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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 8 March 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

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Leaving the EU: Food Producers

1. **Neil Parish** (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support food producers after the UK leaves the EU. [904248]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): As you are aware, Mr Speaker, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is in the United States on departmental business, representing UK interests. I know that he has already written to you about that, and he sends his apologies to the House.

Last week, the Government launched a consultation setting out the policy framework for agriculture after the UK leaves the European Union. This Command Paper outlined a series of proposals to help farmers invest in their farms and become more profitable, to support new entrants coming into the industry and to support collaborative working in areas such as research and development.

Neil Parish: There was nearly a state crisis this morning: the pedal came off my bicycle at Vauxhall bridge. I managed to get here just in time.

I very much welcome the Command Paper. It talks much about having a greener and better environment for the future, but does the Minister agree that part of that agriculture paper must include the means of production—good-quality production—and our being able to increase, rather than decrease, the food that we grow in this country as we go forward with a new British agricultural policy?

George Eustice: I very much agree with the points that my hon. Friend makes. He and I both have a background in the farming industry, and we recognise the importance of this strategically vital industry for our country. He will know that we have a manifesto commitment to grow our agriculture industry and produce more food. Our consultation outlines a number of proposals, including improving both our productivity and research and development.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): When will a decision be made on the reintroduction of a seasonal workers scheme, so that crops do not rot in the ground this summer?

George Eustice: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that this is an issue on which the Home Office leads. We have regular discussions with Home Office colleagues on these matters and we feed in the feedback that we get from industry on this matter. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made clear in his speech to the National Farmers Union, we are looking closely at the idea of a seasonal agricultural workers scheme, so that we can have the labour that we need after we leave the European Union.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Most of the food produced and processed in my Cleethorpes constituency is reliant on good supplies of fish. Can the Minister give an absolute assurance that the fishing industry will not be sold out in these negotiations as it was in the 1970s?

George Eustice: We have consistently been clear that when we leave the European Union, we leave the common fisheries policy. Under international law—the UN convention on the law of the sea—we then become an independent coastal state, and we will manage the fisheries resources in our exclusive economic zone and manage access to our own waters.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): How will the Minister ensure that farm subsidies after Brexit will remain targeted at food production?

George Eustice: We have been clear that we will maintain the total spending that we have on agriculture and the farmed environment until 2022. We have also been clear—our paper sets this out—that there will be a transitional period as we move from an incoherent system of area payments, which we have now, to one that is focused on the delivery of public goods. We recognise that there will need to be a gradual transition from the old system to the new.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The EU's common agricultural policy has been a disaster for the British dairy industry, because it has been designed in the interests of French farmers, not British farmers. How can we put that right after Brexit?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. The common agricultural policy has all sorts of inconsistencies. Having a one-size-fits-all agricultural policy for the whole European Union makes no sense at all, and as we leave the European Union and take back control of these matters, we will have the freedom to design an agricultural policy that works for our own farmers.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): May I say first how relieved I am that the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) made it here today to ask this important question?

When the Secretary of State looks at how best to support food producers, he should be aware that the figures of the Department for Environment, Food and

Rural Affairs show that 64% of farmers earn less than £10,000 a year and that eight supermarkets control almost 95% of the food retail market. Recent figures also show that farmers receive less than 10% of the value of their produce that is sold in supermarkets. Can the Secretary of State—or the Minister today—tell me, please, what he is doing to tackle this clearly inequitable and unsustainable situation?

George Eustice: The hon. Lady makes an important point. If we want to move to a position in which farmers are no longer dependent on subsidies, it is important that we support farmers to come together collaboratively, to strengthen their position in the supply chain and ensure that they get a fairer price for the food that they produce. We recently outlined a series of proposals for a statutory code on dairy and a statutory approach to carcase classification for sheep, together with a range of other options.

Groceries Code Adjudicator

2. **Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on extending the role of the Groceries Code Adjudicator. [904249]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): I have had regular dialogue with Ministers in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy regarding the role of the Groceries Code Adjudicator, and we recently had a call for evidence on the matter. In our response on 16 February to that call for evidence, we set out a range of measures to improve fairness in the supply chain and strengthen the position of farmers and small producers.

Stephen Timms: I am the unpaid chair of the trustees of the Fairtrade organisation Traidcraft. There were high hopes across the Chamber of a stronger Groceries Code Adjudicator to protect suppliers from unfair practices, such as last-minute cancellations of orders and unexplained deductions from invoices. Ministers started consulting, I think, 18 months ago on possible changes. The farming Command Paper last month promised fairness in the supply chain, but hopes were dashed with the announcement last month that there would be no change to the adjudicator's remit. Why are Ministers failing to take action?

George Eustice: I do not accept that there was no change. As I said a little earlier, we have announced a package of measures. It includes a £10 million collaboration fund to help farmers and small producers to come together, compulsory milk contracts legislation to protect dairy farmers, compulsory sheep carcase classification, a commitment to making supply chain data easier to access to improve transparency and market integrity and a commitment to reviewing whether more grocery retailers should come under the GCA's remit.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I hear what the Minister says, but given that the vast majority of producers and consumers are very keen for the Groceries Code Adjudicator to be strengthened, why will he not do so? The Opposition are very happy to help if he says that he is prepared to strengthen the code.

George Eustice: When we looked at the evidence, we found that a lot of it concerned particularly vulnerable sectors, such as dairy and some of the other livestock sectors, which often end up becoming price takers because they do not have sufficient strength to deal with large processors. It was less an issue of the supermarkets and more an issue of the processors. We have decided that a better way to take this forward is to introduce other statutory codes that target the problem, rather than trying to change the GCA's remit.

Bottle Deposit Return Scheme

4. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): If he will implement a deposit return scheme for bottles. [904251]

6. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): If he will implement a deposit return scheme for bottles. [904253]

13. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): If he will implement a deposit return scheme for bottles. [904260]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Last autumn, an independent working group was set up, as part of the litter strategy for England, to hold a call for evidence on measures to reduce littering of drinks containers and promote recycling. That included seeking evidence on the costs, benefits and impacts of deposit return schemes. I have recently received the report, and I am considering the recommendations.

Jeff Smith: We know that in this country, 15 million plastic bottles a day are not recycled. We also know that a deposit return scheme can increase recycling rates, and I hope that the Government will introduce such a scheme after this report. May I urge them to introduce a scheme that applies to all drinks containers, of all sizes and from all sale locations, rather than a scheme that applies only to on-the-go containers from kiosks and vending machines?

Dr Coffey: Part of the evidence that was submitted reflects the fact that councils offer a comprehensive recycling service at the kerbside. I am delighted to say that Rotherham has finally agreed to start collecting plastic bottles. We need to consider the approach carefully. I think that there is an appetite for a DRS, but the schemes that we have seen in other parts of Europe are very different, and we need a scheme that works for this country and achieves the outcomes that we all seek.

Chi Onwurah: Like many colleagues, I have pledged to "pass on plastic". For too many of my constituents, doing so is impossible because their streets and their lives are inundated with a flood of plastic bottles, bags, food trays and crisp packets, turning their environment into a dumping ground. Will the Minister take action urgently and stop denying local authorities such as Newcastle City Council the powers and the resources to tackle the problem? Frankly, right now on the environment, this Government are rubbish.

Dr Coffey: I think that question was a complete waste of space. The hon. Lady refers to powers. The Government have given councils the powers that they have been asking for to tackle littering and waste crime, so I think

she is being rather ungenerous about the progress that is being made. Plastic has a role in safe packaging, but it has become endemic. That is why we are considering it carefully in the resources and waste strategy, which we intend to publish later this year.

Liz Twist: We have litter-picking groups across my constituency, and we see loads of areas where plastic bottles and glass bottles are dumped. Will the Minister commit now to introducing a deposit return scheme for plastic and all other containers, so that we can avoid this plague of plastic?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: Let us be clear: the people who drop litter are litter louts. I reiterate my phrase, “Don’t be a tosser!” because it does not help society to drop litter anywhere and everywhere. Let us get real about how we need to tackle that. I commend the work that Keep Britain Tidy does in encouraging litter collections. However, the hon. Lady is right: we need to sort this issue out in the first place. That is why DRS is being considered very carefully as part of our resources waste strategy.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): On International Women’s Day, I would like to be a bit more consensual and ask the Minister to applaud the campaign by our female colleagues to give up plastics for Lent and the Church of England’s initiative on practical suggestions for something that we can do on every one of the 40 days. Has the Minister given up something plastic for Lent? Will she join us in writing to manufacturers for whom there is no alternative to plastic to encourage them to find a sustainable solution?

Mr Speaker: Let us hear the details.

Dr Coffey: Of course a Church Commissioner would call upon God and the Church of England to inspire us. I am also one of the people who has taken the pledge to try to give up something plastic for Lent. I pledged to carry a water bottle around in my handbag—I am not going to produce a prop, Mr Speaker—and I have had to sacrifice my Marmite in the Tea Room because it is only sold in plastic sachets. We are all looking forward to the proposals from Parliament, because this does matter. The campaigns on passing on plastic and giving up plastic for Lent are partly about behavioural change among consumers. I believe that companies are starting to respond and we are starting to see changes, but the more consumers demand this, the quicker action will happen in the marketplace. I assure the House that this Government will take action.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): A deposit return scheme is not just about raising recycling rates; it is also about educating and raising awareness among the public about the need to be responsible. In that vein, will the Minister join me in praising the many towns across Cornwall—Newquay, Falmouth, Penzance, Bude, and many others—that have declared their aims to become single-use plastic free? Does she agree that Cornwall is leading the way in raising awareness of this issue?

Dr Coffey: As ever, my hon. Friend is passionate about this cause; I know that he has been championing it. Of course I applaud those many towns and communities in Cornwall for wanting to do the right thing.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Is my hon. Friend aware that in Ashbourne over the past four days, tens of thousands of plastic bottles of water have been handed out by Severn Trent because of its failure to reconnect the water supply? At the moment, the compensation level is £30 a day, which is woefully inadequate. Will she look at the specific case surrounding Ashbourne?

Dr Coffey: As I announced to the House the other day, I have asked Ofwat to undertake a review. I have also encouraged water companies to improve the compensation that they could discretionally offer. I expect that Severn Trent is already responding to the call from my right hon. Friend.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The plastic that we see on our beaches and at our roadsides is what brings this to people’s attention, but in fact the plastic particles that we do not see should be of the greatest concern. A recent BBC report found that in 1 litre of melted Arctic sea ice there were 234 plastic particles. Surely, that should be why we treat this urgently. If the Minister is consulting on this, it should be about how we do it, not if.

Dr Coffey: This Government have taken strong action on banning microplastics from certain products. We are still waiting for the other nations, but they have committed to making sure that that happens by June as well. On the right hon. Gentleman’s point about the Arctic ice, this is indeed a global matter. That is why we work hard with other nations through different forums, whether the OSPAR Commission on the convention for the protection of the marine environment of the north-east Atlantic, the G7, other agencies such as the United Nations, or of course our Commonwealth countries, which will be visiting the UK next month for the summit.

Leaving the EU: Policy Development

5. **Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab):** If he will develop agricultural policy and environmental standards for the period after the UK leaves the EU in parallel with trade negotiations with the EU. [904252]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): Our approach to future environment policy was set out in our recently published 25-year environment plan; our approach to future agriculture policy was published in our consultation last week; and our approach to trade negotiations with the EU was outlined in a speech by the Prime Minister last week. All these policies are being developed at the same time.

Angela Smith: I thank the Minister for that answer, but does he agree that there should be a common framework for environmental standards across the whole United Kingdom after Brexit?

George Eustice: As the hon. Lady will be aware, through the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, we are initially bringing across all existing EU legislation as it pertains to the environment. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has also outlined plans for a new environmental body, and we are in discussion with the devolved Administrations about their involvement and a UK framework in these matters.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): Park keeper or food producer—whatever the future for farming is going to be, does my hon. Friend agree that it must be possible to earn a living out of farming?

George Eustice: I very much agree with my hon. Friend, who has a lot of experience in these matters and an understanding of the industry. He is absolutely right. There will be parts of the country where some farmers choose to do more by way of delivering environmental outcomes, and in other parts they may focus more on food production. Either way, we want a vibrant, profitable farming industry across our country.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): In the Prime Minister's speech last Friday, she said that there would be no compromise on environmental standards and animal welfare standards, which was welcome. What guarantees can the Minister give to Welsh and UK farm producers that they will not be disadvantaged by lower-standard food entering the UK market following post-Brexit trade deals?

George Eustice: Both my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have always been consistently clear that we will not lower our high animal welfare standards and high food standards in this country in pursuit of a trade deal.

Marine Environment

7. **Douglas Ross** (Moray) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to improve the marine environment. [904254]

9. **Alan Mak** (Havant) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to improve the marine environment. [904256]

18. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to improve the marine environment. [904265]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Our seas and oceans are an integral part of our history, economy and way of life, and the “Blue Planet” series drew attention to how they are under threat. The UK marine strategy, which was reinforced in the 25-year environment plan, shows what we are doing to reduce harmful pressures and manage activities that have an impact on the marine environment.

Douglas Ross: Our fishermen are strong custodians of the marine environment, and fishing communities in Moray such as Buckie, Burghead and Lossiemouth—to name but a few—are looking forward to this Government taking us out of the disastrous common fisheries policy. Does the Minister agree that leaving the European Union will provide fishermen in Moray, Scotland and the UK with a sea of opportunity, part of which will be protecting the marine environment to ensure that it supports the fishing industry for many years to come?

Dr Coffey: As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister reinforced in the Mansion House speech, we will be leaving the common fisheries policy next year when we

leave the European Union, and that gives us an opportunity as an independent coastal state to manage sustainably the fisheries that we have.

Alan Mak: The Final Straw Solent is a new community group in my constituency whose objective is to reduce plastic use and clean up our local coastlines. Will the Minister join me in congratulating that group on its work and encourage more community groups like it to continue protecting and improving our marine environment?

Dr Coffey: I commend the organisers of the Final Straw Solent. It matters that we have local action. Of course, we want to have wider action to stop people dropping their litter in the first place. On International Women's Day, we should also look across the other side of the Solent to Dame Ellen MacArthur, who is best known for her wonderful sailing record but should also be known as a true champion for the environment. Through her foundation, she is doing a lot of work to make sure we reduce our use of plastics and improve the circular economy.

Sir Desmond Swayne: What about coral?

Dr Coffey: Not many people know this, but we have some of the most spectacular cold-water coral reefs in the world in these fair islands. They are a protected feature of the Canyons marine conservation zone, and the Scottish Government are also protecting coral in some of their marine protected areas. We have re-engaged with the international coral reef initiative and will seek ways to promote its importance at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting next month.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I beg the Minister not to be too parochial? This is a global challenge for all our lives. We have a Commonwealth Parliamentary Association meeting coming up in London. Is it not about time that she and her boss went there to make common cause across the 52 nations to do something on a global scale that is meaningful?

Dr Coffey: There are now 53 Commonwealth nations since the Gambia rejoined last month. We are working together with other Commonwealth nations through the Commonwealth Secretariat to have an ambitious blue charter that will focus on the challenges the hon. Gentleman sets out.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) is right that the threats to our oceans are international, not national. It is good to take action on plastics locally, but plastics in the sea, the acidification threatening coral reefs and many other things call for international action. What leadership will this Government give at that level?

Dr Coffey: I would like to think that the UK is the international leader on these issues. As I said to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), this is an international matter: all this literally moves around the world. I have recently been to the United States and Canada, and we are working on this with Canada, which has the G7 presidency this year. We are leading the way on dealing with ocean acidification, and I assure the hon. Gentleman that that is very much at the top of the agenda for this Government.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): At the last EFRA questions on 25 January, I said to the Secretary of State:

“the question for fishing, given all the tonnes he will take from the European Union, is this: where is it going, and when?”

The Secretary of State answered:

“On to the plates of people from the Western Isles to the south-west of England, who can enjoy the fantastic produce that our fishermen catch every day.”—[*Official Report*, 25 January 2018; Vol. 635, c. 396.]

I said, “Good dodge”, and he replied, “Thank you.” Today, I wonder whether we can get an answer to the question with no dodge. Given all the tonnes the UK Government tell fishermen they will take from the European Union, where is it going, and when?

Dr Coffey: The Government are, of course, still seeking a trade deal, but the hon. Gentleman should also be aware of the fact that countries such as Norway and Iceland, which are independent states, have control of their waters and grant access to them. There are annual negotiations for shared stocks, and we will continue to be part of those negotiations.

Leaving the EU: Economic Viability of Farming

8. **Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): What steps he is taking to support the economic viability of farming after the UK leaves the EU. [904255]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): Leaving the European Union provides the UK with an opportunity to improve the profitability of the agriculture sector. In our consultation document, we set out an approach to support that objective, and we are seeking the views of the industry on a range of measures to improve the competitiveness of the farming sector.

Since it is International Women’s Day, may I take this opportunity to congratulate Minette Batters, who has recently become the first ever woman president of the National Farmers Union?

Hannah Bardell: I join the Minister in that sentiment.

Brexit is by far the greatest threat to Scottish farming. Given that Scotland has proportionately higher rates of common agricultural policy funding than elsewhere and that the types of farming that can take place in Scotland are very specific, will the Minister commit here and now to making sure that no subsidies to Scotland are cut after Brexit?

George Eustice: The hon. Lady will be aware of our intention that agricultural policy and the design of individual schemes will be very much a matter for the devolved Administrations. I look forward to seeing some of the proposals and suggestions that may come from the Scottish Government. We have offered to share our proposals with them so that they can learn from some of our analysis.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I am proud that Vale of Evesham asparagus has been granted protected geographical indication status by the EU, which will help to boost its brand recognition and sales. Will PGI status still be recognised post Brexit?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Vale of Evesham asparagus obviously has a fantastic reputation across our country and, indeed, around the world. On protected food names, our intention is that the existing legislation will come across through the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. Third countries can already seek designations for the EU market, and the designations we already have in the UK will be protected through our domestic legislation.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) is surprisingly shy and self-effacing this morning. We are unlikely to reach Question 12, so if the hon. Gentleman wants to favour the House with his thoughts on this question, which is not dissimilar to his own, he is welcome to do so.

12. [904259] **Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Thank you, Mr Speaker. One way to make small farms viable is to add value to their product. I was brought up on a small dairy farm, and my brother is now a successful cheesemaker—it is rather good cheese. Will the Minister undertake to instruct his officials to encourage small farms to go down this route and, as and when best practice is developed, will it be shared with the Scottish Government, because in my case this is, of course, a devolved matter?

Mr Speaker: The House will be most grateful to the hon. Gentleman, as will the hon. Gentleman’s brother.

George Eustice: We recognise the importance of our small family farms, and we also recognise that some of them may face more challenges in a transition from the old system to the future one. In our paper, we set out detailed proposals on a gradual transition to give them time to prepare, and we also set out a number of measures to help to support productivity, add value and get a fairer price for their products. We would of course be more than happy to share our proposals with the Scottish Government.

15. [904262] **Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Shropshire farmers are pleased with some of the mood music coming from the Government about the financial support that they will get in a post-Brexit world. Will the Minister or one of his senior officials commit to come to the Shropshire show this year and continue that dialogue with our Shropshire farmers?

George Eustice: I thank my hon. Friend for that invitation, and either I or another Minister would be delighted to attend the Shropshire show, which will be part of this year’s agricultural show programme. It will be an important opportunity for us to engage with the industry.

Animal Welfare

10. **Luke Hall** (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve animal welfare on farms. [904257]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): We are firmly committed to maintaining and improving our world-leading animal welfare standards. Our consultation paper sets out the options we are

considering as we leave the EU, such as pilot schemes that offer payments to farmers delivering higher welfare outcomes. We are also producing improved animal welfare codes for meat chickens, laying hens, and pigs.

Luke Hall: I thank the Minister for that answer. There are currently circumstances in which someone who has been charged with serious animal welfare offences is able to acquire new livestock, under the guise of it belonging to a partner, in the run-up to their trial. That can result in serious cases of neglect and cruelty, and there has been such a case in my constituency. Does the Minister agree that anybody charged with the most serious type of animal welfare offences should not be allowed to acquire new livestock in the run-up to their trial? Will he meet me and the leader of South Gloucestershire Council to discuss that matter?

George Eustice: The Animal Welfare Act 2006 gives courts the power to impose a disqualification order on anyone found guilty of causing unnecessary suffering to animals. That can disqualify someone not only from owning or keeping animals but, crucially, from having any influence over the way in which an animal is kept. If someone is suspected of breaching the terms of a disqualification order, the matter should be reported to the relevant authorities. My hon. Friend will understand that there is a difference if someone has been charged but not yet prosecuted, and I would be happy to meet him to discuss the matter further.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The Minister will be aware of long-standing public health concerns about the routine overuse of antibiotics on UK farms, yet we now hear that such use is five times higher on American farms, particularly for US beef production. What conversations is he having with colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that opening the markets to US beef does not happen, and that we do not have a public health crisis in this country?

George Eustice: The hon. Lady makes an important point. We have made good progress in the UK on reducing our use of antibiotics in agriculture. There have been notable successes in the poultry industry, and the pig sector is also making improvements. In our future agricultural policy, we want to support approaches to livestock husbandry that will enable us to reduce the use of antibiotics further and, as I said earlier, we will not compromise our food and animal welfare standards in pursuit of any trade deal.

Game Sales

11. **Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): What steps his Department is taking to support the sale of game in shops and restaurants. [904258]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): Game is an important part of our food heritage, and it is a draw on menus across the UK and served in many establishments. Exports of game meat were worth £9 million in 2016 and £7 million in 2017. We have no specific plans to promote UK game meat, but we continue to raise the profile and reputation of UK food and drink overseas through the Food is GREAT campaign.

Jim Shannon: The Minister will be aware that the game sector is worth £114 million to the industry back home. I suspect he will also be aware that the European market, in particular in France, has decreased. Is he prepared to consider introducing and promoting game in the far east, especially in China, because that market is just crying out for game for people's plates?

George Eustice: I regularly take part in trade delegations with the UK Government, and a couple of years ago I attended the Anuga food conference in Cologne, where there was a producer and exporter of UK game meat. I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman and consider his proposals in this area.

Topical Questions

T1. [904266] **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): Since the last DEFRA questions, the Department has continued to work on plans for our departure from the European Union and we have published our Command Paper on future agricultural policy. We have laid legislation to introduce mandatory CCTV in slaughterhouses, taking forward our agenda to enhance animal welfare. Parliament has also recently debated and passed legislation to strengthen laws on combating litter.

Mr Hollobone: Remainers and leavers agree that one of the very worst aspects of our EU membership is the common fisheries policy. Can the Minister confirm that we are leaving it on 29 March next year, that the British fishing industry can be relaunched as a result, and that he will not trade away our newly re-won sovereignty over fishing in the interests of a wider trade deal?

George Eustice: We have always been clear that when we leave the European Union, we leave the common fisheries policy and become an independent coastal state under international law. There are, of course, always annual negotiations—even for countries outside the EU—to agree an approach on the management of shared stocks, and we envisage that such meetings will continue. I can confirm that the UK Government's view is that there is a trade discussion to take place. We want a free trade agreement and a fisheries discussion to take place, and we want to take back control of our waters.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): Last week's freezing temperatures caused chaos to water supplies this week. Households in London were among those hardest hit, with customers widely reporting a systemic failure by Thames Water to comply with its legal obligation to provide 10 litres of water per person for every day that a customer is disconnected. Will the Minister confirm that that was the case and, if so, when the Department was notified, as is the requirement? What actions does she intend to take against companies that fail to meet that obligation?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): As I said in my recent statement to the House, I have ordered Ofwat to undertake a review of what has been happening. I

have asked for a report to be made available—there might be an interim one by the end of this month—and I will be able to update the hon. Lady after that.

Holly Lynch: I hope that we can ensure that water is getting to customers who are still without connected water supply this week. Given that executives at the top nine water and sewage companies in England earned a combined total of nearly £23 million in 2017 and those companies have paid out £18.1 billion in dividends since 2006, but that Ofwat has already said that taking action on pay, dividends and tax structures is not in its current thinking, what is the Government's plan to rebalance executive pay with investment in infrastructure and resilience and to get a grip on our water companies if Ofwat has said it does not intend to do so?

Dr Coffey: As we set out in our strategic policy statement to Ofwat, there is an expectation of the increased investment that needs to be made by the industry, and the price review is under way. Water companies will be coming out with their consultation, but when my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State spoke to the water industry at Water UK a few weeks ago, he read it the riot act. He has said that he will give Ofwat whatever powers it needs so that the water companies will up their game.

T5. [904270] **Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): In my constituency, plastic debris is often washed up on the town's beach, harming the local ecosystem and damaging tourism. Does my hon. Friend agree that reducing plastic waste is essential for the regeneration of Britain's seaside towns?

Dr Coffey: Absolutely. As a child I lived in Formby, so I visited Southport many times. My hon. Friend is right that plastic does not belong on the beach or in the sea. I commend the work that has been done, but he will be aware of our ongoing measures to reduce the amount of plastic entering the ocean and, therefore, being left on our beaches.

T2. [904267] **Jo Swinson** (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): The Committee on Toxicity is reviewing the most recent research on folic acid. If it advises the Government that the maximum recommended intake should be increased or abolished, will the Minister commit to following the scientific evidence, and successful practice in other countries, by amending bread and flour regulations to require the fortification of flour with folic acid, which reduces neural tube defects?

George Eustice: The hon. Lady will be aware that this issue is shared between the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. The former leads on folic acid and we lead on labelling issues. It is the case that there is a complexity in EU law. EU regulations now require that all products that have flour must include labelling. That creates burdensome problems for the industry, but if there is a recommendation, we will look at it sensibly. Once we leave the EU, we will have an opportunity to adopt a slightly different approach.

T6. [904271] **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What has the Minister done to stop our songbirds from being trapped and eaten in Cyprus?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: My right hon. Friend raises a very important issue. We are part of an international convention on migratory species. Illegal trapping in Cyprus has been a long-running sore. I commend the Ministry of Defence, police and the armed forces at the sovereign base in Cyprus for working so hard to tackle this issue. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has shown that there has been a 70% fall in the amount of illegal poaching.

Mr Speaker: I am so glad that the right hon. Gentleman does not represent a migratory species, and I doubt that proposition would be the subject of a Division of the House.

T3. [904268] **Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): In the light of the Secretary of State's warning to water companies to address public concerns on prices, is he aware of the nine water companies that are committed to the Keep Me Posted campaign to ensure that consumers have the right to choose paper bills and statements?

Dr Coffey: Customers can choose to keep paper bills. Water companies, like many other companies, tend to offer a discount if people choose to switch to electronic communication, but I am sure that customers can take this matter up directly through the Consumer Council for Water if it is proving to be a problem.

T7. [904272] **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): Earlier this week, thousands of my constituents had their water shut off by Southern Water due to poor winter preparedness. What discussions has the Department had with the water industry and Ofwat, the regulator, to ensure that this does not happen in future winters?

Dr Coffey: Officials have been in regular touch with the water companies, and on Tuesday, I convened a meeting of water company chief executives, Ofwat and Water UK. As I announced to the House, I have asked Ofwat to undertake a review to look into the practices that happened.

T4. [904269] **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): The Command Paper includes the line:

"We will adopt a trade approach which promotes... lower prices for consumers",

which I find rather worrying. Is it not the case that food prices are already historically low? Lower prices will not do anything for British farmers. We need good-quality, affordable and healthy food, not a race to the bottom to get ever cheaper food.

George Eustice: The point that we are making is that in the long term, there may be opportunities in certain sectors, particularly for food that we are unable to produce in this country, to have lower prices for certain products. However, the hon. Lady makes an important point. Generally, we have low and stable food prices in this country, and countries that are fully dependent on importing all their food tend to have higher prices and less choice.

T8. [904273] **Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Given the intention to use public money to promote public good, does my hon. Friend agree that as well as rewarding farmers for looking after

the environment, we should support growers who contribute to public health by growing healthy fruit and vegetables?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes a very important point—as a former fruit and vegetable grower, I should perhaps declare an interest—and she is absolutely right. We believe that our future policy, in so far as it supports innovation, will be open to the horticulture sector so that it can invest in its future, and we also talk about the importance of promoting nutritious food.

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): The Government said in court that they considered it sufficient to take

“a pragmatic, less formal approach”

to areas of poor air quality. Portsmouth has consistently breached World Health Organisation guidelines, with 95 premature deaths each year attributed to air pollution. Does the Minister therefore consider it appropriate to take an informal approach to preventing deaths and protecting the health of my constituents?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: I think that the hon. Gentleman is selectively quoting from the judgment. However, this Government take air quality very seriously. Portsmouth is expected to be compliant within the next two to three years. The Government have been using the benchmark of a charging clean air zone, which would take at least four years to come into place. The hon. Gentleman might well be shaking his head, but he needs to be working with his council on what it is doing to improve local roads and what it is working on regarding public health. I am sure that he will work alongside Councillor Donna Jones, who is making great efforts to improve air quality.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): The EU Commission's position on fisheries has been widely reported in the last 24 hours. It states that

“existing reciprocal access to fishing waters and resources should be maintained”.

It also seems to suggest that any future trade deal will be heavily dependent on EU fishermen maintaining the current unfair access to British waters. Agreeing to this position is clearly unacceptable to fishing communities around the UK. Will my hon. Friend confirm that the Government consider the EU's position to be just as unacceptable?

