, blocking people's drives and making it difficult for people to park outside their own homes. Free hospital parking would end that.

We know that trusts are struggling to balance the books after years of being underfunded by the Government, but we must ensure that they are not forced to fill the funding gap by charging sick and poorly patients, their visitors and anxious relatives, and already hard-pressed NHS staff.

Car parking charges are a tax on serious illness. Labour would scrap car parking charges at all hospitals. We would fund that by raising insurance tax on private healthcare to 20%, to meet the £162 million cost of providing free parking at all NHS hospitals in England. Charities, trade unions, the British Medical Association, the Society for Acute Medicine and the public are all calling out for the Government to listen. In Scotland and Wales, car parking charges have been abolished in all but a handful of hospitals. We should show some humanity and do the same. I support the motion.

4.9 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) on securing this important debate.

It is clear from hon. Members' speeches that the scandal of hospital parking charges must come to an end. Gravely ill people and people visiting relatives while in a state of distress should not be treated as cash cows by hospital car park operators. It is shocking that half of all trusts last year charged disabled people to park in some or all of their disabled parking spaces. We need to address the ridiculous inconsistency whereby hospital parking is mainly free in Wales and Scotland while trusts charge for parking in Northern Ireland and England. It is time that all hospitals abolished parking fees. Drivers must not be punished for being sick, visiting loved ones or attending medical appointments. People do not choose to be ill and should not be asked to pay for a no-choice hospital visit.

Many of my Enfield, Southgate constituents have approached me about this issue. A mother contacted me to say that after her husband took their son to the North Middlesex University Hospital accident and emergency unit with breathing difficulties in the middle of the night, he was later presented with a parking charge notice. I do not believe that people rushing to hospital with gravely ill children should be put into the position of having to worry about such matters. Imagine if my constituent had spent extra precious moments scrambling for change for parking while his son struggled to breathe.

Would that have been a sensible and responsible thing for the parent of a seriously ill child to do? Of course not. That is exactly why we must get rid of these charges.

I have also been contacted by a father who had to take his young daughter to the emergency department. Throughout the evening and into the night, my constituent had to leave his daughter to feed more money into the car park meter because she was being kept in for such a long period of time—it ended up being overnight. My constituent kept paying into the machines, which failed to give him receipts when requested, leaving him unsure how much time he had left. My constituent reported seeing other people in various states of distress walking around the car park and seeming unsure of what to do. Two weeks later, my constituent received a notice telling him that he had not paid for all the time that he had been in the car park. Again, we must ask whether this is an appropriate way to treat the parents of very ill children.

We have all heard in the press about desperately ill patients who have been forced to quit work and left with bills for hundreds of pounds due to their frequent visits to hospitals. Then there are hugely unfair cases of NHS staff who have had parking charges deducted from their wages, but then have been unable to get a space and have been fined for parking in the wrong bay. Several elderly constituents have contacted me to say that they face relatively high parking charges for their regular hospital attendances.

This Sunday, 4 February, is World Cancer Day, and many of us know people who have had treatment for cancer. Anyone who knows the effects of chemotherapy will be aware of how debilitating the treatment can be. People often need a carer to help them to make the journey home. Considering the frequency of treatments for cancer and other illnesses, surely car parking charges are nothing more than a tax on the sick. As the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) pointed out, many people have no choice but to drive to their local hospital due to the infrequency of public transport.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): My hon. Friend talks about travel difficulties. Does he agree that reductions in the number of bus services in many areas mean that there is no alternative to parking in hospital car parks? In constituencies such as mine, which has no hospital, that means frequent journeys for people who require treatment.

Bambos Charalambous: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. People in rural areas or who live far away from their local hospitals are unfairly affected by having poor transport networks to ferry them to hospitals, so they have no choice but to travel by car.

The right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) made the excellent point that other emergency workers are not being required to pay to park at their police or fire stations. In addition, hospital staff, by taking up parking spaces, are reducing the number of spaces for patients and visitors. NHS staff should be able to park for free, but they should also be able to afford to live nearer the hospital. It is therefore ironic that we are in a situation in which NHS trusts are forced to sell land that could have been used to house NHS staff locally.

Another pressure on North Middlesex Hospital has been the fact that the closure of the accident and emergency unit at Chase Farm has resulted in far more

[*Bambos Charalambous*]

visitors to its A&E unit. Those additional visits meant that, between Christmas and new year, the hospital ran out of acute beds. One can only imagine how busy the hospital car park was during that period.

Many hon. Members have made excellent contributions about the need for the Government to abolish car parking charges. It is time that those unfair charges were scrapped and the NHS properly funded. For the sake of NHS staff, parents and visitors, I ask the Minister to bring forward measures to scrap car parking charges as soon as possible.

4.15 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is an honour to speak in this debate, and indeed in any debate in which the NHS is at the heart of what is being discussed. I particularly thank the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) for bringing the debate to the House. As has been discussed, the matter is extremely important to patients, charities, emergency workers, volunteers, carers and NHS staff, so it is a credit to him that he secured this debate. He set out his case most eloquently and comprehensively.

The SNP Scottish Government scrapped hospital car parking charges approximately 10 years ago in all car parks that are owned by the NHS. I urge the UK Government to follow both this principle and policy.

As an NHS employee for more than 20 years, I must declare an interest. I was part of the campaign, all those many years ago, as a Unite rep, to scrap NHS parking charges. I was so pleased when we succeeded, because that has made a great difference to many people, and has saved some of the most vulnerable who are already facing so many financial difficulties from spending money on parking.

Robert Halfon: The hon. Lady has been very generous in giving way, and I thank her for her kind remarks. Given that, for the most part, hospital parking charges have been scrapped in Scotland, she must have heard about how the problem of people perhaps misusing the car parks to go shopping or whatever was dealt with.

Dr Cameron: Indeed. Where there is a will there is a way. It can happen; it can be done. Basically, it is a matter of prioritisation and making things happen. That issue can be raised with the Minister today.

Hospital car parking charges hit the most vulnerable people in our society: disabled people; those who are chronically and even terminally ill; families caring for terminally ill children; and those who require repeat appointments and lengthy hospital stays. Before the change in Scotland, I heard about families and couples who had had their cars impounded because their partner was giving birth in the maternity unit and things did not go quite to time, as happens so often in these cases, and they were unable to feed their meter. At a time of utmost importance for the family, that is one of the last things that we would want to have on our mind.

NHS staff, particularly those on community-based shifts, are also penalised. They often have no choice but to use their cars to travel from the hospital to make community visits, so they cannot travel by public transport to their hospital base. There is something fundamentally wrong with charging our valued NHS staff to get to their work of saving lives when their pay has already been affected for so many years by caps.

The SNP is clear that the founding principle of the NHS is services that are free for everyone—services that are not out for profit. We have heard today from hon. Members that it is sometimes cheaper to park in town centres than to park at hospitals. That just cannot be right. By 2015, getting rid of hospital car parking charges had saved patients and staff in Scotland more than £25 million. Parking charges are basically a tax on NHS treatment, and that cannot be allowed to go on. As chair of the all-party group for disability, I am particularly concerned that people with disabilities, who we know are more likely to experience poverty, are being doubly financially penalised if they require medical treatment, as in England they have to pay for hospital parking—should they have retained their Motability vehicles of course.

The right hon. Member for Harlow is right that there are pragmatic ways to address the issue. The things that are said to prevent change from coming about can be overcome. He discussed tokens and other pragmatic ideas that can be put in place and that can work. We have made this work—we made it a success—so it can happen. With the will, there is the way.

I will take a brief moment to extend the issue from hospital parking charges by addressing parking for NHS staff in health centres. I believe that all health centres in my constituency have free parking, aside from the new Hunter Community Health Centre multi-storey car park. I have been in a somewhat intransigent negotiation with NHS Lanarkshire for more than a year, as only a limited amount of permit parking has been made available for staff. This has unfortunately meant that some staff—often those in lower pay bands, such as admin staff—face extortionate weekly charges for getting to work. That is unprincipled and unfair. Why should we penalise only staff who work in a particular health centre?

On Fridays, I have taken to monitoring the free spaces in the car park. I can assure the House that it is half empty every single Friday, which is usually an extremely busy day for car parks elsewhere, so there are enough spaces for the staff. I once again urge NHS Lanarkshire's chief executive, Calum Campbell, to reverse this decision and ensure that permits for staff, as requested, are restored and that this principled step is taken. I will be writing to him after the debate, which I am sure he will look forward to, as he always does. I will let him know that he has been mentioned in the House of Commons once again.

I thank hon. Members from all parties who have taken part in this debate: the hon. Members for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), for Telford (Lucy Allan), for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker), for Slough (Mr Dhesi), for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) and for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous); the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), who raised an important point about people in rural areas being badly affected; the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), who made an extremely pertinent point about volunteer drivers; and the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), who worked for the NHS as fellow Unite rep in my time, and who has done great work for the NHS.

Everyone who has spoken has urged the Government to act. We do not need any superficial rhetoric, but we do need action. I ask the Minister and the Government

to act by putting NHS patients, staff, carers, relatives, volunteers, emergency workers and those who care about the NHS first. We are all requesting change. This request must be taken forward, and I trust that the Minister will do so.

4.22 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I am pleased to have the opportunity to respond to this debate on a very important subject. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) for bringing this subject forward. He and I agree on most aspects of the issue, and he has campaigned passionately on it for so many years.

Robert Halfon: As you have.

Julie Cooper: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that comment.

I am grateful to Members on both sides of the House because it seems that there is much agreement on the matter. It is heartening to hear Members mentioning—and fully understanding—its impact on patients, visitors, carers and NHS staff. My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) mentioned the effect on the greater transportation system.

The hon. Members for Telford (Lucy Allan) and for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), and my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) made powerful speeches, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker), who accused the system of profiteering. My hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) made an important point on behalf of staff. The right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) referred to the burden of having to pay to go to work. My hon. Friends the Members for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) and for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) mentioned personal family issues when people are taken away from a sick family member's bed to replenish parking meters.

No one likes to pay to park, but to pay to park at a hospital really does add insult to injury. We are not talking about a luxury experience, a shopping trip or a fun night out; we are talking about paying to visit a hospital. People are not queuing up to go to the hospital café, as the hon. Member for Telford pointed out. No one goes to hospital because they want to. People go because they are sick. They go for treatment, for surgery, for chemotherapy and for kidney dialysis, and they go to visit loved ones. In short, hospitals are not destinations of choice: people go because they must. I am quite shocked that it is free to park at Trafford shopping centre yet I must pay to park at my local hospital.

During the past three years, I have spent hours and hours visiting my mother in hospital. I have often gone backwards and forwards two or three times a day, juggling hospital visiting around work and other commitments. I have to say that it has all been very distressing. As I leave the hospital each night worried, wondering what tomorrow will bring, the last thing I want to do is to stand outside in the cold queuing to pay for my parking. This burden is, of course, in addition to the actual cost.

Some hospital car parks demand payment in advance, as we have heard. This brings its own set of problems, because patients and visitors have to judge how long

each hospital visit will last, and then often have to leave the ward or treatment room to feed the ever-hungry parking machine. Of course, running to and fro between the car park and the hospital is impossible for someone hooked up to a dialysis machine. Many dialysis patients suffer with multiple conditions and are unable to work, so paying to park three times a week for dialysis sessions that each last four to five hours is a real financial burden for them and their carers.

Paula in my constituency relies on the weekly £62.70 carer's allowance she has received since she was forced to give up work to provide round-the-clock care for her husband, who suffered a severe stroke. He has been in hospital for the past month. She has visited every day, often staying for two to three hours to support and comfort him. This costs her more than £20 a week. By the time she has paid for her petrol, half her carer's allowance is gone.

We have a national health service that was set up to be free at the point of delivery. It was established in 1948 to make healthcare a right for all, but that is not what is happening. Even though hospital car parking is free in Scotland and Wales, here in England, hospital users are forced to pay often extortionate rates, with charges varying from £1.50 an hour to £4 an hour. We are charging the chronically ill, the terminally ill, and their carers and visitors. More than half of all people over 76 have conditions that require regular hospital appointments, and hospital car parking charges are an extra burden for them and their families. The Alzheimer's Society reports that patients with dementia stay five to seven times longer in hospital than other patients aged over 65. Hospitals can be frightening places for people with that condition. They rely on family and carers visiting them to give support. Parking charges are an extra burden that these families could well do without.

The Patients Association has commented:

"For patients, parking charges amount to an extra charge for being ill...Hospital appointments are often delayed or last longer than expected, so even if you pay for parking you could end up being fined if your ticket runs out. Visiting a hospital can be stressful enough without the added concern of whether you need to top up the parking."

Macmillan Cancer Support says:

"The core principle of the NHS is to provide free healthcare for all at the point of access. But sadly some cancer patients in England are paying extortionate hospital car parking charges in order to access treatment for a life-threatening illness."

Bliss, the charity for babies born prematurely or sick, says in its "It's not a game: the very real costs of having a premature or sick baby" report that these charges can contribute to the financial burden that many families face when their babies need neonatal care.

In the midst of all this misery, the average hospital trust is making £1 million of profit from car parking charges, and several hospitals the length and breadth of the country report profits of over £3 million. Last year, NHS hospitals made a record £174 million from charging patients, visitors and staff. In addition, 40 trusts report additional income from parking fines.

Some people point out that public transport is an option that avoids parking charges. Public transport provision has been reduced in response to funding cuts, but even where it exists, there are many for whom it is not an option. Some patients are too unwell or too frail

[Julie Cooper]

to travel on a bus. Others, including cancer patients attending for chemotherapy, have reduced immunity and must avoid contact with the general public.

Sir Mike Penning: The hon. Lady is making a compelling case, as have most Members. Public transport has its place for out-patients and so on, where it is available, but imagine someone going into labour and saying, “Can I wait for the No. 2 bus, please?” This is farcical. We need car parks to be there for people when they need them, rather than being a cash cow.

Julie Cooper: I entirely agree and thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention.

Patients and carers are often balancing work and other commitments, and have tight time schedules that preclude public transport. I have spoken to the parents of a terminally ill child who left their child’s bedside only to tend to the needs of their other children. They do not have time to wait for a bus.

No discussion of hospital car parking charges would be complete without a consideration of their impact on NHS staff, which Members have spoken about eloquently. These staff pay to go to work and are still not even guaranteed a space. That can lead to them being late for the beginning of their shift. Some hospital staff whose shift overruns because they are tending to patients’ needs face fines for overstaying their parking time. That is clearly no way to treat our health professionals. It is no wonder we face a crisis in recruitment and retention.

Government action to date has been limited to a series of recommendations on hospital car parking. Currently the Government recommend that hospital car parking charges should not be applied to blue badge holders, carers, visitors of relatives who are gravely ill, and patients who have frequent out-patient appointments. In reality, those recommendations count for very little. In fact, the trend is to increase car parking charges and to reduce the number of those who are exempt. Many hospital trusts have even begun to charge blue badge holders.

It is not good enough for the Government to abdicate responsibility. This is a matter of principle. Scandalously, Conservative Members have previously argued in the Chamber that the NHS needs the income from parking charges. I have no doubt that the NHS needs this revenue, as it is common knowledge that the service has been starved of funding since 2010, but is it right that we fund our health service by taxing the sick?

Labour Members will have none of this. I am proud that the next Labour Government will ensure that our NHS is properly funded and will abolish car parking charges at all hospitals. To pay for that, we will increase the premium tax on all private health insurance policies. Crucially, no hospital will lose funding as a result of our policy.

In 2015, I asked the Government via a private Member’s Bill to exempt carers from hospital car parking charges. At the time, that relatively modest proposal was met with derision from Government Members. My attempt to remove this financial burden was dismissed as a worthy aim, but not worthy enough for the Government to support. Indeed, Conservative Members went to great lengths to talk the Bill out.

Times, I hope, have changed. Today I am asking, along with the right hon. Member for Harlow, that the Government remove all car parking charges at NHS hospitals. Today we ask the Government to do the decent thing by removing this tax on the sick and taking action to ensure that we truly have an NHS that is free at the point of access.

4.32 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Care (Stephen Barclay): May I begin by commending my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) for securing the debate? Members across the House recognise that he has campaigned assiduously on this issue for some time, as he has on many campaigns, and he has already had some success, as reflected in the Government guidelines issued in 2014. However, it is right, in the light of the concerns raised across the House, that the issue is revisited. This has been a very constructive debate, granted by the Backbench Business Committee, and I commend all Members who have contributed and informed the House of what is happening in their constituencies.

I do not think anyone in the House has any issue with the desirability of scrapping car parking charges. As English Members of Parliament—it is different for our Scottish National party colleagues—we all pay these charges, as the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) said in a constructive way. We all know that they are unpopular with our constituents and are a concern for staff working hard within the NHS.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) highlighted, the charges predate this Government. This issue has long been debated in the House, by parties on both sides. The issue is not the desirability of what is sought by my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow. The issue is the execution and how it would be done in a way that does not have unintended consequences, and how those might be mitigated. I think we got a flavour of some of those unintended consequences in the constructive contributions made by Members on both sides of the House.

Implicit in the motion is the suggestion that car parking charges apply in all NHS hospitals. It is not in the specific wording, but the impression from the debate has been that they apply across the NHS as a whole. However, as hon. Members will be well aware, 67% of NHS sites do not charge at all at present. We are talking about a subset of the NHS where charges apply, albeit that the subset is particularly concentrated in the acute sector, from which many of the examples we have heard come. For example, mental health patients, who are often among the most vulnerable of our constituents seeking the support of the NHS, do not on the whole face charges because those parking facilities are not charged for. This tends to be an issue in the acute sector.

Robert Halfon: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words, but I must say that I disagree with what he has said. Hospital car parking charges in England are widespread, and we just have to go from one hospital to another to see that. As I said, nearly 50% of hospitals are charging the disabled, for example.

Stephen Barclay: With respect to my right hon. Friend, it is a statement of fact, as confirmed by my officials—I am very happy to correspond with him further about

it—that 67% of NHS sites do not charge. If one wants to get into the definition of a hospital, it actually covers more than acute services. I do not want to get distracted by that point. The one I was seeking to make is to recognise that this issue is particularly concentrated on acute hospitals, and that is the issue before us.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby recognised that there is considerable room for flexibility within trusts. One of the key issues in this debate is the distinction between charges covering the maintenance of car parks, and how a reduction in charges may lead to a reduction in the number of spaces and the quality of the facilities—we heard, for example, about the state of the car parks in north Manchester—and those involving profiteering, with charges going beyond of the cost of maintenance. The hon. Lady is concerned about that, and the interplay with the current guidance. The hon. Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker) also mentioned that when she highlighted the distinction between the charges at her hospital and those of the local authority, and raised the issue of transparency.

The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) expressed concerns about transparency in relation to blue badge holders. They are not means-tested, so an affluent blue badge holder could be spared a charge while a less affluent visitor to a hospital is charged. Transparency about how the guidance is applied is therefore a factor, as has been recognised.

Sir Mike Penning: May I push the Minister a little bit on blue badge holders? Quite rightly, blue badge holders are not means-tested. The key is their ability to access services. It does not matter how much they have in the bank. If they need to go to a hospital and they have a blue badge, surely spaces should be free and as close to the point of entry as possible.

Stephen Barclay: Absolutely. As my right hon. Friend will be aware, the guidance speaks to that. My hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) mentioned the 64 pages of guidance. I am very happy to take away and look at why there are 64 pages of it. Blue badges are part of the conversation that my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow began in 2014.

Robert Halfon: I have huge respect for my hon. Friend, but the fact is that the guidelines in relation to blue badges are not working. According to the FOI request—this is backed by charities such as CLIC Sargent—up to 50% of hospitals are still charging disabled people to park. There is no point talking about the guidelines if people with disabilities are still being forced to pay to park at hospitals in England.

Stephen Barclay: I am very happy to look at such cases and to speak to those trusts to understand this better, but I was making a point about the complexity of the issue and how to manage reducing the charges. For example, as the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) will no doubt be aware, there were local media reports over the summer about a hospital car park in Inverness being used by those going to the airport; there was displacement there. We do not want a solution that constrains capacity for those using the hospital and makes access more difficult.