George Eustice: Yes. I simply say to my hon. Friend that this is an EU position. It currently benefits considerably from access to UK waters. At the moment, the UK fleet accesses around 100,000 tonnes of fish in EU waters, but the EU accesses 700,000 tonnes of fish in UK waters, so it would say that, wouldn't it? That is not a position that the UK Government share.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I draw the Minister's attention to the very serious oil spill stretching from Pymmes brook in my constituency right down the River Lea to the Olympic Park. This has happened for the second time in two years. Is it not time for the Environment Agency, the Canal & River Trust, the local authorities and Thames Water to get together, once they have cleaned up the spill, to see what they can do to prevent such spills?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: I have already replied to the right hon. Gentleman about this point through answers to written questions. The Environment Agency has traced the waste oil to a potential polluter, but I cannot give further details due to the ongoing investigation. I assure him that the Environment Agency carries out pollution prevention visits at industrial premises along that area and, of course, we are still working to clean it up.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Last week's Brexit paper referred to the availability of food, but made zero reference to the scandal that one in 12 British adults had gone a whole day without it. Why do the Government not care about people going hungry?

George Eustice: We do care about people going hungry. We have a number of initiatives to support food banks and ensure that food is redistributed. We are also reforming and improving the benefits system to help people back into work, which is obviously the best option.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): The Minister will be aware of the concern expressed by Northern Ireland farmers and other food producers about cross-border trade. Does the Minister agree that we need an arrangement that will accommodate everyone?

George Eustice: I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman. I met him and a number of others yesterday to discuss the particular challenges of the Northern Ireland border, and I can reassure him that the Government are fully apprised of that concern.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for Gainsborough, the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission, was asked—

National Audit Office: Single-use Plastics

1. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): What steps the National Audit Office is taking to reduce the use of single-use plastics in that organisation. [904238]

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): The National Audit Office takes environmental commitments very seriously. Since 2011 it has operated an environmental management scheme certified by the International Standards Organisation, which includes setting challenging targets to reduce or eliminate waste in a number of areas. The NAO has already taken several steps to minimise the use of single-use plastics. For example, it does not use single-use plastic bottles or water cups, and encourages the use of reusable coffee cups in its staff café by offering a discount on the cost of hot drinks.

Mr Hollobone: Will my hon. Friend encourage the NAO to be an exemplar for all public bodies by eliminating the use of single-use plastics?

Sir Edward Leigh: My hon. Friend is an exemplar of an assiduous Member of Parliament, and I will certainly encourage the NAO to be an exemplar as well. Let me say in passing that the NAO's catering team has made a

deal with one of its main suppliers to collect and reuse packaging from catering deliveries. Cardboard and single-use plastics have been replaced by reusable plastic crates. Isn't that marvellous?

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Church Investors Group

3. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What proposals the Church Commissioners have as part of the Church Investors Group for holding businesses to account on executive pay and climate change measures. [904240]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): The Church Investors Group manages a total fund of £17 billion, approximately £8 billion of which represents the Church Commissioners' assets. The commissioners have discharged their stewardship responsibilities for a long time by voting on issues including executive remuneration and climate change, and, most recently, adding to the criteria gender diversity on boards, the disclosure of company pay ratios, and the payment of at least the living wage to staff.

Diana Johnson: Will the right hon. Lady set out in a little more detail the approach that the Church Commissioners are taking to ensure that businesses take the issue of climate change very seriously?

Dame Caroline Spelman: That is one of the stewardship responsibilities, and commissioners will vote against chairs of companies if they are assessed as not having made sufficient progress in addressing climate change. I am pleased to be able to share the good news that when a resolution was filed by the Church Commissioners and the New York State Comptroller asking Exxon to report on how its business model would help to tackle climate change, 62.3% of shareholders voted in favour of it despite opposition from the board.

Wi-Fi and Broadband

4. **Victoria Prentis** (Banbury) (Con): What plans the Church of England has to make its buildings available for broadcasting (a) wi-fi and (b) broadband signal to improve connectivity in rural areas. [904241]

5. **Michael Tomlinson** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): What plans the Church of England has to make its buildings available for broadcasting (a) wi-fi and (b) broadband signal to improve connectivity in rural areas; and if she will make a statement. [904243]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): The Church of England recently signed an accord with the Government to enable churches to improve broadband and mobile connectivity, particularly in rural areas. It sets out how the Church can collaborate with providers to help to achieve that.

Victoria Prentis: The tower of St Peter in Drayton, for example, could really help with connectivity in an area that suffers from a lack of connectivity. Could my right hon. Friend give my constituents some guidance as to how best to find their way through the planning system, to help them make an application in relation to the church?

Dame Caroline Spelman: My hon. Friend's constituency has seen a significant improvement in broadband coverage, which is currently at 95.5%—up from 19% in 2010. However, there are undoubtedly not spots, and I encourage her to get churches to contact Church House to find out how they can avail themselves of this new opportunity. In this accord, the Church has reached agreement with broadband providers to provide a standard contract to make that easy. I pay tribute to the Secretary of State at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Lord Gardiner, for this initiative on working together to get our rural and urban mobile and broadband not spots covered.

Michael Tomlinson: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for her part in securing the accord. On International Women's Day, it seems appropriate to mention Lady St Mary church in Wareham, in my constituency, which is already installing telecommunications equipment in its—or her, I should say—tower. What more can my right hon. Friend do to encourage others to follow where Wareham and Dorset are leading?

Dame Caroline Spelman: My hon. Friend is doing a good job of demonstrating to the whole House the difference it can make when we, as Members of Parliament, make our constituents in not spots aware of this new agreement. If Members have churches with tall towers or spires, these can be used to bounce the broadband signal into existing not spots. The example, on International Women's Day, of the church he refers to gives encouragement to all. I know that the Isle of Purbeck suffers from poorer coverage, and I would encourage him to get the churches in his constituency to apply too.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I hear what the right hon. Lady says, but will she include in the work that the Church is doing churches that have been closed? They are often in the most rural and isolated areas, and their status is sometimes unclear. This could be a very important way in which we could make use of these buildings.

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church of England has put its entire assets at the disposal of the Government to help crack the problem of the not spots—that includes its churches, its schools and its land, where necessary. For example, we can beam a signal from a church spire to the brow of a hill—the land may belong to the Church—down into the next village, which does not have a signal, and thereby get coverage. Those assets are all bound up in this accord.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Lady for her responses. It is really good news that the Church of England is making its buildings available for this purpose. However, does she agree that it is

equally important that historical artefacts, which can be displayed tremendously in small parishes in rural communities that have dedicated Royal British Legion facilities, could also be displayed in buildings owned by the Church of England across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Dame Caroline Spelman: This new accord on wi-fi and mobile coverage will make the churches a hot spot, not a not spot, in communities. That may well bring in people who want to have the benefit of a good signal and, by the way, to discover the wonderful heritage and artefacts that the churches offer. I should add that although this accord has been signed with the Church of England, the Government want to offer the same opportunity to other denominations, because the aim is universal coverage.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission was asked—

Political Parties: Compliance

6. **Sir Patrick McLoughlin** (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): What estimate the Electoral Commission has made of its annual spending on compliance measures for political parties. [904244]

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South): The Electoral Commission has a statutory duty to monitor the political finance rules and take all reasonable steps to secure compliance with them. The amount of money spent on compliance measures fluctuates and tends to intensify around electoral events. The full range of this activity includes creating comprehensive guidance for parties, campaigners and candidates; engaging with parties directly; monitoring campaign activity; checking and publishing financial returns from parties; and the enforcement of the rules. In the 2017-18 financial year, the commission's budget for its political finance and regulation directorate is £2.66 million.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that answer. Will she make the point to the Electoral Commission on our behalf that it is all very well to put these substantial extra compliance costs on to the political parties, but the commission is fully funded by the taxpayer, while political parties have to raise their own finances?

Bridget Phillipson: I am sure that officials from the Electoral Commission will have heard the right hon. Gentleman's comments. The commission provides year-round advice and regularly engages with political parties, as he doubtless knows from his many meetings with the commission in his previous role as Chairman of his party. I am sure that it would welcome the opportunity to discuss any such suggestions with him again.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Following the disgraceful decision by the Government yesterday to keep secret the source of the £425,000 donation to the

leave campaign via the Democratic Unionist party, meaning that the public have no idea where that money came from, what more can my hon. Friend and the Electoral Commission do to ensure that we have full transparency in our electoral and democratic system?

Bridget Phillipson: The commission welcomes the existing order, which will for the first time provide information about donations and loans received by parties in Northern Ireland. However, the commission also wants to see transparency in donations going back to 2014, as Parliament envisaged, and it would support the Government in laying a further order to provide for full transparency going back to 2014.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Charities and academics are warning the Government that the trials for compulsory voter ID this May could risk disenfranchising large numbers of vulnerable people. How will the Electoral Commission monitor these pilots, which are a disproportionate response to the scale of electoral fraud?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend makes an important point on the pilots that the UK Government are carrying out in the forthcoming elections. No one wants to see voters turned away from polling stations, but the extent to which voters in pilot areas are unable to vote on 3 May, and why that is the case, will be key elements of the commission's statutory evaluation of the pilot schemes. I am sure that the commission will want to hear directly from anyone who finds themselves affected as a result.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners was asked—

Environmental Taxation Funding

7. **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What steps are being taken to encourage churches and other religious institutions to apply for funding from environmental taxation. [904245]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): The national Church institutions provide advice to churches and cathedrals on what funding is available. The Church Buildings Council is also able to advise parishes on a number of other funds that are available besides the landfill communities fund, which is the principal source, such as the new plastic bag tax fund.

Mr Sheerman: Many of the churches and other religious buildings that I am aware of are relatively ignorant about the large amount of money from landfill tax that Entrust controls. If the Churches and religious institutions are engaged in broader community activities, they will qualify for such funds. Could that be made more widely known?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The fact that the hon. Gentleman has made us aware of that fact in the House, and that it will be recorded in *Hansard*, is

extremely helpful. The landfill communities fund has spent £106 million on the restoration of places of worship since it was created, but the relatively new plastic bags tax fund is another source of funds for places of worship in our constituencies and goes beyond the 10-mile radius from a landfill site, which is a constraint on the landfill fund.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): We have a large number of church buildings in Scotland, and the burden of maintaining them is onerous for the Churches that own them. Will those Churches be able to apply for similar funding north of the border?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I am not responsible for the Church in Scotland. The Church Estates Commissioner is responsible only for the Church of England, but I am perfectly prepared to make inquiries on the hon. Gentleman's behalf with the Church of Scotland.

Homeless People

8. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What steps the Church of England is taking to support homeless people. [904247]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): The Church of England has many local parish-based initiatives to support the homeless. The

Church also partners with organisations nationally, including Crisis. I think it will be of interest to Members to know that 3,000 people took shelter in churches last winter. That was 53% up on the year before, and I strongly suspect that that number will increase, given the severity of the winter that we have just experienced.

Rachael Maskell: I quote:

“For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me”.

We cannot wait until 2027 to see homelessness eliminated, and I would like to know how the Church of England will use its estate more to ensure that people have shelter in the coming year.

Dame Caroline Spelman: The hon. Lady reads that verse, which always challenges me. One day, when I meet my maker and he asks me, “When I was homeless, did you shelter me?” I have to be able to answer, and the best answer that I can give relates to the remarkable growing initiative within the Church for night shelters. During the recent cold snap, churches were often mentioned in the news as places where homeless people could shelter from the conditions, and I pay tribute to my former headmistress, who helped to set up a night shelter at Holy Trinity, Bishop's Stortford. I went to see for myself how the church had been adapted, with a toilet and shower to make the accommodation suitable, and how volunteers prepared hot meals and were trained to look after the homeless people who came to take shelter.

Mental Health Services: Children and Young People

10.30 am

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to make a statement on the Care Quality Commission's review of children and young people's mental health services.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): Not enough scripture is quoted in this House, but I cannot match what was just said. However, I can tell the House that the Care Quality Commission published its "Are we listening? Review of Children and Young People's Mental Health Services" report this morning, and, yes, we are listening. It was the second piece of work commissioned by the Prime Minister in January 2017 to look at this area of services, and the findings include examples of good or innovative practice and of dedicated people—we thank every one of them—working in every part of the system and a number of areas with strong practice ensuring that patients and families are involved in planning care, but there are also concerns around the join-up between children's services. We thank the CQC and Dr Paul Lelliott for their work.

The Government have already committed to making available an additional £1.4 billion to improve children and young people's mental health services to deliver on the commitments in "Future in mind" and NHS England's five year forward view for mental health, and the CQC welcomes that progress in its report. I know that the hon. Lady and others have worries about this, but spend is reaching the front line. By 2020-21, we have committed to ensuring that 70,000 more children and young people each year will have access to high-quality NHS mental healthcare when they need it. However, there is so much more to do. Claire Murdoch, the national mental health director for NHS England, said in response to the report:

"CAMHS services are now improving, but from a starting point of historic underfunding and legacy understaffing, relative to rapidly growing need"

We see those things across the service.

In December, the Department of Health, jointly with the Department for Education, published "Transforming children and young people's mental health provision". That Green Paper responds to a number of the problems raised by the CQC in this report, and sets out a range of proposals to strengthen how schools and specialist NHS mental health services work together and to reduce the amount of time that children and young people have to wait to access specialist help. The proposals are backed by an additional £300 million of funding. We have carried out extensive face-to-face consultation on the Green Paper proposals and have received a high volume of responses to our online consultation, and we thank everyone for that. We will respond to this CQC review, alongside the Green Paper consultation, in the summer.

The report calls for the Secretary of State to use the inter-ministerial group on mental health to guarantee greater collaboration across Departments in prioritising mental health. We agree, and that recommendation is already in hand. The IMG has already contributed to the development of the Green Paper and will continue

to provide leadership on the issues that the report raises. The CQC also recommends that everyone who works, volunteers or cares for children and young people is trained in mental health awareness. We are already rolling out mental health first aid training to every secondary school and have committed to rolling out mental health awareness training to all primary schools by 2022. The Government and Ministers remain wholly committed to making mental health everyone's business and building good mental health for our children and young people.

Barbara Keeley: The report is the latest piece of recent evidence revealing systematic failures in our mental health services. It follows similar reports of the past few weeks that call into question the Government's claims to have made mental health a priority equal to physical health. In this report, we see evidence of services actively putting up barriers to treatment, resulting in children and young people having to reach crisis point before being able to get access to the right treatment. Children are suffering because of those high eligibility thresholds. We know that 50% of mental health problems develop before the age of 14 and that 75% develop before the age of 18. Does the Minister recognise that imposing high eligibility thresholds means that children and young people are treated only when their condition becomes more serious? These high thresholds are even prompting GPs to tell children to pretend that their mental health is worse than it is. Will the Minister agree to look into referral criteria as a matter of urgency, so that children and young people get the proper treatment at the right time?

The report links these excessively high eligibility thresholds and reductions in access with funding reductions and not enough capacity for services to respond to local needs, so, whatever the Minister says, clearly not enough money is reaching the frontline. Can the Minister tell us how he plans to address that? The report, like the CQC's recent report on rehabilitation services, raises concerns about out-of-area placements, which we know are a barrier to recovery. Will he tell the House what action is being taken to increase the number of in-patient beds available locally?

Finally, what will the Minister do to address the clear problems, highlighted in this report and others, associated with the rigid transition at age 18 from child and adolescent to adult mental health services, which is also a barrier to accessing care?

Steve Brine: The hon. Lady rightly raises the issue of spend reaching the frontline; I said in my opening remarks that it is doing so, and she asked what evidence there was of that. Last year, there was a 20% increase in clinical commissioning group spend on children and young people's mental health, rising from £516 million in 2015-16 to £619 million in 2016-17.

On the broader issues raised in the hon. Lady's response, I said that we have made up to £1.4 billion available over five years to support transformation of these services, and there is the additional £300 million that I mentioned. I want to touch on waiting times, referral routes and workforce. We are the first Government to introduce waiting time standards, and that is relevant to children and young people's mental health, too. We are meeting, or on track to meet, both targets. We will pilot a four-week waiting time for specialist children and young

people's NHS mental health services, as was outlined in the recent Green Paper. As I say, we are considering responses to that.

On referral routes, our Green Paper proposes senior designated leads and mental health support teams—a new workforce—based on the findings of the Department for Education's schools link pilot. They aim to improve the join-up with specialist services and to result in more appropriate referrals.

Barbara Keeley *indicated dissent.*

Steve Brine: The hon. Lady shakes her head; I can only tell her the facts. Health Education England's workforce plan recognises new ways of working as a cornerstone of delivering these improvements. HEE will also work with our partners to continue the expansion of these newly created roles in mental health services, and to consider the creation of new roles, such as that of early intervention workers, who would focus on child wellbeing as part of a psychiatrist-led team.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. Many right hon. and hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye, but I remind Members that there are business questions immediately after these exchanges, followed by an important statement by the Home Secretary. Thereafter, the debate on International Women's Day is heavily subscribed, so there is a premium on brevity from Back and Front Benchers alike, and I want to move on, whether we have incorporated everybody or not, no later than 11 o'clock. Single-sentence questions are much to be preferred.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I commend the Government for promoting the Emotionally Healthy Schools project, which, in my constituency, is working well and engaging not just children who have challenges, but their families. Does the Minister agree that helping children with their mental health challenges needs to involve, wherever practical, their families, family relationships and inter-parental relationships, as recommended by the Early Intervention Foundation?

Steve Brine: As ever, my hon. Friend makes a point about families. I said that we are already rolling out mental health first aid training to every secondary school, which is of course important, and we are also committed to rolling out mental health awareness training to all primary schools by 2022, but to coin a phrase, it takes a village. This is about the state—of course, schools are part of that—but also the third sector, which has an important role to play. It is also absolutely about the love, support and Christian embrace of families.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): This is a very important issue, especially given that half of mental health problems are established by the age of 14. It is therefore particularly shocking that some children are receiving assistance only after attempting suicide. Claire Murdoch, the national mental health director of NHS England, has stated:

“Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services are now improving, but from a starting point of historic under-funding and legacy under-staffing”.

This report is surely an example of the latest reports in recent years demonstrating the impact of this Government's austerity-driven agenda on public services. By comparison,

in Scotland, which had the UK's first ever dedicated mental health Minister, we have seen staffing for Scotland's psychology and children and young people's mental health care services at a record high, with a 79% increase since 2006. Surely as part of the Minister's response to these findings he will wish to look at the actions being taken in Scotland and learn from them.

Steve Brine: We always look at the actions being taken in Scotland and in all the devolved Administrations. The hon. Gentleman is right to touch on prevention, which was the first point he made. The proposals in the Green Paper are focused on providing significant support for schools to develop the work they already do on prevention and early intervention. Today's report talks about the many good things that are going on and, as I said, some of the things we have already taken forward with the Green Paper. While we are kicking this about, let us just remember in these exchanges that this is about the health of young people in England, whom we all represent.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): The CQC has recommended that Ofsted should be charged with looking at what schools are doing to support mental health. Will the Minister take that up with his ministerial colleagues in the Department for Education?

Steve Brine: I am sure my colleague the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), who is responsible for mental health, will be taking that up as she considers responses to the Green Paper. My hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin) is absolutely right to raise that issue and I thank him for doing so.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): With increasing numbers of university students having mental health problems, what action will the Minister take to ensure better joined-up care, with better communication between home and university GPs and student welfare services?

Steve Brine: As a former student union president, I think that is a very good point. One key proposal in the Green Paper is about the new mental health support teams, which will be very important in that. The hon. Lady is right to say that they should work across higher education as well as the earlier forms of education.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): In the next few weeks, work will begin on the construction of a new mental health residential unit for young people in Cornwall, which is long overdue and much anticipated. It is a clear sign that this Government are investing in young people's mental health. However, we continue to have a problem with our clinical commissioning group in delivering frontline services, even though the Government are providing more money, so what steps will the Minister take to ensure that CCGs allocate the money provided to those services?

Steve Brine: I do not know the specific example that my hon. Friend raises, but he may wish to take it up with the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock. I did say that there was a 20% increase in clinical commissioning spend for

[*Steve Brine*]

children and young people's mental health between 2015-16 and 2016-17. We have all been frustrated about spend reaching the frontline, and we have made it very clear that we expect it to do so. I am pleased to see progress in the right trajectory.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): These damning findings come three years after we secured £1.25 billion extra over a five-year period. We know that that money has fallen well short of what was committed to three years ago. Will the Minister absolutely commit to make good the shortfall of money getting through to children's mental health services?

Steve Brine: I thank our former ministerial colleague for that. We have not exactly been shy in investing in this area, both when he was a Minister in the Department and now. We have made £1.4 billion available over the five years to support the transformation of services—and the extra £300 million. He says this is a damning report, but we must remember that it is a report we commissioned. We do not hide from these things. The last time I responded to an urgent question from the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) it was on a CQC report on social care. We must not hide from these things and we do not want to bury our heads in the sand. We must recognise and build on the examples of good person-centred care that are taking place in our country at the moment, and that is why we are putting the money behind it. The right hon. Gentleman is right to raise this issue.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I welcome the priority and funding that are coming from my hon. Friend. What is he doing to co-ordinate and support the devolved nations in this regard, such as Scotland where adolescent mental health waiting time targets were actually missed? We want to make sure that no British child is left behind, no matter what part of the UK they live in.

Steve Brine: That is an excellent point. I will make sure that my colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Health, is talking, as I know she is, to the devolved Administrations as she considers the responses to the Green Paper, which I am sure include responses from them.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): The Care Quality Commission's review found that children were waiting up to 18 months to receive treatment for their mental health conditions. In Lewisham, the Government are cutting the budget for child and adolescent mental health services by 5%. The Green Paper will not help children currently waiting. What will the Government do to address this?

Steve Brine: We will put the money in, publish a sensible strategy in a Green Paper, consider the responses and then take it forward, backed by the investment we think we need to deliver the strategy. That will be the same in Lewisham as in Winchester.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I am sure that both sides of the House will welcome the commitment to 21,000 more personnel in mental health

service provision by 2021, but can the Minister assure me that this will lead to more children accessing mental health services within the four-week target period?

Steve Brine: We talked about testing the four-week target in the Green Paper—it was one of its key pillars—and we hope to pilot the idea to test the impact of our additional investment on reducing waiting times. We will then assess the benefits and challenges and provide information on how the waiting time standard should be adapted to avoid perverse incentives—around thresholds, for instance.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): The Minister's description of mental health provision will not be recognised by anyone providing or using services. Does he think that cutting the funding for the north west boroughs partnership year on year since 2011 has led to improved services for young people in St Helens?

Steve Brine: I do not know about the issue in St Helens. I will look into it, or ask my colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Health, to do so, and get her to write to the hon. Gentleman.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I very much welcome the Government's commitment to mental health workers throughout England's schools. Will my hon. Friend update the House on its timely roll-out?

Steve Brine: As I have said, we will be considering the four-week pilot as part of the Green Paper. We want to see these mental health first-aiders in schools, and as soon as we can give my hon. Friend an exact timetable on the situation Crawley, as well as elsewhere, I am sure that my colleague the Under-Secretary will do so.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Some 75% of mental health problems start before the age of 18, but less than 10% of funding goes to young people. What can the Minister do to prioritise more funding for CAMHS?

Steve Brine: As I have said, the overall budget is the money we have promised in the Green Paper, but the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The Green Paper has at its heart a focus on prevention and significant support—in early years, through schools and, as the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) mentioned, through higher education—to prevent issues from snowballing in the first place.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): With the understaffing of mental health services and the recent Health Select Committee report on the nursing shortage, does the Minister accept that the Government's decision to remove nursing bursaries, which has particularly affected the number of students training to be mental health nurses, was a mistake?

Steve Brine: No, I do not accept that it was a mistake. We need to increase the number of people coming into nursing, and we were turning away far too many who wanted to come into it. The workforce is obviously a huge challenge across the NHS, in primary care—my area—in secondary care and, of course, in mental health,

which is why the Secretary of State has said we will create 21,000 new posts by 2021 to support one of the biggest expansions in mental health services in Europe.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Minister will know from his own background that primary care does not always have the necessary expertise in mental health. How will he guarantee that every GP surgery will have the necessary capacity to deliver excellence in mental health services for our young people?

Steve Brine: That is a good point—and one that sits at the centre of my portfolio. GPs are generalists. As the Minister for cancer, I know that there is always criticism of their specialism in that, but, by their very nature, GPs cannot be specialists in everything. That is why the mental health support teams, which are at the heart of the proposal in the Green Paper, are a key part of our strategy, and we expect them to work closely with GPs and the Royal College of General Practitioners to upskill GPs, working within the multi-disciplinary teams, to help young people when they need that help.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Tomorrow, I am meeting the chief executive of my local mental health trust because we are so desperately worried about the mental health provision for young people in York. We are not only short of staff but short of resources. It takes time to train mental health staff, so what are the Government going to do in the interim to ensure that we have staff in the service?

Steve Brine: I hope that when the hon. Lady meets that person in her constituency tomorrow she will recognise the good work that is going on and the number of people who are going over and above to deliver the services to children and people. I should also say that one of her responsibilities as a Member of Parliament,

as it is ours as Ministers, is to see to it that the sustainability and transformation partnerships in her area collaborate with all the various organisations in her constituency and that the traditional health and social care services are joined up with schools, police, probation services and mental health services, because ultimately it is one NHS.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister listen more carefully to the voice of parents? All my experience as chair of the Westminster Commission on Autism tells me that if parents think there is something wrong with their child—whether it is a mental health challenge or autism—they want early diagnosis and treatment, and they want it at the standard that they have in Sweden.

Steve Brine: I am very aware of the hon. Gentleman's work on the Westminster Commission on Autism—he has a big event coming up in the next few weeks that I hope to go to. I completely agree with him, which is why it was so welcome that the CQC report highlighted Government proposals such as establishing dedicated mental health support teams in schools.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Phase 1 on the CQC review noted that there were unacceptable variations in quality. How can quality be provided more consistently throughout the country?

Steve Brine: That is an excellent point. The NHS is very good at sharing best practice; the challenge comes in implementing it. The report rightly says that there are very good examples of good person-centred care throughout the country. The challenge is to make sure that is rolled out everywhere. I suppose the answer is to focus on the workforce and the investment, and to make sure that we have in place the agreed strategy to take the sector with us and do that.

Business of the House

10.51 am

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

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

MONDAY 12 MARCH—Remaining stages of the Financial Guidance and Claims Bill [*Lords*].

TUESDAY 13 MARCH—My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will deliver his spring statement, followed by debate on motions relating to universal credit, children and young persons and social security.

WEDNESDAY 14 MARCH—General debate on European affairs (day 1).

THURSDAY 15 MARCH—Conclusion of general debate on European affairs (day 2).

FRIDAY 16 MARCH—Private Members' Bills.

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

MONDAY 19 MARCH—Second Reading of the Secure Tenancies (Victims of Domestic Abuse) Bill [*Lords*], followed by debate on Welsh affairs.

Today, Parliament is flying the flag for International Women's Day. This year is particularly special, as we mark the centenary of some women getting the right to vote. We will be celebrating women's achievements throughout the year. I hope that all Members will host an Equalitea party in their constituencies during the summer, to celebrate democratic equality and, yes, the opportunity to have cake and eat it. We have achieved much, but there is a long way to go. Today, the Home Office has launched a consultation on our proposals for a new domestic violence Bill, which will tackle the plight of the nearly 2 million people—mainly women—living with violence.

Today, as we think about opportunities for women, I feel lucky to have not one, not two, not even three but four brilliant female apprentices in my private office and parliamentary office. I know many Members are marking National Apprenticeship Week; speaking from my own experiences, I encourage any Member, and every business, to offer the valuable experience of an apprenticeship to talented young people.

Lastly, this week sees the birthday of our own resident rock star: the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). I hear that he is 21 again, although I might be confusing that with his majority. [*Laughter.*] I am sure he is not much older than that. I hope the whole House will join me in wishing him a very happy birthday for tomorrow.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business and also for her speech—I wonder whether that will happen every time. I am pleased that, despite telling me that statements would not be announced in the House, she has actually announced the date of the spring statement. It is an important statement, and it is business of the House. Is there any reason why the Leader of the House is announcing the business just one week and a day at a time? That seems to be a change, too.

I asked last week about the legislation on restoration and renewal—when is that likely to come to the House? There was a good turnout for the debate on the issue, and every day that goes by when we do not do something, further costs are incurred. I also asked when the Trade Bill was likely to come back to the House, and she did not answer. It seems like all the important legislation is delayed. Is this Government-lite—is this basically a no-business Government?

I do thank the Leader of the House for finding time for a debate on the statutory instruments that the Opposition have prayed against. The only one that is outstanding is on early-day motion 937, which deals with the regulations on abolishing nursing bursaries for post-graduate nursing students.

[*That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that the Education (Student Support) (Amendment) Regulations 2018 (S.I., 2018, No. 136), dated 5 February 2018, a copy of which was laid before this House on 6 February, be annulled.*]

There has been a 33% fall in applications for nursing degrees. That helps women returners, but perhaps the Chancellor might make a concession on bursaries in the spring statement. Immediately after that, when we debate the statutory instruments, people will see that they include cuts to free school meals; an end to childcare vouchers; an end to free childcare for all two-year-olds and families on universal credit; and universal credit regulations that will affect self-employed and disabled people. Perhaps that is what we get with a woman Prime Minister!

May I ask for some other debates? The Liaison Committee has nominated for a debate the Environmental Audit Committee's reports on plastic bottles, published on 22 December, and on disposable coffee cups, published on 5 January. Can the Leader of the House find time for that debate, and for a debate on the announcement by the President of the United States on tariffs on our steel and aluminium?

We have a sitting Friday on 16 March. I do not know whether the Leader of the House is aware that, on a previous Friday, a closure motion was moved after only two hours of debate, actually stopping the Opposition spokesperson speaking. If she looks at the *Official Report*, she will see that she was stopped in mid-speech. Can the Leader of the House confirm whether that will be the norm, in which case we will need to warn the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), who is second on the list, that his Bill will come up much more quickly than it would have done before?

The Leader of the House promised the list of ministerial responsibilities in March. It is now 8 March, so can we have that, please?

We have two days of debate on the UK's exit from the European Union. Will there be further allotted days, or can the Opposition dare to dream that we will have our Opposition day? We have not had one since January.