Some of these issues have a very local flavour. That was recognised in the debate: the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) said that shoppers do not seek to use the car park at the north Manchester site, whereas my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) was concerned that simply removing charges would cause displacement at his hospital. The point is that there are local factors, just as there are with legacy PFI contracts, including in Scotland and Wales, where charges are still made under contracts going back to 2008.

Julie Cooper: Would the Minister accept, though, that people being ill and suffering distress at hospitals is not a local issue? It is a national issue. The burden of hospital car parking charges, wherever they occur, ought to be a concern of the Government.

Stephen Barclay: Of course, but equally the hon. Lady must recognise that the fact that charges are still being applied under PFI agreements put in place by a previous Government in 2008 signals that there are often complexities, in terms of what can be done when different factors apply. As my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull highlighted, there are factors relating to displacement. That is why trusts have local discretion, but as the House has discussed today, we need to understand the transparency around that and how it is applied.

Sir Mike Penning: Will the Minister give way? He is being very generous.

Stephen Barclay: I will, but then I will press on, because I want to give my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow some time.

Sir Mike Penning: I am sure we have time, on this important issue. The Minister raised the issue of complexity. Clearly, as has been shown by Members across the House today, some cases would be easier to address than others. I fully accept, as I said in my speech, that some ludicrous PFIs were put in place, both before the present Administration came to power and since. Do the easy ones first; that is the answer. That is what Scotland did. Then come to the more difficult ones. Ruling out any change at all because there are some difficult issues is surely not the way forward.

Stephen Barclay: A point was raised about whether free parking could be addressed through tokens and barriers, but colleagues in the NHS raised concerns about how that would apply, in terms of any burden on staff. We heard examples of frequent users of a hospital being able to access concessionary schemes, but staff have raised concerns about the impact on them, and how they might be expected to assist in the administration of the scheme in regard to those visiting hospitals as a one-off.

The pertinent point about the impact on staff was raised by Members from across the Chamber. Many Members have been visited recently by representatives from the Royal College of Nursing, regarding the wider discussions between NHS employers and the RCN on pay. It was helpful to hear in the debate contributions about the RCN's understanding of the benefits, pressures and issues.

[Stephen Barclay]

Across the House, there is no question, as was reflected by my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow, about the desirability of addressing iniquities and variance, and about the scope to ensure compliance with the guidance, but we need to be mindful of unintended consequences, and particularly about constraining the car parking available for those who need it. I am happy to continue my discussions with my right hon. Friend on this policy. I commend him and colleagues on a very constructive debate.

4.44 pm

Robert Halfon: I thank the hon. Members who have spoken from both sides of the House. The Minister has heard about the madness of the guidelines not working, the problems with public transport, parking being given over to football club supporters, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) said, and the moving stories of families and the problems that people with severe illness have had to face.

I have to say, I am incredibly disappointed with the Minister's response. I gave him my speech in advance because I wanted him to look at this seriously, but a lot of what he read is very much what we might think would come from officials. It is a great disappointment. He opened his speech by saying that he believes in the desirability of this, but then gave no indication of how. Many hospitals have hospital car parking charges, as figures show. It is not beyond the wit of man to develop a number plate recognition system to deal with the problems of people misusing hospital car parking.

The Minister said that we will just try to make sure the guidelines work. Well, even if the guidelines were working, they would still mean that many hospitals charge millions of patients and visitors. On both sides of the House, we constantly talk about the billions being spent on the NHS and whether they should be. Most members of the public find that hard to understand, but this is real and it affects millions of people who go to hospital regularly—as has been said again and again today, not out of choice, but because they have to. This is real and substantive, and a solution would not cost a huge amount of money in terms of the overall NHS budget. There are different solutions to pay for it, so that the NHS is not harmed.

I strongly urge the Minister to look again at this issue and realise that there is cross-party consensus in the House. Many Government Members want the situation changed. When this issue comes up again, I urge him to

come back with a more substantive solution to scrap hospital parking charges. That is why I moved the motion today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House calls on the Government to undertake a consultation to identify the most efficient means of abolishing car parking charges at NHS hospitals in England for patients, staff and visitors and to provide the timescale for its implementation.

PETITION

Myanmar's Muslim Ethnic Minority

4.47 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I rise to present a petition on behalf of my constituents; it has 356 signatures from people seeking an end to the violence and persecution of the Rohingya Muslim community in Myanmar.

The petitioners request

that the House of Commons urges the UK Government to make representation to the government of Myanmar to cease all violence in Myanmar; further to call for immediate entry aid into Myanmar; further to call for the UK not to supply arms or military training to the military; and further to call on the UK government to do all within its powers to ensure the perpetrators are brought to the international court of justice to be tried for crimes against humanity.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of Stretford and Urmston,

Declares that urgent action should be taken to stop the violence against Myanmar's Muslim ethnic minority, the Rohingya, including genocide, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity; further declares that the petitioners cannot continue to stand by and watch the displacement of hundreds and thousands as a genocide unfolds; further declares that the petitioners note that the Rohingya Muslims are not currently recognised as citizens in Myanmar; and further urges the implementation of the Rakhine commission recommendations chaired by Kofi Annan.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the UK Government to make representation to the government of Myanmar to cease all violence in Myanmar; further to call for immediate entry aid into Myanmar; further to call for the UK not to supply arms or military training to the military; and further to call on the UK government to do all within its powers to ensure the perpetrators are brought to the international court of justice to be tried for crimes against humanity.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002104]

Housing, Planning and Infrastructure: Essex

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Kelly Tolhurst.)

4.48 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I am grateful to Mr Speaker for granting this debate. I welcome my hon. Friend the Minister to his role, and the opportunity to hear about my constituency.

My constituency covers three lower tiers of local planning authorities while Essex County Council has responsibility for waste and minerals, which partly explains why the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government holds such a high volume of correspondence from me on behalf of my constituents. If the Minister visits Witham, which he is very welcome to do, he will see at first hand the boundless economic potential of this part of Essex and of the entire county. He will also note the appetite among our local communities to take a positive, proactive approach to housing, planning and infrastructure. Many parishes are working on neighbourhood development plans and want to deliver on the localism agenda advocated by our Government. They want to exercise the powers at their disposal to allocate preferred sites for housing and business uses, and for protection.

We want to deliver ambitious plans to support economic growth and bring more local homes to our communities. We want and need new infrastructure to support growth, including the widening of the A12, the upgrading of the A120, and investment in the Great Eastern main line. I welcome today's announcement of more than £7 million for the Heybridge flood alleviation and regeneration scheme, in the district of Maldon just outside my constituency, and I hope for more investment rounds to support planning and development.

We recognise that development brings with it employment opportunities, investment in infrastructure and new public services, including schools and GP services, but that should not mean housing at any cost and in any location. I want to draw the Minister's attention to some issues and causes of concern in which localism is being undermined and opportunities to deliver locally led planning are being missed. I appreciate and respect the fact that the Minister cannot give detailed responses on specific planning cases that are live and under consideration, but I hope that he and his Department will reflect on them.

First, the Minister will be aware of the Secretary of State's decision to call in planning applications for up to 260 new dwellings on two sites in Hatfield Peverel, at Stonepath Meadow and Gleneagles Way. A hearing took place in December, and I pay tribute to the residents in Hatfield Peverel and members of our parish council who came together to oppose those unwelcome developments. Their dedication to their local community has been outstanding. Both developments are outside the settlement boundary in the current and emerging local plans and the emerging neighbourhood plan, because they would be detrimental to the countryside. They would also place unacceptable pressures on an already full general practice, with no guarantees of any financial contributions to enhance the service.

Our local schools are also full, but no contributions are being sought because of the community infrastructure levy pooling restrictions. The applicants seem to think it acceptable for primary school pupils—children—to be forced to walk more than two miles along the busy A12 to a school in Witham. As for secondary school pupils, First Bus is axing the 72 bus route, which connects Hatfield Peverel with Maltings Academy and New Rickstones Academy in Witham, so there will be no direct bus service for pupils in the village to use.

We are not opposed to housing in Hatfield Peverel—quite the reverse. That wonderful village is already set to accommodate new housing in an emerging local plan focused elsewhere in the village in the comprehensive redevelopment area covering land between the A12 and the Great Eastern main line. Some 250 new dwellings are already—and rightly—going through the planning process. However, the village is taking its fair share of new housing and cannot take any more.

There are many other reasons why the two applications are totally unsuitable for development. I trust that the Secretary of State will consider those points, and the strong objections that have been made, when the inspector hands him the report of his findings.

Although the Minister cannot comment on the specifics of the two applications, I would welcome his clarification of some wider issues that have arisen. First, councils such as Braintree, and parish councils such as Hatfield Peverel, which are in the process of putting together local and neighbourhood plans that embrace the principles of localism, are being undermined by planning applications many of which pre-empt and undermine those democratic processes. Other villages, such as Kelvedon and Feering, have been similarly bombarded with applications. Those communities need to be protected, and they need the Government to allow them time to put their plans in place.

Secondly, the issue of the five-year land supply of deliverable sites has arisen. Speculative, predatory developers are seeking to exploit the council's claim that it does not have a five-year land supply. The main reason for Braintree's identified supply shortfall is the failure of the last Labour Government's regional spatial strategies, whose housing targets were lower than those in the most recent objectively assessed housing need research. I hope that the Minister can assure communities in the district that they will not be punished because of the last Labour Government's failures, and that decision makers can exercise discretion over the housing supply figures. Councils need flexibility on this issue, and that includes the ability to use the Liverpool method when it best suits them, in respect of, for instance, sites in draft allocations. I hope that the Minister will be able to give some assurances about that as well.

My third point is on the effectiveness of pre-application consultation. In Hatfield Peverel, one applicant issued a so-called consultation that contained false information about education and health provision—which the applicant had not bothered to check—and sought to frighten residents. It also submitted a planning application within a few weeks of securing rights from landowners to promote the site and less than two working days after holding a pre-application discussion with council officers; that is not nearly enough time to take account of local comments. Then, when the council and local community were taking time to resolve issues that had been raised

[Priti Patel]

as a result of the applicant's failures—such as the impact on schools, the NHS and landscapes—the applicant had the audacity to threaten to take the application to the Planning Inspectorate for non-determination.

For other sites in the district, such referrals to the Planning Inspectorate to deliberately bypass local decision making have been made. This abuse of the planning system must stop, and I hope the Ministry will consider how to address these problems. There are some good examples of positive developer engagement with local communities and we need to make sure that more of that happens. Those who fiddle consultations and circumvent pre-application engagement should be sanctioned for doing so.

Another major development issue affecting my constituency is the proposed garden settlement for the Colchester Borough Council/Braintree District Council border. That proposal has the potential to deliver thousands of new homes and bring in urgently needed infrastructure upgrades and public services. The Government have recognised this and provided over £1.3 million to Colchester Borough Council to work on this project.

However, a number of questions and concerns have been raised about the proposals. Primarily, these relate to infrastructure and public services. Residents want to be assured that if this project gets the green light, significant new infrastructure and public services will be put in place and phased in to meet future demand. It is pointless to put in the infrastructure and services once the developments are being occupied; they must be put in in advance, and to a clear timetable. That means that the Ministry, the Department for Transport, the Treasury, local councils and the private sector will need to come together to ensure that the funding is in place to upgrade the A120, widen the A12 and increase capacity on the Great Eastern main line with a passing loop, as well as providing for new GP surgeries and schools.

Questions have also been raised about the delivery vehicle, local engagement, availability of employment opportunities and how the councils have spent the moneys provided to them by the Government. The garden settlement proposals are in the process of being examined as part of the local plan process, but I urge the Minister and Secretary of State to look carefully at these matters. Some residents are opposed to this project; others are in favour. However, it is essential that if this major project goes ahead, it is done correctly and done in the right way.

One of the other reasons why there are concerns about garden settlements is the appalling record of Colchester Borough Council. On planning matters, this Lib Dem and Labour-run council is rotten to the core. The Minister has the background on this and will know that last year, the Secretary of State granted planning permission for a new leisure and retail development known as Tollgate Village in Stanway. The development was supported by an overwhelming majority of local people and transforms a derelict site into a development creating hundreds of new local jobs and tens of millions of pounds of inward investment.

However, Colchester Borough Council tried everything possible to block it. It claimed it would be a loss of employment land, even though there was no interest in

using the site in that way. It tried to pit Tollgate Village against Colchester town centre, and it even tried to smear me by making up a false claim that my representations in writing were somehow improper, and leaked that to the local media. It behaved disgracefully and yet not a single senior officer or senior political figure has taken responsibility. They blocked the creation of jobs, prevented investment and wasted public money.

Close to that site, the council acted in a similar way on the Stane Park scheme, another private investment project which it blocked but which was granted consent on appeal. Also in Stanway, on the Lakelands housing development, the council completely neglected and ignored residents in causing the loss of a green space at Churchfields Avenue and Partridge Way, in an area of land known as parcel SR6.

That area of land should have been landscaped; it was not, as the council failed to enforce a planning condition. It was then designated for protection as open space in the council's local plan. However, behind closed doors and without any consultation, the council allowed a new masterplan to be approved that designated the site for intensive housing. Residents were made aware of this only when the reserved matters application was made in 2015. Despite complaints and concerns about the process, the council approved the construction of 27 new dwellings and the loss of that space in autumn 2016. The matter has been with the local government ombudsman for over a year due to the complexities of the issues involved. This shows once again how Colchester Borough Council is problematic and not fit for purpose. It allowed an area that should have been green open space to be lost without any consultation, and kept residents in the dark for years.

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Nigel Adams.)

Priti Patel: I shall move on to another planning area outside Colchester borough. Thousands of my constituents and residents across Essex and beyond are deeply concerned about the prospect of the Rivenhall incinerator receiving further planning consents and becoming operational. The incinerator was originally granted planning permission by the last Labour Government in March 2010, just weeks before the general election. Since then, however, the applicants have made a number of changes to the site. It has been described as an integrated waste management facility, but the recycling capacity has been reduced and the waste incineration capacity increased by 65% from 360,000 to 595,000 tonnes.

Another planning application is being considered by Essex County Council to increase the stack height to help the site meet Environment Agency requirements. However, given the concerns with the incinerator, the impact on the environment and the new proposals on waste put forward by the Government, the incinerator is not only unwelcome but out of date. It has no energy recovery mechanisms, which makes it all the more damaging to the environment. My constituents would like the latest planning application to be refused, and called in by the Secretary of State to ensure its refusal if necessary. I trust that the Minister will convey that message to the Secretary of State and look at all the submissions that will be coming his way.

My constituent, John Patrick, has had a long chain of correspondence and representations with my hon. Friend's Department. He is well known to the Department. He runs a rural nursery business growing plants. When he moved in, there was live-in accommodation on site. A long and protracted planning dispute involving numerous applications, appeals and enforcement notices has taken place with the local planning authority. He feels that planning policies justify his being able to operate his business and live on site. I ask the Minister to review the case and, importantly, to learn the lessons from it and respond to the most recent representations that have been made.

The last case I want to highlight involves a development outside my constituency, but the medium-sized developer is based in the Witham constituency. Wickford Developments is involved in the development of a site in the Uttlesford District Council area. What appears to be a restrictive planning policy requiring a development to include a lift could prevent the company from providing much-needed social housing. I would welcome the Ministry looking into the case and assisting the company to resolve this issue, if that cannot be done directly with the council.

As the Minister can see, my constituency has a wide range of planning and development issues, and there are many more that time has prevented me from raising. I want to leave him with this message from my constituency: we need the new Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure that local communities can embrace localism in order to deliver sustainable developments and the housing that we need, to prevent unwelcome development and abuses in the planning system, to ensure that intervention takes place in the cases listed, and to guarantee that as new developments take place, local communities can benefit from them with the provision of new infrastructure and key public services.

5.3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) on securing this debate on housing, planning and infrastructure in Essex. It is great to see her being supported in the Chamber tonight by her county colleagues, my hon. Friends the Members for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) and for Colchester (Will Quince) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon). She is a strong campaigner for her constituency. The sheer volume of cases and correspondence from her held by the Ministry is a testament to the diligent way in which she pursues these issues. I thank her for the opportunity to debate these extremely important topics.

In her speech, my right hon. Friend referred to a number of planning cases. As she kindly acknowledged, I am not in a position to comment in detail on the merits of the planning applications or appeals that are ongoing. The cases that she referred to that affect sites in the village of Hatfield Peverel are being considered by a planning inspector, who will provide the Secretary of State with a report to consider in due course. All material matters associated with the proposals will be considered as part of the process, and my right hon. Friend can be assured that her comments will no doubt be noted.

In respect of the applications relating to the waste management facility on the former Rivenhall airfield, my right hon. Friend has provided some of the background. The current planning applications that have been submitted are a matter for Essex County Council, as the relevant planning authority, to consider. However, the Ministry is aware of the requests for the applications to be called in, and they will be considered in the appropriate way.

Turning to John Patrick and my right hon. Friend's points about his case, I can assure her that we will carefully consider and reply to Mr Patrick's correspondence. As an aside, representing as I do a highly rural constituency, I fully recognise the importance of rural enterprise in driving prosperity. I was interested to hear about the case involving Uttlesford District Council. Once again, I am of course not in a position to comment on a current planning application but, on her general points about the provision of affordable housing, we are keen to see approaches taken to deliver more affordable housing. As set out in the housing White Paper, the Government are keen to promote more opportunities for small and medium-sized developers to deliver that housing.

My right hon. Friend made reference to her concerns about Colchester Borough Council. The case of the Lakeland site is currently with the local government ombudsman, and we will take note of the outcome of its inquiries, but we cannot intervene directly in that process. In relation to the Tollgate Village project, an inspector conducting the appeal inquiry produced a report that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State carefully considered before accepting the recommendation to grant planning permission. We are aware of the council's position and of the concerns of my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham about the council's approach to the application. More broadly, as for every single local authority, ultimate accountability comes through the ballot box, and I know from first-hand experience that my right hon. Friend is a top-rate campaigner.

My right hon. Friend also touched on North Essex Garden Communities, which is one of 24 new locally-led garden cities, towns and villages that the Government are currently supporting. Together, they have the potential to deliver 220,000 new homes across England. In general terms, the Government believe that garden communities offer the potential to secure considerable new housing, employment opportunities, modern physical infrastructure and new public services. That is why the Government provide some funding to support local authorities, such as those in Essex, to develop these proposals.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) gave me permission to intervene, and I congratulate her on securing this debate. We are all here because we are concerned about the effects of these garden communities. They must produce quality communities. I know the Department is concerned that it is about not just housing numbers but the creation of quality communities with the necessary infrastructure. The A120 and the A12 are vital pieces of infrastructure that must be upgraded in advance of the creation of the new homes. Will my hon. Friend include that in his consideration of these matters?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend and my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham are absolutely right to raise their constituents' concerns that the additional

[*Rishi Sunak*]

housing must be supported by the right infrastructure and public services, at the right time. The Government and I wholeheartedly agree with that, which is why in the autumn Budget the Government more than doubled the housing infrastructure fund, dedicating an additional £2.7 billion to bring the total fund to £5 billion.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), who is also my constituency neighbour, being an Essex champion and initiating this debate. The loss to the Government is certainly a win for Essex. Given what my hon. Friend the Minister has said, does he agree that new housing and infrastructure in Essex should be accompanied by support for substantial regeneration in towns that have real problems, such as Harlow, where the town centre is decaying because everything was built almost at the same time? Many good things are happening, but we need desperate help with the regeneration of our town centre, for example.

Rishi Sunak: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Economic regeneration and, indeed, the boundless economic optimism that my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham talked about are something the Government are keen to see and should actively support through these proposals and through the infrastructure investment in places, like Harlow, where it can make a difference.

The housing infrastructure fund is designed to provide exactly the kinds of projects that both my right hon. Friend and my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex talked about—key infrastructure that unlocks housing growth. Just today, the Government announced 133 successful HIF projects, which will help to unlock a potential 200,000 new homes. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham mentioned, that includes £7.3 million for a flood relief scheme next to her constituency in Maldon and £5.5 million of funding to unlock more than 500 homes in Colchester by accelerating the delivery of 22 acres for housing development—I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester will welcome that investment.

A forward fund element of the HIF will also be available to the uppermost tier of local authorities in England for a small number of strategic and high-impact infrastructure projects for bids of up to £250 million. Expressions of interest for that funding are being assessed, and I am delighted to tell the House and my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham that the county of Essex has applied to the fund, including for infrastructure specifically to support the North Essex garden communities. The best proposals from across the country will be shortlisted to go through to co-development in the coming weeks. Local authorities will then submit final business cases, with successful bids being announced as early as this autumn.

More generally, my right hon. Friend is right to highlight that garden settlement community proposals are still subject to examination as part of the local plan process. The hearings with respect to the examination of the local plans were concluded last month, as she will know, but I can reassure her that any formal responses made by her constituents either to the Planning Inspectorate or to the council as part of the draft plan consultation will be considered by the inspector in his determination.

Further, I understand that the Planning Inspectorate has sought reassurance that all matters raised by consultees on the draft plan have been provided and will hold further hearings if procedurally necessary.

My right hon. Friend spoke in detail about local plans. New homes need to be provided through up-to-date local plans, which are produced in consultation with local people. I welcome the progress that Braintree, Tendring and Colchester Councils have made on their local plan preparations. Up-to-date plans that are produced in consultation with local communities are a vital element of the planning system. They are the starting point for planning decisions by local planning authorities and planning inspectors.

As my right hon. Friend mentioned, local authorities are required to identify a five-year land supply of deliverable housing sites. Identifying a five-year supply of housing sites provides clarity to local communities and developers on where homes should be built so that development is planned, rather than a result of speculative application. Where there is insufficient available land on which housing can realistically be delivered, however, there are measures in place that help to identify suitable sites.

As my right hon. Friend acknowledged, Government guidance states that local authorities should aim to deal with undersupply within five years, where possible. However, decision makers have the flexibility to consider each case on its merits, and it is for local authorities to present their particular case to the relevant decision makers.

Our housing White Paper acknowledges that the current policy on five-year land supply has been effective in delivering homes, but has had some negative effects, including an increased number of appeals. Through our White Paper, the Government proposed reforms to how land supply is calculated to give more certainty. The proposal offers local authorities the opportunity to have their five-year housing land supply agreed on an annual basis and fixed for a one-year period. It is intended that this ability to fix will reduce the number and complexity of appeals by providing greater certainty to all parties.

The White Paper also indicated that clearer, more transparent guidance will set out how the five-year land supply should be calculated. The responses to this consultation are currently being considered, and I can tell my right hon. Friend that revised national planning guidance will be published for comment alongside the consultation on the national planning policy framework, before Easter this year.

My right hon. Friend next referred to the production of neighbourhood plans and the role that they play in empowering local communities. I note with delight that neighbourhood planning is being embraced in her constituency, with at least 10 neighbourhood planning groups being active and, as she said, doing their best to support the Government's localism agenda. The Government want to support such groups, and we have made £23 million available from 2018 to 2022 through a neighbourhood planning support programme. She highlighted her concerns about whether neighbourhood plans in development get the status they deserve in the planning process, especially if communities are, to use her words, “bombarded” with applications. The NPPF is clear that weight may be given to emerging neighbourhood plans. We have also laid out guidance to set out where

circumstances may justify the refusal of planning permission on grounds that an application would be premature in relation to an emerging neighbourhood plan.

On the points that my right hon. Friend made about pre-application consultation, the Government believe effective consultation is an important part of the planning process. We have clear and detailed expectations, both statutory and in guidance, regarding the consultation of parties affected by planning applications. It is for the local planning authority to ensure that this consultation takes place properly and in accordance with these guidelines. If there are points of concern, they should be raised with the authority as soon as possible.

In conclusion, we have covered an extensive range of topics in this short debate this evening. It seems to me that the Business Secretary and Chancellor should take note: my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham is single-handedly doing her bit to drive up Britain's productivity. In seriousness, this is a testament to the energy and passion with which she cares about her constituents, and wants their concerned aired and listened to by Government. I commend her for achieving exactly that this evening.

Question put and agreed to.

5.18 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 1 February 2018

[MR NIGEL EVANS *in the Chair*]

Leaving the EU: Chemicals Regulation

[Relevant document: Written evidence to the Environmental Audit Committee, on The Future of Chemicals Regulation after the EU Referendum, reported to the House on 24 October 2017, HC 389.]

1.30 pm

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Eleventh Report of the Environmental Audit Committee of Session 2016-17, *The Future of Chemicals Regulation after the EU Referendum*, HC 912, and the Government response, HC 313:

I am delighted to be here with you, Mr Evans, and with so many colleagues to debate this vital matter. I am grateful to the Liaison Committee for granting the debate and to colleagues for attending. I look forward to good speeches and good debate.

Nine months after the Environmental Audit Committee's report, the chemicals industry in the UK remains deeply concerned about the Government's decision to leave the European single market and customs union and the impact that doing so will have on their business. Today, I will set out why our chemicals industry is the foundation stone of UK manufacturing; how the chemical regulation REACH—the registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals—regulates the UK chemicals industry; and what the Government's decision to leave the single market and customs union means in terms of jobs, trade, potential increases in animal testing, duplication of regulation and costs, the risk of tariffs and increased red tape.

Let us begin by looking at the chemicals industry. From the leaked Brexit economic analysis this week, we heard that chemicals is one of the five sectors that will be worst hit by leaving the European single market and customs union. Our Committee looked at that last year. The industry has a £32 billion annual turnover and provides half a million direct and indirect jobs across the country. Chemical clusters tend to be on coastal sites near to petrochemical sites because they are often connected by pipelines. Clusters are found in Hull, Teesside, Grangemouth and Runcorn—areas that have already been hit by industrial decline and capital flight, and where good, well-paid engineering jobs are not easy to come by.

The paints, adhesives, mixtures, polymers, plastics and dyes made by the industry are used in every aspect of our lives, including the car industry, aerospace industry, tech sector, energy sector and pharmaceutical sector—I could go on. They are the backbone of the nation's manufacturing industry, and we rely on an integrated European Union supply chain. The UK no longer produces a number of important chemical feedstocks and is reliant on them coming in from the European Union.

The UK exports almost £15 billion-worth of chemicals to the EU each year. Chemicals is our second largest manufacturing industry and our second largest export to the EU after cars, but it is not getting the attention it deserves. It is not as glamorous; it is a Cinderella sector.

What is REACH? It is the EU's regulation, agreed by this country about 10 years ago, which regulates chemicals and hazardous substances. It covers more than 30,000 substances bought and sold in the EU single market. It also covers products and articles such as the coating on a non-stick frying pan, flame retardants in sofas, carpets and curtains, and medicines.

Our chemicals inquiry came out of our inquiry into the future of environmental regulation after we leave the EU. People kept saying, "You need to look at the chemicals sector", so we decided to do so. The inquiry found that, first and foremost, UK companies want to stay in REACH. They have made more than 5,000 registrations with REACH. Another deadline is looming—31 March—by which smaller tonnages of chemicals will have to be registered. By the end of March, UK companies will have spent an estimated £250 million on registering their products on the database. One concern raised in the inquiry was that smaller manufacturers, looking ahead at the potential of a hard Brexit, would balk at spending £20,000, £30,000 or £40,000 on registering a chemical when that registration could fall exactly one year later, on exit day.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate the Select Committee and my hon. Friend on the report. I represent a constituency in which 7,000 manufacturing jobs are dependent on the chemicals sector and there are 1,250 jobs in chemicals companies. That exact point about the cost of registration has been raised by companies in my constituency. Some of them have spent hundreds of thousands of pounds on registering chemicals over the years, and they suggest that in the Brexit negotiations we should seek third-country status, so that our companies can continue to register within REACH. Does she agree that that would be one route forward?

Mary Creagh: I certainly do, and that was the route recommended in the report. The report was slightly curtailed—we had to rush it out in a form that was not as fine and detailed as we would have liked because of the early calling of the general election—but we were clear that that was the most pragmatic and cheapest route.

The looming deadline raises the threat of market freeze. If a small company decides not to register and just to run down its chemical feedstocks, when a big multinational manufacturer comes to apply that coating to whichever tiny aircraft engine part or car part requires it, the supplier—in some cases they are unique suppliers—might say, "We've run out of that stuff now." We could see market freeze in the automotive and aerospace supply chains long before we leave the EU, because of that deadline and the lack of certainty about what will happen.

Leaving REACH puts at risk our trade in chemicals. The European Chemicals Agency has said that without an agreement to the contrary, all UK registrations will be invalid after exit day. Therefore, the jobs of my hon. Friend's constituents and investment in their companies will all be put at risk. I will come on to talk about the threat from double regulation.

Secondly, the inquiry found that the chemicals regulation framework established by the EU through REACH would be difficult and—critically—expensive to transpose into UK law. It is not just a list of rules or restricted

[Mary Creagh]

substances but a governance mechanism; it is an entire working body of parts. It involves data sharing and co-operation. For the UK to establish a duplicate system of chemicals regulation, as the Minister proposed when she gave evidence to us, will be expensive for us—the taxpayer—or the industry, or both.

Thirdly, after Brexit, REACH could become zombie legislation, which is no longer monitored, updated or enforced. When we debated the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, I tabled new clause 61 to try to remedy that by ensuring that we remained part of REACH. However, it is part of the difficult third of EU environmental legislation that cannot be neatly cut and pasted into UK law through that Bill. The Minister in response said that the REACH regulation is directly applicable, but that is essentially meaningless without the chemicals agency to govern and regulate it. We will end up having zombie legislation, duplicating regulation and potentially diverging from the EU, which could also be a bad thing for British business.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): My hon. Friend did an excellent job on this report and is doing an excellent job of leading the debate. Does she share my concern that when the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs gave evidence to the Committee, it seemed to have only just started conversations with the chemicals industry about all these issues and how complicated they would be? It was almost on a learning exercise—doing its homework—long after article 50 had been triggered.

Mary Creagh: I did notice that. I went over the road to read the impact assessments that were not impact assessments, and it was good to read a secret document on the chemicals sector that quoted our Committee's report heavily. There was some good analysis in there, but I was grateful to see that however thin our report was, the civil servants involved had looked at the evidence we had taken. It was certainly a very useful exercise.

The Government's response to our report was pretty thin gruel—a couple of pages, and quite dismissive. That reflects what my hon. Friend says about the Government making it up as they go along. They are knitting their own policy as they go. There is nothing wrong with knitting, but we do not want something that ends up full of holes.

We put out the response because we wanted to see what the industry would do. It is fair to say that last year, when we were doing the report, the industry was perhaps more concerned about the impact of tariff barriers than it was about regulatory barriers. It was happy to give Government the benefit of the doubt, to believe what it was hearing and to accept reassurances, but as the exit day deadline heaves into view, that belief has been replaced by thorough scepticism and in some cases downright fear, particularly about the impact of a hard Brexit.

We put the Government's response up on our Committee's website and invited comments. The Chemical Business Association said,

“the Government Response to the EAC's Report fails to...recognise the unique nature of the regulatory issues facing the chemical industry”.

Breast Cancer UK said,

“the Government's response to EAC's report is woefully inadequate. It fails to provide even an outline of how the Government will manage chemicals regulation post-Brexit.”

EEF, the manufacturers' organisation, said:

“The degree of uncertainty in this area is causing concern not just in the chemicals industry but also very much among downstream manufacturing industries which are reliant on a wide range of substances and chemical formulations.”

That is why 20% of the 126 companies represented by the Chemical Business Association were looking at moving to the EU. We had that evidence almost a year ago, and it would be interesting to know how many of them have established presences in Dublin, Paris or Frankfurt.

On a recent visit in my Wakefield constituency I went to a bed manufacturer, Global Components. It is in Ossett, in what used to be called the heavy woollen district—the Dewsbury part of my constituency. I was not expecting to hear about Brexit, but the company told me that 90% of its products are imports, so it has been hit by the fall in the value of the pound. It is finding it harder to recruit new staff and has delayed a major investment as a result of uncertainties over Brexit. Crucially, the foam it uses in its mattresses comes from a German supplier, and the price of that foam has risen by 30% since the referendum. Global Components is having great difficulty passing those costs on to its consumers.

The European Chemicals Agency has been very clear that without an agreement to the contrary, all UK company registrations will be invalid after exit day. No REACH means no licences. No licences means no market access. No market access means no trade. It is that simple. As one senior executive said to me, on condition that I did not say his name or his company,

“Brexit is a business-killing issue.”

If we leave the single market and the customs union, businesses will no longer have access to the database they helped to fund and build. UK science, testing, ingenuity, innovation and creativity helped to build the database. UK scientists are present in Helsinki. We helped to build the database, but now we are ripping ourselves out of it and we will no longer have the detailed safety information on all the chemicals that are handled and produced. Obviously, that is of great concern to my own trade union, the GMB, which represents workers in what can often be hazardous industries.

What choice is left to our constituents and companies? UK companies that want to continue to trade must set up what is called an only representative in the EU to re-register with REACH the registrations they used to have. That is absolutely absurd, and it is duplication. If those companies want to stay registered, they must set up somebody in a European Union member state and pay twice for something they have already bought. That is the height of absurdity. It is a huge duplication of costs, and it risks making UK chemicals and manufacturing uncompetitive. Companies could ask the importer to register themselves, but why would they do that? Why would they take on the cost and documentation? They will just switch to an alternative supplier, and that will be bad for British jobs, British growth and British businesses.

Kate Green: Does my hon. Friend share the concerns of businesses in my constituency? Even if the Government are able to say that existing registrations would continue to be recognised in both European and UK law under some form of deal—the Minister suggested in a letter to me that that was the Government’s preferred position—that would not offer any certainty about future registrations and might lead to businesses relocating out of the UK altogether.

Mary Creagh: I do share my hon. Friend’s concerns. UK industry is not waiting for the Government to sort this out; it is already voting with its feet on this issue, delaying investment and winding down operations. None of that is being announced. I asked one senior executive why not, and he said, “In all my years in this industry, I’ve never done a press release announcing job losses and closures. This is not something we want to talk about.” That is understandable, but we have also seen courage—in the case of the chief executive of Airbus, for example, who has talked about how manufacturing and competitiveness will be hit. Our debate goes into the detail underpinning that: what do we mean when we say that, and what will it cost in jobs?

I turn now to what was a touchstone issue during the passage of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill: the issue of animals and animal testing. We might be able to stay in the registration, but will we be able to stay in the knowledge-sharing scheme? If we do not participate in European Chemicals Agency scientific committees or the forum for exchange on enforcement, we may need more animal tests to be done in this country—something that none of us would welcome. At the moment, UK companies registering chemicals within REACH must share data from animal testing. Other registrants access that data, which minimises the need to carry out and duplicate animal testing, but only participants in REACH have access to that data, so we could see an unwelcome increase in animal testing.

The REACH framework is built on co-operation between signatories. It contains obligations, oversight and control mechanisms. It requires freedom of movement of products between all signing countries. If we do not co-operate in that way, how will we ensure that human health and our environment are protected from chemical hazards, and how will we stop our country from becoming a chemical dumping ground?

As an aside, the Committee travelled to the US to see how it regulates chemicals. We were pleased to hear that the US, after 50 or 60 years of fighting the chemicals industry on the issue, has set up its Toxic Substances Control Act, although there was a question mark over its implementation with the arrival of the new regime under President Trump. We also heard that the EU’s chemical standard was seen as the global gold standard and was being used by the states of California and New York; that things such as babies’ bottles were advertised and marketed as meeting EU chemicals standards as a badge of honour and safety; and that the US chemicals industry had asked for that regulation to keep up and compete with European chemical products and articles.

We also heard that the de-regulatory lobbying and the Americans’ approach in this area had led to the absurdity of asbestos—a known carcinogen hazardous to human health—never having been banned in the United States. I am sure that the citizens of this country,

whatever their thoughts when casting their vote for leave or remain, were not asking for an increase in animal testing, a decrease in jobs and the supposed freedom to follow a weaker regulatory regime.

The Government have said that they want to set up their own chemicals agency, but they really have to clarify what system of registering, monitoring and authorising chemicals will be used in the UK post exit. The clock is ticking. What is the plan? How will decisions be made after exit day? Will we be like Switzerland, which does not have access to the REACH database, or Norway, which does, through its membership of the European economic area? How does the Minister propose to protect our £14 billion export trade with the EU?

The Government’s 25-year environment plan promises a new chemicals strategy that will set out the Government’s approach as the UK leaves the EU. I hope we will not wait two and a half years for that new chemicals strategy in the way we did for the environment plan. The Government say that the new strategy will “build on existing approaches”. When will we see it? When will it be published?

Words and phrases such as “build on existing approaches”, “looking” and “monitoring” are a prime example of the “muddling through” that former Department for Exiting the European Union Minister Lord Bridges talked about in the other place on Tuesday. Although we are not clear about what will happen during the two years of the Brexit transition phase—if it is for two years; it will perhaps be longer—Lord Bridges has warned that it

“will be a gang plank into thin air.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 30 January 2018; Vol. 788, c. 1423.]

We must not force our chemicals industry to walk down it. Will the Minister clarify whether there will be a two-year transition period during which we will remain a member of REACH? Businesses need that clarity.

Let us look at the IT aspect of setting up our own agency. The European Chemicals Agency has a budget of more than £100 million a year and 500 staff to manage its database and monitor compliance. Will we still have our own agency? The Minister’s civil servant told our Committee that a new agency would cost tens of millions of pounds. Who will pay for that extravagant bauble? Will it be industry, which already has the double burden of re-registering the stuff they have already registered with REACH, and would then have to register again in a UK system—a triple whammy—or the taxpayer?

Several witnesses expressed concerns to the Committee about the Government’s poor track record in setting up IT projects. Setting up our own database will be expensive, and we have seen the beginnings of the taxpayer footing the bill for it. The DEFRA permanent secretary wrote to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on 18 January requesting a ministerial direction to approve a spend of £5.8 million between February and July this year on the delivery of a new IT system for registering and regulating chemical substances placed on the UK market, as part of the preparations for a no-deal Brexit.

Will the Minister tell the House what that £5.8 million will pay for, the total estimated cost of the new agency, the total estimated cost of the new database and how much it will cost every year to run the system? How many staff will be needed and what happens to them if

[Mary Creagh]

the Government negotiate to stay in REACH, as the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), told Parliament could happen only this morning? How will we recruit the best people to a job that may not be there in a year's time?

The UK's chemicals sector will see its costs treble: it will re-register with REACH, thereby losing the money it spent first registering with REACH, and will also have to register with a new UK regime. However, the pain will not stop there. Leaving the customs union will compound that pain. As well as the regulatory barriers, the risks of tariffs and customs red tape on chemicals could cost companies dearly. A Chemicals Industry Association Brexit survey suggests that tariffs on imports could be in excess of £350 million, while re-exporting could cost £250 million.

Ministers often fail to understand that intra-company trade is a significant percentage of those imports and exports. We import things from the EU to make the wings of an Airbus aeroplane in Alyn and Deeside and then export them to Toulouse, where they are fixed on to an aircraft. Those are intra-company imports and exports, and customs and tariffs and paying more money to import and export such things will make British industry non-competitive.

When I first asked the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how he planned to regulate chemicals after the UK leaves the EU back in July, he said, "Better", and sat down. However, 20 months after the referendum, things are much worse. I hope I have explained why "better" is simply not possible. Remaining close to REACH is not only unavoidable—it is desirable, pragmatic and sensible. Staying in REACH is the right thing for jobs, British growth and British investment, and the majority of our inquiry's witnesses supported continued membership of REACH. The Green Alliance said:

"The REACH regime is the most advanced in the world, protecting citizens and the environment from tens of thousands of chemicals."

Our Committee recommends that the UK remains in REACH. It is the passport to a global marketplace. UK companies do not care whether that passport is blue or brown, so long as it does not kill jobs and investment. Leaving REACH could mean lower environmental or safety standards than in the EU, exposing UK workers, consumers and the environment to greater risks. Leaving REACH places huge additional financial burdens on the chemicals industry and the UK taxpayer to comply with two different sets of regulations. Leaving the customs union creates the added danger of tariffs.

I look forward to the Minister's response to colleagues' speeches and to hearing how she will provide the certainty that our businesses and our constituents rightly crave.

1.57 pm

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I am afraid that I may have to leave early to travel back to the frozen north. I appreciate your indulgence in that.