Despite the fact that the Prime Minister's speech to the Mansion House was 6,800 words, she gave only 2,000 words to the House. I feel robbed, Mr Speaker—I do not know about you. We will need a third allotted day as we come up to the year of triggering article 50 on 29 March and the anniversary of the Good Friday agreement on 10 April. The Prime Minister said to the

House on Monday that the Government are looking at customs arrangements around the world, including on the border between the United States and Canada, but the Irish Prime Minister, Leo Varadkar, who has actually visited that border, said that that

“is definitely not a solution that we can possibly entertain.”

What about the former Deputy Prime Minister, Michael Heseltine, who has criticised the Prime Minister’s speech? He said:

“Why is it that after 18 months since the referendum we have not got any closer with these issues? The answer is simple: because no one has got any answer about how to do it.”

If the Prime Minister’s speech were a recipe for a cake, you would not be able to bake it—even if it was a cherry Genoa cake, or a double cherry Genoa cake. If it were a road map, it would be a road map to nowhere.

I join the Leader of the House in wishing everybody a happy International Women’s Day. Mr Speaker, you have been absolutely fantastic, because you have your reference group. In 2010, before I came to this House, I watched the evidence at the Speaker’s conference on parliamentary inclusion, and I think it made a huge difference. On this International Women’s Day, I must say that women consultants in the NHS have earned on average nearly £14,000 a year less than men. The House of Commons Library briefing said that women were paying a “disproportionate” price for balancing the Government’s books—86% of the burden of austerity has fallen on women. There may be a woman Prime Minister, but the Leader of the Opposition is a person of deeds. His shadow Cabinet is 50% women, whereas the Cabinet is only 26% women. The Opposition are leading the way with the representation of women; we make up 45% of the parliamentary party.

As it is International Women’s Day, may I ask the Leader of the House to make representations to the Foreign Secretary about Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe? If France can provide an exhibition to Iran, please will the Leader of the House urge the Foreign Secretary to make representations on the release of Ms Zaghari-Ratcliffe, as he could have done before Christmas? In addition, more schoolgirls have been kidnapped in Nigeria.

On the day on which the National Audit Office has published a report that talks about cuts of almost 50% to local government services, I want to thank all the public services for their hard work over this period of inclement weather. They have protected us and made sure that we are all safe.

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly join the hon. Lady in thanking all those who worked so hard during the period of really difficult and challenging weather, as well as those who had to bear the brunt of it when they were sitting on trains that could not move because of the weather. Everyone should be congratulated on their efforts and community spirit.

The hon. Lady raised a number of legislative issues. I am glad that she did so, because she often asks about policy issues, which are not technically a matter for business questions. She asked about legislation on restoration and renewal. As she knows, because she is on the House of Commons Commission, which I updated only last week, we will be introducing legislation on the establishment of a delivery authority and a sponsor body as soon as possible.

On the Trade Bill, we discussed last week the fact that several amendments have been tabled. The Government are considering them carefully, as it is right to do. As I have always said in this Chamber, we will always consider amendments that are tabled to try to improve legislation as we enter into the important decision to leave the European Union and take steps to prepare ourselves in the best possible way. I am glad that the hon. Lady is happy about the statutory instrument debates. We will be having them next week, as she requested last week.

The hon. Lady asked about nursing training places. She will be aware that there will be an increase of 25%—the biggest increase ever. She also raises the question of plastics and what we are doing about them. I hope that she has signed up, as I have done, to plastic-free Lent. That is an attempt to minimise the use of single-use plastics during the Lent period and an opportunity for us to highlight the importance of reducing our use of plastics. Of course, the Government’s record on that is very good, with the determination in our 25-year environment plan to be the first generation that leaves our environment in a better state than we found it in.

The hon. Lady asks about the talk coming out of the United States on tariffs on steel and aluminium. We are very concerned about that. As she will be aware, we in the UK have made social and economic factors part of the consideration for public sector procurement of steel. We have commissioned research to identify high-value opportunities for UK steel worth up to nearly £4 billion a year by 2030, and we have taken great steps since 2013 to support our steel sector with the costs of renewables and climate change policies. The hon. Lady is right to raise concerns about US policy in this area, and the Prime Minister spoke with President Trump recently and raised our deep concern about his forthcoming announcement on steel and aluminium tariffs. The Prime Minister has noted that multilateral action is the only way to resolve the problem of global overcapacity in all parties’ interests.

The hon. Lady asked again about ministerial responsibilities. I can tell her that the list will be forthcoming as soon as possible, once the positions have been confirmed and clarified with all Departments.

The hon. Lady asked about the debates on the European Union, and I think she is happy that we are having them. They are, of course, in response to the request from many right hon. and hon. Members to be able to talk in general terms about their ideas and proposals for how we should leave the European Union. We had a very important speech from the Prime Minister last week, and the EU Council, where we hope to secure an implementation period, is coming up soon. Now is a very good time for all hon. and right hon. Members to put forward their thoughts and views.

Finally, the hon. Lady asks for representations about Ms Zaghari-Ratcliffe. She is absolutely right to raise that case, which we are very concerned about. She will know that the Foreign Secretary raised it with the Foreign Minister of Iran when he had the opportunity to do so, and the Foreign Office continues to do that at every opportunity.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): I associate myself with the birthday wishes to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), whom I regard as an hon. Friend.

[*Sir Greg Knight*]

On 2 February this year, my private Member's Bill, the Parking (Code of Practice) Bill, received its Second Reading thanks to support from the Government, the official Opposition and the Scottish National party, for which I am obliged. However, the Bill cannot proceed any further until a ways and means motion is tabled. Will the Leader of the House speak to our mutual friend the Patronage Secretary—the Chief Whip—and hopefully agree with him that it should be tabled sooner rather than later?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises a very important issue. The Government have expressed support for a number of private Members' Bills so far this Session, and we continue to work with the Members in charge. That will include bringing forward money resolutions on a case-by-case basis in the usual way.

Mr Speaker: In offering my best birthday wishes to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) for tomorrow, perhaps I can borrow the legendary observation to me from the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) and apply it to the hon. Gentleman: fortunately he is not yet at the age at which the cost of the candles exceeds the cost of the cake.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Thank you very much for that, Mr Speaker. I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week and for her very kind birthday wishes. Birthdays nowadays are more to be noted than celebrated—as are majorities of 21.

I, too, wholeheartedly welcome International Women's Day and pay tribute to all the incredible women throughout history who have contributed so much to progress in our communities, while acknowledging that we have still so much to do to reach the truly equal society to which we should all aspire. I am sure that the whole House, like half the world, saw the incredible speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) yesterday on misogyny: a powerful, profound personal account of some of the misogynistic abuse that she has suffered just for being a young woman in politics. On International Women's Day, will the Leader of the House at least consider making misogyny a hate crime and proactively legislating to ensuring that we could start to make this part of the history of the women's movement in this country?

On Saturday, the Scottish National party is having a day of action against Royal Bank of Scotland branch closures—an issue that continues to upset and concern communities we represent. The Scottish Affairs Committee, which I chair, has finally secured RBS's chief executive officer, Ross McEwan, to come before us to answer questions about this closure programme. However, the one group of people we have not heard from and who still refuse to speak to us are the majority shareholder—this Government. The Government are the stewards of the public interest in this. Will the Leader of the House therefore join me in insisting that Treasury Ministers agree to come before the Scottish Affairs Committee to answer questions about what they are doing to represent our interests?

We need a statement on the emerging constitutional crisis on Brexit. The Government now say that they will push ahead with amendments to clause 11 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill without any agreement from the Scottish Government, who are still progressing their continuity Bill. The BBC says that it has a letter in which the Government say that they cannot counter the "power grab" claims. Perhaps they cannot do that because a power grab is exactly what it is.

Andrea Leadsom: On the hon. Gentleman's first point, I am very appalled, as I think all hon. Members are, to hear of the experiences of his colleague, the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black). I sincerely apologise to her, on behalf of everybody here, for the appalling abuse she has received: it is utterly unacceptable. Of course, in my role as Leader of the House of Commons, if she wanted to come and talk to me I would be very happy to do so to see whether there is anything specific I can do for her.

As the hon. Gentleman knows and as you know, Mr Speaker, we have worked tirelessly, cross-party, to put in place our independent complaints procedure. I am not sure whether, if that were up and running today, it would have gone some way towards improving the hon. Lady's situation. However, I certainly hope that our commitment across this House and in the other place to stamping out abuse and making our Parliament one of the best places to work and be employed in will stand us in good stead for the future.

On the hon. Gentleman's second point, about RBS, I am very aware of the grave concerns about bank closures expressed on a number of occasions by Opposition Members. He will be aware that these are commercial decisions. There are procedures to go through before a bank decides to close, such as consultation with local communities. I point out that one of his hon. Friends has an Adjournment debate on banking in Scotland next week, on 14 March, and I am sure he will want to take part in that.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman raised the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill and the Scottish National party's continuity Bill. It is the Government's position that the EU withdrawal Bill will provide consistency across the UK to ensure that all parts of the UK are ready for our departure from the EU. We are still hopeful that we can reach agreement with the devolved Administrations on the Bill in the coming weeks.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): In a recent debate in the Lords on the family test, which is perhaps better called the family impact assessment, there was good cross-party support for Lord Farmer's private Member's Bill promoting a more satisfactory application of the test than currently appears to be the case, from several questions I have asked of Departments recently. Will the Leader of the House facilitate the safe passage of that Bill in the other place by liaising with the Leader of the House of Lords, so that it can be brought to this House for consideration as soon as possible?

Andrea Leadsom: First, I would like to commend and congratulate my hon. Friend for the amazing work she does across the parties and the Houses on supporting families. I totally share her desire to see the strengthening of families of all types. In particular, I know that she

shares my concern for the importance of early attachment and giving every baby the best start in life. I absolutely support her desire to see the family test carefully applied and would be delighted to meet her to discuss how I can specifically help her.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I note from the Leader of the House's statement that the Backbench Business Committee has been given a holiday from days for Backbench Business debates. We have a number of outstanding applications waiting for time allocation, and I therefore hope that we will get some time before the Easter recess to get some of those unheard debates timetabled.

I am afraid that the chickens have come home to roost with regard to the membership of the Backbench Business Committee. Despite the fact that we had three members present on Tuesday, that is not quorate for our Committee. We require four, although we currently only have six members. We hope that the cavalry will come over the hill from the Conservative party, as there are two members missing at the moment. Will the Leader of the House look again at the quorum of the Backbench Business Committee? On a Committee of eight, a quorum of four seems excessive.

Andrea Leadsom: I gently point out to the hon. Gentleman that there is Government time next week for a Welsh affairs debate. As he will recall, we were all disappointed on St David's day when, owing to the awful weather and the need for Members to get home before the train stations closed and so on, the debate was cancelled. I was at the No. 10 reception for St David's day and we sadly missed out on the Welsh school choir, who could not get there. That was a great shame. We were delighted to offer Government time for that debate to continue to take place, notwithstanding that it is not under the hon. Gentleman's Committee, but in Government time. I will of course ensure that I make representations where necessary for his outstanding applications.

I have discussed with colleagues what we can do to facilitate extra Conservative Members on the Backbench Business Committee and will continue to press for that. If the hon. Gentleman would like to write to me on the quorum, I am happy to look at that matter seriously.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): You will know, Mr Speaker, that this House only works if conventions are followed. My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) mentioned a private Member's Bill. My private Member's Bill passed its Second Reading on 1 December, and another one about constituencies passed its Second Reading on that day. Both were unopposed. Unfortunately, more than three months later, no money resolutions have been forthcoming. There can be only one private Member's Bill in Committee at any one time. There is none in Committee because of this. This looks to be an obstruction of the private Member's Bill system by the Government. I am sure that that is not the case—well, I am not sure that that is not the case. Will the Leader of the House arrange for an urgent statement next week, so that this can be discussed?

Mr Speaker: Earlier, the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) asked a question about migratory species, and in the course of the delivery of the question from the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), a number of Opposition Members noted

that he has migrated from his usual seat to his new seat. I do not think any particular significance need be read into that, and I should assure the House that even if it is thought to be unusual—

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): He's pro-Europe!

Mr Speaker: I do not think it suddenly means that the hon. Gentleman is pro the European Union. If the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) said that outside the Chamber, I rather imagine that the hon. Member for Wellingborough would be consulting m'learned friends. His behaviour is perfectly orderly.

Andrea Leadsom: I am slightly disappointed that my hon. Friend is a bit suspicious. How could he possibly think that, especially of me, since we are very much honourable Friends? I can say to him, as I did to our right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight), that the Government have expressed support for a number of private Members' Bills so far this Session—and the Government do support the Health and Social Care (National Data Guardian) Bill, which my hon. Friend is taking through as a private Member's Bill—and we will bring forward money resolutions on a case-by-case basis in the usual way.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I really appreciate the right hon. Lady's comments about President Trump's announcement on steel tariffs, but I am deeply concerned and I think we need the Secretary of State for International Trade to come and make an urgent statement next week. Some 10% of UK steel is exported to the US and 15% of the output of our automotive industry goes there, so this has huge implications, particularly post Brexit, and I would really appreciate the opportunity to debate it.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a very important issue. As I mentioned to the shadow Leader of the House, the Prime Minister has spoken to President Trump and raised our grave concern about his proposals. I can also tell the hon. Lady that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Trade is speaking with Wilbur Ross, the US Commerce Secretary, about this matter. She may be aware that there has been an overnight briefing that tariffs may not apply to allies and so on. This is a moving issue, and we will continue to take every step to protect the UK steel and aluminium sectors.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): On Monday, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government made a welcome statement on housing and planning in this country. Sadly, it coincided with a meeting of the Select Committee on Housing, Communities and Local Government, so those of us on both sides of the House who have a degree of expertise in this area were unable to question him about the new policies. Equally, the estimates day debate on homelessness was heavily over-subscribed, so colleagues could make only very short speeches. Will the Leader of the House find time for a general debate in Government time on housing and planning, so that Members on both sides of the House can express their views and tease out some of the policies that the Government are proposing?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend will be aware that the Prime Minister has been very clear that sorting out our broken housing market is one of the top priorities for her premiership. She is determined that young people should be able to aspire to a home of their own, and that means building more houses and changing planning, and it also means protecting tenants and sorting out things such as leases on new homes. All those are among the new policies of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government.

I just want to pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. The Government have implemented it, and it is part of our determination to deal with the problem of homelessness and rough sleeping in this country.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Cancer Research UK says that obesity is the second most preventable cause of cancer and the Government are reviewing their childhood obesity strategy, so may we have a debate on stopping junk food adverts before the 9 o'clock watershed to help to reduce childhood obesity?

Andrea Leadsom: I completely share the hon. Gentleman's concern about childhood obesity. It really appears that we have a massively growing problem in this country. He may well want to seek an Adjournment debate, so that he can talk directly to a Minister about his own ideas.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): As we are aware, we have just approved more housing to be built in this country, and we can all say, "Yes, that's good." However, I could name councils—I will not do so this time—that have used private companies and estate agents to further their aims. My council, West Somerset Council, is being dragged into such a situation. May we have a debate on making sure that there is a clear understanding between developers, estate agents, planners and companies? If we do not have such an understanding, situations are going to arise that will not help any of us in our future deliberations.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is right to raise the importance of keeping good boundaries. Ultimately, the aim is to produce more homes, so that more people can aspire to owning a home of their own. He may want to raise his specific concerns during questions to the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, which will happen on Monday 12 March.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): As one of my very favourite feminists, Mr Speaker, may I wish you and everybody else a happy International Women's Day? Will the Leader of the House consider a debate or Government statement on gender pricing? We now know that consumers have to pay on average 31% more for goods that are marketed or aimed specifically at women. That is not limited to toiletries; it could be toys, stationery, clothes—a whole host of things. We need to put pressure on retailers and manufacturers to stop the pink tax.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an issue that many of us are equally concerned about, and it is obvious with toiletries, for example, that men get their face care products much cheaper than women do—let

us be honest about that. I would support the hon. Lady in seeking an Adjournment debate, so that she can raise the issue directly with Ministers.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Following the recent band of storms there has been another significant cliff fall on to a beach in Newquay, just a short distance from a site that has recently been granted planning permission for the development of houses. That is causing great concern among local residents, so will the Leader of the House arrange for a ministerial statement to make clear to local authorities and the Planning Inspectorate the position on coastal development, particularly in areas that are prone to coastal erosion?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to hear of the incident in my hon. Friend's constituency, and he is right to raise it as a real local champion for St Austell and Newquay. Local plans determine the allocation of land for development, and planning permission should always take account of the risk of erosion. The national planning policy framework sets the expectation that local planning authorities will establish coastal change management areas and encourage development that is suited to an area's changing coastline. The planning rules are probably there, but my hon. Friend might wish to seek an Adjournment debate to discuss his concerns.

Mr Speaker: I heard what the Leader of the House said about facial products and differential costs and so on, but I am not experienced in such matters because I concluded long ago that I am well beyond redemption. I bear my fate with as much stoicism and fortitude as I can muster.

Mr Sheerman: On International Women's Day, may I remind the Leader of the House that worldwide there will be about 1.5 million knocks on doors, and families will be told that their mother is dead, or their daughter or their son, and the family will be totally destroyed? There is a Commonwealth parliamentary meeting in the next few days in London, but may we have a debate in the Chamber to focus on this scourge? It is the greatest epidemic of our time, and there is not enough concentration on how to reduce these avoidable deaths.

Andrea Leadsom: I think the hon. Gentleman is speaking about violent deaths—

Mr Sheerman: Deaths on the road.

Andrea Leadsom: Deaths on the road—I beg his pardon but I did not hear that. He raises an incredibly important point, and across the world every day there are tragic and avoidable deaths. In the United Kingdom, our track record is good and improving, and numbers of road deaths are reducing. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would like to seek a Backbench Business debate to talk about road safety, or an Adjournment debate to raise that specific issue.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): My right hon. Friend knows well the serious concerns of the people of Redditch regarding the centralisation of paediatric emergency services from Alexandra Hospital to Worcestershire, because I have raised the issue so many times in the House. Will she join me in calling on the

clinical commissioning group and the trust to speed up their plans to bring forward the GP-led urgent care centre? May we have a debate about the future of health services in Worcestershire?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a strong voice for her constituency, and I commend her for raising this matter in the Chamber. Local commissioners are currently reviewing the national guidance issued on urgent care centres, prior to commissioning a revised model for the Alexandra Hospital. I understand that they expect to implement the new service in the next 12 months as planned, and she might like to seek an opportunity to raise the matter directly with Health Ministers.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The “beast from the east” brought red danger weather warnings to life for the first time last week. I welcome the fact that organisations such as Renfrewshire Council, the local McDonald’s franchisee Peter O’Keefe, and, as of one hour ago, Swissport at Glasgow airport are paying their employees who were unable to travel to work. May we have a debate on employers’ responsibilities for the safety of their staff and in ensuring that no worker is left out of pocket during severe weather warnings?

Andrea Leadsom: I join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating all those who put in extra effort to keep people safe and transport open. All key transport operators, including airports, local authorities, train operating companies, Highways England and Network Rail, have winter contingency plans, as I am sure do their equivalents in Scotland. We pay tribute to all those who put in extra work. It is for their employers to ensure that they take the right decisions in securing the right balance between keeping services open and protecting their employees at all times.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I still hear way too many stories from constituents who are in battle with landlords or house builders about the condition of their homes. May we have a debate on the review of the housing complaints system?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for an excellent question. It is vital that consumers have swift, effective routes through which to complain when things go wrong. People need to know where to go and to be clear about what they can expect. He is right that existing routes can be confusing, so I am sure that he is pleased, as I am, that on 18 February we published a consultation on strengthening consumer redress in the housing market. We are looking at options about how to ensure that people, whether tenants or owners, can have access to quick, easy and effective redress, including at whether a single housing ombudsman could simplify that access.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I would like to raise the issue of volunteer drivers who receive reimbursement for patient transport. The present UK taxation rules hit those with high mileage very hard indeed. In my constituency, people have to travel huge distances—well over 200 miles—to get a

patient to hospital and back again. Does the Leader of the House agree it would be helpful to have a debate on this issue in this Chamber?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very particular issue, which I can well understand is a real concern to his constituents and others where there are long distances to travel. I suggest that he raises the subject in an Adjournment debate so that he can hear directly from a Minister what they can do for those who have to travel particularly long distances.

Mr Speaker: Very good idea.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): May we have a debate on local businesses that are also global brands? That would allow me to highlight the fantastic Walkers Shortbread company, which has been subjected to unacceptable and despicable abuse this week from nationalists in Scotland because just one of its many products features a Union Jack. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should condemn those attacks and instead celebrate the success of Walkers Shortbread, which has been established in Moray for 120 years, employs hundreds of local people and is a great credit to our area?

Andrea Leadsom: As ever, my hon. Friend raises a very significant issue for his constituency. He is a great champion for Moray. I absolutely agree that Walkers Shortbread is delicious. It is a vital UK brand and a fabulous Scottish brand. Many of its tins are marked with “I love Scotland”, while others, very often for export, are marked with the Union Jack. It is a fabulous export and a delicious snack. It should be eaten in moderation—we do not want to encourage the overeating of shortbread or any other sugary product—but nevertheless we love Walkers. It is a great UK and Scottish product.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The Leader of the House was quite right to say, in her answers to my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) and the shadow Leader of the House, that the threat by the US Administration to put huge tariffs on steel is a moving issue, but the very fact that it is a moving issue underlines the need for a statement in this House on what the Government are doing. When will we have a statement on that, and when will the official Opposition be again granted an Opposition day debate?

Andrea Leadsom: I think that I have said as much as I can about the Prime Minister’s determination to protect UK interests. She has made her views very clear to President Trump. As I have already mentioned, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Trade has raised the matter with US Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross, and overnight, the White House has indicated that there may be exemptions from tariffs for allies of the United States. It is very important that we continue to work to look after global trade. As we leave the EU, the United Kingdom wishes to be a world leader in promoting free trade around the globe, so that is what we will be doing. In terms of Opposition days, as I mentioned to the shadow Leader of the House, they will be brought forward in the usual way.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): European Union structural and social funds have benefited local authorities across the United Kingdom. May I request from the Leader of the House some parliamentary time to debate what will replace those funds post Brexit?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is right to raise this matter. He will be pleased that we have committed to replacing European structural funds with the UK shared prosperity fund after we leave the European Union. The new fund will be designed to raise productivity and reduce inequalities between communities across all four nations of the Union. We will consult on that later in the year.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Every year, 20,000 elephants are slaughtered simply for their ivory. When can we have a debate about the results of the consultation that finished a couple of months ago on the Government's plans to ban the sale of ivory as soon as possible?

Andrea Leadsom: I am so glad that the hon. Gentleman raises this issue because it is absolutely vital that the UK continues to be at the forefront of clamping down on the illegal wildlife trade and, in particular, the poaching of ivory. When I was Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, I was very proud to be progressing that consultation, which is now completed, as he points out. It received more than 70,000 consultation responses—one of the largest numbers in the Department's history—and it is quite clear that an overwhelming majority support a ban. We will have a conference on the illegal wildlife trade later this year, and I absolutely assure him that we will do everything that we can to bring forward legislation as soon as possible.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday, Babcock announced that 500 defence jobs would be lost at Devonport dockyard. With the uncertainty about the possible cuts to our amphibious warships and the Royal Marines, and the sale of HMS Ocean to Brazil, may we have a statement from Ministers about what support the Government can offer to the dedicated Babcock workers who are losing their jobs in Plymouth?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to hear about the prospective job losses. As the hon. Gentleman points out, Babcock International has announced 500 job losses. As he will no doubt be aware, 100 of those posts are unfilled, making the reduction in actual headcount potentially 400. Although the restructuring is a commercial matter for that company, a consultation period with staff and trade unions is nevertheless under way, and is expected to conclude in mid April. In the meantime, the Government are closely monitoring the situation, and the Department for Work and Pensions is on stand-by to provide support for those affected via Jobcentre Plus's rapid response service.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): May I also wish a happy birthday to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart)? Indeed, he shares it with somebody who has every intention of continuing to be 21 again.

On Friday 2 March, several busy Southeastern trains were stranded for hours outside Lewisham station due to severe weather conditions. Many passengers self-evacuated from the trains, and we were extremely lucky

that no one died. May we have a debate on updating the guidance for stranded commuter trains to keep our passengers safe?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a really important and topical matter, as she so often does, and I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate to discuss this directly with Ministers. We are all very concerned to hear about the risks that people pose to themselves and to the train system when they decide to self-evacuate from trains, and we need to put a stop to that. She will be aware that safety plans are in place, but it is vital that people abide by them for their own safety.

Mr Speaker: I am sure that the House will join me in wishing me the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) a happy birthday tomorrow. I was her age once, but I must admit that I do not remember it—it is too long ago.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): You are like fine wine, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Oh! Such kindness and generosity of spirit from the hon. Lady, who makes an analogy with a fine wine. You say all the right things.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): May I pursue the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft)? Given last week's serious travel disruption, may we please have a debate about putting passengers first? When trains are cancelled, for example, passengers should automatically be entitled to use other train services. We have experienced severe disruption in Hull, and it has come to my attention that the East Coast main line company has not been willing to automatically allow Hull Trains passengers who cannot travel all the way to London to use its service.

Andrea Leadsom: As the hon. Lady will know, train operating companies are beginning to give automatic reimbursements to people who have experienced train delays and so on, but she is right to raise the issue of whether they automatically allow passengers to use other transport. We are all aware that although there tends to be an announcement at some point, it is often made when people have already turned up for a train that is not there, and they then have to move to a different station. I sympathise entirely with the hon. Lady's point, and encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate on the subject.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I, too, wish my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) a happy birthday. I am sure that he will be celebrating with a slice of shortbread or two.

Pete Wishart: British shortbread.

Patrick Grady: Chlorinated shortbread, from the United States.

May we have a debate on the relationship between personal independence payment reviews and the Motability scheme? I have a constituent who faces losing her car for the second time while she waits for her PIP appeal to

be heard. When will a Minister come to the House and explain why the system punishes people and takes away their cars even before their appeals have been heard?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important and worrying constituency issue. As I always say, if he wants to raise it with me in writing, I can take it up with the Department on his behalf. In the more general context of policy, however, I can tell him that we spend more than £50 billion a year on benefits to support disabled people and those with health conditions. We are trying to enable more disabled people to work, and we are seeing a significant increase in the number of people who are able to get away from their disabilities and into work, which is a great way into a more productive and enjoyable life. That is the policy that the Government are trying to pursue, but if the hon. Gentleman has particular concerns, I shall be happy to take them up on his behalf.

Salisbury Incident

11.37 am

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): With permission, Mr Speaker, I shall make a statement on the incident in Salisbury that has been unfolding over the past four days.

Let me first pay tribute to the continued professionalism, dedication and courage of the emergency services. They have handled the incident with their customary attentiveness, alacrity, and sense of public duty. First responders put themselves in dangerous situations on a day-to-day basis, and this incident has underlined that fact—to which, sadly, I shall return later in my statement.

I shall now update the House as far as is possible on the basis of the current facts of the case. At approximately 4.15 on Sunday afternoon, Wiltshire police received a call from a member of the public who was concerned for the welfare of two people in a park in Salisbury. Emergency services were called, and the two were admitted to the A&E department of Salisbury District Hospital. They were a man in his 60s and a woman in her 30s, with no visible signs of injury. They are understood to be Sergei and Yulia Skripal. Both remain unconscious, and in a critical but stable condition.

I regret to inform the House that a police officer has also fallen seriously ill. The officer was one of the first responders on Sunday, acting selflessly to help others. The latest update from the hospital is that the officer's condition remains serious but stable, and that he is conscious, talking and engaging. Officers from Wiltshire police are providing support for the officer's family and colleagues. Our thoughts are with all three victims, and their families and friends, at what will be an incredibly difficult time for them.

Wiltshire police began an investigation on Sunday to determine how the individuals had fallen ill, and whether a crime had been committed. They declared a major incident on Monday. On Tuesday the Metropolitan police decided that, given the unusual circumstances, responsibility for the investigation should be transferred to the National Counter Terrorism Policing Network. Samples from the victims have been tested by experts at the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory at Porton Down, who are world-renowned experts in the field. As Assistant Commissioner Mark Rowley announced yesterday, that forensic analysis has revealed the presence of a nerve agent, and the incident is therefore being treated as attempted murder. I can confirm that it is highly likely the police officer has been exposed to the same nerve agent.

I spoke only this morning with Assistant Commissioner Mark Rowley, and he confirmed that we remain in the midst of a fast-paced, criminal investigation. As such, I will not comment further on the nature of the nerve agent. We must give the police the space they need to conduct a thorough investigation. All Members will recognise that an investigation such as this will be complex and may take some time.

Public safety continues to be the No.1 priority for this Government. Professor Sally Davies, the chief medical officer, stated yesterday that, based on the evidence we have, there is a low risk to the public. The UK has a world-leading emergency response. It is regularly tested and exercised to ensure we can deliver an effective

[Amber Rudd]

response to a wide range of chemical, biological and radiological incidents. The three emergency services are well supplied with state-of-the-art equipment to respond to such threats.

The frontline response is supported by world-class scientific research and advice. This ensures that decision making on the ground, by all agencies involved, is firmly based on the available evidence. This will also support the decontamination activity needed to return the location to normality.

The police are working closely with Public Health England, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the DSTL. They have cordoned all known sites in Salisbury that were visited by the two initial victims before they became unwell, and are taking the necessary measures to protect public safety.

I want now to turn to the speculation—of which there has been much—around who was responsible for this most outrageous crime. The use of a nerve agent on UK soil is a brazen and reckless act. This was attempted murder in the most cruel and public way. People are right to want to know who to hold to account. But, if we are to be rigorous in this investigation, we must avoid speculation and allow the police to carry on their investigation.