I congratulate my colleagues on the Environmental Audit Committee on producing the report. I have become a devoted environmentalist since serving with my colleagues

on the Committee. I am a farmer, and partly an organic farmer, and as I said to the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) the other day, I once owned a vegan food manufacturer, of all the bizarre things. However, I am also a beef farmer. I seem to be crossing the divide.

The report was written largely before I joined the venerable Committee, which is so ably chaired by the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) with her typically collegiate approach, which I very much enjoy. Not being the author of the report, I will be brief. The report recommends that the Government take a pragmatic approach to the UK's relationship with the EU's single market for chemicals, and in particular that it should seek to remain a participant in the registration process for those chemicals.

I represent Gordon, the constituency with the biggest oil and gas footprint, so hon. Members will see how difficult it is for me to be on the Environmental Audit Committee. However, I see oil and gas as part of the solution, not part of the problem. The oil and gas industry is clearly a massive feedstock supplier to the chemicals industry, which employs 157,000 people. To put that into perspective, the oil and gas industry employs 320,000 people, down from 460,000.

The UK could decide to follow the regulatory decisions made through REACH—the regulation on the registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals—or to take a different approach while still allowing UK companies to sell their products in both the UK and the EU, thanks to continued data sharing. Oil and gas is an international, dollar-denominated industry; 60% of oil and gas exports are outside the EU. Oil and gas should be an example to other sectors of how there may be good things outwith the EU. UK oil and gas, a bit like the UK chemicals industry, sets EU standards and has done for the 40 years during which it has been producing. The Government indicating that they have no intention of aligning the future UK system of chemicals regulation with that of the US is welcome news. However, the experience of the US in providing consistent regulation across the country, rather than allowing variations from one state to another, could be a model for the Government should the UK decide to establish its own system. I say that because we have UK-wide frameworks and we will be maintaining the single market within the UK.

As I am not the author of the report, that is how brief I am going to be.

Mary Creagh: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has spoken on the report, and it has been fascinating to hear about the oil and gas industry, but does he agree that the experience in respect of, in particular, worker protection in that industry has been potentially much weaker outside the UK? I am thinking of the experience of Deepwater Horizon and some of the environmental degradation in the Niger delta in particular. Those are not models that we would wish to follow in our own oilfields, where we want workers and, of course, the environment to be protected.

Colin Clark: That is a very interesting point. The UK and Norway are obviously the two biggest oil and gas producers, by a long way. UK regulation has set EU regulation for the last 40 years; and interestingly, the EU is currently trying to put through regulation that

Norway will not accept, because it feels that its regulation is already higher. I am therefore very optimistic that the oil and gas industry in the UK and in Norway will continue to set standards. It will be interesting to see how the UK chemicals industry will set international standards and have an effect on the EU going forward.

I look forward to greater participation in the Environmental Audit Committee, and I hope that the next time I stand here I am a signatory to its report.

2.1 pm

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate. I congratulate the EAC on its report and my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) on her very clear and detailed explanation and defence of its recommendations, which I entirely endorse.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark). He had no need to justify his position as both an MP for a constituency with oil and gas interests and as someone with an interest in the environment. If we dichotomise those two very important issues, we do a disservice to the country. The oil and gas industry remains important; it will not disappear overnight. We need to work hard to reconcile those two key interests as much as we can.

This topic is critically important. I am chair of the all-party group on the chemical industry, and this report is of great interest to me and to the all-party group. I reinforce the point that the chemicals sector directly contributes £6.4 billion to the UK economy each year and employs approximately 88,000 people—in all the areas that my hon. Friend outlined but also in areas such as the south bank of the Humber, where it is a critically important employer.

As has been pointed out, 60% of our chemical exports go to the European Union, and 75% of our imports in this sector come from the bloc. We must recognise that the chemicals sector has an important impact on all manufacturing sectors—in my constituency, for instance, we have the steel sector, which is an important downstream recipient of chemical products—and therefore the knock-on effects of regulation in this sphere will be profound and felt far and wide.

Mary Creagh: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the brilliant work that she has done in chairing the APPG and ensuring that the voice of the chemicals industry is heard loud and clear in this place. Does she agree that the issue is not just upstream but downstream chemicals, affecting things as diverse as kidney dialysis chemicals and machines, artificial limbs and so on? It spreads right out into the medical industry as well. We do not want there to be unintended or unforeseen consequences, because chemicals really do network out into every nook and cranny of our lives.

Angela Smith: I agree. That is why chemicals are considered one of our key foundation industries that is of profound importance to the UK economy in every respect. On that basis, it is imperative that we get this right; on that, at least, I hope that we all agree.

The Environmental Audit Committee made several very sensible recommendations as part of its inquiry. However, in their response, the Government have given very little away about policy proposals. Nine months

later, and with the Brexit date looming on the horizon, I, alongside the sector, the members of the Committee and Parliament more generally, remain deeply concerned by the lack of clarity.

What do we know and what do we not know? Against the Committee's explicit advice, the Government are attempting to use the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill to give Ministers the power potentially to create a new UK-based regulatory body to replace REACH. The industry has made it abundantly clear that replacing REACH would be costly and over-bureaucratic. It would also potentially limit important access to data, as my hon. Friend pointed out, and to scientific collaboration, a point made powerfully by the Royal Society of Chemistry.

REACH represents the gold standard in international chemical regulations, and there is no appetite at all in the industry for degrading regulatory standards, I am pleased to say. What is more, if companies are to continue trading with the EU, compliance is, in the words of the Chemical Business Association, “non-negotiable”. Failure to comply means no market access and therefore no trade, as my hon. Friend pointed out.

As I said, creating a body like the one that we are discussing risks costing the public purse and taking a huge amount of time, simply to add another layer of bureaucracy for no practical purpose whatever. After all, substances requiring evaluation or authorisation will already have achieved that status by complying with REACH by this year's deadline of 1 May. I ask the Minister these questions directly. Will she urge the Government to reconsider their approach to chemicals regulation post Brexit? Can she assure the industry today that we will remain in full regulatory alignment, both in the transition and in the long term?

Another area causing immense concern relates to the registration process. The Committee recommended that “as a minimum” the Government should ensure that the UK retain the registration element of REACH. The Government even acknowledge that any company wanting to trade with the EU will have to engage with that element of REACH. So why leave it? In the short term, companies need assurance that REACH registrations made before May 2018 will remain valid post Brexit, because otherwise, why bother, why do it? Millions of pounds have already been spent on registrations. The Chemical Industries Association says that if companies have to re-register everything because of Brexit, the cost will be in the region of £350 million. That is not pocket money; it is a significant sum that could have a serious impact on the industry.

The uncertainty is enormously problematic for companies, which need REACH registrations to operate but are reluctant to make the payments in case they become invalid. That dilemma risks an exodus of companies from the UK to the European Union—to other member states—and has already led a number of companies to spend vast sums of money opening up offices on the continent.

Mary Creagh: My hon. Friend is making a brilliant point. As she sets it out, I am struck more and more by the fact that the Government like to talk about sound finance, but actually our own chemicals regime starts to look more like an ideological indulgence, an extravagance, with, of course, other people's money—taxpayers' money and the chemicals industry's money.

[Mary Creagh]

Does she agree that many of the only representatives of American firms based here are now having to—or will have to—shut up shop and set up in other countries? Not only are our own companies moving out into the European Union, but companies from third countries, which use the UK as a springboard into that integrated European market, are also going shopping and setting up elsewhere.

Angela Smith: I agree with that latter point. On the first point that my hon. Friend made about ideological indulgence, I find it enormously frustrating that we are set not only to spend large sums of public money to achieve satisfaction and indulge ourselves ideologically, but to ignore the voice of business. I find it startlingly difficult to comprehend why what has always seen itself as the party of business is ignoring those very important voices—I just find it absolutely unbelievable.

Two years after the referendum, I still find it hard to reconcile my understanding of the party of Government. I have always respected it as a party that has always listened to the voices of those who make the wealth that keeps this country going, but it is no longer doing that—all in the name of a project that will damage the country's economy in the long term. I find it absolutely astonishing, I have to say.

I ask the Minister what she is doing to give clarity to business in this area. Should businesses continue to make REACH registrations and will these registrations remain valid post-Brexit, or at the very least during the implementation period? Have her Government colleagues broached these subjects with their European counterparts during negotiations? I think we need to know—Parliament has a right to know this.

Does the Minister acknowledge that the easiest way to resolve these issues would be to stay in the single market and, as a consequence, to remain within REACH? That is the easiest way forward. It is the way forward that the chemicals industry prefers, and it would solve so many problems. I look forward to the Minister's response and hope that she can provide some clarity.

2.12 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Evans. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) on her brilliant job chairing this inquiry. When we first started taking evidence, I thought, "How on earth are we ever going to get our heads around such a complex subject?" I have to confess that I might have got 50% of the way there, but I am pretty sure that she got 100% of the way there and it is a credit to her. I think we saw that in her speech.

It is unusual that both environmental NGOs and the chemicals industry think that the structure of REACH is about right. It is one of the most sophisticated chemicals regulations systems in the world, and if the Government are planning to leave its protective framework—I do not think they should—they need to clarify as a matter of urgency what will replace it. Not doing so is not fair on the industry. If the Government do not get on with the job, we are going to be left in limbo.

As my hon. Friend said, when we talk about chemicals, we are talking not just about things that are obviously chemicals—the sorts of things you keep under the sink, such as bleach or cleaning sprays—but the chemicals that are present in every product and activity. Chemicals are in car engines, in the paint on cars and in our carpets; I had never thought that carpet dye was a chemical. We are exposed to countless chemicals in every facet of our lives, and they are all controlled by REACH. They are all part of the system. It should therefore be of the highest priority to ensure that chemicals continue to be properly managed after we leave the EU, not least because of the potential harm that improperly regulated chemicals can cause to the environment, and human and animal health. There is another debate to be had about chemical use in the developing world, for example, where things happen that we would not tolerate here, but that is a question for another day.

Everyone has heard of the American case made famous by the film "Erin Brockovich", in which 370 million gallons of chromium-tainted water leaked into the local water supply and dramatically increased the levels of cancer in residents. More recently, in 2008, tributyltin—a paint used to cover the hulls of boats—was outlawed in Europe after it was found to be extremely toxic to both humans and the marine environment, with the World Health Organisation reporting a 20% to 40% increase in the risk of certain types of cancer after regular contact with the substance. That shows us the importance of regulation and vigilance.

Mary Creagh: I thank my hon. Friend for her speech, and for the brilliant contribution she makes to the Committee. I am sure she was far more than 50% of the way there in this inquiry. If she did not feel that way, she certainly did not let on. I know that the inquiry was difficult. Does she agree that information sharing and knowledge sharing are a really important part of the REACH regime? This stuff is all around us and the evidence only builds up gradually, in bits and pieces, because we do not conduct controlled experiments on ourselves to see what gives us cancer—that would be unethical. The information emerges over time, and we are often ignorant of the damage that a chemical is doing to our body. When that gets out, there is always a vested interest that does not want it to be banned, changed or removed. That is why REACH is the global gold standard.

Kerry McCarthy: That is absolutely right. I do not think I need to add anything to that. My hon. Friend has told us, in a nutshell, why it is so important to be vigilant and on top of things—almost ahead of the game—in terms of what is being brought on to the market. If we are not, there could be quite devastating consequences that we might not discover for years. New chemicals are being manufactured continually, so we cannot rest on our laurels.

It is impossible to know what chemical regulation will look like in the future, so to transpose current standards without supplying the surrounding infrastructure would be an approach that was totally unfit for purpose. It is not a case of bringing in a law and then putting it into operation in the UK, as has been said—such a law would be out of date almost immediately. As we have heard, the infrastructure that is required to regulate

chemicals is extensive. REACH manages tens of thousands of chemicals, with an estimated 140,000 chemicals present in the EU market, and 33 new chemicals are awaiting evaluation.

When we were in the United States, we discussed the time-lag—how long approval can take. I think the US system has been improved now, but, at one point, if a chemical had not been assessed and approved within, I think, six months, it automatically got approval by default. That seems a dreadful way of going about things, and I think that the US has introduced new legislation on the matter fairly recently. We want an efficient and speedy but absolutely thorough system that can get these new chemicals on the market or reject them as required.

The UK has the second largest number of REACH registrations in the EU. It is important to remember that REACH is a relatively new creation; it did not come into existence overnight. It came into force in 2007, after many years of preparation, and there are 600 people working on it at the European Chemicals Agency. There is a suggestion that we could create a British REACH. There was some laughter in the Environmental Audit Committee when the Minister coined the acronym BREACH, because it is probably not the best name for our own chemicals regulator. If we were to create BREACH, it would be impossible and absolutely foolish to try to replicate the work of REACH, when there are 600 people already working on it and we could seek to be part of it. Trying to duplicate that work would require the investment of a huge amount of time, resources and expertise.

We know that DEFRA has suffered from budget and staffing cuts over recent spending reviews. It has so many competing priorities—it seems to be about to release a new plan or strategy every other week—so I do not see how it could take on this task as well. We cannot match the pooled resources of all the EU member states. If we try to operate with a reduced capacity and a pared-down scheme for regulating and managing chemicals, the negative impact on the environment could be huge.

Hundreds of chemicals are classified as toxic to marine life under EU harmonised classification. That includes 1,045 chemicals that are classified as very toxic to aquatic life, 933 chemicals that are classified as very toxic to aquatic life with long-lasting effects and 405 chemicals that are classified as harmful with long-lasting effects. I use the marine environment as an example because, as people will know, it is a passion of mine. The organisation Blueprint for Water estimates that, even with the stringent regulation that is in place at the moment, at least 27% of total ecosystem losses are due to chemical pollution. Reduced capacity could further expose humans and animals to numerous cancers, disrupted reproduction, immune dysfunction, DNA damage and deformities, to name just a few concerns.

There is also the problem of persistent pollutants, called bioaccumulators, which build up inside cells or environments over time, meaning that humans, animals and the natural world are still exposed to them today. The negative impacts are felt only when a certain threshold of accumulation is passed, and that could be many years after their use begins. Bioaccumulation often occurs through food chains, with those at the top suffering from the worst exposure—in most cases, humans are at

the top of the food chain. Polychlorinated biphenyls, which were once widely used in electrical products, paper and flame-resistant coatings, are a prime example. It took many decades, pre-REACH, for a ban to be finally implemented, and during that time people were regularly exposed to dangerous carcinogens. Surely, it is better to take a pragmatic approach and attempt to stay in REACH. Although it is not perfect, it has, as I said at the start of my speech, the support of both sides of the equation: the vested interests in the chemical industry, and those who seek to protect the environment, humans and animal welfare.

REACH is being constantly updated, and it has had 38 amendments since its creation. UK companies would have to continue to comply with REACH if they wanted to continue to trade with the continent. As we have heard, even if only a small component of a product—with a car, for example, it could be the paint, the seats or any of 101 different elements—is manufactured in the UK, that small part may well have to comply with REACH. The UK Chemicals Stakeholder Forum recorded that there was a

“clear consensus that businesses did not want to see a weakening of environmental standards”,

and that the industry wants to maintain access to REACH after we leave the EU.

REACH is also closely connected with the EU's classification, labelling and packaging legislation, as well as the more general EU health, safety and environmental legislation. Just as “chemicals” includes a wide variety of substances, so too does the body of regulation that is required to adequately govern them. If we leave REACH, it is not just a case of replacing it; the UK would need to offer up a substitute for EU regulations, including the sustainable use of pesticides directive, the biocidal products regulation, the industrial emissions directive, the bathing water directive, the drinking water directive and the urban waste water treatment directive, to name just a few. They are all interconnected.

The UK has signed up to a number of sustainable development goals that bind us to regulate chemicals properly and not to support a drop in standards. They include ensuring that by 2020 we use and produce chemicals in ways that do not lead to significant adverse effects on human health and the environment; and, by 2030, reducing the number of deaths and illnesses from hazardous chemicals and air, water and soil pollution and contamination, as well as improving water quality by minimising the release of hazardous chemicals.

That strays on to the turf of another Environmental Audit Committee report on the sustainable development goals and how we can implement them in domestic policy. Again, we were not particularly happy with the Government's response, and I am sure we will continue to pursue the matter. Despite the obvious risks and uncertainties that face both the chemical industry and the health of the public and the natural environment, the Government's response to the EAC report was disappointing and rather lacking. I urge the Government to commit to and implement the Committee's recommendations, because the cost of failing to act, and of not being adequately prepared for when we leave the EU, is too great. In the Government's election manifesto, they promised to be

“the first generation to leave the environment in a better state”

[Kerry McCarthy]

than they found it, but achieving that is incompatible with their current approach to chemicals regulation, and with any regulatory system that does not adequately protect humans, the environment and animals to the extent that REACH does.

2.24 pm

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans.

I take this opportunity to thank the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) for securing this crucial and topical debate. Some interesting and intriguing points and concerns have been raised. The hon. Lady has already said that she feels as though the Government are treating the chemicals industry as a Cinderella industry. Her point about zombie legislation was not lost on Members, and her detailed knowledge of this subject is admirable.

Other Members made clear their concerns about the loss of jobs and the possibility of animal testing, which raises another unnecessary problem that we would have to deal with. Many other important questions are as yet unanswered. It was good to hear that the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) might cross the divide—that intrigues me—but it was reassuring that he has already become a devotee of the EAC. The hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith)—

Angela Smith: The hon. Gentleman is one of the very few people who have got the pronunciation right.

John Mc Nally: Am I? If I can say “Auchtermuchty”, and so on, it is fairly easy.

The hon. Lady raised the importance of getting the transition right and reiterated that we need policy certainty on this issue. The modesty of the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and her understanding of the complexity of this inquiry is to be admired. She is without doubt a very able and knowledgeable MP, as I have learned.

It has been a privilege to be a member of the Committee, as it is to follow the hon. Lady. As well as benefiting from my deeply committed and knowledgeable colleagues, I have relished fighting on issues that I am passionate about. Highlighting the need to protect our precious environment against pollution on a local, national and international level has been my mission. From the scourge of plastic microbeads and nurdles on our beaches, to plastic fibres from clothing that poison our waterways, the Committee has shone a light on environmental issues that the public want and need to know about. The Committee has successfully alerted corporate giants to their responsibility to communities and to the wider world that we share. We have never shirked asking difficult questions. I wish to acknowledge our Chair, the hon. Member for Wakefield, and I am sure that my colleagues want to do the same. In my opinion, she provides the best model for the operation of a successful Committee.

I, too, was on the trip that the hon. Lady mentioned to America prior to last year's election. The Committee visited Washington DC to meet various agencies, senior academics and scientists. We were told by one of the

scientists there that they had already had 100,000 companies registered in Ireland. That immediately raises concerns, and it reinforces what has been said today. We were all warned that Brexit threatened our membership of REACH and would result in disastrous consequences for our industries and economies. I was also warned that the Scottish Government's competencies in environmental matters were facing an existential threat.

The chemicals industry is an economic linchpin, and we heard grave concerns from senior people who fear that Brexit may result in deteriorating standards if REACH is compromised. REACH has been widely described as the most complex piece of legislation ever undertaken in the EU's history, and around 30,000 chemicals are registered under it at present. I think that in the UK something like 6,500 are registered under it at the moment. Meanwhile, as has been said, its membership is a passport to the global chemicals marketplace.

REACH standards are recognised by regulatory regimes worldwide. That enables exports worth £14 billion every year across the EU. By May this year—the looming deadline for registering chemicals under REACH—UK companies will have spent an estimated £250 million on the process over the past 10 years. If the unthinkable occurs and no agreement is hammered out between the UK and EU, are we then a UK out of EU reach? Chemical registration-related data sharing would cease to exist. That would be utterly disastrous for businesses and their investments, and they would have to reapply all over again. It would be an absolute nightmare for us to go through.

Let me turn to my homeland, Scotland. The Scots chemical industry is a truly international and invaluable part of the Scottish economy, second only to our thriving food and drink industry. It is a major exporter that delivers outstanding GVA and has shown remarkable resilience in these turbulent economic times. I believe that the most recent Office for National Statistics figures show that the Scottish sector maintained double-digit export growth between 2014 and 2015, before the recent weakening of the pound. Surely that success cannot be allowed to face uncertainty. As we know, the sector is acutely sensitive to any tariffs or barriers that would make exports less competitive. We must also think of the vast numbers of people employed in the sector, as has been said—more than 10,000 directly in Scotland and six times that figure indirectly—in an array of jobs ranging from manufacturing, sales and marketing to logistics. Chemical sciences account for 33% of all Scottish manufacturing.