As the assistant commissioner said yesterday, the investigation now involves hundreds of officers, following every possible lead to find those responsible. Some of those leads have come from members of the public. I would like to thank the people of Salisbury for their help and for the calm they have shown over the last four days. I encourage anyone who visited Salisbury town centre and surrounding areas on Sunday afternoon, who has not yet spoken to the police, to get in touch.

We are committed to doing all we can to bring the perpetrators to justice—whoever they are, and wherever they may be. The investigation is moving at pace, and this Government will act without hesitation as the facts become clearer. As my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary made clear on Tuesday, we will respond in a robust and appropriate manner once we ascertain who was responsible.

I would like to close where I began, by expressing my sincere thanks to the emergency services and hospital staff for their tireless efforts over the last four days. They have acted with utter professionalism both to minimise the risk to the wider public and to care for the victims of the attack, for which I know we are all very grateful. Our thoughts will be with the victims and their families over the coming days.

Finally, I thank Members for their understanding that there will clearly be limits on what we can say as this investigation continues. As and when information can be made public, it will be. I commend the statement to the House.

11.44 am

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for advance sight of her statement. May I start by paying tribute to the courage and dedication of the emergency services that responded to this horrendous incident? In particular, may I say that the thoughts of the whole House will be with the officer who has been

hospitalised following this attack? I also pay tribute to the people of Salisbury. Can the Home Secretary confirm that the great cathedral city of Salisbury remains open for business?

The apparent poisoning of Yulia and Sergei Skripal and the police officer who suffered serious injury must of course be fully and completely investigated. I wholeheartedly concur with the Secretary of State that the investigation should be allowed to take place free from speculation, conjecture or interference. At best, these can be a distraction; at worst, they can hamper the investigatory efforts. Hon. Members and right hon. Members should be equally cautious and guarded in their comments. Idle or ill-informed speculation is not helpful. Can the Home Secretary assure the House that all the necessary resources are being made available to the investigation? Clearly, it is vital that there should be no speculation about the conclusions of the investigation, and that it is allowed to take its course, but will she ensure that she continues to keep the House updated?

My right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), the shadow Foreign Secretary, asked the Foreign Secretary on Tuesday about the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill. Is the Home Secretary satisfied that the Government have all the necessary sanctions available to them? A number of proposals are currently being debated in Committee. Will she look at them again to ensure that we have the necessary tools?

This case raises broader and extremely important issues. These include how we prioritise the fight against crime and terrorist crime in this country. There is, after all, no greater priority for the state than to secure the safety of all those who are resident here. Today is not the day for discussion of those priorities, or divisions over them, in the fight against crime and terrorism, or for a discussion on budgets and how they are allocated. We will return to those matters at another opportunity. For now, let us be clear that we on the Labour Benches are appalled at the idea that anyone might be poisoned on the streets of our towns and cities, and we offer our full support to those seeking to investigate the matter. We commend the professionalism, dedication and bravery of the emergency services, and we share the Government's determination that this case should be brought to a speedy and just conclusion, and that similar incidents should be prevented in the future.

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his carefully thought-out and considerate comments. I am delighted to hear such unity of purpose across the House on this matter. He referred to the great cathedral city of Salisbury, and I share his views on that city and on the people of Salisbury, who have reacted so well. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen), who is with me here on the Front Bench, for his consideration and support over the past four days.

Yes, I can reassure the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) and the House that the police and the emergency services have the necessary resources. That is always one of my first questions, and they have been reassuring on that matter. On his point about keeping the House updated, of course I will do that. I thank him for his consideration and understanding that there might be limits to that, but when I can, I will of

course take the opportunity to come here to discuss the matter with the House. Partly because of the severity of the situation, I recognise the need to do that whenever possible. Members are rightly keen to find out what is happening.

The hon. Gentleman also referred to the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill. We are of course engaging with the Members of Parliament who are proposing additional amendments. There have already been amendments to the Criminal Finances Act 2017 that reflect the sorts of initiatives he is asking for. There are additional proposals relating to the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill, and we will be considering them carefully.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The circumstantial evidence against Russia is strong—who else would have the motive and the means?—and I will put the same question to the Home Secretary that I put to the Foreign Secretary earlier this week. Those of us who seek to understand Russia know that the only way to preserve peace is through strength. If Russia is behind this, it is a brazen act of war and humiliates our country. I echo the remarks of the junior Defence Minister last week: defence is the first duty of the realm and spending 2% on defence is now not enough.

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. My first concern must be the incident in hand and the safety of the people in the area around the incident. There will come a time for attribution, and there will be further consequences and further information to follow. Now, however, I am concerned about the incident and its consequences.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I thank the Home Secretary for advance sight of her statement. The circumstances surrounding these attacks are extremely worrying, particularly the fact that they constitute a potentially serious threat to public safety—although I am relieved to note that the chief medical officer considers there to be a low risk to public safety now. The emergency services have done a fantastic job, putting their safety on the line to ensure that Mr Skripal and his daughter were stabilised as soon as possible. We are pleased to hear that the police officer's condition has improved and that he is now able to communicate. Our thoughts are with his and Mr Skripal and his daughter's family and friends at this time.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) put questions to the Foreign Secretary on Tuesday that I want to put to the Home Secretary today. How do we protect human assets such as Mr Skripal in this country? Will this type of scenario lead to a review of how we best protect such people across the United Kingdom? Considering Mr Skripal's background, he was at high risk of being the victim of an attempted assassination, so does the Home Secretary know how the planning of such an attack was able to slip through the net of the UK intelligence services? What steps is she taking to ensure that those who are at risk living in the UK are properly protected?

Earlier this week, the Foreign Secretary stated that the Government would respond appropriately should evidence emerge that implies state responsibility. Will the Home Secretary therefore confirm that she has had,

and is continuing to have, discussions with her counterparts from across Europe and further afield to get to the bottom of the matter? Reports that as many as 14 deaths on UK soil could have occurred in similar circumstances is very worrying. Will there be an inquiry into those incidents and the frequency of such attacks?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Lady for her support for the general tone of the Government's approach, and I of course join in her admiration and support for the emergency services, which are doing such excellent work. I must repeat to the hon. Lady that the investigation is ongoing at pace, and the police and the other services involved appreciate the urgency. It does not help their work, which must be our priority, to speculate about what might happen when we make an attribution. When we are ready to bring more evidence to the House, I reassure the hon. Lady that I hope to be able to go further in answering her questions. For now, she must allow me to say that we will not be drawn any further as we allow the investigation to complete.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Whoever the culprit, it is just as well that we are currently reviewing our defence capabilities, so that we can increase them—can't we?

Amber Rudd: As far as our security at home is concerned, I reassure my right hon. Friend that we have already put in substantial extra funds. The security services are recruiting 1,900 new people between now and 2020, and I am reassured by them that that recruitment is proceeding at pace and with success.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I join the Home Secretary in paying tribute to our remarkable emergency services, which have responded with such professionalism to this awful attack. All our thoughts will be with the brave police officer and with Sergei and Yulia Skripal.

I have written to the Home Secretary to ask for a review of 14 other cases, and she will know that there are many ways in which that could happen and precedents for doing so. As for the immediate investigation, has she considered going to the UN Security Council to ask for a statement calling on all nations to provide assistance, including willingness to extradite suspects if necessary?

Amber Rudd: I thank the right hon. Lady for that. I have her letter, and will respond, but gently say that now is not the time to investigate what is, at the moment, only rumour and speculation; now is the time to focus on the incident at hand, and the investigation that is proceeding. She makes a suggestion regarding international activity; at some stage, we will come back to the House with our proposals, but for now, we are merely preparing, and concentrating on the incident.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I share the sentiments of my right hon. Friend about the bravery of our police officers and the people in Salisbury who witnessed this terrible tragedy; it was an awful thing for them to have to see in their town. Will she assure the House that all appropriate support will be made available, not just for the police officers, but for any witnesses who might come forward?

Amber Rudd: Yes. That is a very good point. Quite a number of individuals in Salisbury have been concerned about their health, and have wanted to report concerns about the incident. They have been coming forward and receiving the appropriate treatment and support.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I commend the Home Secretary on her statement, and on the calm and cool way that she has approached the immediate response to the incident. She will be aware, however, that many Members on both sides of this House have for several years warned of the growing threat of the terrorist Russian state under President Putin, whether we are talking about money laundering in the City of London, the targeted murders that my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) spoke about, or interference in our political and democratic system. Will the Home Secretary please assure the House that when this immediate crisis is over, she will work with other Secretaries of State in a joined-up way across Government not only to listen to concerns, but to take meaningful action to tackle this threat?

Amber Rudd: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. I reassure him that this Government have not been asleep at the switch, in terms of where our international enemies are. He refers to Russia. Separately from this incident, we have been very clear about our disagreements with Russia, particularly on Ukraine and Syria, and we have been outspoken in our criticism and our determination to take action—hence the amendment to the Criminal Finances Bill, and the considered amendments to the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill. We will go further, should there be need to do so.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement. Will she reassure the public that our renowned, world-leading facilities at Porton Down, where amazing scientific work is done, have the resources and capability to continue with the work that they have rightly been doing? They have been getting good results in the last few days.

Amber Rudd: Yes, and I thank my hon. Friend for giving me the opportunity to do exactly that: reassure the public that our facilities, support, scientists and expertise at Porton Down are world-class. I hope that gives the public, and her, the comfort that they need.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement, and the calm leadership that she is showing on this issue. I associate myself and my party with her comments on our amazing emergency services, and pass on our thoughts to the victims.

Following on from the questions from the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), whether or not Russian agents are shown to be responsible for this incident, is it not time that we got more realistic about Russia? Will the Home Secretary confirm whether the memorandum of understanding between the UK and Rosatom—the Russian nuclear power company so strongly championed by the former Prime Minister, Mr Cameron—

has formally ended? She may not know that today, but will she write to me when she finds that out? If it has not been ended, will she make sure that it is ended, so that the love-in with Russia that we saw a few years ago is completely finished?

Amber Rudd: I cautiously welcome the right hon. Gentleman's comments. I do not recognise his description of our relationship with Russia over the past few years, but I will indeed write to him on the matter that he raises.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for her approach. Clearly, Members across the House will be calling for investigation of unexplained deaths that may be connected to this incident. Equally, a number of individuals out there will fear for their life as a result of their activities with Russia and other such countries. Will my right hon. Friend undertake to review the security arrangements for those brave individuals, so that they can live their life in this country in the way that they have chosen to, in a free society?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend makes a good point. In this country, we want to make sure everybody is protected and everybody is free, in a free society, as he rightly says, to go about their family life and their work life. He makes a particular point about keeping a certain group of people safe. I gently say to him that that is a matter for the police and the other services, but I am confident that they know what they are doing and we will keep that in hand.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): I join all those in the Chamber, including the Home Secretary and Opposition Front Benchers, who have praised the emergency workers and hospital staff. My thoughts and condolences are with the families involved.

The Home Secretary has made a commitment to ensure that the safety of those at risk is looked at again and reviewed once this investigation is completed and we know exactly what has happened. Will she commit to ensuring that the police have the resources necessary to properly implement any improved security procedures once this investigation is out of the way and we know what we need to do?

Amber Rudd: We always make sure the police have the resources they need to keep this country safe. On this particular incident, on this attack, I have made it absolutely clear to the police and the emergency services that they have our entire support to do whatever is necessary to get to the bottom of this investigation. I understand the hon. Lady's willingness to raise the issue of resources, but I reassure her, this House and this country that the police have the resources they need and are full tilt on this investigation.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I wish to add my tribute to the Wiltshire police force. My best friend from school serves in that force, and I know how dedicated he and his colleagues are to the security of the county. How are Wiltshire police working with national teams collaboratively to progress this investigation? What lessons will be shared with police forces throughout the UK?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for his support in this important incident, on which it is very important to see local leadership as well from Members of Parliament. I reassure him that the local police and the national police are working well together. I spoke this morning to Mark Rowley, the deputy commissioner who is in charge of counter-terrorism, and he has of course been in regular contact with the Wiltshire police, because local knowledge is just as important as expert knowledge.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): I commend the Home Secretary and the Opposition spokesman for the calm but clear statements they gave. No Member of this House would seek to compromise an ongoing criminal investigation by speculation about motives or perpetrators. However, given the circumstances and the huge level of public concern, will she consider the request made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) to review the 14 cases to which my right hon. Friend referred?

Amber Rudd: I repeat to the hon. Gentleman that that is a series of rumours and speculations, and it is for the police to decide what to investigate. I understand that it is reasonable to want to raise it at this moment, but our focus must be on the serious event that has taken place over the past four days. Now is not a time to follow up on some other allegations.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I add my voice to those that have congratulated our emergency services and the Home Secretary on the way she is handling this serious event. Following the call from the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) to examine other unexplained deaths, the Home Secretary will be aware that this is not just confined to this country but can be seen in the international arena. Perhaps it is not the time right now, but will she assure the House that she will work internationally, so that when we find out “who”, “how” and “when”, we will be able to hold those people to account, even in the international arena? Will she join me in regretting the fact that Russia is disengaged from the Council of Europe, and therefore the European Court of Human Rights, which is not a good signal for good international relations?

Amber Rudd: I share my right hon. Friend’s disappointment with that situation. Russia plays a role internationally, although the Prime Minister has been very clear, calling this out at her Mansion House speech in 2017, that she has concerns about its behaviour. Russia does have a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, and we do engage with the Russians up to a point, but there is no “business as usual” here. We need to make sure that we are very clear-eyed about their role and their intentions, so I do join my right hon. Friend in that matter, and I hope we will be able to work internationally should the situation arise and this be needed.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement. Has it been necessary to issue revised guidance to frontline

police officers on what to do if they are concerned that such circumstances might arise again? If it has been revised, has she seen it, and is she satisfied with it?

Amber Rudd: As the hon. Lady will know, we have been operating at a “severe” terrorism level for a while now—five terrorist attacks got through last year, of course—and we did therefore review police guidelines on unusual substances last year, so I believe that the police have all the right information and tools available to them.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): This country is rightly praised around the world for the dedication of our police and our determination to follow proper process to ensure we come to the right conclusions before then acting with calm deliberation. Does my right hon. Friend agree that in these most awful and appalling of circumstances we need those attributes more than ever?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is the professional approach we need to take to this incident. We must support the police, who have such a strong and rightly earned reputation internationally, to make sure they have the space and time to make the inquiries, collect the evidence and then proceed.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Can the Home Secretary tell us more about the work of Wiltshire public health officials to keep local people safe?

Amber Rudd: The chief medical officer has told us, given the information we have now, that she thinks the threat to the public is low, which I know will reassure local health officials in Wiltshire.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I agree we should be cautious about attributing guilt at this stage, but does the Home Secretary share my and my constituents’ anger about the cruel nature of this crime, which could so easily have resulted in considerably greater collateral damage, and will she therefore assure me and my constituents that eventually the full force of the law will be brought down upon the perpetrators?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is exactly right. Just because we want to approach this with a cool head in order to collect the evidence, it does not mean we do not share the outrage that he and his constituents clearly feel. When we have the evidence, I will return to the House.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): As the proud husband of a serving police officer, I welcome the comments from the Home Secretary and Members across the House in support of the brave men and women in our emergency services. Should this not also serve to remind us, however, of the pressures on their families, who every day do not know when their loved ones leave for work what they will face?

Amber Rudd: That is such a good point. It is not just the individuals who are affected but their families, and I know that the thoughts of everybody in the House will go out not just to the victims but to the families around them, who must be having such a worried and anxious time right now.

Points of Order

12.8 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Can you advise me on the correct course of action when a private company gives commitments and assurances to Parliament and its Select Committees on issues that affect national security and public safety and then fails to meet them? There is widely available on YouTube this week a banned illegal propaganda video from the extremist proscribed organisation National Action, despite the fact that the Home Affairs Select Committee has raised this video with YouTube and Google seven times over the last 12 months, and despite the fact that they have promised us that the video is illegal and will be taken down and that they have the technology to prevent it from being put back up. Have you had any indication that the Government will look into this, Mr Speaker, and do you share my immense concern that one of the richest companies in the world is failing to meet its basic responsibilities to tackle extremism and protect public safety in this country?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for her point of order and share her intense concern about the matter. As I am sure everybody in the House will agree, National Action is a despicable, fascist, neo-Nazi organisation. My understanding is that it was proscribed by the Home Secretary. If those commitments have been made by those companies, they must be honoured. The right hon. Lady suggested that commitments have been given by those companies, not merely to her as an individual, but to the Home Affairs Committee. If that is so and those commitments have not been honoured, it is open to the Committee, although it should not be necessary, to demand, as a matter of urgency, the appearance of representatives of one or more of those companies before it to explain themselves. This matter must be sorted sooner rather than later. My strong sense is that that would be the will of the House, but the will of the House can also be expressed, and the public order considerations can most appropriately be articulated, by the Home Secretary, who thankfully is in her place.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) is absolutely right to raise this issue. As you rightly said, Mr Speaker, National Action is a proscribed group—I proscribed it myself—and it is a terrorist organisation. The fact is that internet companies have made good progress in taking down Daesh-focused material. We have demonstrated that with our own system, which we showed them, they can take down 94% of material that goes up from Daesh-type terrorist organisations. We need to see much more effort put into the particular area of extreme right-wing groups, like the one the right hon. Lady has raised. We need to see more effort made using artificial intelligence. I hope that the right hon. Lady and I can work together to make sure that we hold internet companies more to account.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the Home Secretary. We would not want a situation to arise in which the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) felt it necessary to write to

me to allege a contempt of the House, although that is of course a recourse open to her if people do not comply and honour their undertakings. We very much hope that that will happen very, very soon.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Today, there are reports in the media that one in 10 councils could follow Tory Northamptonshire into technical bankruptcy, according to the National Audit Office. The main causes are the relentless 50% cuts in central Government funding to councils and the increasing pressures on children's and adults' services, which have resulted in the cutting of other vital services, unsustainable one-off sales of assets and the use of reserves.

Given that this is the worst crisis to face local government in the sector's 170-year history, and given that the Government are unwilling and unprepared to give time to the Opposition to debate matters such as this, has the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government given you, Sir, any indication that he will come to the House today to make a statement, so that Members can question his disastrous slash-and-burn strategy and the findings of this most devastating NAO report in the fullest manner possible?

Mr Speaker: The Secretary of State has given me no such indication. I must say to the hon. Gentleman that the Secretary of State is a very willing fellow, but we would not in any way or case want to countenance the idea of him interfering with the time available for the debate on International Women's Day. However, the hon. Gentleman has registered his concern, which will have been heard on the Treasury Bench.

I note what the hon. Gentleman said about the current absence of Opposition days, which would be a normal mechanism by which such matters could be aired. If the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues want such matters to be aired in the Chamber, he can rest assured that they will be aired. They can be aired on the terms of the Secretary of State, in the form of a statement, which it would be open to him to volunteer. If they are not aired in that way, they will be aired in another way.

BILLS PRESENTED

HOUSE OF PEERS BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Christine Jardine, supported by Tom Brake, Tim Farron, Layla Moran, Jamie Stone, Wera Hobhouse, Jo Swinson, Sir Vince Cable and Norman Lamb, presented a Bill to provide for the renaming of the House of Lords as the House of Peers.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 June, and to be printed (Bill 179).

FORENSIC SCIENCE REGULATOR BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Chris Green, supported by Vicky Ford, Damien Moore, Maggie Throup, Andrew Bowie, Mr William Wragg, Jack Brereton and Stephen Kerr, presented a Bill to make provision for the appointment of the Forensic Science Regulator; to make provision about the Regulator and about the regulation of forensic science; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 March, and to be printed (Bill 180) with explanatory notes (Bill 180-EN).

Vote 100 and International Women's Day

12.14 pm

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Amber Rudd): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Vote 100 and International Women's Day.

This House welcomes International Women's Day as an occasion to come together to celebrate the achievements of women, while also recognising the inequalities that still exist. Around the world, International Women's Day is being marked with arts performances, talks, rallies, conferences, marches and debates like this one. It is a great honour to lead today's debate.

This year, 2018, is a particularly significant year to be having this discussion in the UK, as we mark 100 years since some women won the right to vote after a long and arduous struggle. In 1919, Nancy Astor became the first woman to take her seat in this House. Can Members imagine walking into this Chamber as the lone woman among a crowd of men? It would not be until 1979 that we would get our first female Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher.

I am pleased to say that the Parliament that I joined in 2010 was a place very different from the Parliament of Nancy Astor's day. There were 142 other female MPs on these Benches, and we had a female Home Secretary—a trend that I am proud to continue. We now have a more diverse Parliament than ever, with 208 female MPs. A third of the Cabinet are now women and, of course, we also have our second female Prime Minister.

Nevertheless, getting women into Parliament is not simply about changing the faces on these Benches; at its heart, it is about how we use our positions here to make meaningful change to women's lives throughout the UK and the world, because from here we can bring about real change.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I join the Minister in welcoming International Women's Day. Does she also welcome the fact that the UN Commission on the Status of Women is meeting again in New York next week? Does she agree that it is really important that it comes up with strong policies so that women in rural communities are adequately supported?

Amber Rudd: I am delighted to agree with the hon. Lady about the importance of that meeting of the commission. Her emphasis on making sure that we get real policies for women in rural communities is essential.

I am proud to be part of a Government who are wholeheartedly committed to improving the lives of women and girls. Since 2010, we have made significant progress in accelerating gender equality at home and abroad, whether by empowering women in the workplace, tackling violence against women and girls or improving girls' education around the globe.

We all know, though, that there is more to do, with sexual harassment scandals, stories of debauched dinners, one third of women worldwide experiencing physical or sexual violence, and the fact that it will take an estimated 118 years to close the global gender pay gap. As the theme for this year's International Women's Day makes

clear, we must continue to “press for progress”. This effort must span countries and continents, policy areas and political allegiances.

I wish to kick off today's debate by talking about three areas in which I think women are still losing out to men globally, and what we are going to do about it. The first is violence: too many women and girls face harm and abuse. The second is money: many women still earn less than their male counterparts. The third is influence: around the world, men still occupy the majority of the top jobs.

Let me start on the first point, violence. A truly equal society is one in which everyone is free from the threat of gendered violence. Today, I am proud to announce the launch of the Government's consultation on tackling domestic abuse, which will help to inform the introduction of the domestic abuse Bill. Domestic abuse affects approximately 2 million people in England and Wales every year, and the majority of the victims are women. The Government are determined to do all we can to confront the devastating impact that such abuse has on victims and their families, and in doing so to address a key cause and consequence of gender inequality.

Our consultation seeks to transform our approach to domestic abuse, addressing the issue at every stage from prevention to early intervention to bringing more perpetrators to justice. It reinforces our determination to make domestic abuse everyone's business. This comprehensive consultation will last for 12 weeks, and I encourage every Member of the House to engage with it and share it with those in their networks who have, or who should have, an interest in this area. This is a critical opportunity to bring these crimes out of the shadows.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will know that, last week, the United Nations convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women said that the way we treat women in Northern Ireland, denying them access to abortion in their home nation, is a form of violence against women. Today, 135 parliamentarians from throughout the House have written to her asking her to commit to providing an opportunity to put that right in the legislation she is talking about. Will she give us a right to vote to give women in Northern Ireland equal access to abortion rights?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady will know about the limitations on my announcing any such statement, but may I nevertheless take the opportunity to thank her for the good work that she has done in this area, including in ensuring that, for the first time, the women of Northern Ireland have access to abortions? We now have a new system—a centralised system—for those women so that they find it much easier than ever before to access the health support that she, like me, thinks is so vital.

The consultation will last 12 weeks, and I urge every Member of the House to engage with it. Domestic violence is not the only type of violence that demands our urgent attention, though. Internationally, too, we must continue to combat violence against women and girls. Globally, one in three women are beaten or sexually abused in their lifetime. We are generating world-leading evidence through our £25 million “What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls” programme.

[Amber Rudd]

This year, results from 15 innovative interventions being evaluated across Africa and Asia will provide new global evidence about what works to stop violence before it starts. We want this evidence to be a game-changer in supporting more effective UK and international support for ending violence against women and girls globally, and it is essential that we put what we learn into practice.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I welcome the announcement that the Minister is making about the international dimension to protecting women against violence. Will she assure the House, as part of the consultation on tackling violence against women here at home, that refuges will be properly resourced? Many have closed down in recent years, including in my constituency. Women need proper support when they have to go to refuges because they face violence. Can she assure the House that she will make sure that happens?

Amber Rudd: Quite simply, I can assure the House that ensuring that women have the right support at refuges is an essential part of the support that we will provide women when they become victims of domestic abuse. I know that there are concerns in the sector about funding, and there is a consultation ongoing, but we will not oversee a reduction in beds. We are looking for the most efficient, effective way of delivering that support, and nothing is off the table.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Probably all of us in the House were shocked when we heard the reports of sexual harassment and abuse in the aid sector. When we are looking at what happens to women internationally, it is important that we hold our charitable organisations' feet to the fire to tackle the abuse that has been reported. How does my right hon. Friend propose that we can ensure that those organisations will deal with the allegations of sexual exploitation in the aid sector?

Amber Rudd: My right hon. Friend will have heard, as I did, the absolute conviction and determination of the Secretary of State for International Development to make sure that, as my right hon. Friend says, she holds the charitable sector's feet to the fire. It is wholly unacceptable that anybody going abroad for a charity should take advantage of vulnerable girls and women. I am confident in the activity of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in this area.

The second area that I wish to discuss is money. A truly equal society is also one where women and men are equally economically empowered. Globally, women earn less than men, have fewer assets, and still do 60% to 80% of unpaid domestic work. One in 10 married women in developing countries are not consulted by their husbands on how their income is spent, and although in the UK we are enjoying record female employment, we are also grappling with a national gender pay gap of 18%. Therefore, although as women we might think we have equality in the workplace, our pay cheques tell a different story. That is why this Government have introduced world-leading legislation.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Secretary of State agree that this is a matter not just of social equality, but of economic equality, bearing in mind the estimate this week that, if we closed the gender pay gap, it would mean an extra £90 billion going into women's income? That is a staggering figure when we reflect on what that means about women being kept poorer as a result of the pay gap.

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. It is bad not just for the economics of the individual woman and the individual family, but for the country as a whole. As she says, if we can raise pay in a fair way, it would be good for the economy of the country. That is why we have introduced world leading legislation requiring organisations with more than 250 employees to publish their gender pay gap by the end of the tax year. I want businesses to have their pay gap laid bare and then do something about it.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): On that point, my right hon. Friend will have read in the press some speculation that organisations may be flouting the gender pay gap reporting regulations that the Government have rightly brought in. Can she outline to the House what action the Government will take to ensure that businesses take this requirement very seriously indeed?

Amber Rudd: I thank my right hon. Friend, who has done such important work in this area. She will know that it was a manifesto commitment to bring this requirement forward. It is the law, and we will make sure that companies stick to it, abide by it, deliver on it and then, hopefully, make changes on it.

Equality is not just about getting women the same pay as men, but about getting women the same jobs as men. I have lost track of the number of meetings that I have sat in where I am the only woman at the table—I expect that I am not the only one to have found that. Women are still under-represented in a whole range of fields from politics to business, and we are particularly under-represented at the top.

We have made good progress since 2010, and have eliminated all-male boards in the FTSE 100, but only a quarter of directors in the FTSE 350 and only 4% of FTSE 350 chief executive officers are women. That is simply not good enough, and it is bad economics, too. We know that organisations with the highest levels of gender diversity in their leadership teams are 15% more likely to outperform their industry rivals, so we must think long and hard about what we need to do to improve those statistics.

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I endorse what the Minister says about being the only woman in meetings; that still happens. Does she agree that when women reach senior levels in business and in work, they must be paid equally to men? Sadly, today, there are still many women doing the same work of equal value and not achieving equal pay.

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Women must be paid the same as men. It has been illegal, for many, many years not to give equal pay for equal work, but we are trying to take that one step further with reporting on the gender pay gap. Hon. Members will

know that there has been quite a lot of reporting on substantial banking and media companies, which has shown the scale of the gender pay gap. Managing directors and senior directors are having to take action as a result, which is very welcome.

I am pleased to support the Hampton-Alexander review's targets of achieving 33% of women on boards and 33% in executive committees. It is not just about getting in; it is about getting on, and women deserve to get to the top of all the professions and to get as far as their aspirations will take them.

I end by reminding the House of the aspirations of Emmeline Pankhurst, who famously said of the campaign for suffrage that the suffragettes had to

“make more noise than anybody else”

for their cause to be heard and to enact the change that they wanted. Man or woman, we must continue the legacy of the suffragettes, suffragists and their supporters. We must all make enough noise so that the agenda that I have talked about continues to be realised. This is an important debate, and I urge everyone here to continue to “press for progress”, as the International Women's Day slogan suggests, to finally achieve the true gender equality for which women have been fighting for so long.

12.30 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): I am so pleased that we are making time available today to continue the important tradition of marking International Women's Day. I thank Mr Speaker, because he has done it again—he has made history. He helped me to raise the International Women's Day flag over the Parliament buildings for the first time in history, and for that, I salute him.

This year's International Women's Day has been a bit of a rollercoaster of emotions for me. Reading about the struggle that led to some women gaining the right to vote in a general election 100 years ago has highlighted how far we have come, but also just how far we still have to go. It led me to reflect on the persistent inequalities that relate to class and ethnicity, as well as to gender. Working-class men were denied the vote until 1918, and their enfranchisement paved the way for working-class women. But our demand for equality goes beyond the vote, vital though it is. We are interested in the advancement of equality, on a broad front, and we cannot ignore the fact that class and race often go hand in hand in the struggle for equality.

There is little doubt that 2018 is turning out to be a landmark year for women. The decades of campaigning that led to women's suffrage a century ago highlights what women can achieve when we unite and organise. If all women had been granted the vote in 1918, we women would have been the majority, but it was another 10 years before full electoral equality for women was enshrined in the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act 1928. That legislation was the result of decades of struggle by famous and not-so-famous people.

I remember hearing the saying, “If you hold the pen, you write the history.” That is hard to understand until we start reading history and realise that there are bits missing. My theme today is taken from the writer Virginia Woolf, who said that for most of history, Anonymous was a woman. At the march on Sunday, I was asked who I was marching for. I said that I was

marching for the hidden history of women—for the women whose campaigning zeal did not make them famous, and for the women who suffered, and still suffer, in silence.

The role of women of colour in the suffragette movement has often been overlooked. I am so grateful to the Commons Library for unearthing the case of Sarah Parker Remond, the only known woman of colour to have signed the first petition for women's suffrage in 1866. She was a prominent African American lecturer, abolitionist and agent of the American Anti-Slavery Society. Sarah was an educated, independent woman of wealth. Why would she be hidden from the history of the suffragette movement? There can only really be one answer: the colour of her skin. Today, I salute Sarah Parker Remond in Parliament so that her name will live on in perpetuity in *Hansard*. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] Thank you.

A better-known woman of colour and suffragette is Sophia Duleep Singh. She is rightly celebrated even though she was born after the original suffrage petition. She campaigned for women nationally as well as locally. She has been the subject of a BBC documentary and a Royal Mail commemorative stamp. I treasure the photograph of me with a poster-sized version of that stamp—a small one would not have been very good, would it? The part played by the vast majority of black, Asian and minority ethnic women in the suffrage movement has been lost. They are basically a hidden history—a story that might never be told.

I am proud of the Opposition's 50:50 shadow Cabinet, and I am truly proud of the fact that 45% of Labour MPs are women. One more heave, and we will have parity. All we need is a general election in the next couple of months. It is also notable that across the House, the number of women MPs is at a record high of 32%. We welcome women MPs from all parties in this place. If we could clap, I would say that we should give ourselves a round of applause—but not too loudly, because we still have persistent problems that will not go away unless we take a radical approach. We should applaud the Conservatives for electing a woman leader—

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Twice.

Dawn Butler: Twice, as the hon. Gentleman says. We should, however, note that for eight years the right hon. Lady has sat at the table of a Cabinet that has sanctioned £80 billion of tax and benefit changes, as a result of which more than 86% of cuts fall on the shoulders of women. So I say this: a round of applause, but not too loudly.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: I congratulate the hon. Lady on her speech and the way in which she is reflecting on International Women's Day. Will she join me in recognising the fact that for the past 66 years we have had a female Head of State? Will she send congratulations to Her Majesty the Queen, who has presided so well over this country through smooth times and rough?

Dawn Butler: I will congratulate the Queen on the dignity and poise with which she has held her position over the years. I hope that we might see the new generation coming in and taking that place in the future. [Interruption.] Long may she reign—absolutely. We do not want to see

[Dawn Butler]

the end of her reign, but I understand that she is scaling back her duties to make way for the next generation. I am in no way advocating her quick demise.

Let me offer a cautionary tale from 100 years ago. Just as women were getting the vote, male misogyny struck a blow at women's sport. Teams of women were playing football in front of large crowds and making big money, but the Football Association banned women from its grounds. The FA said that

"the game of football"—

this was probably said in a more pompous voice—

"is quite unsuitable for females and ought not to be encouraged."

At a stroke, the FA destroyed women's football. I bet that if Eniola Aluko is watching, she is probably thinking that not much has changed.

Women football players have been making up for lost time, however. Sadly, the England team lost narrowly last night to the world champions, the United States, but I wish them well on their continued journey. I would like to acknowledge the first real international women's football star, Michelle Akers. In the 1991 women's world championship, she was the winner of the golden boot, and she even appeared on a cereal box.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I want to highlight the work that Lewes football club does in the world of women's football. It was the first club in this country to give equal pay to the men's and women's teams.

Dawn Butler: That is excellent news, and I hope that it will be reflected nationally as we encourage the game of women's football. I would also like to note Briana Scurry, a goalkeeper who was the first black woman to be elected to the US hall of fame.

As women, we know that we have to break down structural barriers, but sometimes we forget just how deep the roots of those structural barriers are. We have to break down centuries-old traditions to get into places such as Parliament, which were designed to keep us out. Today, too many groups still face discrimination and disadvantage. We must look forward and tackle the structural barriers facing all women and those with protected characteristics so that we can achieve true equality for all.

The official theme of International Women's Day is "Press for Progress". I want to set out Labour's priorities in the areas where the need for change is most pressing. There is a long list, and it includes tackling violence against women and girls, tackling domestic violence and abuse in the workplace, and, of course, tackling the enduring gender pay gap. I am proud of the role that Labour has played in ensuring progress in the UK by breaking down structural barriers that have long held women back. Labour brought in the Equal Pay Act 1970, the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 and the Equality Act 2010. We introduced the minimum wage and Sure Start. We extended maternity leave and doubled maternity pay, thus valuing women.

Now, Labour believes that we will make a real difference in closing the gender pay gap only with a combination of sticks and carrots. We will mandate all companies with over 250 employees to produce action plans to close the gender pay gap. Companies would be accredited

for their progress and issued with certification, and only companies with certification would be able to bid for lucrative Government contracts. This is a win-win situation—it is the right thing to do. The workforce will be loyal, and companies will make more profit, as the Minister mentioned, and will be rewarded for good practice. We will also benefit as a country. According to a study by PwC, the closure of the gender pay gap would give a £90 billion boost to the UK. Globally, the boost would be trillions of dollars—trillions! In the developing world, it is widely recognised that empowering women is an important step in driving economic growth, and that should be part of our sustainable development goals.

Between 2015 and 2016, the UK fell from 14th to 15th place in a ranking of 33 OECD countries based on five key indicators of female economic empowerment. Our country deserves better. Our country needs a Labour Government and our policies to put people and progress at the heart—

Maria Caulfield: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way; she is being incredibly generous with her time. I hear with interest the proposals that the Labour party has on the table. Does she see a time when there will be a female leader of the Labour party, and if so, why has that not happened so far?

Dawn Butler: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. This policy, whether introduced by a male or a female, is important to address pay inequality for women and to ensure that the gender pay gap is not just audited but closed. That is the important factor.

The near parity between women and men in the parliamentary Labour party has not come about by chance. The introduction of all-women shortlists promoted a change of culture. When the election was called at short notice and we had no time for all-women shortlists, we still selected and elected more women than any other party.

The test for any party is, "Are you helping or hindering?" I am afraid that many current Government policies fail that test. We in the Labour party are determined that we will be a help, not a hindrance, to women. I do not have time to go into all the elements of our key policy strands, but they form an acronym—AHELP. That covers access to justice; health and wellbeing; economic equality; leadership and representation; and protections for women. With this, we will see a real transformation.

Women make up 51% of the population, and without that 51%, the other 49% would not be here. So let this be the year that change happens. I will not wait another 110 years for real equality.

12.44 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): This is the first time in many years that the International Women's Day debate has been held in Government time. I thank those on the Front Bench who made that happen—we know who they are—and hope that this is a trend for the future as well.

Today is a very special day indeed: International Women's Day in the year that we celebrate 100 years since women first won not only the right to vote, but the right to stand for election to this place. It has also been,

for a long time, a day of celebration in my household, because today is my youngest son James's 16th birthday. I think there might be other Members on the Front Bench who also have children who were born on International Women's Day. This is a day when men and women can and should come together to celebrate, whether it is for their children or for other reasons.

Equality affects us all, and persistent inequality disadvantages us all. That is why, in the work of the Women and Equalities Committee, we look at all strands of equality. We have a particular interest in women's equality, but we are not frightened to look at the issues that face men too. Our latest inquiry has been into dads in the workplace. I thank all my colleagues who are here today—the hon. Members for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) and for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), and others who serve on the Committee—for their dedication to the work of the inquiry. We will be publishing the final report in the next two weeks.

The Government have, as outlined by the Minister, shown their huge commitment to gender equality in this country, but also abroad. Today's announcement on the proposed tough new laws on domestic abuse indicates that that commitment is showing no sign of diminishing. The Government's record needs to be put on record, because it is so striking: the criminalisation of forced marriage, two new stalking laws, the roll-out of domestic violence protection orders, new offences on domestic abuse relating to coercive control, shared parental leave, equal marriage, making revenge pornography a crime, and making sex and relationship education compulsory for all children. All those things show that this Government understand the very wide nature of the policies that they need to put in place to address equality issues for women.

Today's theme is about pressing for change. The role of the Women and Equalities Committee, which I chair, is to make sure that we continue to hold the Government's feet to the fire, not just on their existing legislative work but on that for the future. I will talk about three areas of our work in the Committee that I gently suggest require further work in future. Maternity discrimination, despite some of the strongest laws and a clear determination by the Government to outlaw it, continues to blight the lives of too many women. The use of non-disclosure agreements in many of the arrangements that are put forward to encourage women to leave the workplace means that it is difficult for us to see the full scale of the problem. That is why the Committee will be looking carefully at how we should reform non-disclosure agreements for issues not just like sexual harassment, but maternity discrimination as well.

Another area that I am sure the Committee will want to continue to scrutinise is the role of women in this place. We produced a very important report shortly before the last general election calling for the implementation of aspects of the Equality Act to make it transparent how many women are standing for election at various points in the parliamentary calendar. It was disappointing that the Government did not agree to go forward with the part of the Act that would require all political parties to be transparent about the data on their gender split of candidates at that time. I hope that I can encourage those on the Front Bench to continue to look at how we might be able to use that legislation to throw transparency on to this issue.

As our previous leader David Cameron said, sunlight is the best disinfectant, and that is still the case today, particularly when it comes to the work of parties in the selection of their candidates. While there may be more women sitting on the Labour Benches today than on the Conservative Benches, I am sure they would agree that the selection procedure can stand in the way of women coming into this place. We need to ensure there is transparency of the data.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: I praise the work that my right hon. Friend does as Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee. I loved the list she gave of what we have done in government; that is an important message, because both parties have something to contribute. Does she agree that we must put forward a very positive view of women's role in this House? The most important thing is to encourage young women to look at being an MP as a potential career. If we are always complaining and pointing out the downsides of this job, that will not be very encouraging. I encourage her Committee to look at those positives, so that young women know that this could be a job for them, and that it is one of the most fantastic jobs they could ever do.

Mrs Miller: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The best thing that we are doing at the moment to encourage young women to be interested in politics is having a female Prime Minister. It was when I saw Margaret Thatcher become leader of the party and then Prime Minister of our country that politics became relevant for me. It turned politics from, frankly, a lot of old men in grey raincoats to something technicolour and relevant to me as a 14-year-old girl living in south Wales, where there were not too many Tories around. I could see an amazing role model on the television who was not only a fantastic female politician but was turning our country round from the crisis of the '70s, when we were—

Dame Cheryl Gillan: The sick man of Europe.

Mrs Miller: Indeed.

Seema Malhotra: Does the right hon. Lady agree with me about the value of teachers and the role they can play in encouraging young girls to come forward? I want to tell a slightly different story that I have not often shared. One of the reasons I got involved in politics was that, for our homework one day at school, we were asked to go and work ourselves up about something, and I managed to work myself up about Margaret Thatcher. I can honestly say that the rest is history.

I want to acknowledge the work done by teachers in my schools, such as Cranford school, which has started Cranford Parliament and will be holding International Women's Day events today and tomorrow. Those initiatives have an impact by making people feel involved in political debate and are important in connecting Parliament with education.

Mrs Miller: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Inspiring people to get involved in politics is such an important part of our job.

[Mrs Miller]

I want to talk about inspiring women. I might have been the first woman to be elected to Parliament in North Hampshire, but I am now joined by five other female Conservative Members of Parliament in Hampshire, including my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies). Where one woman treads, others will follow. I am very proud indeed that 60% of my borough councillors in Basingstoke are female, led by the incredibly impressive Councillor Terri Reid. It is important to recognise that as Members of Parliament, we can inspire others to become involved in politics through our work.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): On that point about inspiring women, does my right hon. Friend agree that it is important that as Members of Parliament, we get into our schools to speak to young women and show them that being an MP is exactly the sort of job they should be aspiring to do, as is being the leader of a company? As a male MP with two female bosses, I know that women are at least as good at this job and probably better. Does she agree that a woman's place is not, as some old-fashioned people might say, in the kitchen, but on the Front Bench?

Mrs Miller: What we are trying to say is that a woman's place is in the House, which is a similar thing. I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution. He is absolutely right that we need to recognise the importance of encouraging more young women into politics.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is important that we in this House take responsibility for inspiring other women, including our daughters, but we should also remember on this day that many of us owe our inspiration to our mothers, our grandmothers and important women in our lives. My own grandmother did not have the right to vote when she was born. I wear her wedding ring to this Chamber every day, and occasionally it serves as a reminder of what we owe to generations past.

Mrs Miller: The hon. Lady makes such a poignant point, and I am sure all of us will reflect on the role of women in our own families in getting us here today.

There are other women in our communities whom we need to celebrate. We are incredibly privileged in Hampshire to have one of only four female chief constables in the country, Olivia Pinkney, who is doing an incredible job of running one of the largest police forces in the country. The chief executive of my local hospital in Basingstoke, Alex Whitfield, succeeded another female chief executive, to make sure we have some of the best health services in the area.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The right hon. Lady is right to point out the need to have more women in senior policing positions and to encourage more women police officers to rise up through the ranks. Will she join me in paying tribute to the woman Met Commissioner, the woman head of the National Police Chiefs' Council and the woman head of the National Crime Agency? To have Cressida Dick,

Sara Thornton and Lynne Owens all in those top positions is a huge tribute to them and the work they have done to rise through the profession.

Mrs Miller: Coupled with a female Home Secretary, they make a formidable team.

I also want to point out the role of women in business. I represent one of the top 10 centres of business in the south-east, and it is local businesswomen in smaller businesses who I find incredibly inspiring—people like Beryl Huntingdon in my constituency, who runs a business to support other businesses. When I look at my local charities, I see it is often women who are not just helping to run existing charities—people like Evelyn Vincent, who was a founder member of Headway Basingstoke—but setting up new charities. I think of women like Charlie Porter, who set up the Muffin's Dream Foundation to support families with disabled children, Catherine Waters-Clark, who founded Inspiro to help children understand where their food comes from and how they can cook it, and Mary Swan, who is the artistic director of my local producing theatre company.

It does not stop there. If it was not for the women, I do not know what the Church of England would be doing. It is people like Jo Stoker of St Michael's Church who keep our churches running. We were talking earlier about football teams. Basingstoke Town ladies football team plays in the FA women's premier league south-west division, and I am hugely proud of the fact that they are doing extremely well—in fact, better than the men's team.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: May I add to my right hon. Friend's list someone I am going to see tomorrow in my own constituency? Sally Preston runs a company called Kiddylicious, which she has started from scratch. It is producing fantastically healthy children's food and is now a multimillion-pound international business.

Mrs Miller: By recognising women who are doing things in other roles and walks of life, we can help to ensure that young women in our schools realise that the only thing that limits them in this world is their imagination and the support they get from their families and their schools to realise their ambitions.

In talking about women in my constituency, I could not fail to refer to the most famous daughter of Basingstoke, Jane Austen. Until very recently, almost nobody in Basingstoke knew that she was born and bred in our borough—the most famous novelist in the world, and we had failed to recognise her. I do not know whether that was because she was a woman, or maybe it was just that people did not like reading her books—I love them, but some people do not; it is an acquired taste. When we commemorated the 200th anniversary of her death, I was immensely proud to be part of a programme to make sure she was better remembered, which culminated in the first ever sculpture of her being put in place in the centre of my town. I would like to put on record my immense thanks to the sculptor, Adam Roud, and Amanda Aldous MBE, who made that project possible. I want to celebrate women now, but also the women who have made my town a great place to live.

Women in Basingstoke are no different from those in the rest of the country—there is prodigious talent—so why are women still paid less than men? In my constituency,

women are paid 25% less than men, and we are in the bottom 4% in the UK. Despite the fact that there is no difference in the levels of education of men and women in my constituency, women are consistently being paid 25% less than men, because they cannot find the sorts of jobs they need to use their experience and talent.

Organisations are working hard to try to reverse this worrying trend of our not using the skills of our people in the way we should. The local borough council has focused on this, and it now has a positive gender pay gap of 2.16%. Of local employers, AWE has a programme to increase female apprentices and clear targets for increasing female management, and Fujitsu has a programme to attract female apprentices. Companies are waking up and realising that they are not using female talent in the way they should.

I very much support the Government's work on gender pay gap reporting. Such reporting provides the sort of transparency that companies in my constituency need if they are to focus more on this problem. There are about 900 businesses in Basingstoke with more than 250 employees, and I will be looking very closely at gender pay gap reporting to ensure that we capitalise on the skills and talents of women that are otherwise lost to the economy.

I particularly want Ministers to reflect on the availability of flexible working. I was very pleased that the Prime Minister has pointed out the need for flexible working right at the start of somebody's time in employment. Research by Timewise has shown that at the moment just 6% of job vacancies pay the annualised equivalent of £20,000 a year or more, leaving many women with no option but to take low-paid jobs—often poorly paid jobs with little progression—if they need the flexibility that many require to balance work and family life. I hope that the Prime Minister's announcement on flexible working last year will be just the start of a much broader set of work that the Government will do to make flexible working a reality from day one for everybody in this country.

As was asked earlier, is this a turning point and a landmark year? I am sure that people at the time of the first and second world wars and in the 1960s and 1970s, when so much of the legislation we enjoy today was put in place, felt that those were landmark years. The reason why we may do better in calling this a landmark year, following all the revelations of sexual harassment in Hollywood and Westminster, is that we have record numbers of women in work, and economic empowerment is such an important part of cementing the changed attitudes that we are all looking for in the debate today.

I hope that the establishment of the Women and Equalities Committee has helped to keep equality issues, particularly those that relate to women, at the top of the agenda, and that it has added to the momentum for change. We started our series of sexual harassment reports in 2016 with one on the sexual harassment of schoolgirls. At the time, I was told that we were expecting children to accept something that had been outlawed in the workplace, but how wrong we were about that. Sexual harassment blights the lives of 50% of women in this country, and we must tackle it. I am pleased that the Select Committee is doing two reports on it at the moment: on sexual harassment in the public realm, and on sexual harassment at work.

There really is more that unites us than divides us when it comes to issues of women. I think that the women—and the men—sitting in the House and taking part in this debate today can make sure that if we work together, this turning point does create the lasting change we want.

1.4 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller). She is of course the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee—the first of its kind—on which I have had the honour of serving for the past almost three years. It is a great honour that we have the whole afternoon to debate International Women's Day. It is also an honour to follow the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), who rightly put it on the record that many women are not recognised in history. It is great that that will be corrected today.

As we mark 100 years since women first secured the vote, we have an opportunity in this place on International Women's Day to put on the record some of the great successes. However, we must not forget that the reason why we still need an event such as International Women's Day is that we have had to fight for so long for much of what we have achieved, and we still have a long way to go. Today, as we mark Vote 100 and the progress made by women on the centenary of women's suffrage, we must also note that this year's theme for International Women's Day is "Press for Progress".

In the past 100 years, we have seen incremental advances in women's rights. In 1928, women were granted universal suffrage. In 1945, the Family Allowances Act introduced child benefits. In 1967, the Abortion Act was enacted in the UK, but this has still not been extended to Northern Ireland. In 1975, the Sex Discrimination Act made it illegal to discriminate against women. In 1985, the Prohibition of Female Circumcision Act made female genital mutilation a crime. In 1986, statutory maternity pay was introduced. In 1994, rape in marriage was made a crime. In 2014, shared parental leave was introduced, and that year also marked the introduction of equal marriage. The year 2015 witnessed the introduction of coercive control as a crime. In 2017, thanks to my hon. Friend the former Member for Banff and Buchan, we witnessed the ratification of the Istanbul convention, and I thank the former and the present Home Secretaries for their work in that regard.

This year, the Government will introduce a Bill on domestic violence and abuse. Yet this year, on average, 40% of women will report that they have experienced some form of sexual harassment in the workplace. In Scotland, 58,810 incidents of domestic abuse were reported last year. Rape and attempted rape account for 17% of sexual crimes, and 35% of women have experienced either physical or sexual intimate partner violence or sexual violence by a non-partner at some point in their lives. An estimated 200 million women and girls have undergone female genital mutilation, and the majority of them were cut before they were five. One in five girls in the world are said to be married before the age of 18. One in five lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender women have said that they have experienced a hate crime or incident due to their sexual orientation or gender identity, of whom one in four have not reported this to the police.

[Angela Crawley]

While we recognise that there is still a long way to go, today is an opportunity to celebrate the fact that women have achieved a great deal in the past 100 years. I want to turn around the rather bleak view I have presented and celebrate some of those whom Sky News recently called “Britain’s most influential women”—marking those who have made achievements historically as well as the trailblazing women of today. The list rightly includes suffragettes, to whom we owe a debt, such as Emily Wilding Davison and Emmeline Pankhurst. It also includes great writers such Virginia Woolf and Zadie Smith, and women in the public eye who rightly use their voice to advocate political activism, such as Annie Lennox, Vivienne Westwood and M.I.A.

The list covers prominent female politicians, including of course my own First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, and my colleague and friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black). I might add that my hon. Friend made a brilliant speech yesterday on misogyny, only to be met by further online abuse, which exactly proves the point. I should say that she did get some support, but the point is well made.

While we rightly recognise these extraordinary women and acknowledge the struggles they face in striving to make the world a better place, it is worth recognising the extraordinary women who live otherwise ordinary lives. I therefore wish to pay tribute to some of the truly inspiring women in my constituency of Lanark and Hamilton East. I pay tribute to Carol Clarke, Mary McGowan and Christine Emmet, who have been passionate in promoting Fairtrade and making Hamilton a Fairtrade town. I pay tribute to Donna Barrowman who established the Hope Cafe in Lanark—a charity that supports mental health. I also pay tribute to each member of staff, past and present, of Women’s Aid South Lanarkshire, who do incredible work each day to support women who have suffered from domestic violence, abuse or sexual violence. I also take the opportunity, as always, to put on record the plight of WASPI women, including my constituents Nancy Rea and Lorraine McColl. They continue to fight for the right to a fair pension, although they feel that their voices are largely unheard.

I pay tribute to Loraine Swan, chair of the Lanimer Committee, who plays a key role in keeping the traditions of Lanark alive, and to Liz Wilson, chair of Uddingston Pride, who ensures that the environment and community lie at the heart of her local area. Sheena Campbell, chair of Larkhall Community Council, fights to make her community a better place, and Mavis Daniels of Sivam Hair and Beauty in Hamilton is a pioneering businesswoman who was recently shortlisted for the Black Beauty and Fashion Awards 2018.

Those women are all exceptional, as indeed are women such as Anne Barrett, Josephine McVey, Paula Sullivan, and Margaret McAllister. These women are administrators, teachers, and kitchen staff and have worked hard throughout their adult life, supporting their families, caring for children and aging parents, while also fighting for pension justice, equality, and equal pay. Their voices deserve to be heard just as much as those of every woman on Sky’s list of influential women.

The recent “Time’s Up” movement against sexual harassment, as well as the scandal in this place regarding sexual harassment and the established patriarchy, served to highlight that women in all sectors experience patriarchy,

misogyny and bullying in their workplace every day. However, not all women have a voice. We have a long way to go, and we in this place have an opportunity to make a change. Let us make a real change over the next 100 years in closing the gender pay gap, tackling maternity and pregnancy discrimination, and encouraging more fathers to take shared parental leave. We must continue to tackle systemic inequality in institutions such as this place, and we must lead by example to create the change we want.

Today, I launched a petition calling on the Government to scrap the 4% tax on claimants of child maintenance for those who have experienced domestic violence in their relationship and who rely on that vital service. Parents should not be penalised for protecting their families, and the Government should not seek to balance the books on the backs of the most vulnerable in our society. Once more I call on the Government to consider using the opportunity presented by the domestic violence and abuse Bill to address that inequity. It is not fair to ask women to pay tax on a service that they ultimately rely on and have no other choice but to take.

I will end with a quote from a truly inspirational woman, Maya Angelou, who said:

“Each time a woman stands up for herself, without knowing it possibly, without claiming it, she stands up for all women.”

Let us make our voices heard this afternoon. It is International Women’s Day, and all of those women’s voices deserve to be heard.

1.12 pm

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): It is a privilege to contribute to this hugely important debate. Gender inequality represents the biggest waste of talent on our planet right now, and closing that gap is not only a moral imperative but an economic imperative for us all. The figures on gender inequality are striking. Evidence produced by the McKinsey Global Institute in 2015 estimated that tackling gender inequality, and achieving gender parity across the global economy, would be worth \$28 trillion to global GDP. Put in context, that is essentially the economies of China and the US combined. That is probably the biggest economic lever that could be pulled to support jobs and prosperity in our global economy.

I am proud of the work done by the UK internationally, and following the sustainable development goals agreed in 2015, for the first time the world has a to-do list that includes achieving gender equality. Not only is it a long list, it is a comprehensive list that specifically covers areas such as FGM and health inequality. Achieving gender equality is mainstreamed through all the sustainable development goals in a way that is vital if we are to have real change.

The impact that gender equality could have on countries around the world is stark. That impact would be positive not only for economic performance, but for underlying stability and outcomes in society more generally. Gender equality is a good, positive thing that all countries should be striving for, not because it is a nice thing to do, but because it is crucial for us all. Some of the most inspiring people that I met in my time at the Department for International Development were amazing women who were fighting for women’s rights in places like Afghanistan, fighting against child marriage in places

like Zambia, or tackling Ebola. Frankly, nurses on the frontline often gave their lives to save others and help to treat those suffering from Ebola. They were absolutely inspiring, and achieving gender equality is a shared responsibility. If it is shared, however, we must take collective action, not just as individuals but in the organisations and institutions of which we are part.

I would like to speak briefly about what such collective action really means. First, it means working in our communities. We can all think of amazing groups in our communities that are leading the way. I remember some of the young people I have met during my time in politics, such as the girls in Bristol who set up Integrate Bristol, which has shaken up that city and drawn attention more broadly to tackling FGM. There was wonderful work by long-standing institutions such as the Girl Guides, and there are fantastic international development charities, such as Restless Development, that focus on gender equality.

I say a huge thank you to teachers around our country who are in our classrooms right now inspiring and educating a brand new generation of girls and young women to aim high and have high expectations for themselves. They must also have a sense of how they need and deserve to be treated by others, and what relationships—including stable relationships—look like. The reforms that the Government are introducing on relationships and sex education are long overdue and crucial to ensuring that this is not just about women aiming high, but that men and boys understand the positive role that they can play in helping to deliver gender equality in our country. The work happening in our classrooms, especially in encouraging girls to study science, technology, engineering and maths, and to go into industries and sectors that they have not perhaps entered traditionally, is important if we are to crack some of the statistics that we all mention, such as the gender pay gap.

That brings me to the world of business, and how important it is for the change in the workplace that has steadily begun across our country over recent years to continue. Hon. Members have mentioned the gender pay gap, and the transparency that the new regulations, simple as they are, have brought to the reporting of the pay gap is hugely powerful. We are at the beginning of a journey, and when I spoke to companies that were considering the reporting that lay ahead of them, I found that many wanted to make progress in advance of reporting their statistics. Focusing on those numbers for the first time simply told them what they needed to know, which was that they needed to make a change.

There are three to four weeks left before eligible companies must submit a report on their gender pay gap, and my advice to them is: don't be late. People will spot who is missing, and if a company is missing it will never be able to go back and correct the fact that it had a year to get its house in order and ensure that its reporting was on time, but it failed. All companies and employers must understand that young people growing up in the United Kingdom now have different expectations and attitudes on gender, culture and diversity. They expect those attitudes and values to be shown in the organisations they interact with on a daily basis, particularly organisations that want to sell them goods and services. The sooner businesses understand that and see the opportunities in responding to it, the better not only for them but for our broader society.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) mentioned the broader workplace reforms that all Governments, including this one, have brought forward to make flexible working a reality. In the end, if we really are to see a difference we have to go beyond laws: attitudes need to change in companies. We all saw what happened at the Presidents Club dinner. I think that is symptomatic of a clear point, which is that change needs to be led from the top. All leaders in all the many companies and organisations that employ people need to realise that they, individually, have to show leadership. They have to drive it through their senior management teams and evidence it not just through their people but in their processes, their systems and the data they collect to ensure they are moving in the right direction.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): Would my right hon. Friend like to give credit to Northern Power Women, who this week have been winning awards in Manchester for the great change they have been making in driving forward engagement as role models and agents of change to transform the culture of organisations?

Justine Greening: I very much welcome all the work they are doing, and I hope the awards ceremony goes well. Achieving gender equality is down to all of us. It is a million-piece jigsaw. It is about millions of people around our country and around the world all doing things that add up to something big. "Don't wait" is my advice to people who want to see things change—get involved and be a part of the change yourself.

We know that gender diversity is good for business. Research from McKinsey showed that companies in the top quartile for gender diversity on executive teams were 21% more likely to outperform others on profitability and 27% more likely to have superior value creation. Companies in the top quartile for ethnic and cultural diversity on executive teams were 33% more likely to have industry-leading profitability. Equally, there is a penalty for dropping out. In other words, it is not just that the companies doing this are better performing, but companies not doing this are poor performing. The clear steer is that if someone cares about their business's growth, they should do it simply for the economics, even if they have not, for some obscure reason, already bought into why this is the right thing to do.