The regulation system achieved through REACH allows us to protect our environment and therefore human health. Industry and the public—our constituents—cannot afford to wait for the UK Government to act on these issues. Industries will still need to meet EU regulations after we leave the EU if businesses are to continue trading, so why is the Government's position so vague? We are painfully aware that prolonged uncertainty could cost the taxpayers of this country millions of pounds and leave our exports in disarray.

I believe wholeheartedly that membership of REACH is vital to allow unhindered movement of medicines and drugs post-Brexit. Yet when they were asked by the Environmental Audit Committee to take a pragmatic approach to the UK's future relationship to the EU

single market for chemicals, the Government gave a meaningless response that held no answer. That is simply not good enough. As for Scotland, its continuing transition to a low-carbon energy country must be allowed to continue. It is important for everyone that that approach is seen as a way forward for the environment. Everybody here has asked questions; we now demand some answers. 2.31 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to serve under your chairing, Mr Evans. It is good to see the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), back in her place; I fear that we may spend some time in statutory instrument Committees, including on this topic. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), Chair of the Committee, on a thoughtful presentation. I do not intend to repeat much of it, because I think that the Minister has got her train of thought and will be answering some of her points.

I commend my hon. Friends the Members for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) and for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for their speeches, and my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), who made an intervention. The hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark), although he is no longer in his place, made a good contribution, and the hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally), who spoke for the Scottish National party, also raised numerous pertinent points.

The report is good and, I must say, pithy. I enjoy Select Committee findings when they can be read within a relatively short time; I always think that the shorter they are, the better the quality. That would be fine, except that the Government's response was even shorter and, I am afraid, not as pithy, in the sense that it did not get to the point of things, except one bit, which I will ask the Minister about. The Government say:

"The government will use the Repeal Bill (The European Union (Withdrawal) Bill) to convert EU law into UK law and use the powers to amend REACH, as well as other related chemicals regulation to make them work properly in the UK."

Can I assume from that that REACH is still the preferred methodology for dealing with chemicals? That is important. As far as I understand it, this is an interesting issue, because the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is only one part of it, and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy also has a strong interest. I gather that the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has more or less intimated that he also wants some continuation of the relationship to REACH. Is that our starting point? That is my question for the Minister, because all other factors follow from that. The issue is important. Interestingly, this excellent paper from the House of Commons Library on Brexit and the environment uses REACH as an example of the implications, because it will have a pretty big impact on our industry, but also on how we feel safe with chemicals.

The report preceded the general election, even though the Government's response came after it, so we must consider something a bit more recent—the 25-year environment plan, in which three pages are allocated to chemicals. It makes some clear commitments. On page 100, the Government commit to four actions. The first is:

"Publishing an overarching Chemicals Strategy to set out our approach as we leave the EU."

When? The second is:

"Exploring options to consolidate monitoring and horizon-scanning work to develop an early warning system for identifying emerging chemical issues."

How will that be done? The third is:

"Considering how we will address tracking of chemicals in products to reduce barriers to recycling and reuse whilst preventing a risk from harmful chemicals."

Who will do that? If not Government, will it be done in partnership? The fourth is:

"Working internationally to strengthen the standardisation of methods that assess chemical safety in support of the mutual acceptance of data to identify and share information on emerging concerns and new approaches to risk assessments."

If not REACH, what could it possibly be?

We have already talked about double registration, the impact on jobs and investment and the possibility of relocation. All four of those actions impinge closely on how the industry will evolve, so it is important for the Minister to give us at least some way forward on how the Government are tackling them. Like my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Wakefield, I read the previous Brexit impact assessment—are we allowed to call it an impact assessment now? Like everyone else, I do not know whether the Minister has seen the one on chemicals; presumably it would have been referred to in the latest documentation, which we have been debating this week. It is important to know that the industry will feature, because it is important.

In terms of where we are, it is not just a question of the chemical industry. As my hon. Friends have made clear, it is about how that locks into all sorts of other industries, such as the food chain, health and medicines and animal welfare. That is important, because every time I sit next to someone from those industries, all they say to me is, "Is there any certainty? Is there any way we can make decisions? We don't know what we're going to do, because we get nothing but confusion. We need some clarity."

It is not just about the industry. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East discussed some of the implications when things have gone wrong. I mention organophosphates, to pick up an issue after not having been here for some time. I am dealing with a constituent who suffers from organophosphate poisoning. It has nothing to do with the Minister—it predates both her Government and mine, although it involved mine—but we all know that when regulation goes wrong, people suffer. For someone facing the repercussions of OP poisoning, it is awful. That is why we must get this right. It is a matter of human safety and, eventually, someone's life experience, so it would be good to know that this issue is at the top of DEFRA's agenda, and that the Department is talking to BEIS to ensure that we get it right.

I have a series of questions. I will go through them quickly, but they are important. First, the European Chemicals Agency, the current chemicals regulator, has extensive databases. Are we talking to the ECHA about how we could still access those databases after exit day? Secondly, I have already referred to the overarching chemical strategy. Is there a timetable? I know that it has been said that it will not happen until after exit day, but there must be some clear steer on what the timetable is. Thirdly, will the Department be transparent and publish what it is doing and thinking about how those procedures will be taken forward?

[Dr David Drew]

Chemistry World published a story—whether it was a leak or an inspired story—that said that Government had set aside £5.8 million for an IT system to look at the registration and regulation of chemicals. Can the Minister confirm that? Is that in addition to REACH or a replacement?

I have mentioned the Business Secretary's view that REACH is something we need to build on rather than replace. It would be useful to know whether the Department is talking to BEIS about how that will happen.

The Department's research is hopefully now focused on this issue. Does it have sufficient civil servants and sufficient expertise? Is it drawing in other outside expertise? It is very important to draw together to ensure that whatever the outcome, we get this right.

Finally, can the Minister assure me that there is no intention to lower standards? The bottom line is that it cannot be any worse, for the reasons that we have discussed: people suffered when we got it wrong, and the industry needs stability and security. The Minister has plenty of time to respond, and I look forward to hearing her answers.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): I remind the Minister that it is customary to allow a couple of minutes at the end for Mary Creagh to sum up.

2.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) on securing this debate and I thank her Committee for its report.

The Government recognise that the UK chemicals sector is vital to the economy and to many other industries, often leading the way in research and innovation. Not only is it our second largest export industry, but it is a key component in almost all our other huge sectors. As the hon. Lady explained, chemicals are in many of the products and processes that we use. I am fully aware of the extent to which they can be in everyday products, and indeed in medicines and elsewhere.

The Committee's inquiry took place nearly a year ago and we replied to it in July. I note that the Committee invited comments on our response. I have continued to meet the industry, and across Government, engagement with the industry and stakeholders will continue. I recognise that the principal concern of the industry—to ensure that existing REACH registrations remain valid—has not changed.

I also recognise that trade associations and other organisations have continued to call for the UK to stay in REACH. As I have explained elsewhere, given the principles set out by the Prime Minister in her Lancaster House speech, we will not stay in REACH per se but, through the provisions set out in the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, we will bring into law the regulations that put REACH into effect. That is important because the continuity will provide an effective regulatory system for the management and control of chemicals to safeguard

human health and the environment. It will also minimise any market access barriers for UK companies trading with the EU.

It has been suggested that we are not listening to the voice of business, but I humbly point out that the Government are listening to the voice of the people by respecting the referendum result. It was reiterated throughout the 2016 campaign that a vote to leave was also a vote to leave the single market.

Angela Smith: I differ on the point that people voted to leave the single market. Nevertheless, I am sure the Minister just said that the Government will do their best to minimise any lack of access to the European market. Is that not an acknowledgement that there will be some damage to the industry if we leave REACH and have to set up our own regulatory regime?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Lady will recognise that our future relationship is still a matter for negotiation. Phase 1 has happened and we are moving into phase 2. Having exactly the same regulation the day before and the day after we leave the European Union will minimise market access barriers for UK companies trading in the EU.

We agree that ensuring the continued validity of REACH registrations is a critical issue and fully recognise the investment that UK companies have made in the REACH registration process. We are clear that we want existing registrations, authorisations and approvals to remain valid in the EU and UK markets, which is clearly in the interest of businesses operating in the UK and the EU. That recognises the complex compliance activity that takes place through supply chains. As the hon. Member for Wakefield pointed out, it is not just about sales between companies but about the movement of goods through the supply chain within a company.

We want to avoid the unnecessary duplication of compliance activities undertaken by businesses prior to exit. That was set out in the Government's position paper, "Continuity in the availability of goods for the EU and the UK", published in August 2017, which also set out our principles for maintaining the availability of goods after exit.

It is likely that some products will be undergoing testing, registration or authorisation processes at the point of exit. For such cases, given the ambition for a close future relationship, the body carrying out the assessment should be permitted to complete it and the results should be recognised in UK and EU markets. That would be in the best interests of businesses across Europe, and I encourage them to work together to support that pragmatic outcome.

Although it would not be appropriate to pre-judge the outcome of the negotiations, we will discuss with EU member states how best to continue co-operation in chemicals regulation in the best interests of the UK and the European Union. That extends to aspects of knowledge sharing—it would be ideal to continue that work through the negotiations. For example, the EU is highly reliant on the expertise of the Health and Safety Executive in the assessment of chemicals, particularly biocides and pesticides.

I am aware that the guidance that the European Chemicals Agency published on its website about the UK's withdrawal from the EU has caused concern.

That guidance reflects the EU's view of what would need to happen if there were no future relationship between the EU and the UK. It does not, of course, take into account potential negotiated outcomes and I am pleased to note that that has now been acknowledged on the ECHA website. As hon. Members may be aware, the guidance has recently been updated to reflect issues about the transfer of registrations and authorisations.

We have increased resources within my Department, in the HSE—a body sponsored by the Department for Work and Pensions—and in the Environment Agency to work on chemicals policy and prepare to deliver an effective regulatory regime after we leave the EU. We have established a joint programme of work with HSE to deliver what we need to have in place for day one. I work with ministerial colleagues across Government from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the DWP, the Department for Exiting the European Union, the Department for International Trade and the Treasury.

We are also planning for a non-negotiated day one outcome to have a functioning chemicals regulatory and enforcement system. We are now scoping and designing what such a system would look like, including an IT system to replicate REACH. As the hon. Member for Wakefield pointed out, that includes the budget that has been released so far to scope that system.

On leaving the EU, our regulatory system and laws will be identical to those of the EU. There could be opportunities to consider improving the regulatory system to maintain standards in protecting the environment and human health. That is why we have considered the regulatory approaches of other countries, including those that are largely modelled on REACH.

Although we will not be part of REACH, there is an opportunity to work internationally to strengthen the standardisation of methods that assess chemical safety in support of the mutual acceptance of data to identify and share information on emerging concerns and on new approaches to risk assessments. In a global world where we share chemicals and have several existing chemicals conventions, it makes sense for our regulatory authorities increasingly to share that information to ensure that we have greater compliance and convergence in understanding and recognising the benefits and hazards that chemicals can pose. I do not see any reason why we cannot have that ambition once we leave the EU.

Dr Drew: After the dreadful experience of the Rural Payments Agency's IT system, will the Minister confirm whether the IT system to replicate REACH has already been commissioned? Will it be put out to private contractors or done in-house within Government?

Dr Coffey: The system is at the stage where we are waiting for an aspect of the business case to be signed off. I have met the new Minister responsible for the Health and Safety Executive—the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton)—and work is ongoing between our Departments and the HSE.

The most relevant environmental principle to chemicals regulation is the precautionary principle, which is embedded in international conventions relevant to the regulation of chemicals, such as the Stockholm convention on persistent organic pollutants, to which the UK will

continue to be a signatory in its own right. The Secretary of State has announced that we will consult on how we will incorporate various environmental principles and governance mechanisms, and we are carefully considering our proposals at the moment.

As the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) noted, we recently published our 25-year environment plan, in which we acknowledged that chemicals provide substantial benefits to society, but their widespread use in industry, agriculture, food systems and homes has led in some cases to pollution of land, water, air and food. We will publish a new chemicals strategy to tackle chemicals of national concern. The new strategy, which will build on existing regulatory approaches, will set our priorities for action and will detail how we will achieve our goals. It is intended to support collaborative work on human biomonitoring, address the combination effects of different chemicals and improve how we track chemicals across supply chains. I am not able to set out a timeline, but I certainly do not anticipate that the strategy will be published this year, because our main focus is implementing a smooth transition and continuing existing regulations.

We also need to consider the domestic market within the United Kingdom. REACH currently gives us a consistent framework across the UK, and we would like that consistency to continue. We have already started discussions with the devolved Administrations on a future chemicals framework across the UK.

Let me tackle some other questions raised by hon. Members. Is REACH the preferred methodology for chemicals regulation? In our international discussions, as I told the Environmental Audit Committee, we are not minded to take the United States' approach. We think that REACH has shown its worth. As has been pointed out, a lot of chemical companies were not necessarily its greatest fans when it was introduced but are now embracing it. When I discuss the matter with Ministers from Brazil and other countries, it is clear that they are trying to get the best of all worlds, which is what we need to ensure for ourselves as we go forward. I have spoken to Switzerland, and I think officials have had discussions with South Korea. A lot of countries are taking a REACH-style approach but may not be replicating it in every detail.

On early warning and horizon scanning, I hope we can set out our approach in more detail when we publish our chemicals strategy. In answer to the question about sufficient expertise, I must point out that the HSE is the responsible authority and there is no reason to doubt its expertise; I commend it for its work in support of the chemicals industry.

I fully understand hon. Members' concerns about bureaucracy, which is why we are in negotiations. I am afraid that I cannot give hon. Members an update on where we are, because phase 2 of the negotiations is yet to start; I fully understand the uncertainty that that brings. I have engaged with stakeholders. We have seen only representatives becoming part of networks or opening branch offices in different countries or a presence in the European Union. As I told the Committee, from my experience of working in multinational companies, I fully expect them to be contingency planning, but that does not mean that they will be abandoning this country all of a sudden. Far from it: the size of the market in this country, not only for chemicals but—as has already

[Dr Thérèse Coffey]

been explained—for many other manufacturing sectors, absolutely means that they will keep a permanent presence in the United Kingdom.

I do not anticipate any new approaches to risk assessment. The precautionary principle is well embedded in what we do. As I have articulated, we will be bringing different regulations into law, as will the devolved Administrations. We sit on committees now and we hope to retain those links in the future, but that is a matter for the negotiations.

The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) raised third-party country status. We still need to consider and negotiate elements of that. The approach set out by the Prime Minister on behalf of the Government, in which not being governed by the European Court of Justice is a guiding principle in what we do, still applies, so some assessment is still needed. Bioaccumulation is among the matters that we intend to cover in our chemicals strategy.

Let me assure hon. Members that ensuring we have a regulatory regime that continues to be effective is a very important part of my portfolio, but my top priority has been a smooth transition. As I am sure hon. Members recognise, I cannot answer questions today about exactly what our future customs arrangements with the rest of the European Union will be. However, I am highly conscious that we want to help business to continue to be successful, and I would like it to get certainty as quickly as possible. I am sure that I have disappointed hon. Members today by not being able to do that, but I will move on to the next phase of negotiations shortly.

I reiterate that we will do all we can to ensure a smooth transition and a successful industry for years to come. I saw the hon. Member for Stroud and members of the Environmental Audit Committee yesterday. I am sure that broad consideration of the environment in different ways and across different industries will continue, quite rightly, to be a key topic for debate in Parliament.

2.56 pm

Mary Creagh: I thank Environmental Audit Committee members present—the hon. Members for Gordon (Colin Clark) and for Falkirk (John Mc Nally), and my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy)—for their support, along with the Minister's Parliamentary Private Secretary, the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow). I certainly feel that the Committee is waking up, having been a sleeping giant on the Committee Corridor; it is finally finding its voice.

I agree with the Minister that her response was very disappointing. Based on what she is offering the sector, I think the verdict is “Must try harder”. She has told us that the chemicals strategy will not be published this year, which is deeply worrying. She is not offering

continuity, as she said, but rupture and multiplication of uncertainty. She is in danger of sounding complacent when she talks about only representatives setting up in other countries. These are the people through whom business flows, so if they leave, the business leaves with them.

Dr Coffey indicated dissent.

Mary Creagh: The Minister says no, but we can have a debate about that. She talks about setting up a database with £5.8 million of our money, yet she says that a business case has not yet been developed for it.

Dr Coffey: May I add some information? Clearly the system will cost more than £5.8 million. That is part of the release of money.

Mary Creagh: How much will it cost?

Dr Coffey: We do not have a final estimate for the budget, because the system is still to be finalised. That is why the business case still needs to be assessed.

Mary Creagh: This looks like a release of initial moneys to scope out and make the business case for the rest. I wonder about DEFRA's capacity to deal with this. DEFRA has lost 5,000 civil servants in the past seven years.

The ECHA website states:

“Only a mutual agreement between the EU and UK authorities can change this date”,

meaning 30 March. It also states:

“It is the European Commission that conducts the withdrawal negotiations with the UK Government under a negotiating mandate...ECHA is not party to these negotiations.”

We face the uncertainty of whether there will be a transitional period, how long it will be and what will happen, and then the further uncertainty of what will happen afterwards. Lord Bridges said that the transition period was set to be one of “muddling through” and “a gangplank into thin air.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 30 January 2018; Vol. 788, c. 1423.]

The Minister says that when people voted in the referendum, they were voting to leave the single market. Daniel Hannan, her Tory MEP colleague, said that only a madman would leave the single market. Well, I am afraid the Minister's party seems to have been taken over by the madmen. We need a sensible, rooted debate based on the reality of people's lives and the reality for businesses in this country, not constant reassuring words that give solidity to mere wind.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Eleventh Report of the Environmental Audit Committee of Session 2016-17, The Future of Chemicals Regulation after the EU Referendum, HC 912, and the Government response, HC 313.

Backbench Business

Leaving the EU: Agriculture

[MR PETER BONE *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the policy framework for agriculture after the UK leaves the EU.

As ever, Mr Bone, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

Before I start, I should say that I am very grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for having allowed the House the opportunity to debate this subject today. I see a reasonable number of Members in Westminster Hall, so I shall try to keep my remarks fairly short, to ensure that everybody gets a chance to have their say.

First of all, however, it is worth noting the context for this debate. For the 40-plus years that the United Kingdom has been a member of the Common Market, the European Economic Community and ultimately the European Union, the common agricultural policy has been the dominant force in shaping agricultural policy in the United Kingdom. As is often the case when there is such a dominant force, we can get dragged down into the weeds. We can lose sight of the higher purpose—I suspect that, if pressed, any of us could come up with lots of things that we dislike about the CAP.

The moment of our leaving the European Union will be, of course, an opportunity to change much of that and to do things differently, if that is what we choose. However, it is worth reminding ourselves about the context of what has been achieved and the nature of the agricultural industries—I use the plural advisedly—that we have had for the last 40 years as a consequence of our membership of the EU.

Some would say that this is a moment for moving away from financial support for agriculture completely—the New Zealand “cold turkey” approach. That is a respectable view; it is not one that I happen to share, for reasons that I will explain. However, it is a statable case, and if we are sensible it is one that we should address. When the Secretary of State recently made a speech at the Oxford Farming Conference, he spoke about the CAP being a mechanism for subsidising inefficiencies. One man’s inefficiency may be another man’s lifestyle, so I listen to terms such as that being bandied about with some caution, shall we say.

What would be the consequence, though, of ending the support there has been for agriculture? The most obvious consequence, in my view, would be food price inflation. There is a cost attached to maintaining an agricultural business, and if farmers are not to get the money they need through the mix of what they get at the farm gate and financial support from Government, then of course a higher price will have to be paid by the consumer in the supermarket.

In fact, earlier today it was put to me that the most obvious victims of the end of the era of cheap food—the era in which we have lived and continue to live—would be those on the lowest and fixed incomes. That is a good

point: people on low incomes spend a higher proportion of their disposable income on food than on anything else. Ending support would also have very profound implications for our countryside. Many of the things that we value most about our countryside come about because people live there—because they can work there and make a living there. The countryside is not just a glorified retirement home.