This issue applies to our institution of Parliament. Everything we talk about being good for businesses and employers applies to all of us too. I know that all Members in the Chamber, and many colleagues who are not here, feel as strongly as I do about that. It is up to us to continue to ask ourselves the difficult questions about how our own parties need to change. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke that transparency is crucial. The Conservative party should leave no stone unturned in continuing to play a role—indeed, a stronger role going forward—as one of the parties in this House helping to make sure that we have a 50:50 Parliament. We should be out there working with other parliamentarians on the 50:50 Parliament campaign #AskHerToStand. That is absolutely crucial. It is 100 years since some women first got the vote. Frankly, although we have made a lot of progress, it has not been enough. We have to recognise that unless we work together there is a real danger that the House of

[Justine Greening]

Commons will flatline on about a third of us being women parliamentarians. We need to go above and beyond that.

We should never lose sight of the culture and diversity element of everything I have spoken about today. We should recognise that too many women growing up in our country, often black and minority ethnic women, face a double challenge in being able to make their way. None of us should be prepared to accept that. Whenever we talk about gender equality we should be explicitly clear that there are groups of women who face even greater challenges, dare I say, than some of the rest of us. Fixing this for every woman is our challenge, and we should not stop until we have achieved it.

Finally, it is 100 years since we got the vote, but the suffragette movement actually began back in the 1860s. I am so pleased they did not give up after 40 years. If there is one message we can all take from that, it is that this is long-term. But I do not want it to be long-term—I want change to happen faster. I do not want to be looking at what we can achieve over the next 100 years; I want us to be looking at what we can achieve in a generation, or in the next five years, 10 years or 15 years. We need to do that, because lives are ticking by. I had the chance to meet too many girls in too many countries with bags of talent but no opportunity. Their clock is ticking. Every single day that we do not see change fast enough, for them and for the rest of us, is a day of opportunity lost and a day of talent wasted.

I do not accept that our world needs to be like this. I do not accept that our country needs to be like this. We have made a lot of progress, but we have to go further and we have to go faster. I am really proud that all of us here can be a strong voice for women, not just in our country but around the world, to articulate the challenges they often face when they have no way of talking about them themselves. We know, looking back over recent years and over the last century, that things can be different. We also know, however, that we have to choose to make them different. If nothing else, this debate is showing that as far as the UK Parliament is concerned, we are making that choice for things to be different. All I can say is that I am going to be part of that change and part of the effort to see the next 100 years deliver much, much more than the last 100 years did.

1.27 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I rise today to keep my promise to every year remember the women killed by male violence since the previous International Women's Day. As always, I owe the research of this list to Karen Ingala Smith and the Counting Dead Women project, which works in partnership with the Women's Aid "Femicide Census" report. Women like Karen face a backlash for undertaking such research. After today, I will be told that I do not care about men who have died, which is obviously ridiculous. Such a thing is never said to those who stand up and honour the men of this country. I am grateful that Karen Ingala Smith ignores this and remains on the side of the women who died, not the forces who want to ignore them.

All these stories are in the public domain. As always, the women are of all ages and were killed in violent episodes at the hands of men. Violence against women

and girls is an epidemic. If as many people died every week at a sporting event, or because they had a specific job, there would be a national outcry. These women deserve the same. We must all do better to hear their stories and to end the culture of male violence that killed them.

The names are: Anne-Marie James; Sabrina Mullings; Sheila Morgan; Tracey Wilkinson; Kanwal Williams; Vicki Hull; Hannah Bladon; Carolyn Hill; Katrina Evemy; Megan Bills; Karolina Chwiluk; Jane Sherrat; Tracy Kearns; Concepta Leonard; Gemma Leeming; Emma Day; Mohanna Abdhua; Marjorie Cawdery; Sobhia Khan; Romina Kalachi; Arena Saeed; Alyson Watt; Sarah Jeffrey; Karen Young; Jean Chapman; Janice Griffiths; Joanne Rand; Ellen Higginbottom; Julie Parkin; Molly McLaren; Vera Savage; Celine Dookhran; Vanessa James; Florina Pastina; Olivia Kray; Farnaz Ali; Elizabeth Jordan; Leanne Collopy; Rikki Lander; Alex Stuart; Leah Cohen; Hannah Cohen; Beryl Hammond; Quyen Ngoc Nguyen; Karen Jacquet; Asiyah Harris; Jessica King; Tyler Denton; Emma Kelty; Jane Hings; Linda Parker; Nasima Noorzia; Katherine Smith; Leanne McKie; Jane Sergeant; Moira Gilbertson; Shaheen Akthar; Teresa Wishart; Anne O'Neill; Elizabeth Merriman; Janet Northmore; Jillian Howell; Mary Steel; Chloe Miazek; Simone Grainger; Michele Anison; Patricia McIntosh; Lisa Chadderton; Monika Lasek; Susan Westwood; Ella Parker; Janine Bowater; Suzanne Brown; Rebecca Dykes; Jodie Willsher; Beverley Bliss; Nicole Campbell; Iuliana Tudos; Jayne Reat; Jillian Grant; Pauline Cockburn; Julie Fox; Anne Searle; Melanie Clark; Elizabetha Lacatusu; Terrie-Ann Jones; Claire Tavener; Julie Clark; Amelia Blake; Cassie Hayes; Claire Harris; Cheryl Gabriel-Hooper; Ruksana Begum; Saeeda Hussain; Danielle Richardson; Jill Sadler; Lynn McNally; Charlotte Teeling; Crystal Gossett, who was killed with her son, who was 16, and her baby daughter; Diane Gossett; and Laura Hutson. Karen texted me this morning, after she had sent that list, to add three more women to the list from over the weekend: Laura Figueira de Farida; Angela Rider; and Fiona Scourfield.

I also want to read the names of the women murdered at the hands of terrorism in the UK in the last year. It may seem to some that this pattern of violence is different from violence against women and girls, but we in this place must recognise that the patterns of violent behaviour and the perpetration of violence against women and girls have been seen in the history of many of those who go on to commit terrorist atrocities. Their names are: Aysha Frade; Christine Archibald; Kirsty Boden; Sara Zelenak; Angelika Klis; Georgina Callandar; Saffie Roussos; Kelly Brewster; Olivia Campbell; Alison Howe; Lisa Lees; Jane Tweddle-Taylor; Megan Hurley; Nell Jones; Michelle Kiss; Sorrell Leczkowski; Chloe Rutherford; Eilidh MacLeod; Wendy Fawell; Courtney Boyle; Elaine McIver; and Andreea Cristea.

I want to finish my remarks by saying that all of these women mattered. So many people want to use their political persuasion to assume that perpetrators of this violence look and think in a certain way. I care about all women and want to pay tribute to the All Women Count lobby that is taking place in Parliament to recognise the advanced barriers to support and, if I am honest, our national sympathy—

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I thank the hon. Lady for the passion and experience with which she speaks in the House about

domestic violence and, sadly in this case, murder. She spoke of Alyson Watt, a constituent of mine who was murdered by Gary Brown, who pleaded guilty just a few weeks ago. That horrific crime was compounded by the fact that Alyson's son was caught up in the act and was critically ill in hospital. He has huge, life-changing injuries. In a bitter irony, Alyson was a senior domestic abuse project worker with Barnardo's. Her friends said that she dedicated her life and work to helping others. Politicians like us are here today and gone tomorrow, but does the hon. Lady agree that we owe it to Alyson and everyone else she just listed to be much more proactive in our schools and communities to try to end male entitlement and violence?

Jess Phillips: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. I thank him for coming here to listen to the name of his constituent and for recognising that just because someone is in the know about domestic violence, as his constituent was, that does not protect them from male violence. I have met women who, on the face of it, people would never think would be victims. We want to cast victims as being one way and it is simply not the case.

We in this place need to recognise our commitment to ending the barriers faced by every woman in this country. We must never, ever forget that that includes refugee women, who face multiple disadvantage in our country and have often suffered before they arrive here—and suffer while they are here—multiple forms of violence, both sexual and domestic. Our test should always be: did we do everything that we could to protect all women? For too many women in this country, the answer to this is still simply no. We must do better.

1.36 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): It is a huge privilege to follow the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), whom I served with on the Women and Equalities Committee. People say, "Do we still need an International Women's Day?", and I think that her speech sets out exactly the reasons why we do.

It is a huge honour to speak on International Women's Day, which is a huge opportunity for us all to share in the achievements, particularly in this anniversary year of suffrage. One hundred years ago, some women were first given the vote, but this is also an opportunity to set out our ambitions for the next 10 years, as we come to celebrate the centenary of all women getting the vote, and for the next 100 years, so that the women who will be sitting in this place then can look back and list what our generation has achieved for women. I take the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening): it is important to get on with that, so that they have a long list of achievements to read out in the years to come.

There is still so much to do in this country. We have heard many hon. and right hon. Members set out the issues that women in this country still face around equal pay and the gender pay gap. We just heard the list of names of women who have died by domestic violence. We still have to get 50:50 representation in Parliament, and we also have the ongoing issue of sexual harassment.

Women across the world still face burning injustices. Women in this world are still living in absolute poverty. Women experience rape as a weapon of war on a daily basis. Women still cannot access education, even just to

learn to read and write, and as a result, it is not just them but their families who suffer. Women are still being used as sex slaves and trafficked across the world. There is also the issue of female feticide—female babies are valued less than male babies and are often dumped, abandoned or even murdered in some parts of the world because men and male children are valued so much more. We have a huge amount of work to do.

In this anniversary year, to tackle the issue of getting more women into this place, Conservative Members of Parliament have set up a series of "Her Stories," where we highlight our personal history and how we got into this place. In my new role, when I ask women, "Why don't you stand for Parliament, for local government, for your local assembly or as a police and crime commissioner?" one of the most common comments I hear is that they do not think that they have what it takes to make a difference. Highlighting our individual stories shows that we have such a diverse mix of people in this place from all parties—people have done different jobs, come from different backgrounds and are of different classes or faiths—and we all have a right to be here.

Listening to the individual personal stories of how women got into this place will hopefully encourage other women out there to think, "Yes, I can do that." I say this to women: "If you are coming here because you want to be the third female Prime Minister of this country, you are probably coming here for the wrong reason. If you are coming here because you care passionately about an issue and you will not stop until you have achieved your aim, you are exactly the right person to come here, regardless of your background or experience."

Mrs Miller: I want put on record the extraordinary work that my hon. Friend does, the experience as a former nurse that she brought to the Women and Equalities Committee, and the experience that she brings to the House as a whole, which provides an example for us all. She is absolutely right to highlight the importance of those stories in inspiring other women to come here.

Maria Caulfield: I thank my right hon. Friend for her kind comments. She herself is an absolute inspiration to women throughout the House as a result of the work that she has done as the first Chairwoman of that Select Committee in not only highlighting issues that are important to women, but pushing those issues.

I want to reflect on my personal and family story. The hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) mentioned her grandmother. A hundred years ago, my own grandmother did not have the right to vote. My family were Irish Catholics, and it was not until 1922 that women in southern Ireland—and men—were given the vote. In Northern Ireland, which is part of the United Kingdom, many Catholic women and men could not vote in local elections until the Electoral Law Amendment Act 1968 came into force, mainly because the Irish Catholic community were neither home owners nor ratepayers and were therefore disqualified. I welcome our celebration of what happened 100 years ago, and I shall welcome our celebration in 10 years' time, but I think it was a travesty that there were women in the United Kingdom who could not vote simply because of the community from which they came.

In the next generation of the family is my aunt, who came over from Ireland to work in this country. She actually worked in this place—in the dining rooms,

[*Maria Caulfield*]

serving Members of both this House and the other place. She has many a tale to tell about her time working here, although you will be pleased to know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I will not reveal any of them today. One of her abiding memories is of being able to pay tribute to Winston Churchill when he was lying in state. I am honoured to follow in her footsteps by also working in this place, although in a different role.

We all have family stories to tell that would make a difference, and we should be loud and proud about our history. It concerns me, however, that although we are achieving equality for women, we are not achieving it for all women, in this country or in the world. It is important that when we fight for equality for women, we do so for all women, and those in the most vulnerable communities often need our help the most.

I am also slightly nervous about the discord in this country that makes some women more equal than others, and gives some a greater right than others to speak out on women's issues. We are a broad church of women in this place, and within our own political parties there is a broad church of women who have come here with different experiences and values, and different issues on which they want to campaign. My message is that there is no right or wrong issue on which to campaign. We all have different views about the NHS, education and the economy, and we all have a right to express those views. It is important for us, as a group of sisters, to respect each other's views: we may debate them and, perhaps, argue against them, but we must respect the fact that we all have the right to express them.

Let me pursue that point by highlighting the person from whom I take inspiration on the political scene. You would of course, Madam Deputy Speaker, expect Margaret Thatcher to be one of my political heroines. I grew up in a working-class area of south London where there was little or no aspiration for a working-class kid like me, but on television I saw a woman who—although she had a posh accent, often wore a string of pearls, and carried a handbag at all times—told me from that television screen that it did not matter where I came from; it was what I wanted to do and how hard I was prepared to work for it that was going to make the difference.

You would expect Florence Nightingale to be high on my heroine list, Madam Deputy Speaker. As a nurse I worked at St Thomas' hospital, and did courses at the Nightingale training school. She transformed not just nursing but healthcare in this country. You would also expect Marie Curie to be high on the list, Madam Deputy Speaker. As someone who worked in cancer care, I know that she put her life on the line to increase scientific advances and make a difference to cancer treatment. My greatest respect, however, goes to someone in a political sphere very different from mine. She sat on the Opposition Benches, but she is my absolute political heroine. She has, I believe, been underrated and underestimated in the history of women in politics.

We often talk about Northern Ireland nowadays. We talk about issues related to Brexit and a frictionless border; about the lack of an Executive and the lack of an Assembly; and about the Good Friday agreement. We highlight the work of John Major, Tony Blair and

George Mitchell, but we have airbrushed the work of Mo Mowlam. I think that if she were still here, we would completely disagree on issues of health, education and economics, but I hold her absolutely in respect for the work that she did in bringing the nationalist and Protestant communities together in one room. At a time when there was not a female leader of the Democratic Unionist party or a female leader of Sinn Féin, she was in a room full of men and had to knock heads together. She was a straight-talking woman, she was a feisty and funny woman, and she got things done that other people could not do. She was the first female Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and I think that her efforts should be recognised.

I absolutely take on board the advice that we should never meet our heroes in life because we will only be disappointed, but I had an opportunity to meet Mo Mowlam when I was working as a nurse in Brighton and she was giving a talk at Sussex University. I had never been to the university before, and I did not really "do" political talks. I was not into politics; I just voted in elections. I went to see Mo Mowlam and hear her talk because I was so inspired by the work that she was doing for the Irish Catholic community in Northern Ireland and, indeed, for all communities by bringing them together. Her talk was funny and witty, and she was everything that I had expected her to be. I went up to her and asked her to sign a copy of her autobiography for my other half, who was working overseas at the time. She refused to do it. She said, "I am not going to sign a book and dedicate it to him if he could not make the effort to be here. I will sign it to you, as a woman—and you must keep up the good work of being interested in becoming politically aware."

I think that Mo Mowlam was one of the great politicians of our time. She was a fantastic woman, and we must remember her and all the work that she did. She was a woman you could do business with, whichever side of the political divide you came from.

This is an opportunity and a time for us to recognise that equality is not about everyone being the same. We can have differences and still strive together for equality for all. Calling someone less of a sister because she is on a different side of the argument does not really promote our cause of achieving equality for all women. We have fought so hard to get freedom for women, and we have fought so hard to get freedom of speech and freedom to vote, but we still have so much more to do. So let us celebrate our differences and embrace them. One of my favourite sayings from Mo Mowlam was, "You are never terrified when you say what you mean," which is something to which I still aspire. With that in mind, let us celebrate today. Let us remember the women who have made this country great, and let us work together to tackle the issues that still exist.

1.49 pm

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): I am very proud to be sitting on these famous green Benches on International Women's Day, surrounded by other women representing constituencies in all four corners of the United Kingdom.

Since the Representation of the People Act 1918 and the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1918, both of which celebrate their 100th anniversary this

year, significant advances have been made in ensuring that Parliament represents more accurately the country that it serves. Since those Acts, 489 women have been elected as Members of this House—a milestone that must have seemed so distant to women such as Mary Smith, who delivered the first women's suffrage petition to Parliament in 1832. Currently, there are 208 female MPs, and I am honoured to be the first female MP for Coventry North East.

Alongside those Acts, great changes—including the industrial revolution and both world wars—successfully challenged the notion that a woman's role was solely domestic, and opened up possibilities for women economically, politically and socially. Despite this progress, the battle is far from won. Yes, it is fantastic that we have 208 female MPs in the House, but that equates to only 32%. At the last general election, only an additional 12 women were elected; at the current rate it will take 50 years to achieve gender equality in Parliament. One hundred years after some women won the right to vote, and some were afforded the opportunity to stand for election as an MP, the fight for political equality must continue.

I am proud to come from a party that has such an impressive record on striving to achieve these things. Labour has more female MPs than all other parties put together and is the only party to advocate the use of all-women shortlists to address the inequalities still present in the current system.

I have seen many, many changes from when I first started work—in a job where I did not get equal pay. I was happy to see the introduction of the Equal Pay Act 1970 and the Work and Families Act 2006, which extended the right to statutory maternity leave for a full year. When I had my children, I was back at work after six weeks and 12 weeks respectively. I needed the money, and I needed to keep my job.

As we have heard in previous contributions, there have been many other advances in the cause of women's equality. However, more still needs to be done, especially regarding maternity rights and the gender pay gap. In Coventry—the city I represent—a recent survey found that fewer than 20% of female respondents felt they are treated equally to men. A further 42% believed they have experienced gender discrimination in the workplace, and nearly 60% felt that women are under pressure to look good at all times.

It is clear that significant advances have been made since the Representation of the People Act and the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act. However, the results of that survey are alarming and remind us how far we have yet to go. Women are still paid less than men in many fields, and gender stereotypes surrounding certain degree subjects and industries still exist. Women are still objectified in the media, and for many, politics remains a man's world, with many women feeling this glass ceiling will never, ever shatter. We have come so far, but the fight for gender equality is not over. With cuts, especially to tax credits, the NHS and social care budgets, it is often women who are hit the hardest.

Before I conclude, I would like to pay tribute on this special day to a great, strong and formidable woman, who was elected and who swept to power on 3 May 1979. She was to inspire a young woman who watched her every move—a young woman who, because of that woman's inspiration and very presence, would become

the 414th woman ever to be elected to this place. She is probably not the person Members are thinking of: this great woman lived in Coventry, and in her kitchen there was a plaque that said, "A woman's place is in her trade union". Her name was Dorothy Dalton; she was my mother, and she was elected to Coventry City Council on that very night—a night when the Labour party swept to power in Coventry.

Great women inspire other women. Women of influence give other women confidence. Thinking about all women around the world, I hope the Minister will join me in honouring International Women's Day with not only a reflection on what we have achieved so far, but an acknowledgment that more can and must be done for gender equality.

1.54 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): It is a great delight to follow the hon. Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher). As other Members have said, we may disagree when we are in this Chamber, but there are occasions when we agree. The hon. Lady and I have had some good conversations and discussions in all-party parliamentary groups, and we agree on many other issues, so I thank her for her words in support of ladies in Coventry.

I am delighted to be able to speak in this important debate, partly because the issue, as so many other hon. Members have said, is very important, but also because, even in 2018, too many women are not allowed a voice.

What are we celebrating? We are celebrating 100 years of the Representation of the People Act 1918. We are celebrating 60 years of the Life Peerages Act 1958, under which life peers of both sexes can be Members of the Lords—that was not possible before that Act. We are celebrating 90 years since the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act 1928 was passed, which gave women electoral equality with men—in 10 years' time, we will have even more celebrations, which is fantastic. It is 100 years since the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1918. Later this year, on 14 December, it will also be 100 years since the 1918 general election, when finally women over 30 and virtually all men over 21 could vote in a general election for the first time.

In Erewash, we have had female representation since 1992, when Angela Knight was elected. She was followed, in 1997, by Liz Blackman; in 2010, by Jessica Lee; and, in 2015, by me. That is 26 years of Erewash being represented by women. I know for definite that, for half of those years, women were selected to fight the seat because they were the best, not because they were women. It is important that women feel able to put themselves forward for positions as Members of Parliament or on boards of directors, or for whatever role they want.

Let me talk about what else is happening in Erewash. Our current mayor is Councillor Mary Hopkinson, and the leader of Erewash Borough Council is Carol Hart. No one can doubt the excellent reputation Erewash has for female representation.

In previous debates on International Women's Day, I have highlighted the great women in my constituency who are active today. I am always fearful that I will miss someone out, so today I recognise them in general for all the work they do. I also want to look back 100 years,

[Maggie Throup]

because that is really what we are celebrating. I want to extol the virtues of another Erewash lady, who was alive 100 years ago. Dame Laura Knight was born in 1877, and she passed away in 1970. She was a highly acclaimed artist, who really embraced English impressionism. In her long career, Dame Laura was among the most successful and popular painters in Britain. She was created a Dame in 1929, and in 1936 she became the first woman elected to full membership of the Royal Academy—the Royal Academy was established in 1768, so it took a long time for the first woman to become a member.

During the first world war, Dame Laura was prohibited from painting her beloved coastal scenes, in case the artwork posed a security risk when it was displayed. Her husband Harold was a conscientious objector during the war and was required to work as a farm labourer as a result. They lived through a time when women were not represented and many men did not have representation either.

When we got to the second world war, Dame Laura was asked to produce a recruitment poster for the Women's Land Army—once again, she played an important role in getting women involved and playing their part. In the aftermath of the war, Dame Laura was famous for her oil painting "The Nuremberg Trial", which was reportedly greatly praised by those who had witnessed the trials, but not by those in the art world.

Dame Laura Knight—no doubt without realising it—broke many of the rules and the barriers put up by men. I am sure she has been a great role model to many people since, particularly in the art world. I am known in this House for pushing science, technology engineering and maths—STEM—subjects, yet I have just extolled the virtues of an artist. To me, however, this is all about breaking down barriers wherever they might be.

Growing up, I was an active girl guide, and I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to that organisation and all other youth organisations, whether for girls or boys, for the work that they do in our communities and for the real difference that they make. Each year, Girlguiding puts out an attitude survey, and the 2017 girls attitude survey shows some disturbing data. It shows that 64% of 13 to 21-year-olds have experienced sexual harassment in school in the past year. Sadly, that figure has gone up by 5% since 2014. The survey also shows that 55% of girls aged seven to 21 say that gender stereotypes affect their ability to say what they think, and that 30% of girls aged 11 to 16 think that computing is more for boys. In addition, 76% of girls aged 11 to 21 feel confident in their IT skills, but just 37% would consider a job in technology. There is a huge mismatch in that information, and it is really worrying. The survey shows that we have much more to do, and I hope that debates such as today's will play a part in breaking down those barriers and letting girls know that they can do whatever they want.

We all want equality, and we all want the barriers to whatever we do to be removed, but it is also important that we have choices. It is important that we recognise the contribution made by those women who take the decision to dedicate many years to raising our future generations. My mum was one of those women who stayed at home to bring up her family, and I want to

finish by repeating something that she said to me as I was approaching 18. Her words have stayed in my mind, and I remember them every time we get near to an election. Her words were more of an instruction. She said: "Women died for us to have the vote. Always vote."

2.1 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) and to hear so many inspirational speeches across the House today. In particular, I want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) for her moving tribute to the victims of violence in our country.

It is fitting that we should mark International Women's Day alongside the 100th anniversary of the Representation of the People Act 1918. My constituency has a proud history of women being pioneers and fighting for women's rights and workers' rights, going back to the matchwomen's strike of 1888 and to the establishment of the East London Federation of the Suffragettes, led by Sylvia Pankhurst, which was based in Bow and had branches all over the east end. The suffragettes grounded their campaign in the everyday reality of working women's lives and fought for a living wage, decent housing, equal pay, food price controls, adequate pensions and much else. They saw the vote as just one aspect of the struggle for equality, and while it was an important step towards equality, it represented a partial victory rather than a complete one. We owe a huge amount to them for giving us the opportunity to stand here today and speak in this debate, and to make a contribution to public life in our country and internationally. Much progress has been made since then, but we have so much more to do in relation to women's status, safety, rights, pay and representation.

I am incredibly proud of the fact that I am one of the three Muslim women elected to Parliament in 2010, along with my hon. Friends the Members for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) and for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood). I am also proud of the fact that many other Muslim women and women from other faith backgrounds and from black and minority ethnic backgrounds have entered Parliament, but there is much more to be done to increase the number of women and those from other backgrounds in our Parliament. I want to pay tribute to the women in Parliament who enabled us to get here. They were the pioneers who first arrived here, and I want to single out two in particular.

The first is my Labour predecessor, Oona King, who is now a member of the House of Lords. She was only the second black woman to be elected to this House. The other is the former deputy leader of our party, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), who has done so much for us and for our country, and who commands the support of women across the House. I certainly would not be here were it not for the encouragement and support from her and from many other women in public life.

I hope that we can continue to build on that by ensuring that women have the confidence, the encouragement, the support, the networks and the back-up to enable them to charge ahead and to stand for positions

in public life. That is why I took the step of setting up the UpRising leadership charity, which has cross-party support. It supports women and men—particularly women—from white working class and ethnic minority backgrounds to enter public life in the professions and, particularly, in politics. We work in different constituencies so that the next generation can have the support it needs and does not have to struggle in the way that previous generations have done.

I have heard many stories of people deciding to stand for Parliament and being told, “You can’t do that because people won’t support a woman.” Having the audacity to stand is still a challenge for many women. Too often, they are told that they cannot make it because they will not have the support of the people in their communities or that they will not have the support of the men. It is when women push forward and stand, as I and many others have done, that those preconceptions and prejudices are shown to be wrong. That is why we must continue to encourage young women to stand for public life and for positions in politics locally and nationally, despite all the online abuse and all the stories of abuse and injustice that we have heard in the past year. I hope that we can all continue to work together on that effort.

We have achieved a great deal, as we have heard today, but the focus on progress must continue. Progress comes with pressure. Over the past year, we have seen the #MeToo campaign and other campaigns relating to the plight of women emerging in countries where we do not expect women to suffer in this way, and that tells us that we still have much to do. Around the world, women continue to bear the brunt of poverty, of war, of sexual violence and of climate change. There are 130 million girls not in education, and 15 million girls of primary school age who will never get the chance to learn to read or write in primary school. Globally, more than a third of women are subject to violence, and 750 million women and girls are married before the age of 18. Far too often, women still bear the brunt of the conflicts around the world. They are exposed to brutal attacks, often as deliberate tools of political and ethnic violence. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, women are far more likely than soldiers to be victims of violence. In Sudan, rape has been used as a weapon of war by Government and opposition forces. A report published by the International Rescue Committee last year stated that the scale of violence against women and girls in South Sudan was double the global average.

Justine Greening: The hon. Lady is making an important point. A longer-term consequence of children in those communities growing up with violence around them is that domestic violence rates, even after peace is secured, are way higher than in other countries. It is vital that she makes that point, and she is quite right to do so.

Rushanara Ali: I thank the right hon. Lady for that intervention and for her work when she was International Development Secretary. As a former shadow International Development Minister, I cannot stop being affected by the experience of women in conflict zones and other parts of the world. The ongoing crisis in Syria has forced the displacement of women, who have fled to other countries in the hope of finding safety. However, as the right hon. Lady points out, women continue to experience violence long after they have fled the instability

in their own countries. The women living in temporary refugee settlements in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and elsewhere have limited access to support and live in constant fear of further violence and forced marriage.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): The hon. Lady is making a powerful point. Does she agree that much more should be done to encourage more women to take part in making peace? There should be greater recognition of the valuable role that women can play in creating peace agreements and trying to end conflict. In Northern Ireland, very many women helped to bring about the peace that we enjoy today.

Rushanara Ali: I could not agree more with the hon. Lady. We have seen the important contribution that women can make, but they are too often left out of the negotiations. Our Government must continue to push forward and ensure that women have a strong voice in peace negotiations.

Many girls whose lives have already been devastated by conflict in their own countries are being forced into situations that no child should have to face. They are living cycles of abuse, exploitation and trauma. Some 70% of the Rohingya who have fled to Bangladesh from conflict in Myanmar are women and children, and the United Nations has identified what has happened in Myanmar as a textbook example of ethnic cleansing and that genocide cannot be ruled out. It is increasingly apparent that the Burmese military has systematically used rape and violence against Rohingya women as part of their campaign of terror. They have torched villages and tortured civilians, particularly women. According to a UN report, girls aged as young as five or seven were raped, often in front of their relatives and sometimes by three to five men taking turns, all dressed in army uniforms. The report goes on to detail accounts of summary executions, torture and disappearances. I have visited the region several times in recent years and have spoken to refugees who have fled violence and who have shared stories of rape and violence against them. As the world watches on, our Government must ensure that those who have perpetrated the violence—the Burmese military—are held to account and that a referral is made to the International Criminal Court.

Violence against women is a violation of human rights, and we have a collective responsibility to protect women here in this country and around the world from the appalling suffering that they face and to address the implications of that suffering for their children. Britain has a proud history as a leader in international development, and we must continue to press for progress. As other hon. Members have pointed out, the millennium development goals galvanised efforts from countries around the world to meet the needs of the world’s poorest and most vulnerable, particularly women. We must also continue to support the sustainable development goals and encourage other countries to do the same. The 2030 agenda for sustainable development, which has gender equality and women’s empowerment at its heart and which was adopted by world leaders in 2015, offers a significant opportunity for progress. The first SDG aims to end poverty in all its forms everywhere, and the fifth seeks to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. I urge Ministers across Government to champion the need to achieve those goals and to continue to support our aid effort.

[Rushanara Ali]

In conclusion, I want to share a personal story. I was born in a country, Bangladesh, that was born out of a conflict in which millions of people lost their lives. Rape and violence were used as weapons of war, and that continues to be the case in many other countries today. We must all continue to work hard to ensure that we bring an end to sexual violence in conflict.

2.15 pm

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): It is an honour to follow a moving speech by the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali). One of my faults is usually overconfidence, but I confess that I begin to speak in this debate with a degree of nervousness. So much often goes wrong when men try to talk about issues related to women and their rights, and I could too easily end up saying that women need to step up when the truth is that grotesque imbalances at a senior level often mean that it is men who need to step up and work with women to deconstruct the obstacles that stand in the path of female progress. We need more men from all sides of the political debate to step up and speak up about that in this place.

I could also easily end up being one of those men who says that simply because we have a female Prime Minister, a female Home Secretary and more female MPs than ever, this debate should be over. However, just because suicide is a disproportionately young, male problem that does not mean that a gender pay gap, whereby women effectively work for free for 63 days a year, is okay. We need to work on both those issues, not pretend that one cancels out the other. Worse still, the deeper one goes into such issues, the more likely it is that one will be accused of mansplaining, and then one will hear from the Prime Minister. I hope to avoid most of that, and I want instead to make three points.

I could not go on the women's march on Sunday, but I was sorry to miss it, so I tweeted as much, saying:

"A better gender balance will make parliament stronger for everyone."

For just a few hours, I subsequently received if not the torrent of abuse that women often receive on Twitter, then a small flood of abuse. Twitter is not an equal opportunities abuser, but users were certainly keen to tell me what equal opportunities would look like. Users told me that a meritocracy would produce the best Parliament, never mind if it was a balanced Parliament. The more I explained that I am not in favour of positive discrimination—I had not said that I was—the more I realised that Twitter was showing me what being mansplained to feels like. While it seems self-evident that, in an equal society, a balance in Parliament or the workplace is an obvious consequence of equality of opportunity, to too many it is not. Likewise, it seems obvious that if an equal Parliament better reflects the population it serves, it better represents that population and acts more instinctively in the whole country's interests.

In saying all that, I cannot help thinking that I am preaching to the converted here, but I was shocked to see that what felt obvious to me was interpreted as an attack on men, and that is the second thing that I want to talk about. Too many people still seem to think that men have to lose for feminism to succeed. The reality is surely that a society that draws without discrimination

on the talents of all its members is better for all its members. When women are treated better, men and women are the winners. A fairer division of labour both in how people bear the burdens of childcare and in the pressure of earning the money that pays the mortgage would benefit everyone. Men have nothing to fear from the shards of glass that fall after the shattering of the glass ceiling.

Finally, I want to talk about what men might do to create a society that is so equal that nobody would bat an eyelid at the idea of a man having the same aspirations to equality as a woman. Here are a few tiny ideas: should men—still more often the senior people at work—do more to promote the flexible working that might promote equality? Should the Government incentivise that? Should teacher training include more on the casual use of language, which shapes children, whereby boys are good if they are strong, and girls are praised for being pretty, but somehow "pretty boy" doesn't always ring true as a compliment? Should toy manufacturers think more carefully, as they increasingly do, about whether blue is always for boys? Should we not consider that if we make catcalling a hate crime, we are treating the symptom, when all of us here should be committed to treating the causes of sexist behaviour wherever it starts? Should we not all do all of that, because when the country is better for all women, it will be better for all men, too?

I wanted to speak not because I am some paragon of right-on virtue—

Gavin Newlands: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Matt Warman: On the point of my virtue, I give way.

Gavin Newlands: I have no knowledge of the hon. Gentleman's virtue, but I thank him for giving way. I praise him for a good speech so far. May I add to his list? He should join the white ribbon campaign and the all-party parliamentary group for the white ribbon campaign UK, so that we can try to end violence against women and girls. He is most welcome at our meeting next Tuesday.

Matt Warman: Not least because the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is nodding vigorously on the Front Bench, I take it that the white ribbon is a good campaign to join. It is obviously a weakness that I do not know a huge amount about it. I will do my best to join the hon. Gentleman on Tuesday.

I am not pretending that I am a paragon of virtue on this matter, or indeed on any other; I wanted to speak because I know that I am not. The more we are conscious, across this House, of where we are weak, the stronger we can be. I know how often I have failed to step up, at home, at work and in this Chamber—it is not always possible to do so, for a whole host of very real reasons—but personally and professionally, inequality is the loss of all of us. Now more than ever, we need men to stand up with women for fairness, because we will all be better off for it.

2.21 pm

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I feel immensely privileged to speak in this debate to mark International Women's Day, 100 years after some women

first got the vote. I represent the borough of Lewisham, where, I am proud to say, 100 years after women got the right to be Members of Parliament, we have three female MPs. I am delighted to serve alongside my hon. Friends the Members for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), and for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander), who have given me immeasurable support before and after my election to this place. The borough of Lewisham has been pioneering in gender equality. In the 1970s, the council set up the Lewisham women's rights working party. I am proud to say that we have no gender pay gap on Lewisham Council, and we have more women in senior council roles than men.

So much has been done over the last 100 years to promote gender equality—the Equal Pay Act 1970, the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, the Maternity and Parental Leave etc. Regulations 1999, and the Equality Act 2010 to name but a few—but there is still a great deal more to be done. Having worked as an employment rights lawyer for many years, I all too often saw women demoted or dismissed after returning from maternity leave, and employers putting up unnecessary barriers to flexible working. I saw women being paid less than men for work of equal value, and women who were too afraid to speak out when they were discriminated against, for fear of losing their job.

Those experiences motivated me to try to make a difference. Two years ago, on International Women's Day, after I had become a mum, I launched my business providing affordable legal advice to women who faced maternity and sex discrimination at work, which I ran until I was elected to this place. I wish there was no demand for such a business, but there was, and that is borne out by the statistics.

In 2016, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Equality and Human Rights Commission undertook a major piece of research on the prevalence and nature of maternity discrimination at work. The results, based on survey interviews with more than 3,000 mothers and 3,000 employers, are quite shocking. More than three in four mothers—77%—said that they had a negative or discriminatory experience before, during or after their maternity leave. One in five mums reported experiencing harassment or negative comments from colleagues or their employer relating to pregnancy or flexible working. Ten per cent. of mums said that their employer discouraged them from attending antenatal appointments, and 11% said that they felt forced to leave their job after having a child. Scaled up, that amounts to 54,000 women a year being forced to leave their job simply for becoming a mum.

According to the Fawcett Society, the mean aggregate gender pay gap for part-time and full-time workers stands at 18.4%. At the current rate of progress, it will take more than 100 years to close the gap, which is just not acceptable. There is a huge amount more that should and can be done to end gender inequality at work. The Select Committee on Women and Equalities has made strong recommendations in this area that have yet to be enacted by the Government.

To start with, all jobs should be advertised as flexible by default, unless there is a strong business case for them not to be. In the age of technology, being sat behind a desk in an office from 9 am until 6 pm, five days a week, is rarely necessary, yet the culture of presenteeism—of staying late in the office but not necessarily

being productive—persists. A cultural shift is needed in the way that we work, with compressed hours, home working, staggered hours or term-time working becoming the norm, so that families—both men and women—can better strike a work-life balance, and so that having children does not diminish prospects at work.

We urgently need proper paid paternity leave to be introduced. Shared parental leave has been a step in the right direction, but take-up has been low—it is only at an estimated 2%—and the statutory rates of pay mean that it is only really an option for those in high-income families or those with savings. In addition, the model of transferring leave from mum to dad does not work for all families. Instead, non-transferable paternity leave, paid at a rate closer to actual earnings, should be implemented. Only then will we get the cultural shift at work needed to end stereotypes about women being a burden on business, and the assumption that they alone will be responsible for childcare duties. That would go a long way towards ending the gender pay gap sooner rather than later.

Laws on maternity discrimination and enforcement of breaches also need toughening up. To start with, it should be made harder for women to be made redundant after their maternity leave. Regulation 10 of the Maternity and Parental Leave etc. Regulations 1999 gives women some protection against being made redundant while pregnant or on maternity leave, but the protected period ends when the woman returns to work. That does not make sense, given that very often it is exactly when a new mum comes back to work that they begin to feel pushed out. To strengthen our discrimination laws, the period of protection against redundancy should be extended to 12 months after a woman returns to work following her maternity leave.

We also need stricter sanctions against employers who breach discrimination laws or fail to publish details of their gender pay gap. I welcome the Labour policy launched today by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler). It would help to close the gender pay gap by ensuring that all private and public employers with more than 250 staff had to audit their gender pay gaps—and, furthermore, prove that they were taking action to close the gap—or face strict penalties. If employers risk losing money, they are more likely to comply with their legal obligations.

Finally, rights are often far too difficult to enforce. According to the charity Maternity Action, the introduction of employment tribunal fees led to a reduction of 40% in maternity discrimination claims. I am alarmed that there have been suggestions by Conservative Members that fees might be reintroduced, albeit at a lower level. Tribunal fees are a clear barrier to access to justice for women who have been discriminated against at work.

The time limit for bringing a claim for maternity discrimination in the employment tribunal is three months from the act complained of. Both the Women and Equalities Committee and the Equality and Human Rights Commission have said that this is not long enough. Those with a newborn baby at home are likely to be having sleepless nights, not to mention feeding round the clock and endless nappy changes. New mums also often go through a huge period of readjustment, physically and mentally, so the notion that they will engage with a complex legal process is simply unrealistic

[Ellie Reeves]

in many cases. It is likely that far more women would assert their rights if the time limit was increased from three months to six.

Later today, I will be proud to mark International Women's Day by speaking at an event in Lewisham alongside some of the original members of the Lewisham women's rights working party. We will reflect not only on how much has been achieved over the past few decades, but on how much more we still have to do: ending the gender pay gap once and for all; making flexible working the norm rather than the exception; and promoting shared caring responsibilities. Only then will we achieve true gender equality at work.

2.30 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): It is huge honour to be called to speak as the first woman Member of Parliament for Chelmsford on this, the International Women's Day in the 100th year since women won the vote. Yesterday I became a member of the Women and Equalities Committee and attended my first meeting. There are a number of mothers on that Committee, and we were looking at the challenges faced by the parents of a newborn baby. We came up with a long list of recommendations, every one of which is to help fathers, because it is only by working together that we will achieve equality. I want to thank the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) and, especially, my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) for their contributions in this debate.

I am also a member of the Science and Technology Committee. As this is also the Year of Engineering, I want to focus my words on issues that affect women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. EngineeringUK estimates that the demand for graduate engineers outstripped supply by 20,000 people last year. We aspire to be a world-leading, 21st-century, innovative economy, but to achieve that we will need to double the number of engineering students at our universities. We will succeed only if we inspire the next generation of young women in our schools to take up the opportunities of science and tech.

Before coming to the House today, I attended an assembly at Barnes Farm Junior School in Chelmsford. I met Ada Barnes, who is in year 3. Ada told me that she is named after Ada Lovelace, who was the pioneer of computing. She invented the first algorithm that was run on a computer. She was the world's first computer programmer and the mother of the digital revolution. We all know about Charles Babbage. He invented the machine, but she discovered what the machine could do. Ada Barnes asked me which woman in history had inspired me, so who do I choose? Do I choose my own daughter's namesake, Elizabeth, our great Queen today? Do I choose Elizabeth I, who stood at the dockside at Tilbury as the Spanish armada was approaching and explained that she had

"the body of a weak, feeble woman; but...the heart and stomach of a king"?

She defended our country. Do I choose my namesake, Queen Victoria, who not only ran the huge British empire, but was mother to nine children? Or, at a time when I said I want to focus on women in science, do I focus on Margaret Thatcher, not only our first woman Prime Minister, but a scientist, too?

In areas of science we are doing really well, as 50% of those studying to become doctors at our medical schools are women.

Maria Caulfield: Does my hon. Friend recognise that Margaret Thatcher was also the scientist behind the Mr Whippy ice cream?

Vicky Ford: Absolutely, which goes to show how interesting science is. Women in science make great leaders, and women doctors have already broken through the glass ceiling in so many ways. Last year, the chair of the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges brought together the presidents of the Royal Colleges of Surgeons, of Physicians, of Pathologists, of Radiologists, of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, of General Practitioners and of Paediatrics and Child Health. They were joined by the outgoing president of the Royal College of Ophthalmologists for a photo call. Every one of the nine people present was a woman. Our chief medical officer, Professor Dame Sally Davies, is a phenomenal woman, leading the world with her campaigns on antimicrobial resistance and now focusing on air quality. Those who are interested in technology, tech ethics and artificial intelligence should go and meet our Information Commissioner, Elizabeth Denham, as she is inspirational. She has degree in history and a masters in informational science.

However, there are other areas of science in which we are not doing at all well. Fewer than one in 10 of the engineers in this country are women, and we have the lowest level of female engineering professionals anywhere in Europe. Not only are we behind Germany and France, but we are way behind countries such as Latvia, Bulgaria and Cyprus. We must do better. Increasing the number of pupils taking maths at A-level is key. In November, the Government announced that schools would get an additional £600 for every additional pupil taking A-level maths. That has the potential to be transformational, so I thank Ministers for that. I hope that it will dramatically increase the number of pupils studying maths, but it will not necessarily solve the problem. That is because already nearly four out of 10 of the people doing maths A-level are girls, so that is not where the issue lies. The problem is in physics.

To become an engineer, one needs to do not only maths but physics. Girls are really good at physics. At GCSE, the classes are 50:50; some 64,000 girls passed physics GCSE last year, with nearly half of them receiving a top grade—an A or A*. That is brilliant, but at A-level the level drops from 50:50 to girls making up just one in five students. That ratio has not changed in 20 years, so we must encourage young women to do more in physics.

I need to declare an interest: I did physics A-level and I did win a prize. I won a silver medal in the physics Olympiad. I still have the book I was awarded, and inside the front cover is an inscription that is addressed to "Mr Victoria" and congratulates "him" on "his achievement". I gave up physics—let us just say that I did not think that this was a career that valued me. That is ancient history, and a generation later much has changed, but we do need to encourage girls and to give them the evidence of why that career wants them.

I told the primary school assembly at Barnes Farm today three reasons why the girls might wish to consider a career in engineering. The first was that they are

wanted. One third of companies say that they cannot find the STEM skills they need, so if girls do science and technology, they will find jobs. The second was that they will make money, because those jobs will be well paid. The evidence shows us that girls who have studied maths and one other science at A-level earn, on average, 30% more than their peers—an extra 30p for every pound. The third was that they will be happy. A recent study of more than 300 women engineers found that more than 80% of them said they were happy or very happy with their career choice. How many people can say that?

Taking a degree in engineering is a passport to work all across the world. Engineering gave us flight and helped to break through the frontier of space. Just last month, I was at CERN in Switzerland, where our engineers are uncovering the secrets of the universe. Taking up a career in engineering does not mean giving up all the glitz and the glamour. Just 10 days ago, at the catwalks in Milan, they had got rid of the models and instead the handbags were flown down the catwalks and paraded by a squadron of drones.

Today is International Women's Day. It is a century since women got the vote. It is also the Year of Engineering. May I ask that we encourage all the women and men in this House to use that opportunity to go out and inspire the young women in our schools and classrooms to consider a career in engineering?

2.39 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): It is an honour and a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), with whom I shared that memorable trip to CERN last month—it was a joy. I was particularly moved to come across not one but two of my old school friends, both female, working on the large hadron collider—I very nearly understood what they were doing.

In the 21st century, is it not time to say, “Job done. We don't need International Women's Day any more”? I say that we need it as much as ever, as many others have today, and not because I look backwards, refusing to accept progress. In fact I celebrate our progress, which is one reason why International Women's Day is so important: we get to celebrate our achievements. I say that we still need it not because I want women in the role of victims—quite the opposite—and not because the job is done, because it is not. International Women's Day has the power to focus women's and men's minds not just in this place, but across the country and the world, in really productive ways, and there are benefits for men and women of doing so.

One of those ways is the domestic stocktake—others have already mentioned some of this, but I will give a few more examples. The date of 8 March gives us a nudge to ask how we are doing on different dimensions of gender equality. We can look at the affordability and availability of childcare, at gender pay gaps, as others have mentioned, and at the impact of public sector finance cuts on women's lives. All those give us a sieve for sifting out the stubborn aspects of economic and other inequalities.

Another value of today is that it nudges us to lift our gaze to the rest of the world. We should be asking how the millennium development goals and now the sustainable

development goals have benefited women and girls. How might women's lives be improved by better, more inclusive and more transparent processes for trade negotiations, for example? Those things matter, yet women get left out of those questions and processes. What is the availability—or otherwise—of water, sanitation, healthcare, education, finance and technology doing to limit or assist women's and girls' routes to learning and employment across the world?

A third value—the one I want to focus on—is that of imagining. What would a world free from gender inequality look like? How would we recognise it, how would it be better for women and for men, what more do we need to do to get there, and how will women's liberation truly change the world? Well, it would be a world in which no woman would ever be fearful or uncomfortable walking down a city centre street or into an office, whatever the time of day or night, wherever they are and whatever they are wearing. It would be a world in which it was unthinkable that my nieces would ever be sexually harassed, or even have to think about the possibility. It would be a world in which it was impossible that my mother could be made nervous by big groups of loud men shouting stuff.

It would be a world in which no one would even dream of paying to have someone else's body at their disposal for sexual gratification, objectification or abuse, whether in a so-called sexual entertainment venue, in prostitution or pornography, or in an intimate relationship. In a world of gender inequality, or even equality—see; it is difficult to imagine, but we are getting there—in which there was women's liberation, no man would even want to do any of those things. They would choose. They would know the benefits of and how to have intimate relationships, professional relationships, and social and wider public relationships with women based on respect and, in the case of intimate relationships, shared mutual enjoyment, rather than something that is enforced. In that regard, I pay tribute to Bristol Fawcett Society, Bristol Women's Voice and the many other women in Bristol who are working and campaigning specifically on changing the landscape of sexual objectification and gratification, and on challenging our rules and processes for making decisions about so-called sexual entertainment venues.

It would be a world in which young girls were just as likely as young boys to consider jobs in technology, engineering, particle physics or business management; as likely to take up apprenticeships in building trades or in catering; and as likely to get those jobs as their male peers—and, most of all, without any comment, nudging, eyebrow raising or sexual harassment at work when they did. It would be a world in which all employers, not just the really good ones—they do definitely exist—saw all men, not just women, as potentially needing time off to care for babies, children or vulnerable older relatives; and then, as some employers already do, worked with employees and trade unions to value those qualities in men and women, instead of discriminating against them, and worked out how to manage the employment structures needed. That is a big job for all of us in the 21st century.

It would be a world in which rape was not used as a war crime. In fact, in my head—this is a big imagine—it would be world in which rape was not a part of any woman's life. Just saying that out loud, I am struck that that seems really difficult to imagine, which is a marker

[Thangam Debbonaire]

of why International Women's Day is still so important. To me, it should be unimaginable that any man would ever think it was an option or something they would want to do. It would be a world in which rape was a part of history. It would be a world in which refugee women were not trafficked, abused or imprisoned, with their talents refused to be recognised. It would also be a world in which the end of violence against women and girls meant that not only the use of rape as a war crime, but the abuse of women in other areas of conflict, was over. It would be a world in which women and girls were not forced to flee their homelands in the first place, but in which, if they were, we would welcome them and make them safe.

So how do we get there? Government, business, education and so on all have their roles, as we do in this place, but I want us—men and women—to start right here in this room. We can all help to bring about, and benefit from, true gender equality. Women in this place and beyond, I ask you a series of questions. Can you advise, guide, support and encourage other women and girls? Can you be the person who spots a woman's potential and tells them, because they might not have realised it? Can you take part in any of the many schemes to give women a chance to shadow or be mentored by you? Can you speak out against injustices that are holding women back and keeping women fearful, and stand by your sisters who are affected by those injustices even if you are not—in fact, especially if you are not? Can you recruit male allies and talk to them about why it matters that we live in a world of gender equality and how they, too, can speak out?

Will you always thank those women who have mentored and helped you? Will you let them know, years later, how their advice worked out for you? I want to say thank you to my maths teacher, Mrs Morley, who years and years ago helped me to see that maths was for girls. I also want to thank the many women MPs—too many to mention—particularly my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), who I am delighted and slightly nervous to say is just in front of me, and Baroness Jean Corston, the former Member for Bristol East, both of whom showed me just how much women MPs can do for women, and in ways that many of those women will never know about. They showed me that that does not matter, because we should not expect a “thank you” note from all the women we might benefit—we should just be glad to have the chance.

While I am at the thanking stage of my speech, I might as well thank all the women in my family, particularly the young women, who challenge me so much, inspire me and make me question my beliefs and think again about my particular form of feminism. I thank all the sisters in the violence against women movement who have helped us to make so much progress from where we were when I started out as a teenager, to where we are now.

I ask all Members to look around our constituencies to see whether we can spot where we are making progress towards that truly great, gender-equal world, and where progress is still stalling—and we need to be honest about that.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): The hon. Lady is my near neighbour—her constituency is almost in Somerset—and she is making such a passionate case. May I say in the spirit of cross-party relations that one of women's great strengths is that they are very good at working together. I know that we have our differences, but when we get together—for example, on the Jo Cox campaign—we do great work. Perhaps we should highlight that more. On a day like today, we should give particular credit to the women who work together in so many areas and who can indeed do so much great work.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. She almost predicted what I was about to say next, which was to ask us all in this place whether we can do more to work across party lines. For example, the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) and I have worked together on an issue that is very dear to, as well as physically close to, both our hearts. That is a really good example for me, and a personal one. In our different ways, everyone in this place finds their route to cross-party working.

As Members, can we visit more schools, youth clubs and businesses, and show more women and men that women are capable of political leadership, and that it is for us, too? Can we speak out, ask questions, use our positions for good, expect—nay, demand—answers, and hold others and ourselves to account, while always providing for improvement rather than just blankly assuming that things will never get better? Can we show women and girls that there is potentially another #MeToo—one that says, “Me too, I can be politically active, I can take a leadership role, I can study maths, I can work on whatever it is that matters to me, not held back by my gender but perhaps even helped by it”? Can we always give out that hope? My hope is that everyone present today can take forward some of the suggestions that have come from Members from all parties, and those yet to come. Can we take with us some of the spirit of International Women's Day, here in this place, and help us all to get ever closer to a world in which gender equality and women's liberation are a reality for us all?

2.50 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to follow that wonderful speech by the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), for which I thank her.

On International Women's Day, there is certainly cause to celebrate women who have achieved great things, as well as remembering the women who are still striving to change the world. For example, there is cause to celebrate the career of Anne Glover, a biologist who was Scotland's first chief scientific adviser and later became chief scientific adviser to the President of the European Commission, again being the first to hold the position. Professor Glover is about to become the next president of the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

The hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) would be interested to hear about Victoria Drummond, who was the first woman marine engineer, the first woman to serve as a merchant navy chief engineer, the first woman to hold a Board of Trade certificate as a ship's engineer, the first woman member of the Institute of Marine

Engineers, and the first woman to receive the Lloyd's War Medal for Bravery at Sea for her courage under fire in world war two.

Or, we can talk about Roza Salih, Amal Azzudin, Ewelina Siwak, Emma Clifford, Jennifer McCarron, Toni Henderson and Agnesa Murselaj. As schoolgirls, they shook the country, demanding better treatment for child asylum seekers and an end to dawn raids on families. They got movement—the UK Government stopped the policy of detaining children for immigration removal purposes in 2010—but none of them would claim total victory, I think. Those “Glasgow Girls” are all young women now, and it is to be hoped that they will continue to make a difference in their lives and the lives of others. They are already impressive and I hope we hear much, much more about them.

There are legions of women who have proven their ability in many, many fields, and there are many more who are proving that now. Being a woman is not a design error; nor is it a blessing without measure. Women are, quite simply, human beings. All around the world, though, there are examples of women being treated unfairly for the simple crime of being a woman, and we have heard some examples today. I think, though, that we can be too smug in suggesting that that is something that thrives elsewhere and has no foundation here. The “Time's Up” and #MeToo revelations have shown that sexism is deeply embedded in our culture—that it is seen as simply a part of life and that women are expected just to deal with it.

We see it in this House: a juvenile, grinning idiocy that is sometimes so offensive; the smugness of a minority of men who think that supposedly clever point scoring proves something; an anti-intellectual nonsense that makes this continuing debate so tiring. There are men in this House who have a record of opposing progressive politics, without substantive argument but with plenty of bluster and filibuster, opposing equality as a playground joke. Like others, I am sure, I am tired of engaging with men with so little—so very little—to offer and am pleased that they represent a tiny percentage of the men I encounter.

I encourage all Members to watch the video of the debate on misogyny as a hate crime in Westminster Hall yesterday. If they do, they will see an intervention that illustrates very well what I have just described, but they will also see several excellent and important contributions that are really worth digesting. In particular, I recommend the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black). The direct manner of her speech added a clarity that makes a harsh point so much more effective.

As the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) said in that debate, we seem to have come to a point where very often it is women, rather than men, who are expected to address misogyny. I hope that this year turns that around. I do have hope for Scotland's politics in that regard. We have a woman First Minister, who is an extremely effective politician, a woman leader of the Opposition in Holyrood and a woman head of our civil service. We have a gender-balanced Cabinet in the Scottish Government already, and a large number of very good women in local government. It is not so much a case that change is coming, more that change is already happening, and Scottish politics is being rebalanced.

In this world where the President of the United States excuses juvenile offensiveness by claiming that it is just the talk in which men indulge in the changing room at the gym, and where Members of this House are falling short of decency, leaving the staff of this place feeling unable to raise complaints, it is surely time to clean the stables. I ask all Members to take that on board, as I know that they will.

2.55 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock).

It is an honour to speak today in this extremely important debate on International Women's Day. I hope to raise awareness in this House of the significant challenges that still face women in politics in this significant year celebrating 100 years since some women got the vote.

On arriving in Westminster last June, it was quite extraordinary how a group of us became friendly, having realised that we were all in very similar situations. Just one of the common denominators was that we were single parents, elected to Parliament; and the other was that we were women. At least five of us found ourselves thrust from being working single parents to Members of Parliament, practically overnight, but, every day, we are proud to be working-class women standing up for our communities.

I am very proud to be a member of the Women and Equalities Committee, and to be part of the all-party group on single parent families, which will be officially launched on International Single Parents Day on 21 March. In one of my very first conversations with the chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq), she said that she had never discussed being a single mother before. It seemed that, in our company, she felt comfortable enough to speak about it. Being a single parent is not a status that people necessarily want to share, as it brings with it a stigma. It would be interesting to know, across this House, how many Members are single parents. It is imperative that we stand together to recognise the challenges that lone parents face every day. In the media, Stacey Solomon has championed being a single mother and taken a lot of criticism for it, but she speaks plainly and openly about the “mummy guilt” that goes with working away from home and with being in the public eye.

There are many challenges that I have experienced since becoming an MP. Balancing family life is not easy. It can be impossible to maintain a relationship and, unfortunately, that is one of the sacrifices that I have had to make. Throughout my working life, I have seen at first hand how many women are juggling balls—I have always been proud of the fact that that is something that I can do, but I have always known that even the most talented jugglers drop a ball. When someone is on their own, when they are the provider, the organiser, the mother, the daughter, the person who people depend on, where do they turn when that ball drops? Sadly, many women return to abusive relationships, go further into debt, or turn to alcohol, drugs or anti-depressants.

A report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in July last year shows how single parents on low incomes are being hit so hard by rising living costs and the benefits

[Tonia Antoniazzi]

freeze. How they cope with the impact of low pay and insecurity is of great concern to me and my colleagues, because, although we have been working in relatively well-paid jobs, we know at first hand that the cost of a divorce or separation is not only financial, but emotional. Only last night, when I should have been preparing this speech, I had chats with two friends who I studied A-levels with—unfortunately, not maths. They are both ambitious and talented women—we have shared a life journey—and both are happily married with three children. One battles daily in her place of work to have her hard work and dedication recognised, and she is too scared to ring her union because she fears a backlash and being seen as a troublemaker. That is not the sort of working environment that we want for women, or for anybody in society, in 2018.

I was telling my friend, in contrast, about our other friend, who lives in Melbourne, Australia. The friend I was speaking to said, “Please don’t tell me about her perfect beach life down under.” Unfortunately, I had to tell her that our friend suffered something similar to a stroke two months ago and has been told that even after intensive physiotherapy, a full recovery is unlikely. Regardless of that, I said to her, “I am sending you strength and love on International Women’s Day.” She told me that her 15-year-old daughter is doing a presentation today to 600 students in her middle school about inspiring women, and that she was going to talk about this famous woman—a teacher, a single mother and a family friend—who followed her dreams so that she could influence change.

On International Women’s Day, I can tell Members that women from all walks of life are fighting a daily battle and desperately trying to hold it together. It is great that the dynamics of this House are changing. Being a female Member of Parliament is incredible, and I am still, and always will be, full of awe and wonder at the privilege. Every woman faces a challenge every day, and the challenges that we face reflect the challenge that our society puts on women every day, from harassment in all its forms to putting food on the table and providing a home for our children.

We have many challenges in getting more women into politics, and we need to identify the barriers in order to make careers in politics more accessible to women. It is at the grassroots of politics that we need to look. I read in *The Guardian* yesterday that Sarah Childs from Birkbeck, University of London argues that political parties need to think again about how they assess women’s contributions. If long service is a condition of selection, for example, it automatically discriminates against women with caring responsibilities. She called for a rethink of what constitutes a good party member, because the way that is viewed often excludes women. It is well known that I am a latecomer to politics—a relative newbie in the party—and I am glad to say that in my short time in politics, my potential and talent have been recognised in my selection by Welsh Labour.