I have seen a lot of farms’ books in my time as a Member of Parliament, for a whole variety of reasons. When it comes to farmers in my constituency and throughout the highlands and islands—and doubtless those in other parts of the country—there simply would not be a living to be made without the farm subsidy payment coming into their businesses every year. We would lose the farms, then the shops and the post offices. The country schools would close, which would lead to the loss of professional support, such as the lawyers, accountants and the vets. With that loss, we would start to lose the mix that a rural community needs to sustain itself. Thereafter, it is pretty easy to see where we would go.

The alternative to food price inflation, of course, would be to import cheap food from other parts of the world. However, I caution hon. Members about that. One of the reasons why our costs of production are high in this country, relative to other parts of the world, is that we maintain very good standards of animal welfare, traceability and biosecurity. Those all come at a price. We are told that such things are valued by the consumer, and there is a price attached to that. If our farmers are to compete on a level footing, we should expect the same standards in those countries from which we would envisage importing food. At that point, one would wonder whether the price difference between food produced here and imported food would be as marked as it is now.

In that context, the CAP and support for agricultural industries have given us considerable stability in recent decades. There is then the question of what will follow the CAP. If we take away the framework that we have had since the mid-1970s—the CAP—we will inevitably have to replace it with some other sort of framework: a UK-wide one, if that is to be the extent of our regulation. I am pleased to note an emerging consensus between the UK Government and the devolved Administrations: that the creation of a UK-wide framework is a desirable and necessary event, which will have to be taken seriously.

To my mind, there are something in the region of four different objectives that such a new framework would need to have built into it. First, and most importantly, it would need to preserve the functioning and integrity of the UK internal market. That is important for consumers and producers across the length and breadth of the country. Secondly, it would need integrity, to ensure that the UK was in a position to enter into trade agreements with other countries. Thirdly, it would have to ensure that the United Kingdom could continue to meet its existing international obligations, never mind those that we may seek to take on. Fourthly, it should provide for effective management of common resources. As I say, the first of those four objectives—preserving the integrity of a UK internal market—is the most important.

[Mr Alistair Carmichael]

As the National Farmers Union Scotland has put it in one of the many briefings that have been provided for today's debate,

"animal welfare and traceability, public health, pesticides regulation, and food labelling"

should all be part of a "commonly agreed 'framework'". That is in the interests of all parts of the United Kingdom.

Of course, once an overarching framework has been agreed, everything else that remains should be devolved to the constituent parts of the United Kingdom. For the purposes of England, that would obviously be the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; the Scottish, Northern Irish and Welsh Assembly Governments would have control and responsibility for their own respective jurisdictions. The thinking that needs to be done now about how we design that framework is important. We need something that will allow each Administration to implement it as is appropriate for their area.

As one who was always a keen supporter of the idea before it happened, I think that devolution since 1999 in Scotland has been very good for Scottish farmers. They say that the administration of agricultural policy from a dedicated Department in Edinburgh has been better for them: it is closer to their needs and better able to design a system that is suitable for the farmers in our constituency.

I am sure that that is true across the whole United Kingdom, so the framework must provide a structure without tying the hands of the devolved Governments. They should be able to continue to do as they currently do: look after the less favoured areas such as the highlands and islands, and perhaps then the beef farms and dairy farms; I am thinking not only of Orkney and such places, but the north-east of England—I see the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack) from the south-west of Scotland—or the south-west of England.

There are upland farms in Yorkshire and Cumbria. All the different industries have needs that are best met by devolved Administrations delivering policy in their own jurisdictions. For that reason, when the framework is constructed, it has to deal with those matters in a way that that can be commonly agreed. If the Minister has not already had representations from the NFUS, although I suspect he probably has, he should consider its proposal for the creation of a strengthened joint ministerial Committee. The mechanisms of devolution already make provision for that sort of thing, but as we move to the next phase of our constitutional change, it is pretty clear that something of that sort will be necessary.

The idea posited to get a commonly agreed mechanism is that something such as qualified majority voting, as is often used in the Council of Ministers, could be engaged. The advantage would be to create something that was genuinely a common agreement, rather than a top-down approach where control would still be vested in DEFRA and in London.

Inevitably, one comes on to the question of finances. Currently the United Kingdom remits money to Brussels, which then pays the respective Administrations money that goes in a dedicated way to farm support. Obviously, after our departure from the European Union, that supply line will be significantly shortened and we shall

look to the Treasury. I do not see any other mechanism than that the money should come from the Treasury, but perhaps the Minister has other ideas about how that would work. More importantly even than that, we need to know the mechanism by which that funding will be distributed across the different parts of the United Kingdom. For most public spending purposes, we currently have the Barnett formula, but that takes into consideration a whole range of different matters that would not really be relevant, so some sort of thinking at this point will clearly have to be done.

On the brass tacks of this, when the Minister comes to reply to the debate today—I realise we are in the early stages of the thinking and we can look only for broad principles—will he confirm that the pie that we will slice up by whatever mechanism we devise will remain the same size as the one we currently have? The one thing that consistently comes through to me, from talking to farmers and crofters in my constituency and to the farming unions, is that at this stage our objective should be continuity and stability. Farmers really need to know what the future holds for them. If we do not have early confirmation of what the future holds, we cannot expect them to have the confidence to keep investing.

A whole range of imponderables will come from our decision to leave the European Union. Access to export markets, the terms on which imports will be allowed from other countries, and the availability of labour for both the production and processing of food are just a few of them. All those matters are outwith our control, but the creation of a UK-wide framework is one element entirely within our own control; more than anything else, it will give our farmers the opportunity to continue their planning for future investment.

In his speech at the Oxford Farming Conference, the Secretary of State guaranteed support payments to 2024. That was a welcome announcement and I do not want to diminish the importance of it in any way, but in doing that he prayed in aid the need for long-term certainty.

I speak as a farmer's son. I know two things about farming. First, I knew I was never going to be one; that is partly why I am here today. Secondly, I know that six years for a farmer is nothing like the long term. The long term is what agriculture is built on and what our farmers and crofters need to hear about. I hope the Minister will at least give an indication that we have started the process of giving it to them.

3.16 pm

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this debate. I listened intently to his speech and he will be pleased to hear that I agreed with absolutely everything he said. However, that will not stop me saying some of it again.

Brexit is a great opportunity for us to reform the policy framework for agriculture in a way that promotes both the agriculture sector and the environment, but it is crucial that we get it right. In Scotland, a healthy agricultural sector makes for a healthy economy. Across agricultural production and the food and drink industry, Scottish farming and crofting supports more than 400,000 jobs. Scottish agriculture has functioned for decades under the EU's regulatory framework, including

the flawed and inefficient common agricultural policy. It is no surprise, therefore, that a majority of British and Scottish farmers voted for Brexit.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman tell us the source of his information? The National Farmers' Union of Scotland is under the impression that most of its members voted by a narrow majority to remain, so what is his source of information?

Mr Jack: My source is the farming press. According to *The Scottish Farmer*, a survey revealed that 66% of Scottish farmers said they had voted for Brexit.

Many farmers will be glad to see the back of the CAP and will be looking forward to what will replace it. I am encouraged by the UK Government's commitment to deliver the same level of farm support money until at least 2024, which the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland mentioned. I am also encouraged by the plan to put in place a green Brexit that rewards good environmental stewardship. However, even more can be done.

The CAP has failed to keep up with the pace of change in agriculture, trade and the wider economy. We would be hard-pressed to find many farmers who would describe the CAP as modern, efficient, or even fit for purpose, and that assumes that they get their CAP payments on time, which I know, as a Scottish farmer, can sometimes be a bit of a luxury. We should build an agricultural policy framework fit for the 2020s and beyond that supports a healthy, profitable, diverse, innovative and sustainable sector in a global economy and that seeks to embrace the future and make the most of it, rather than shy away from the challenges it presents. But the issue goes far beyond farm support. As the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland said, it is vital that, for example, we maintain our high regulatory standards.

The EU is not a perfect regulator, and Brexit allows us to make changes to regulate better and smarter, and respond more proactively to changing circumstances. There is no case for compromising our standards, and we must make sure that standards in all parts of the United Kingdom are as high as or higher than they are at present. Animal welfare in particular is an area where we should seek to hold ourselves to even higher standards after Brexit. We must also maintain the commitment to high agricultural standards in our trade negotiations with third parties, and develop a framework that ensures that we can make such trade deals while preserving the devolution settlement. I expect that the powers over agricultural policy due to return from Brussels will in turn be devolved to Holyrood at implementation level.

The preservation of the UK internal market should underpin any future framework. If that were not to happen, it would be harder and more expensive for Scottish farmers to trade in the rest of the UK, and vice versa. We cannot allow that. That is a particular concern for farmers in my constituency. Dumfries and Galloway is near England and Northern Ireland, and trades extensively with both. We must not give our agricultural sector trouble at home when it should be seeking new opportunities around the world. We therefore need frameworks that ensure a degree of harmony between all parts of the United Kingdom, and that make sure our common resources are managed as effectively as possible.

Brexit is a challenge for Scotland's agricultural sector, but it is also a great opportunity that can get the sector flourishing for decades to come. However, that will require the UK and Scottish Governments to work together to create an effective policy framework that can give a real boost to Scottish, and indeed British, agriculture.

3.21 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you here, Mr Bone.

The debate is very welcome. It has obviously been a long time since agriculture policy was in such a period of transition, and where there was so much up for debate and needing to be decided; as we come out of the common agricultural policy we look towards the negotiation of new trade deals, and there is an agriculture Bill on the horizon, I hope. The Environment Secretary has made some welcome statements at the Oxford Farming Conference and the Oxford Real Farming Conference—I attended the latter—which were restated in the 25-year environment plan, about trying to shift to the use of public money for public goods. That must be the backbone of the approach. I welcome his clarity about the ending of subsidy per acre, and using it to pay for public goods. It is encouraging that the direction of travel on that is so clear. Farmers want to do much more to conserve their land for future generations; the structure should be there to support that.

We need to do a much better job of internalising the external costs of the damage we do to the environment, including soil degradation, deforestation, biodiversity loss and the impact on public health of the routine use of antibiotics. Those have been disregarded for too long. I am sure that we all agree on the desirability of the new regime supporting the public goods that the Environment Secretary identified, such as planting woodland and restoring habitats for endangered species, and restoring and enhancing soil. I would add other things, but the direction of travel is good.

As chair of the all-party group on agroecology for sustainable food and farming, I would also like specifically to promote the benefits of agroecological approaches. They are sometimes seen as backward-looking, because they can involve reviving some old-age systems, but I am not personally anti-innovation. I think that agroecological measures can be adopted without a reduction in productivity. As the former UN special rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter, said, the approach has been shown

“to improve food production and farmers' incomes, while at the same time protecting the soil, water, and climate”.

That is the balance we need.

I want to focus my comments on two areas about which little has been said so far. The first is post-Brexit agricultural policy, which urgently needs to address how we increase our food sustainability and, given global pressures, ensure long-term food security. The second is the growth of diet-related ill-health and widening health inequalities. As to food security, leaving the EU potentially puts UK food security at greater risk. At the moment we produce less than 60% of the food we consume and rely on the EU for almost 30% of our imports. Post-Brexit, shortages of farm labour and a more volatile market could make that situation even

[Kerry McCarthy]

worse. I am vice-chair of the all-party group on fruit and vegetable farmers. Witnesses from the sector, and the wider horticulture sector, gave evidence to the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs a while ago; the sector is already starting to suffer from the Brexit effect. Last year, there were reports of produce rotting in the fields in Cornwall from a lack of EU workers to pick it, put off by poor exchange rates and uncertain future employment. I know that the Minister has attended the all-party group and the Select Committee to hear our concerns. I am sure that the Committee Chair, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), will mention that later.

Nothing was said about the workforce in the 25-year plan. Although the Environment Secretary has said that he recognises the need for seasonal agricultural labour, we do not have a clear indication of what he intends to do about that. We need to ensure that agricultural policy addresses the prevalence of low pay, insecure employment and the exploitation of workers in the food and farming sector. I do not think that that is too much to ask.

Mr Carmichael: The issue of labour availability is important, but it is not confined to low-paid workers. The hon. Lady should be aware that the veterinary profession relies heavily on vets who come to work in this country from other parts of the European Union, especially for meat inspection.

Kerry McCarthy: I think that I am right in saying that about 85% of the vets from overseas who work in this country have not been in the UK more than five years; so they would not be captured by the arrangements being put in place to enable people to apply for status to stay in the country. That is an important issue.

On the question of horticulture and healthy eating, we need to ensure that our agricultural policy not only maintains but widens access to healthy, nutritious food for everyone. Analysis by the Food Foundation, which was of course set up by a former Conservative MP, who is doing excellent work, shows that a British family of four could be spending up to £158 per year more on fruit and veg after Brexit, as a result of tariffs, inflation and increased labour costs. That is a huge amount of money for those already struggling to put nutritious food on the table. Ninety-two per cent. of teenagers in the UK already struggle to get their five-a-day, and diets low in vegetables are linked to 20,000 premature deaths every year. We had a debate in Westminster Hall the other day about the links between junk food and childhood obesity. Cancer Research provided inspiration for that debate, and the other side of the healthy eating coin is obviously the consequences of unhealthy eating.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): Does the hon. Lady accept that produce has never been so affordable or abundant, and that it may be more of a reflection on society that teenagers do not eat enough fresh produce, rather than what she suggests?

Kerry McCarthy: It is partly due to consumer choice; but it is also a question of what is presented to people in supermarkets, and the encouragement to people to get cheap ready meals. As we saw during the horsemeat scandal, it is much easier for people with a very limited

income, who are running out of money before their next pay cheque, to buy a ready meal such as a lasagne that costs 99p or a pack of 12 Tesco burgers in the Value range, than it is to buy all the separate ingredients that would enable them to cook a similar meal at home. They just do not have the resources to do that.

That is something that the Food Foundation stresses. It says that if we increase the level of UK self-sufficiency in fruit and veg, production could become more competitive in comparison to pricier imports, and that there are 16 types of fruit and veg that we could grow more of in the UK, which would increase supply and help to protect demand in the uncertain times of Brexit. Last summer there was a sudden shortage of iceberg lettuce in shops because of the situation in Spain. I am sure that the Minister has looked at the Food Foundation report “Farming for 5-A-Day”, but if he has not I urge him to do so.

I want to raise the real threats to UK food and farming from a no-deal scenario and from free trade agreements with the US and countries with lower animal and food safety standards. The most carefully structured subsidy regime could be fatally undermined by the trade arrangements we enter into post-Brexit. The all-party parliamentary group on agroecology highlighted that in our recent inquiry. We found that trade deals post-Brexit could pose the biggest peacetime threat to the UK’s food security, if current environmental and public health standards are not prioritised in the terms of the negotiations. It is vital that agriculture does not become a bargaining chip or something that can easily be traded away during negotiations. We know there is a difference of opinion between the Environment Secretary, who has sworn that he wants to uphold standards, and the Trade Secretary, who has a less acceptable stance on these issues. He does not appreciate how much the public care about protecting these things.

There is a very real danger that when faced with the threat of rising food prices post-Brexit, many will argue for cheaper food through low or no tariffs, but that will come at a cost. The US Commerce Secretary, Wilbur Ross, has made it clear that any post-Brexit trade deal will hinge on the UK ditching its higher EU-derived food safety laws. The debate on chlorinated chicken and hormone-pumped beef is very much in the public domain. That situation could drive out higher-welfare and smaller-scale UK farmers who would be unable to compete on price. It could make it more difficult for British farmers to export to EU countries, with worries that they could provide a back door to the EU for these US imports. There are food safety issues, too, with US eggs and poultry much more likely to have salmonella contamination than UK products. At a recent meeting of the EU environment committee, Which? gave evidence. It said that something like one in six Americans get food poisoning over the course of a year, compared with one in 66 in the UK. That cannot just be down to poorer hygiene standards in people’s homes.

We cannot trigger a race to the bottom on standards. Nor should we seek to compete by copying American mega-farms, cutting costs by becoming ever more industrialised and intensive. One of the recent farming Ministers was very fond of the phrase “sustainable intensification”, but I never quite got him to explain what he meant by that.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): The hon. Lady is making an interesting speech. It is important that our policy on food standards is evidence-based. Salmonella rates are 1.5 times higher in Europe than they are in the US. We must not proceed in any trade deals on the basis of any anti-American bigotry. I am not suggesting that the hon. Lady is guilty of that, but some who contribute to these debates are. We must proceed only on the basis of evidence.

Kerry McCarthy: I agree with that, but the Soil Association has come up with a list of 10 products that are currently banned that could enter UK markets if we enter into a trade deal with the US. Chlorinated chicken and hormone-pumped beef were banned for very good reasons.

Andrew Percy indicated dissent.

Kerry McCarthy: We have different views on EU protections, but the EU ban on chlorinated chicken was introduced in 1997. Hormone-pumped beef was banned before that. If the hon. Gentleman asked his constituents whether they wanted these products in the UK market, I think they would support his Environment Secretary's position, whether they see these things as animal welfare concerns or food safety concerns. When he was giving evidence to the Select Committee, the Environment Secretary said that he saw that issue as a red line in negotiations and that we should not allow such things in. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman can ask the Environment Secretary what evidence he has considered. On that note, I will conclude my remarks.

3.33 pm

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone; I think it might be my first time. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this important debate. I have four points that I would like to make, and I will try to keep my remarks brief because we have got just under half an hour before the first Front Bencher is called. The four points are about subsidies, promoting agricultural jobs, migrant workers and environmental protections.

On subsidies, it is my firm belief that the common agricultural policy is fundamentally flawed and wasteful. The UK could implement a subsidy of its own that could save money and create better standards. The safeguarding of our current level of subsidies in establishing the new system was a welcome announcement from the Government, but we need to look further ahead, and we need some strategic investment in our agricultural sector. We need to offer capital grants, loans and tax incentives for investing in infrastructure. It is my firm belief that farm-led research and things to do with equipment and buildings should be implemented in collaboration with farmers.

The need to support new entrants and succession in farms is an issue that I have picked up when I have been out speaking to my farmers. There seems to be a break in people wanting to take part in agricultural work. We need to ensure that we invest in that. We also need to make things much more resilient for farmers who need protection against and compensation for unforeseen circumstances, such as crop blights. We have a step to go in that direction, but by promoting agriculture, we will see huge investment in the south-west.

Secondly, there are big opportunities for tech-based agriculture jobs. I recently met with Duchy College in my constituency. People there talked to me about how they are linking food and agriculture, and teaching young people about how the new innovation and tech of the future will benefit them. The Government also need to explore the opportunities for apprenticeships in agriculture. We have not done enough in that regard, and we owe it to our agricultural workers to do much more.

My third point is on migrant workers. We heard from the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) about the challenges around crops in Cornwall. In the south-west, 57% of our workers in the meat sector and 40% of people in the egg sector are migrant workers. Leaving the EU will enable us to control the number of people entering and leaving the UK, but we must maintain the balance by ensuring that we have the right people in place to do farm work. We need that to continue.

The NFU has been keen to promote an agricultural permit scheme for a 12-month visa. We had a seasonal agricultural workers scheme that stopped in 2012 or 2013, and we should look again at that. We have a challenge that we need to address to ensure that everything in the field is brought in on time. In the short and medium term, I want our farmers to have access to labour markets and visas. In the long term, we should be looking to retrain and re-employ British people to do those jobs and to bring in EU or other workers if and when required.

My main point is about environmental protections. I see big opportunities post Brexit for us to have a British agricultural policy that shapes production and improves environmental standards. I recently went out with the Westcountry Rivers Trust on a farm visit in my constituency, and the trust talked me through its work on upstream thinking. It implements a policy with a water company to provide a 50% grant to take slurry pits away from water courses. As we move towards a British agricultural policy, our water protections, our improvements to soil quality, our ability to maintain the uplands to store water and our ability to deliver high standards of animal welfare are all vital.

In conclusion, I am firmly of the belief that we can improve our production and increase our environmental protections at the same time. We will need to shape a British agricultural policy. I am looking forward to the agriculture Bill coming to the House. I ask the Minister to consider the points I have made.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): I advise Members in the Chamber that I would like to start the wind-up speeches at 4 o'clock. First, I will call the people who have notified me that they wish to speak. If we have time, I will call the others.

3.39 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this important debate and getting Back-Bench time. It is also good to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann), who I know is very supportive of farming, agriculture and the countryside. It was good to hear what he had to say. I agreed with the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland when he said that the countryside

[Neil Parish]

and farming are intricately linked, and that farmers are very much a part of the community. He may be a farmer's son who is no longer a farmer, but I am a farmer's son who is still a farmer. We have much in common, even if he is not farming now. We were both born on a farm and have farming in the blood.

As we move forward, we have to look at exactly what we want agriculture and our land to provide. We want it to provide good, wholesome food, and a good quantity of food. Let us not just play at farming; let us have proper production. The common agricultural policy has many sins, but the money that comes in through the basic payment scheme is used by the farming community—especially family farms—to keep farming going and to keep it profitable. Contrary to popular opinion, most of it, especially in the livestock sector, does not drive food prices up. I suggest it probably keeps them down, because it keeps a level of production going, which is key as we leave the EU.

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee is conducting an inquiry into all the commodities. Some 70% of our exports go to Europe, so we need a combination of support payments, continuing into the future, and access to that market. We cannot have a New Zealand or Australian-style policy, because when the New Zealanders and the Australians got rid of subsidies they had virtually no regulation on their farmers whatsoever. The result would be a perfect storm were we to say, “Okay, we’ll allow all the food in. Let’s not worry about tariffs. Let’s have the cheapest food we can get from South America—Argentinian and Brazilian beef. Let’s get our sheep meat from New Zealand. Let’s not worry about the cost and the price of produce in this country.” We cannot do that, for the simple reason that we want an improved environment, and our farmers will have many controls, quite rightly, on the way we control water and nitrates, and the way we help to stop flooding. All those things are great benefits, but they come at a cost.

There needs to be a real policy, and I know the Minister is very keen to see that. I welcome the support payments, but whatever period we have them for, I do not want them to stay roughly the same and then fall off the edge. Whatever we do, we change the system of payment and move farmers in another direction. Certainly, we can make farming more competitive, and we can give grants and support, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall said, to help that happen. However, when it comes to livestock and the sheep and beef sectors, it is very difficult to see, given the present pricing structure, how those industries will thrive without some support.

The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) rightly talked about the availability and affordability of food. That is why we need enough production. We can have a great farm shop and a great tourist attraction, and we can sell food to our tourists—that is all great stuff—but it is perhaps 1% or 2% of the total production in this country. It is no more than 5% of food. We need to make sure, as we go into our large retailers as consumers, that we get British food. Back in the '80s, around 80% of food was produced and consumed in this country, but that has gone down to 60%. Perhaps some tastes have changed. Even though we have a bit of global warming, I do not think that we can quite grow

bananas, oranges and rice yet. Seriously, though, we still have a great opportunity to produce more food.

We also have a great opportunity to keep the environment sound. Where we draw water for our reservoirs, let us look at the amount of nitrates going into that water. Such things are important; however, every time we restrict a farmer in his or her operation, there is a cost. I do not think that our consumers and the population of this country really see the opportunity that that offers to support farming. I do not believe that we should control farming so much that we stop that production and the income from it. We have to do a combination of things. I know the Minister is very keen on looking at insurance policy and how we might remove some of the fluctuations in price. All of that is right, but the policy has to be a practical one that farmers can afford to buy into.

As we go forward, we must also look not only at ways to get new entrants in, but at our tenancy laws and how we rent our land. Perhaps slightly contrary to what I have been saying, as much as we like the support that comes to farming through the basic payment scheme, there is an argument that it drives rents up and can therefore make land, particularly for young entrants and other coming in, more expensive. As we target the payments, they must end up in the pockets of those who do the farming, manage the land and look after food production and the environment. I am very keen to see that that happens.

I do not believe that coming out of the EU will be a disaster, or that it will lead us to a great sunny upland where everything will be rosy—perhaps the Minister and I may slightly disagree on that. I think we have to be realistic as we leave. Food production is necessary. I am very fond of our Secretary of State, and I know that he loves to talk about the environment, but I want to hear more about food, farming, production and how we are going to feed the nation. It is important that we keep those exports going and that we have a market that works.

The environment is great, but we need a market along with the environment. We need profitable agriculture above all things. The Minister will know as well as I do that if someone goes to the bank manager and they are not making a profit, they will not stay in business for long. I have huge confidence in the Minister, and I am sure that he will have huge influence on the Secretary of State, so that when he gets to the National Farmers Union conference in a couple of weeks, we will hear about food production and how we will keep farming and food going in this country.

3.47 pm

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), and to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I refer hon. Members to the register of interests: I am an active farmer and a recipient of single farm payment.

Many people have referred to the speech at the Oxford conference, which was described in *Farmers Weekly* as “one of the most important speeches for UK farming in living memory”.

I think that is testament to the vision that the Secretary of State has had. On the face of it, funds are guaranteed, but it is up to the devolved Governments to set their own policies.

I have been involved in the agri-food industry for my entire career. I believe passionately that productive agriculture and protecting the environment are mutually inclusive—having well-to-do, or economically viable, countryside is the best way to protect the environment. The vast majority of our countryside environment has been shaped by man. We should not kid ourselves that this is North America; this is not a big wildlife park. It is very important that the general public realise that the main purpose of agriculture or farmland is to produce food. Many hon. Members have spoken about the affordability and availability of food, which is what is ultimately important. It is estimated that every household contributed £400 to the CAP every year, but we have affordability, availability, and wholesomeness in food that we have never seen before. The policy framework must recognise the importance of affordability of food because, as the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) said, many people find it difficult to make budgets balance, and we cannot have wild fluctuations in the price of food. It is not good for farming.

I have been involved in produce for ever, or at least since I was in my 20s [*Interruption.*] Not quite for ever—I thank my hon. Friends for their asides. If the production goes up, the price goes down. We have to have a leveller.

I would also clarify that a support payment, not a subsidy, supports agriculture and the food industry—the biggest manufacturing industry in the country. The vast majority of payments are effectively reinvested in the business. Anybody who looks at agricultural statistics will see that farmers are not making a fortune in the islands; they are not making a fortune in Gordon and they are not making a fortune in Dumfries. It is important to recognise that.

We must bring to the debate the scale of British farming and the proportion produced in the different areas. It is important to realise that the scale of farming in the UK is, on average, bigger than in the rest of the EU. It is very productive and relatively efficient, despite the CAP. A system of payments that achieves environmental and productivity targets would allow a mix of farming. There are 19,700 claimants in Scotland alone. Some 8,000 of them claim less than £5,000, and it is obvious that there is a socio-environmental opportunity there, not just a purely agricultural one.

The National Farmers Union Scotland has its own negotiation to do with the Scottish Government, and I will not speak about Scottish policy here because that will be formed in Scotland, but I would clarify one point. There have been concerns about a DEFRA-centric approach to the devolved countries, despite Ministers being crystal clear that that is not the case. For absolute clarity, I would ask the Minister to state clearly that there will not be a DEFRA-centric policy dropped down on to Scotland.

It is clear from comments made by many Members that we want to see a common framework across the whole of the United Kingdom. That is just good practice. Farmers in Aberdeenshire have as much to do with farmers in Lincolnshire as they do in Essex; similarly up and down the west coast. It is very important that we

have standards across the entire UK, and how they are policed is also important. England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland should be policed effectively, perhaps by some sort of super-environmental agency, as DEFRA has suggested.

There is an 80/20 rule in agriculture: 80% of all production is by 20% of farmers. It is probably nearer to 10% to 90%. It is important to recognise that the affordability of food depends on scale and productivity. Having come from the retail sector, I have seen rapacious rationalisation by the supermarket. In the long run, that does not bring us any benefit; it brings far too much dependency on one or two very big players, which makes us very vulnerable to food scares or problems.

Affordable food is every bit as much a public good as the environment. They must go hand in hand and I hope the policy framework will respect that.

3.52 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this important debate. Many of my points have been raised by other Members, so I will keep this short and sweet, and make three key points. First, I will touch lightly on the UK framework and funding; secondly, I will talk about the opportunity to do things differently; and thirdly, I will stress the importance of the environment and infrastructure in the development of UK frameworks.

In my constituency of Ochil and South Perthshire, agricultural industries are a cornerstone. They are involved in land and environmental management. They create jobs. They help integrate the economies of the villages and towns that make up the constituency. Although farmers are different, whether they are arable, livestock or dairy, and face different challenges in different parts of the country, there are some common challenges throughout the UK, including price pressures from retailers, international competition and the pressure on innovation and value. It is important when we develop UK frameworks that we recognise the differences throughout the United Kingdom, but also that we, as elected Members, make sure we are reaching through each part of the United Kingdom to recognise the common challenges faced in each of our constituencies, and that we make policy that works for the entire United Kingdom.

As my hon. Friends have outlined, funding and decisions on how the spend is distributed should be devolved, as currently. However, it is very important that, whatever the UK body turns out to be, the funding should be ring-fenced. When Westminster is putting money out to the devolved Administrations around the United Kingdom, that should be ring-fenced and protected, so that devolved Administrations, which may be under some political pressure, do not shift funding from agriculture into health or transport or whatever might be the subject of political pressure at the time—maybe even things such as IT systems.

When we devolve different areas of funding, as already takes place, we still maximise the benefit of being one United Kingdom together. Central Departments such as DEFRA have central resources such as IT systems. Perhaps the devolved Administrations should have freer

[*Luke Graham*]

access to those things, which could save money and help farmers with the receipt of payments and other administrative tasks.

My second point is about the opportunity to do things differently. The Secretary of State outlined in his Oxford speech that we have a chance to develop our own policies, shaped by our collective interests. I could not agree more. This is an opportunity to tackle the criticisms of the common agricultural policy. Anyone who studied politics or economics at Higher or A-level has been taught for many years about butter mountains and the inefficiencies of the system. This is our chance to address that. We can create a bespoke policy for our industries, not for one political party.

On the environment and infrastructure, we have stressed the importance of the protection of the environment and its preservation, but it is important to remember that my constituency and others across Scotland and the United Kingdom are not biscuit-tin communities. They are active, working, agricultural landscapes. We have to make sure that we are educating people across the UK to understand the value of the agricultural industries, which help preserve, protect and progress the environment as a working, living landscape.

This is a prime opportunity for us to start redirecting payments towards more infrastructure. In reports on broadband over the last week, rural parts of our country fall vastly behind urban parts. We have targets of 95%, reaching 100% under the devolved Administration, for superfast broadband. My constituency is at 83.3%. I hope that when forming policy we look not only at direct payments but at how we can help regenerate our towns and villages and make sure that our rural economies are as connected as our cosmopolitan ones.

It is important that in our UK framework we make sure that we devolve implementation so that we recognise the nuances, but pull together common resources where that will serve our constituents best; that we take note of the opportunity and grasp it with both hands in order to do something differently, and finally, that we recognise the importance of the environment but also the opportunity to invest in more infrastructure.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): I appreciate the courtesy of Members. To give Mr Percy a little longer, the wind-ups will start slightly after 4pm.

3.37 pm

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Thank you, Mr Bone. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today. I am not a farmer—I am perhaps unique in that. I do farm votes, however, and I am pleased to say that my productivity rates in every election have improved, so that means I am doing a good job for the farmers I represent. Indisputably, I represent the finest farmland in the United Kingdom, in east Yorkshire and northern Lincolnshire, which is some of the most productive. [*Interruption.*] I am pleased to hear the cheers of agreement from my hon. Friends.

I have a number of points to make, many of which have already been made, but as Members new to the House will have realised by now, that does not prevent somebody else from making them. I would emphasise the point made by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael). I thought his speech

was excellent and there was not much I could disagree with. Particularly important were his two points about a UK-wide framework and maintaining the integrity of the market within the UK. I entirely agree. It is an innovative idea to leave the European Union and then copy the European Union's decision-making model, but it is one worthy of consideration.

In considering agricultural policy, we have to think in the broader context of the whole of food and drink in the UK and how we support that entire sector. What we do in the agricultural sector is so important in the supply chain through to the food and drink sector, which is such an important part of our exports. I am very involved in food and drink export promotion in my role as the Prime Minister's trade envoy to Canada, and we need to ensure that policy is connected across Government with that in mind.

Comments have been made about labour flexibility. I am a Brexiteer, and I think we have made the right decision. Last night, I was a remainer, for staying in this place. I look forward to the second vote—obviously, we voted to leave by a very narrow margin.

I and most of my constituents fully understand that we have to maintain labour flexibility. I think most of the public will buy into an immigration system that we can trust, which matches skills to the areas of the country with shortages. Brexit gives us the opportunity to have a sensible, informed debate about immigration, as has happened in many countries, such as Canada and Australia.

I have another point here, but I cannot read my own writing—I used to be a schoolteacher—so I will ignore that. I agree with the comments that were made about animal welfare. My real reason for coming here this afternoon is that I want to talk about what we do in terms of our trade deals with the rest of the world. As I said when I intervened on the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), we must build trade deals on the basis of evidence. In the previous couple of Parliaments, I was very involved in the all-party group on transatlantic trade. It originally focused on the transatlantic trade and investment partnership negotiations, which of course are going nowhere, but eventually focused on the comprehensive economic and trade agreement.

I want to chide the Secretary of State slightly, because some of his comments about American food production and chlorinated chicken have not been helpful to our future relationship. Having access to the US market is incredibly important to British farmers post-Brexit, just as it is important for American farmers to gain access to our market. Any agreement must therefore be based on evidence. Let us look to the CETA model. In those negotiations, the language that Ministers, Secretaries of State and European Commissioners used was always modest—I will not say that it was not extreme, because that would be a terrible thing to say. The EU and Canada had big differences on standards. In particular, we had a 20-odd year dispute with Canada at the World Trade Organisation about hormones and antibiotics in beef, but it was resolved through CETA and has now ended. Of course, that beef is not coming into the European Union.

Where we have differences, it is still possible to negotiate a deal. Some of the comments that have been made about things such as chlorinated chicken have fed anti-American bigotry, which would not be accepted in any

other relationship. There is a lot of evidence out there about chlorinated chicken. I do not propose to go into it, other than to point out that a person would have to eat a full chlorinated chicken to get the same amount of chlorine as they would get from one glass of water. I do not see many people advocating drinking or importing raw water. We must do this on the basis of evidence.

Some of the differences between the EU and the US are based on trade defence, rather than science, so let us have a scientific, evidence-based trade policy. The Secretary of State should be conscious of the fact that talking down the prospect of trade deals with a market as big and important as America is not particularly helpful. That said, it would be incredibly difficult to come to such a deal—I do not underestimate this—particularly if it includes agriculture. The all-party group on transatlantic trade went out and met various American food producers, including an American beef producer—he had a Stetson on—pork people and chicken people. I am not going to pretend that it will be easy to negotiate a deal. Given the agricultural propositions in CETA, it may well be very limited, but let us not buy into this bigotry. Let us ensure that our policy on agriculture and trading relations more generally is evidence-based. I hope the Minister will take that message back to his Secretary of State, who otherwise is doing an excellent job in his new position.

4.3 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone, and to start the summing up speeches.

We have had an interesting debate, but the most interesting aspect of it was what nobody said. Despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of those who spoke were Conservative MPs, nobody suggested that free-market capitalism should be the basis for the production of our most basic, fundamental commodity. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael)—I congratulate him on securing the debate—raised that possibility for as long as it took to shoot it down.

One thing is clear: whether we are in or out of the European Union, we need some kind of sustained Government intervention in our agriculture and food production industries. That is partly because where we have tried to run them through a free, unrestricted market, it has not worked. Does anybody seriously think we have struck the right balance between Tesco and the farmer with 50 or 60 cows, who is trying to get a decent price for their milk and to make sure that the person they sell it to this week will come back and buy it next week?

We have to be cautious, because although everybody can point to the faults, failings and weaknesses of the common agricultural policy, at the moment nobody knows what we are going to replace it with in 16 or 18 months' time—perhaps in 30 months' time if we get a transition and implementation period. We have to be very careful that we do not wait so long for a decision that there is a sudden shock to the system. Farmers are the same as workers in any other industry or business; sudden changes without adequate warning do not help them. I ask the Minister to guarantee that we will know about any decisions that are taken in plenty of time so people can adjust to them.

We have to remember that our agricultural industries are not just about the production of food. They also

have a massive impact on the appearance and the very fabric of all the nations in these islands. The way that the land is farmed or worked makes a huge difference to its appearance, which makes a difference to its attractiveness as a place to live and has a huge knock-on effect, for good or for ill, on our tourism industry, for example.

Glenrothes and Central Fife does not look like the most rural, farming-intensive constituency in the United Kingdom, but I reckon about 1,000 households in my constituency live either in isolated homes or in homes in groups of two or three, scattered around the countryside. They do not all work full-time in agriculture, of course, but a lot of them do. My constituency is also home to Cameron Brig, the biggest grain distillery in Europe, and therefore perhaps the biggest customer for grain producers in Scotland—perhaps in the United Kingdom.

The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) made a very well-informed speech, which touched on a lot of areas that other hon. Members did not mention. She reminded us that Brexit is not just about what happens to the common agricultural policy; it is also about where workers come from and what conditions they work under.

On the affordability of fresh food, I think staff at my food bank in Glenrothes would beg to differ with the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark), who said that food has never been more affordable. The hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) used a lot of his time to sing the praises of chlorinated chicken. We respect each other's views in this place, so the hon. Gentleman is welcome to his opinion. He is also welcome to his chlorinated chicken, but I do not think many of my constituents will be too chuffed if taking back control means that someone else decides whether chicken can be chlorinated.

Andrew Percy: My point was that people should proceed on the basis of evidence. I am not an expert, but my simple point was that we should listen to what bodies such as the European Food Safety Authority say about such things, rather than rely on bigotry. I trust the experts, not those who buy into anti-capitalist, anti-American bigotry.

Peter Grant: It would be nice if the Government's approach to Brexit was based on evidence, facts and proper analysis, rather than ideology. The hon. Gentleman also welcomed the opportunity to have what he described as an informed debate about immigration. I think it would have been nice if we had had an informed debate about immigration, rather than the desperately ill-informed debate we had up to, through and since the referendum. We have not heard enough about the enormous benefit that immigration brings to these islands and will continue to bring if we allow it to do so.

The hon. Member for Gordon reminded us at Brexit questions this morning that, as far as agriculture is concerned, one size does not fit all. In fact, the danger is that one size very often does not fit anything, so nobody gets the result they need.

Anyone can work out that the needs of a hill farmer or crofter in the highlands of Scotland or in Wales are very different from the needs of a dairy farmer in the south of England, or indeed of a fruit grower in lowland Scotland or lowland Perthshire. That means that whatever framework is put together has got to be capable of

[Peter Grant]

being adapted and applied flexibly to ensure that the decisions taken are those that are most suited to where they are being applied.

I do not have an issue, and neither does the Scottish National party, with recognising that in some areas of public policy there are huge benefits to having one framework and one set of rules to apply everywhere. For example, animal welfare standards are common throughout the United Kingdom—good idea. Let us face it, they are going to be common throughout the United Kingdom and the European Union, because we will still want to be able to sell our stuff across the Irish border, so Northern Ireland will have to fit in with European Union standards in the longer term.

It is essential that a decision that something will be taken on a UK framework basis is a decision by consensus. I am waiting, as are a lot of people back home in Scotland, to hear the Government confirm that no UK framework policy will be decided without the consent of the devolved Administrations, and that once it has been agreed that something needs a UK framework, the content and detail of that framework will be agreed by consensus among the four equal partners in the Union, not simply imposed on us by a Government in Whitehall—nor indeed imposed on the farmers of England by a Government in Edinburgh.

Mr Carmichael: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Grant: I will give way very briefly indeed.

Mr Carmichael: What view do the hon. Gentleman and his party take of the NFUS suggestion that any decision should be taken on the basis of some form of qualified majority voting?

Peter Grant: I am not convinced that defining a specific voting system now would be particularly helpful. I would not have a problem with the system being more devolved in England, if only there were a government structure to allow that to happen, because farmers in Devon do not necessarily need the same response as the farmers of east Anglia—but that is for the people and representatives of England to sort out. If decisions are to be taken that will affect farmers in Scotland, it is essential those decisions are the right ones for Scotland. The best place for decisions affecting Scotland to be taken is in Scotland—if we want to, we can replace Scotland with Northern Ireland, Wales or even Cornwall.

Andrew Percy: Yorkshire!

Peter Grant: Yorkshire, absolutely—we could possibly even split Yorkshire into north and south, if the hon. Gentleman wants to go that far.

Decisions used to be taken by Ministers or civil servants in the ivory towers of Whitehall and imposed on communities the length and breadth of these islands, but those days have simply got to be over. Scottish farmers produce a significant amount of our food and export earnings. They often provide employment, as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland pointed out, in areas where there is not a lot of alternative employment. It is important that decisions that affect our farmers are taken by the people they elect.

To pick up on a final point, the hon. Member for Orkney and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) asked for complete ring-fencing of the funding. Perhaps, but only as long as the decisions about how much funding is to be allocated and what is ring-fenced are taken by consensus—

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman but I have to be fair and ensure that each party gets its allocated time, so we will have to move on.

4.13 pm

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone.

I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for securing the debate and recognising the challenges that we face in Cumbria. There have been many good contributions from Members across the Chamber. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for expressing her concerns about food security and labour, which are an important part of the debate.

We have heard that British farming is critical to our economy, providing thousands of jobs and the cornerstone of our food production. It is therefore important for the Government to step up to the plate to get the best deal and maintain the high standards that we have heard about, to enable our businesses and farms to flourish and remain successful. When we negotiate our trade agreements, it is important to make sure that they work for British farming, while protecting the high standards of food safety and animal welfare that our consumers expect. As we have heard from a number of Members, it is important that any deals do not undercut British farming.

Food and farming need to be a clear strategic priority and a cornerstone of the broad industrial strategy that the Government are promoting. I agree that there is a clear need, as hon. Members have said, for a plan to enable food and farming to grow more, so that people have a greater appreciation of British food and are encouraged to buy British at every opportunity. We also need to look at the brand of Britishness to help us to export more and get others to appreciate our high standards.

It is important that we appreciate exactly what is at stake for the farming industry with Brexit. If we get it wrong, that is the nation's food security, nutrition, environment and public health, as we have heard. Farming is an integral part of the Labour party's vision of a fairer society—one that tackles the increasing social ills of food poverty, poor diet, environmental degradation and inequality. We believe that we must be ambitious in the creation of our new British agricultural policy, which should aim to establish a new deal and a consensus on what a modern farming industry can do for the economy, rural communities, consumers and the environment. Change cannot be left to market forces alone, as long as farming is critical to our food security and to stewardship of the natural environment.

We have to look at better food labelling, which is vital. If our farmers are to be able to compete fairly under any new trade deals, product labelling must be clear and unambiguous so that people know exactly what they are buying. Such labelling should include the country of origin and method of production.

As we have heard, the issue of farm labour is critical and immediate. Farmers and food manufacturers need to have access to a wider labour market. Without access to that labour, the agricultural sector and food manufacturers will face severe difficulties. A lack of labour will lead to consequences for UK agriculture. We could end up with product being left to waste, the movement of investment and operations out of the UK and, on top of that, price inflation for consumers.

At the moment, the profitability of many farms is too dependent on direct payments from the CAP. Because of the huge diversity in farming and the volatility in many areas, we need to consider how we can support farms to become more resilient, while mitigating the volatility. When it comes to replacing the CAP, we believe that a future payment system must broadly seek to do the following things. We need to look at how we target support to farmers who provide the most public good but may struggle to compete in the market, through no fault of their own—for example, the hill farmers in my Lakeland constituency. Any future system must be transparent as well as relevant. It must be easily accessible—we have heard about broadband—and cost-effective. It should reward environmentally sustainable practice and environmental stewardship, such as the management of habitat and natural resources. I believe strongly that we should recognise the cultural and historical landscape for the benefit of us all.

We should also support flood mitigation through land management, so we need to look at how any future programme can include that. We also need to include technological innovation, and consider how investment in it could meet the aims of improving resource efficiency and animal health and welfare, managing disease and adding value. It could also be used to encourage investment in machinery and software. It is important to support rural communities and family farms as part of any system. They, too, are central to the economy.

In short, any new system must enable profitable and sustainable farming businesses that support a vital and dynamic rural economy. Farmers tell me that their big problem at the moment is uncertainty about the future, so I am looking forward to hearing what the Minister has to say. I hope that anything being developed will provide that certainty and direction for our farmers, so that they can engage in long-term planning for sustainable future prosperity.

4.19 pm

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this debate. Like him, I am a farmer's son. Unlike my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), I am not farming now, but I did try farming for 10 years. It is a real honour to be farming Minister at an exciting time: we have an opportunity, for the first time in half a century, to design fresh thinking and coherent policy in agriculture.

As the Minister for Agriculture, I have wrestled with the common agricultural policy, and the rules and bureaucracy, for four years. It is stifling. Although there have been changes to the CAP over the years, in its current incarnation it is a bureaucratic quagmire. It attempts to regulate every single field and every feature in them. Our administrators spend their time fretting

about the width of a hedge: whether it is too narrow or too wide, whether the gateway is too big and whether there are too many trees on a parcel of land. It goes on forever.

Every Administration in the UK feels deep frustration at some of the bureaucracy in the CAP. We have an opportunity as we leave the EU to do things differently and to design coherent policy. We set out our intention in the Queen's Speech last year to bring forward an agriculture Bill later this year. Before that, we will publish further plans about our initial thinking—some time later in the spring or in early summer.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland and others talked about the importance of UK frameworks. We absolutely recognise that and I think that all other parts of the UK do, too. As he pointed out, when we consider the UK framework, we will be looking predominantly at two areas: first, what is required to protect the integrity of the UK single market. Clearly, we could not have one Administration subsidising sheep farmers in a way that would be to the huge detriment of farmers in other parts of the UK. There would have to be some boundaries. Secondly, everyone accepts the need for UK frameworks when we talk about what is necessary to secure international agreements, be they on trade or other matters: things like phytosanitary, food safety and traceability issues to protect our export market. We will have to have some kind of framework and common outcomes and objectives to deliver those things.

I reassure the hon. Gentleman and others that we are engaging regularly with Ministers in all the devolved Administrations. We have regular meetings with them and in some of those meetings, different devolved Administrations lead on particular aspects. They have been updating us on some of the work that they have been doing. At official level there has been a very in-depth analysis, both to deliver what is necessary for the current European Union (Withdrawal) Bill and for the detailed work on the principles and features that a future UK framework will need.

Picking up on the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) made, our critique of the CAP is that it is a one-size-fits-all policy, and it does not work for that reason. I want to ensure that leaving the EU and the CAP is liberating for everyone in this country—for all the devolved Administrations and for farmers right across the UK. As he put it, it is not our intention at all to have a DEFRA-centric, top-down policy. Far from it: we want to protect maximum flexibility and ability for each individual devolved Administration to design policies that work for them.

I will give an example of the sort of thing that we have to put up with. About 18 months ago, the Welsh Government got into a legal dispute with the European Commission because the Commission did not like the size and shape of the ear tag that they used as the second tag on cattle. I would have no intention of trying to dictate to other devolved Administrations what the size, shape or colour of their ear tags should be. All I would want to know is that they had proper traceability in place.

Mr Carmichael: The Minister's policy is all very well, but it is meaningful only if we have the money to go with it. Will the Minister address the position of the Treasury in relation to funding of it?

George Eustice: The right hon. Gentleman pre-empted me—I was about to get to that point. We were very clear in our manifesto that the budget in cash terms for agriculture policy will stay the same until 2022. My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) asked the question: I reassure him and other Members that that applies to all parts of the UK. There would be no question between now and 2022 of any devolved Administration departing from that and using those funds for some other purpose—that would be a breach of the manifesto commitment.

As a Government, we have been very clear that we will keep the cash total the same until 2022, but we have given a very clear undertaking that we will seek to phase out over time the single farm payment and to replace it with the new environmental land management scheme, which will be funded. It is not the case that funding will end in 2022; at this stage we have not set out exactly what the figure will be post-2022, but we are absolutely clear that there will be a gradual transition and a funded policy to support our environmental land management scheme after 2022.

I am going to touch very briefly on a few of the areas that we are looking at in England as future policy. For a new environmental land management scheme we want to move away from the current direct payments, which are on an area basis. I do not think there is much sense for that. We want to directly reward farmers for what they do by way of delivering public goods—whether enhanced animal welfare or environmental goods. We want to move to a system where we are rewarding farmers for the goods that they provide. We are also looking at innovation and competitiveness, including the possibility of grants to support investment on farms, to help farmers prepare for a new world in agriculture.

To pick up on the point that my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) raised, we are looking at whether we can help support and foster the development of futures markets and insurance products to help farmers manage risks. We are looking at issues such as fairness in the supply chain, too.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland and my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton raised the issue of New Zealand. New Zealand is different: people often forget to take account of the fact that when it removed subsidies, it also devalued its currency by 45% and priced itself back into world markets. In doing that, New Zealand had certain problems with the environment—even today, New Zealand dairy has environmental impacts that we would not want to tolerate in this country. There are differences and there are things that we would not want to follow in the case of New Zealand. There are also things that we can learn—for instance, its support for investments on farms through grants.

I assure the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland that I regularly meet with NFU Scotland—I can see its members today in the Public Gallery, carefully

watching the debate—and we are very keen to get its engagement; we are not allowing that to be something that just the Scottish Government do. As the UK Minister, I want a UK perspective. My hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack) mentioned animal welfare. I agree with him; we have prioritised it and we are looking at ways that we can incentivise and support high animal welfare systems of husbandry. As I said, it is a public good and we recognise it as such.

The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) gave some positive comments on what she has heard so far. I very much look forward to her supporting us in the Division Lobbies as we try to take the Bill forward on that basis. She mentioned the issue of labour; I was formerly a strawberry farmer and I understand the challenges that fruit farmers face. We have been working with the Home Office to discuss what work permit arrangements we might put in place for when we leave. The Migration Advisory Committee has just started a big piece of work to look at the labour market in the round. I agree with what the hon. Lady said about some of the work of the Food Foundation. Horticulture often has been overlooked, and we have an opportunity to address that. I attended the launch of the project that she highlighted.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton talked about some of the pressure on the uplands. We recognise that, but I had a very interesting conversation with the Uplands Alliance just last week; it pointed out that although they are financially more vulnerable, it believes that there are more things that they can deliver by way of public goods—whether peatland restoration, flood mitigation work or public access. There are many opportunities for it to do that.

Farmers are the recipients of subsidies, but they are not always the main beneficiaries. Subsidies distort all sorts of markets. We have an opportunity to do things very differently. It would be remiss of me not to mention trade with the US. It is difficult to assign the description of “anti-American bigotry” to the Secretary of State, who is quite an Atlanticist, but we recognise and value our high animal welfare standards and we are determined to protect them.

4.29 pm

Mr Carmichael: I thank all hon. Members who have taken part in the debate. I feel that we will return to this subject many times. In particular, I thank the Minister, who has been assiduous in addressing the points; he took copious notes throughout, but despite that, he still managed to send me an email at 3.30 inviting me to a reception to mark Cornish Pasty Week. I accept his invitation with some pleasure and look forward to discussing with him there the importance of protected geographical indications, of which Cornish pasties, Orkney beef and Shetland lamb are but a few.

4.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Thursday 1 February 2018

CABINET OFFICE

Cabinet Committees and Implementation Task Forces

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Mr David Lidington): Today I am publishing the updated list of Cabinet Committees and Implementation Task Forces (ITFs). The updated list includes several key changes:

Housing taskforce: the ITF will now be chaired by the Prime Minister.

Industrial strategy taskforce: a new ITF has been established to oversee the delivery of the industrial strategy.

Rough sleeping and homelessness reduction taskforce: a new ITF has been established to co-ordinate action to reduce homelessness and halve rough sleeping over the course of the Parliament.

Copies of the associated documents will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and published on gov.uk.

[HCWS441]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Faith Practices

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The Government have today published the independent review into the application of Sharia law in England and Wales. The review has been laid before the House (Cm 9560). Copies of the report will be available from the Vote Office and it is also available on the Home Office website.

The review was commissioned by the then Home Secretary in May 2016 and was chaired by Professor Mona Siddiqui, an internationally renowned expert in Islamic and inter-religious studies. Professor Siddiqui was supported by a review panel of experts that included experienced family law barrister Sam Momtaz QC, retired High Court judge Sir Mark Hedley, and specialist family law solicitor Anne Marie Hutchinson OBE QC. The panel was advised by two religious and theological experts, Imam Sayed Ali Abbas Razawi and Imam Qari Asim.

Sharia law has no jurisdiction in England and Wales and the decisions of Sharia councils are not legally binding. The review focused on whether and to what extent the application of Sharia law by Sharia councils may be incompatible with the law in England and Wales. This included ways in which Sharia law may be being misused or exploited in a way that may discriminate against certain groups, undermine shared values and cause social harms.

To gather evidence the review team issued a public call for evidence and ran a number of oral evidence sessions. During the course of the review, the review chair and panel heard evidence from stakeholders including users of Sharia councils, women's rights groups, academics, lawyers and Sharia councils. I am grateful to Professor Siddiqui for the thoroughness of her review and for the review team's comprehensive report.

The review found that most of the work of Sharia councils concerns Islamic divorces, and that the applicants are mostly women. While there are a number of reasons women desire an Islamic divorce, a significant driver is that some Muslim couples do not have a civil marriage as well as an Islamic ceremony. The review also found evidence of a range of practices across Sharia councils, both positive and negative. The review concludes with a series of recommendations to Government.

The review made three recommendations:

Recommendation 1 (legislative change): amendments to marriage law to (a) ensure that civil marriages are conducted before or at the same time as the Islamic marriage ceremony and (b) establish the right to a civil divorce.

Recommendation 2 (building understanding): proposes developing programmes to (i) raise Muslim couples' awareness that Islamic marriages do not afford them the protections under the law that come with a civil marriage because their partnership is not recognised as a legal marriage; and (ii) encourages Muslim couples that have or are having an Islamic marriage to register for a civil marriage as well.

Recommendation 3 (regulation of Sharia councils): proposes regulating Sharia councils through the creation of a state-established body that would create a code of practice for Sharia councils to accept and implement.

The Government will carefully consider the review's findings. The review team's failure to reach a unanimous agreement on recommendation three (regulation of Sharia councils) demonstrates the complexity of the issues. The Government consider that the proposal to create a state-facilitated or endorsed regulation scheme for Sharia councils would confer upon them legitimacy as alternative forms of dispute resolution. The Government do not consider there to be a role for the state to act in this way. Britain has a long tradition of freedom of worship and religious tolerance and regulation could add legitimacy to the perception of the existence of a parallel legal system even though the outcomes of Sharia councils have no standing in civil law, as the independent review has made clear. Many people of different faiths follow religious codes and practices and benefit from their guidance. The Government have no intention of changing this position and for this reason cannot accept recommendation three.

The review found some evidence of Sharia councils forcing women to make concessions to gain a divorce, of inadequate safeguarding policies, and a failure to signpost applicants to legal remedies. This is not acceptable. Where Sharia councils exist, they must abide by the law. Legislation is in place to protect the rights of women and prevent discriminatory practice. The Government will work with the appropriate regulatory authorities to ensure that this legislation and the protections it establishes are being enforced fully and effectively.

[HCWS442]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Housing Infrastructure Fund

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): Today the Government announce that we will invest £866 million to help unlock up to 200,000 new homes through 133 marginal viability fund projects, within the housing infrastructure fund.

The Government have set out a plan that puts us on track to increase housing supply to 300,000 homes a year and this first wave of funding from the £5 billion housing infrastructure fund is part of a comprehensive programme to fix the broken housing market.

This investment will fund key local infrastructure projects including new roads, cycle paths, flood defences and land remediation work where it is needed for new housing to be built. Without this financial support, these projects would struggle to go ahead or take years for work to begin, delaying the homes these communities need.

The marginal viability fund was available to all single and lower-tier local authorities in England to bid into.

We received 430 bids from local authorities, worth almost £14 billion in total. This shows how much local authorities are willing to step up to fix the broken housing market, and we are committed to supporting this ambition. Bids went through a rigorous assessment process and were assessed on the basis of their strategic approach, value for money and the ability of the projects to be delivered. We are putting infrastructure at the heart of housing delivery and are committed to bringing communities, local authorities and the private sector together to solve this problem.

The second component of the housing infrastructure fund—the forward fund—is available to the uppermost tier of local authorities in England to bid into, and aims to pump prime a small number of strategic and high-impact infrastructure projects. Expressions of interest for forward funding are being assessed and the best proposals will be shortlisted to go through to co-development shortly. Local authorities will submit their final business cases with successful bids announced from autumn 2018 onwards.

The full list of successful marginal viability fund projects, and the indicative amount we are awarding (subject to final financial clarifications) can be found on the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government website at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/housing-infrastructure-fund>

[HCWS440]

JUSTICE

Justice and Home Affairs Council

The Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor (Mr David Gauke): The first meeting of EU Interior and Justice Ministers during the Bulgarian presidency took place on 25 and 26 January in Sofia. Her Majesty's ambassador to Bulgaria, Emma Hopkins, and a senior Government official represented the UK for interior day. I represented the UK for justice day.

Interior day began with a debate on European asylum policy. The presidency set out its objective to conclude negotiations on the reform of the common European asylum system (CEAS) package, including Dublin IV, by the end of June. Member states supported the aim of concluding negotiations by June but there remains a lack of consensus on the inclusion of burden sharing mechanisms in Dublin IV. The UK continues to support a comprehensive approach to migration but does not support a mandatory redistribution system within the EU and has not opted into the Dublin IV regulation.

Over lunch, Ministers discussed the global UN compact on migration (GCM), which will be negotiated in the UN over the next six months. The discussion aimed to

initiate consideration on the alignment of member states' positions on the principles of the GCM text. The UK is committed to agreeing a global framework for a new approach to orderly, safe and regular global migration. The UK reaffirmed the Government's principles that underline our approach to achieving this, in particular that refugees should seek protection in the first safe country they can reach; that a distinction needs to be maintained between economic migrants and refugees; and that states have the right to control their borders and the duty to accept their citizens back.

Interior day ended with a discussion on integrated border management. Member states highlighted priorities for co-operation among the relevant authorities and agencies involved in border security and with third countries to help secure the Union's external border. These priorities related specifically to implementation of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (EBCGA) and related EU databases—the entry/exit system (EES) and the European travel information and authorisation system (ETIAS). The UK recognises the importance of increased border security across the EU. However, the UK is not part of the border aspects of the Schengen agreement and therefore does not participate in the EBCGA, EES or the ETIAS.

Justice day began with a consideration of the issues relevant to future co-operation between the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) and other partner agencies and offices of the EU, such as Europol, Eurojust and the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF). Member states agreed on the importance of clear working relationships, with a clear delimitation of responsibilities so that the EPPO does not limit or encroach upon other agencies' competences. The Government have been clear that we will not participate in an EPPO and did not opt-in to the regulation.

The day continued with a discussion on the Brussels IIa recast regulation. Member states agreed that the continued requirement for exequatur in some family cases was a significant obstacle to the operation of the system and should be abolished. Similarly, it was agreed that the grounds for refusal of recognition of a judgment should be limited, which is of particular importance where children are concerned.

The Commission presented an update on the progress of the forthcoming legislative proposal on cross-border law enforcement access to e-evidence held by communications service providers. The Commission aims to present the proposal to the JHA Council in March. The Government will consider their position and whether to opt in to the proposal when it is published. The Commission also provided an update on the code of conduct on countering illegal hate speech online which was signed in June 2016 by major social media companies and aims to ensure illegal hate speech is removed within 24 hours. The Commission detailed the progress made by social media companies and explained their intention to expand the number of signatories to the code.

Over lunch, Ministers discussed the justice issues raised by artificial intelligence, in particular on questions of liability. Member states broadly agreed on the need for clear, but light touch, rules on liability which would create certainty to allow investment decisions to be taken without overregulating and discouraging innovation.

[HCWS443]

ORAL ANSWERS

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