I often draw comparisons from my time playing rugby. Obviously, I believe that rugby is the best team sport in the world. Rugby union provides a platform for a wide range of players, and that, for me, is the key to a successful team. A successful political team has its forwards and its backs. It draws from a wide range of

skills, but, more importantly, it represents society. We have to strive to be a political team that reflects our communities—50:50. The new Labour intake and the new intake across the House in 2017 have brought a new dynamic not just to the Labour party, but to this Parliament. I look forward to us continuing to make a difference to the lives of women in the United Kingdom and across the world.

3.3 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): We have had an excellent debate so far, with some very inspiring speeches about International Women’s Day. I want to spend the time available to me doing some womansplaining. I want to take stock of how far we have come in gender equality and look back at some amazing ordinary women who have achieved extraordinary changes in our society, but who have often been ignored or written out of history.

I want to tell Members three stories. The first is from July 1888, when 1,400 women at the Bryant and May east end factory went on strike against bullying, low pay and dangerous working conditions, which resulted in many of them developing phossy jaw. The second story is about the June 1968 equal pay dispute by 187 women machinists at Ford in Dagenham. My third story, which is also from 1968, is about the campaign by the Hessle Road women’s committee in Hull, which was led by four great local women: Lily Bilocca, Yvonne Blenkinsop, Mary Denness and Christine Jensen. They campaigned to improve safety at sea for trawlermen.

In 1968, Hull was one of the world’s largest fishing ports, but there was a dark side to the industry. A trawlerman was 17 times more likely to die in an industrial accident at sea than the average worker. It was the most dangerous occupation on earth. Six thousand men had died at sea in the years before 1968. When a further 58 trawlermen were lost on the *St Romanus*, Kingston Peridot and *Ross Cleveland* trawlers between January and February 1968, it became known as the triple trawler disaster. Those lost were the husbands, the sons, the brothers, the uncles and the nephews of the women in Hull. After the triple trawler disaster, Lily Bilocca said, “Enough is enough”, and started a campaign to improve safety for their menfolk.

All three of those stories of determined working women getting organised and taking a stand share three similar characteristics. First, all these women took action that shocked the society of their time and offended some. Each went against the view that women should not have views of their own or the will to take action. At this point, I am thinking of the maxim, “Well-behaved women rarely make history.” In 1888, in late Victorian England, matchwomen were dismissed as little more than ignorant young women, largely of Irish immigrant stock, who were easily led astray by outside militant forces.

The 1968 Dagenham women machinists fought as much against the TGWU establishment of the time, tepid at best in any support for equal pay, as much as they fought against the Detroit bosses of Ford. Hull’s headscarf revolutionaries shocked the nation and knocked the Vietnam war off the front pages of newspapers with their 10,000-name petition, their local marches, and their picketing of the dockside. They took the fight to Westminster and met Harold Wilson. They threatened

to picket his private home if their demands to improve safety were not met. They did this in the face of death threats, actual violence, and insults from trawler owners and others. They were described as “hysterical women” and told that they should not get involved in men’s business. This was, of course, all before social media. We know now how threats and insults are used to try to put women down and stop them standing up for the issues that they care about.

Secondly, all these women achieved far more in a very short period of time than men, supposedly campaigning for the same causes, achieved over decades. The 1888 Bow strike lasted only about 14 days, but it resulted in more progress than the men had achieved in decades before. The ripple of change throughout the wider labour movement was even more profound from the matchwomen’s strike, because in the following year we had the 1889 dock strike in east London, spawning more politically active new unionism. As such, I believe that the matchwomen can be described as the founding mothers of the Labour party.

The 1968 Ford Dagenham strike lasted just 21 days. Like the matchwomen and the headscarf revolutionaries in Hull, the women brought their case to Westminster and won. As a result of this strike, Labour’s Secretary of State for Employment and Productivity—the wonderful, the marvellous Barbara Castle—introduced the Equal Pay Act 1970. Although we all know in this House that the battle for equal pay goes on, the Dagenham women overturned decades of stalling on pay equality.

In Hull, as one of the headscarf revolutionaries, Mary Denness, said, they had

“achieved more in six weeks than the politicians and trade unions have in years.”

Their campaign persuaded the Government to adopt their demands in the fishermen’s charter, which meant full crewing of ships, radio operators on board every ship, improved weather forecasting, better training, more safety equipment, and a mother ship with medical facilities to accompany the fleet. Those ordinary yet extraordinary Hull women, led by Lily Bilocca, a cod skinner on the docks, saved thousands of men’s lives by their short campaign of direct action.

Thirdly, all the victories won by those women were then obscured in the history books for decades and even written out. The 1888 Bow matchwomen, though recognised by leading trade unionists at the time, were soon written out of history for the entire 20th century. Bow 1888 was downplayed in its significance. Many claim the strike was led by a more establishment figure, Annie Besant, who I think people would describe as the Polly Toynbee of her day.

The real names of the strike leaders—Alice Francis, Kate Slater, Mary Driscoll, Jane Wakeling and Eliza Martin—were finally published in Louise Raw’s brilliant book published in 2009, “Striking a Light”. My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) first read those names out in Parliament in 2013. The story of the 1968 Dagenham Ford women slipped from view for decades, until the 2010 film “Made in Dagenham” raised its profile again. It is a delight that some of those original women have now had the recognition they deserve in their lifetime.

I want to conclude by returning to the story of the headscarf revolutionaries. Events in 1968 in Hull faded from popular culture, partly due to the post cod war

decline of the local fishing industry, but also because of some frankly very outdated views about women in the city. Lily Bilocca, who led the headscarf revolutionaries, was sacked after the campaign, blacklisted and told she would never work in the fishing industry again. She was out of work for two years, eventually finding work in a nightclub cloakroom. She died at the age of 59 in 1988, and there was no public recognition by the people or the city of Hull of the pivotal role she had played in helping to protect the lives and improve the safety of trawlermen.

Despite that huge victory for safer working conditions, before today Lily Bilocca’s name has only ever been mentioned in this House once, on 25 March 1969 by a local Hull MP, James Johnson—no relation—and, sadly, just in passing. There was no proper recognition of or tribute to what she and those other women did, so it was great to see the story of the headscarf revolutionaries brought back to life in Brian Lavery’s 2015 book “The Headscarf Revolutionaries” and more recently the excellent BBC 4 programme based on his book, as we this year mark the 50th anniversary of the triple trawler disaster.

Interestingly, Hull has granted freedom of the city to many notable citizens over the years, but I have discovered that since 1885, when that honour could first be bestowed, of 47 recipients only two have been women—that is 45 men and only two women. Regrettably for the pioneering city of Hull, one of our most famous daughters, Amy Johnson, did not make that list and did not receive freedom of the city. In fact, we waited more than 100 years for the first woman to receive the freedom of the city of Hull. Janet Suzman, a wonderful anti-apartheid campaigner, received the award in 1987, and then we waited another 30 years before Jean Bishop, a lady in her 90s who has raised more than £100,000 for Age UK, was given the honour of freedom of the city at the end of last year.

Today, along with the other two Hull MPs, I am calling on Hull City Council to honour the leading women of the Hessle Road women’s committee by making them all freewomen of Hull. Fifty years after the triple trawler disaster, Hull needs to properly recognise these women. We have had wonderful theatre plays and murals for the women in the city, but we need to make sure that they get the tribute they really deserve.

As the headscarf revolutionaries achieved change both locally in the fishing industry and nationally in health and safety practices, they should be recognised nationally too. That is why all three Hull MPs are backing Ian Cuthbert’s campaign for Yvonne Blenkinsop, who is sadly the only surviving member of the headscarf revolutionaries, to receive an honour. It is just not on for these wonderful heroines from Hull to be overlooked any longer. In Lily Bilocca’s own words, “Enough is enough.” It is time to act now.

3.15 pm

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): I am very grateful for the opportunity to speak in today’s debate. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), and to have heard about the work that very ordinary woman can do in changing the world. It is a privilege to join right hon. and hon. Members in celebrating International Women’s Day, the first of which was celebrated in 1911. I want to start by reflecting on the progress in rights and opportunities for women across the United Kingdom since then.

[Mary Robinson]

I was delighted to join Members from across the House to mark the centenary last month of the Representation of the People Act 1918. Not only did the legislation give some women the vote in parliamentary elections for the first time, but it enabled Nancy Astor to become the first woman to take her seat in this House 18 months later. This goes to show that, even 100 years ago, when opportunities are opened up to women, they take them and succeed. From then on, a whole range of possibilities opened up for women—from the first female Cabinet Minister in 1929 to our first female Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, in 1979 and the first female Speaker in 1992. Although such achievements are to be celebrated, the fact is that there are still Cabinet positions that have never been held by a woman, and this shows that progress is still needed.

When I was elected as the MP for Cheadle in 2015, I became the 445th woman to take my seat in this House. I welcome the fact that, since we celebrated International Women's Day last year, the number of female MPs has risen yet further—to a record 208, or almost one third of this place. The ratio of female representation here is often compared with that of Parliaments around the world, but it is worthy of note that last year's general election saw this House overtake Germany's Parliament in the representation of women. I am honoured to be the second woman to represent Cheadle, and I would like to take this opportunity to recognise the role of Patsy Calton, who in 2001 became the first woman to represent Cheadle. Even though it is 13 years since she passed away, she is still mentioned on the doorstep and remembered for her hard work.

At a local level, women in councils up and down the country do a great job and are inspirational role models for others. I particularly want to note the wonderful example set by the Mayor of Stockport, Councillor Linda Holt. Linda has represented the community of Bramhall for 10 years, and has used her time this year as Mayor to support a variety of causes, such as local animal welfare charities, as well as the historic Plaza theatre, of which she is a board member. Indeed, she began serving as a board member of the Plaza before even becoming a local councillor, and was delighted last year when the Prime Minister was able to visit the theatre and meet some of the dedicated volunteers who support and sustain this vital community asset. I am sure Councillor Holt would be the first to acknowledge that she is privileged to enjoy the support of brilliant female councillors in her area, such as Lisa Walker and Alanna Vine; all three of them are Bramhall councillors.

As a former local councillor and as a member of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, I know how important it is to have such strong representation in local councils across the country. I warmly welcome the progress of recent years that has resulted in almost one third of local councillors across the UK being women. Sadly, however, there remains much more to be done. To achieve equal numbers of male and female councillors, 3,028 more women will need to be elected—an increase of over 50%—and, at the present rate of progress, that will take 68 years.

Unfortunately, we face an even greater task with respect to council leadership. Just 17% of council leaders are women, and of the new mayoral combined authority

boards only 4% of constituent members are women and all six are led by men. Indeed, in Greater Manchester, all 11 cabinet members of the combined authority board are men. That is particularly disappointing when I reflect that 62 Nelson Street, Manchester, was the birthplace of the suffragette movement. Today it houses the Pankhurst Centre, and it was the home of Emmeline Pankhurst and her family, who led the suffragette campaign for votes for women. It was also the place where the first meeting of the Women's Social and Political Union was held.

During last year's debate, Members rightly highlighted the perennial problem of male dominance in STEM subjects—science, technology, engineering and maths—at A-level and university, and subsequently in the jobs market. Right hon. and hon. Members will therefore be delighted to note that the number of women graduating in a core STEM subject has grown for another year. These women are talented individuals who are qualified to take up the exciting opportunities available in STEM subjects, and they help to address persistent skills gaps across the UK. However, owing to more rapid growth in the number of men graduating in those subject areas, the percentage of female graduates dropped slightly from 25% to 24%, so there is still work to do.

Not only do we need more girls studying STEM subjects, but we need more women with STEM qualifications to become teachers and inspire the next generation of girls. We need women such as Jo Lowe, headteacher of the Kingsway School in my constituency. She went into education from engineering and she inspires her students. As a result of that inspiration, I was delighted to present Kingsway School with an award for engineering excellence last year—one of only a handful of schools in the country to receive such an award. I strongly agree with Alun Jones, head of the Girls' School Association, that girls can be encouraged to “think like a scientist” in the right environment and through exposure to scientific roles. As he said:

“We're dealing with centuries of gender bias and what people and parents think and say, often without realising it, does influence children's expectations of themselves.”

However, although progress is undoubtedly needed in many areas, we have a huge amount to be proud of from the past 12 months alone. Since last year's International Women's Day, we have witnessed the appointment of the first ever female President of the Supreme Court, Baroness Hale, and the first female Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Cressida Dick. Women have enjoyed similar progress in our armed forces in the past 12 months: last April the first female Army officer was commissioned into a close combat regiment, and last September the RAF lifted its ban on women serving in close combat roles. Those are a few key examples of women flourishing in roles that were once the preserve of men, and that bodes extremely well for the future.

Before I conclude I wish to mention an initiative in Stockport, where the 100th anniversary of women gaining the vote is being marked by naming the town's newest public area Suffragette Square. The council asked the people of Stockport to come up with a name for a new square, and after reviewing more than 1,500 entries from the public, the panel decided on Suffragette Square to celebrate the achievements of four Stockport women. Elizabeth Raffald, Gertrude Powicke, Elsie Plant and Hannah Winbolt were all Stopfordian women who were

active in the suffrage movement, and they were nominated by members of the public in the light of this year's commemoration. I firmly believe that although progress is still needed, we must move on and welcome the achievements of all women, and help them come forward and be recognised for the work they do.

3.23 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) and to take part in this debate. As a proud member of the Labour party in a Parliament where 32% of MPs are women—the majority of them, 57%, from my party—I know that we still have work to do to achieve true equality in gender representation, but the Labour party is heading the right direction. I am pleased that some male MPs have been, and still are, in the Chamber. I have enjoyed their contributions, particularly that of the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman), who regrettably is no longer in his place.

International Women's Day is for everyone to celebrate, and it is important that men have an understanding of inequality in our society. I welcome their thoughts, and most certainly would not dream of accusing any one of them of mansplaining.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): On that point—[*Laughter.*] I thank my hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene. Does she not agree that it is the collective responsibility of all of us—not just women, but men too—to ensure that we have equality in all senses of the word? With regard to Parliament, she rightly says that the Labour party has managed to get 45% of the parliamentary Labour party as women. For the House of Commons as a whole to have only 32% of Members as women is just not good enough.

Liz McInnes: I thank my hon. Friend for that point, which he has made very well. He is absolutely right: this is our collectively responsibility, and 32% is not good enough. We also need to look at equality in other representations in addition to gender balance. He makes a very good point, which I would in no way ever describe as mansplaining.

It was heartbreaking today to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) recite the names of all those women who have died at the hands of men. Sadly, one of them, Linda Parker, was from my constituency. My heart goes out to her friends, family, children and grandchildren. I dream of a future International Women's Day when my hon. Friend no longer has a list of the names of murdered women to recite, and when the figure of two women murdered every week by a current or former partner has become history due to better investment in women's refuges, women's safety and a complete change in attitudes.

Today is International Women's Day. It was my pleasure yesterday to attend the launch of a report commissioned by the all-party group on population, development and reproductive health, of which I am an active member. The report is entitled, "Who Decides? We Trust Women" and concerns abortion in the developing world and the UK. I pay tribute to the chair of the all-party group, Baroness Jenny Tonge, for her tireless work. As a retired GP, she really knows her subject and demonstrates the value that can be brought to the other place by experts

in their field. The report makes the important point that from 2010 to 2014, one in four pregnancies worldwide ended in an abortion. Abortion rates have been declining in the developed world since 1990, but the rate in developing countries has remained fairly constant.

An estimated 56 million abortions occur worldwide each year, with three quarters taking place among married women. Significantly, abortion rates are roughly the same in countries where abortion is legally restricted and those where it is liberally available. Restrictive abortion laws do not prevent women from seeking abortion; they only endanger women's health and lives as women seek unsafe procedures. There is a clear correlation between restrictive abortion laws and higher rates of maternal morbidity and mortality. In the group of countries where abortion is completely banned or allowed in very narrow circumstances, three out of four abortions are unsafe. Lack of money prevents women and girls from accessing safe abortions in the private sector. In addition, fear of being reported to the police prevents women and girls from seeking medical attention when they are faced with life-threatening complications due to unsafe abortions.

The report makes the important point that more family planning will reduce abortion worldwide. Family planning is one of the most cost-effective strategies to prevent maternal deaths and suffering from unsafe abortion. Indeed, the lowest rates of abortion in the world can be found in Germany and Switzerland, where family planning is widely and easily available. Yet only last week I heard from Marie Stopes International that due to President Trump's global gag, which blocks US funds going to any organisation involved in abortion advice and care overseas, its funding has been cut drastically, severely restricting its ability to provide contraceptive services to women and girls in the developing world. The international campaign SheDecides says that every girl and every woman has the right to do what she chooses with her body. She must have access to education and information about her body and her options, modern contraception and safe abortion. Only when women are in control of their own fertility will they have control over their own lives.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her very thoughtful speech, and she is absolutely right. Those of us who, many years ago, marched and took to the streets to protect the Abortion Act 1967 and ensure that it was not in any way interfered with did so because we knew about the extremely important point that she is making. It was not because we wanted people to have terminations of pregnancies; it was all about women having a right of control over their bodies. That is about empowerment, a lack of prejudice, their freedom and a lack of discrimination.

Liz McInnes: The right hon. Lady makes an excellent point. We have to allow women the world over to control their own bodies and therefore their own lives. However, there is still much work to be done, both nationally and internationally. Today, on International Women's Day, I call upon our female Prime Minister to call on President Trump to reverse the global gagging order. A woman Prime Minister who is prepared to stand up for women around the world would do that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I call Dr Stella Creasy.

3.31 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker—it is wonderful to see the number of men who are in the Chamber for this debate growing exponentially as we continue, in whatever role.

So many Members have made fantastic speeches, talking about the past and what we have achieved, but I want to honour International Women's Day in the way that I feel is best. I consider International Women's Day to be feminist Christmas; it is about what goodies and actions are coming. I want to talk about that because we need to learn from what the suffragettes drummed into all of us: deeds, not words, make a difference. Even when there were men who claimed to care for women's rights and for the future of women, they knew that it was not enough to have them speak for them. The true deed was to have true and equal representation.

We must learn that lesson today as we continue to look at the inequalities in our world. It is simply not enough to pay lip service to equality. It is not enough to march and to use the hashtag. I am struck when I go in to shops such as Hennes that people can now buy plenty of t-shirts that say, "Female Equals Future". But we will only have a more equal future when we have deeds, and when we actually tackle the barriers to discrimination and the inequality that holds 51% of our population back.

In perhaps being the Grinch of feminist Christmas, I am inspired by Mary Wollstonecraft, who said:

"My own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their fascinating graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone."

When we view the world as it is and are rational creatures, we see that if the call is to push for progress, we are not making the progress that we think we are and its pace is agonisingly slow. We are celebrating 100 years since some women got the vote, and we have talked about the fact that we have now achieved a 30% share of this Parliament for women. A whole 12 extra women were elected at the last general election. If we carry on at that trajectory, we will need another 14 general elections to achieve parity. I know that we have been having elections more frequently than we used to, but we need more appropriate action.

It is not just national Government where we fail to make the progress that we want. The hon. Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) rightly pointed out the progress in local government. I am proud that we have one of the few female leaders in local government in my borough, Clare Coghill, the new leader of Waltham Forest Council—the first woman to be elected there. Only 17% of council leaders in this country are women. We would need 12,000 women to stand for election if we were to achieve the extra 3,000 who would give us parity in local government.

We know that this country continues to fail what I shall now call the Piers Morgan test. This morning, Piers Morgan tweeted that the fact that there were six women in positions of responsibility in the country meant that the country was run by women. Job done: we can all go home. The point is that such women are still too often the exception rather the rule. That is why we can name them. True equality will come when there are so many women from so many backgrounds in

those positions that it is simply the norm, and the fact is that we are nowhere near the norm. Only 11% of surgeons in this country are women—it will take 100 years to achieve parity—and only 24% of judges are women. Why do we never hear about all this? I would wager that it is because only 34% of people in senior roles in our press are women.

Too often we tell ourselves that because we have seen one woman, there must be more behind her, but the truth is that this country is still agonisingly behind where it needs to be to realise the potential of all its people. We see that not least in the arguments that we are having about equal and, indeed, fair pay. The equal pay legislation is older than I am, but we still have to explain to the young women coming into our workforce that there is a 14% gap—and, yes, it is growing for their generation. This is not just about women having children. Women ask for pay rises just as often as men, but men are four times as likely to get them. We are starting at lower salaries, and that inequality is continuing and is not being reduced.

Companies facing gender pay gap reporting are now hiding behind each other. I welcome the legislation: we all fought for it, and we can see the cleansing effect that it is starting to have. However, we know that only 1,200 of 9,000 companies have declared their data so far, and we know that the deadline is fast approaching. That tells us that plenty of companies are waiting until the very end, hoping that they can find cover in each other. Let us send a strong message today, on International Women's Day: "It does not matter whether you publish today, or whether you all publish together. We will look at every single set of data, and we will hold to account every single company that does not offer equal pay."

We must also, as a House, speak up for the right to talk about equal pay. As we have seen at the BBC, when women start asking questions, they get shut down. Freedom of speech in the workplace is a fundamental human right, and the legislation relies on the principle that we can start to have such conversations. We must not give an inch on the idea that it is acceptable for managers to tell employees that if they start asking those questions, they will be labelled difficult and it might harm their chances of promotion. It is what we might call the John Humphrys test.

Anna Soubry: Does the hon. Lady agree that one of the problems is the fact that we do not have as many trade unions operating in as many workplaces? I used to be the mother of the chapel when I worked at Central Television, which was obviously a very long time ago. One of the things that shop stewards do is to act on behalf of all their members when, as sometimes happens, they are fearful of stepping up to say the sort of things that the hon. Lady rightly identifies. If we had better, more democratic, more open trade unions, that would go a long way towards advancing the cause of women.

Stella Creasy: I completely agree. Let me put on record that if I were ever to face problems in my workplace, I would certainly hope that the hon. Lady would act as shop steward.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): And vice versa—[*Laughter.*]

Stella Creasy: I know that the hon. Lady would fight the good fight. She is absolutely right: this is about representation and voice, and we see the impact of women not having that voice.

This is not just about gender; it is also about ethnicity. We know when we talk about inequalities in pay that our sisters from the black and ethnic minority communities face even higher differentials, and we, as a country, are a long way from knowing how to tackle that. I welcome the initiative from my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), who said, "It is not enough to have data—we need to see what you are going to do about it." It is clear from the data that we have already seen from only 1,200 companies how far we have to go.

This is also not just about the major companies. We know that 62% of people earning less than the living wage are women. It is about persistent poverty pay, and what it does to families around the country. It is little wonder that one of the themes of the debate that we have started to have in 2018 is period poverty. All too often, women are trying to pick up the pieces of a failing economy in an institutionally unequal society. What does that mean? It means that women are often the ones trying to make the difference, and it is the men who, like Piers Morgan, simply say, "I've seen one of you do it. If one of you can do it, all of you can do it."

We see that nowhere more than when we try to tackle violence against women. The writer Margaret Atwood said:

"Men are afraid that women will laugh at them. Women are afraid that men will kill them."

As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) set out so clearly, that is still a challenge for us in our society. Violence against women is endemic; the #MeToo movement has started a conversation about something that has been part of our society for generations. It is just a conversation, and we have not yet seen the real change—the real progress—we know we need to make. When 85,000 women report being raped, and 400,000 report sexual assaults, we know that that is just the tip of the iceberg. Then there are the 12,000 honour-based violence crimes and the 135,000 women and girls living with female genital mutilation. That only 15% of these crimes get reported is not about the women, but about the society we are right now; and about our failure to understand these crimes and prosecute them, and to support the people affected by them.

As part of dealing with that, I very much welcome the Government's commitment to ratifying the Istanbul convention, but one of the things I want to do today is to hold the Government to account for deeds not words. If we are going to ratify the Istanbul convention, we have to right a long-standing wrong. I pay tribute to the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), who made a powerful speech about the importance of women's reproductive rights, because women's reproductive rights are human rights. I want to put on record my gratitude to every one of the parliamentarians who has signed the letter to the Minister for Women and Equalities calling for us to give equal access to abortion for women in Northern Ireland.

Members may say, "A year ago, we decided to provide funding to help women from Northern Ireland to travel to England to have an abortion." The figures we have today show that 600 women have taken part in that

scheme—clearly, there is a demand. But it is little wonder that the United Nations says very clearly that the way we treat Northern Irish women—by making them travel, and by putting that restriction on their access to a basic human right—is degrading and inhuman. We cannot ratify the Istanbul convention unless we right that wrong. That treatment is inhuman. Not everybody can travel. We are treating women in one part of the United Kingdom differently—the women who cannot travel, the women in coercive relationships, the women who have small children and the women who are undocumented.

We cannot leave this to chance. We cannot say, "Because we can give you some ability to travel, that means you have equal access." We cannot let whatever deal the Government may have needed to do with the DUP allow us to get away with arguing that women's rights are devolved, especially when the Government have committed to giving us a vote on same-sex marriage. Equality cannot be selective. It is right that people should be able to love who they love and to record that in the way they want to, and it is right that women should be given control over their bodies and not be forced to continue an unwanted pregnancy.

I say to Ministers that these things are there in the Istanbul convention. We are treating citizens of this nation with contempt and in a way that the UN called degrading. If we are not going to have a free vote on the domestic violence Bill, which is supposed to ratify the convention, when will we have parity? When will we treat equality as what it truly is—about solidarity? If we want to show solidarity with our Northern Irish friends and their right to marry who they want, we should show solidarity with our Northern Irish sisters in giving them back control over their bodies.

I also want to echo the call by my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton on the global gag rule, but I would go further. On International Women's Day, the deed that we need is for this Government to commit to contribute to the SheDecides fund. It is one thing to face Donald Trump and his decision to withdraw funding—we know that women have died in the last year because they have not been able to access maternal healthcare following the funding cut he made to stop abortion services—but it is another thing when other countries step up to the plate and say, "We will bridge the gap." However, this country shies away from being part of that fund.

This is not just about the money; it is about the message of solidarity it sends when we are part of the SheDecides fund. I call on the Government not simply to tell Donald Trump that he is wrong to cut this funding, but to put our money where our mouth is and to stand with our sisters around the world who need the services that his withdrawal of money has cut.

We have also today had the wonderful Women for Refugee Women organisation in Committee Room 10. I am sure that they are still up there singing, and I hope that Members will go up and join them. They are singing for their sisters who are in Yarl's Wood. In 2018, we in this country are not making the progress we think we are if we are still locking up women who have been the victims of violence, sexual abuse and torture in conflict, yet that is exactly what we are doing in Yarl's Wood. The fact that 75% of the women in Yarl's Wood are set free, sometimes to be detained again and then set free again, tells us that the system is broken. This

[Stella Creasy]

expensive system enshrines inequality in the way in which we treat the most vulnerable women in our society, and I urge Ministers to rethink their determination that this is the only way to manage our immigration system.

Like many of us, the lessons that I take on International Women's Day are from my constituents, and I want to share two quick stories. In 1962, Beryl Swain was the first woman to compete in motorbike racing on the Isle of Man. The men were so horrified that they changed the weight categories to prevent women from taking part, and that continued until 1978. Karpal Kaur Sandhu was the first Asian female police officer in the world, and she proudly served Walthamstow. She was murdered by her husband in 1973 because he disapproved of her job. What that tells us is that the backlash, the power, the abuse and the violence will always mutate.

We have to keep fighting the patriarchy, and in that sense, that is why I am proud to see so many men here today, including the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman). In creating these deeds, men have a vital role to play. As we have all tried to remind Piers Morgan, we do not think that all men are violent. This is about standing up for the reputation of men and for the better world that men and women working together as equals can create, and we ask men now to be our allies and to show solidarity. This is also about cold, hard economic logic. More equal societies are more prosperous, more resilient and more diverse. The right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening), who is no longer in the Chamber, said that the equal employment of men and women would create \$28 trillion in growth, from which we could all benefit.

That is why I say to the men in this Chamber and the men in Britain: do not leave it to the women of Britain to resolve these problems. Do not expect us to lead this fight on our own and to come up with all the solutions and the deeds. Do not tell us that you do not think that quotas work or that you do not think that turning misogyny into a hate crime is a good thing. Tell us what you will do to create an equal society. We all have a responsibility to come up with deeds, not words. I will end with the words of Millicent Fawcett, who said:

“What draws men and women together is stronger than the brutality and tyranny which drive them apart.”

I will champion the contribution that every one of my constituents, male and female, makes to this country, but I know that only a truly equal society will realise that for all of them. On International Women's Day, I call on every man and woman in this country to ensure that we have not just one day of fighting for that better world, but 365 days of fighting for it. Truly, it is worth it for all of us.

3.48 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a real honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), who has a fantastic record in this place of standing up for women. I particularly thank her for her comments on Mary Wollstonecraft. I understand that as a result of her campaigning and that of other Members on both sides of the House, there is now a plan to have a statue of Mary Wollstonecraft.

Well done to my hon. Friend for putting on record the proud history of that woman in our tradition of freedom and equality.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. May I draw the attention of the House to another great hero? Eleanor Rathbone was probably the most important Back-Bench Member of this House since William Wilberforce. She was a towering figure on all fronts, and an early-day motion has been tabled proposing that we should name a Committee Room of the House after her. That motion also bears the name of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman). In the light of the speech that we have just heard, naming a Committee Room is perhaps a small thing, but this is about keeping alive the memory of people who, in their own lifetime, made a real mega-difference.

Catherine West: I could not agree more with my right hon. Friend. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), whose name appears on that EDM, has done such amazing work in this place, and I read her fantastic book when it was hot off the press. I also enjoyed the book of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), who somehow found time to write a book while being an MP. Both of those stories, histories or records remind us about the struggles. So much in politics just appears to happen, but we understand just how hard the struggles are.

As I mentioned my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley, I want to thank her for mentioning Iuliana Tudos, who tragically lost her life in Finsbury Park, which is on the borders of Hackney, Haringey and Islington. She was my constituent and lost her life in a terrible way, and we think of her family, because things must be terrible for her parents, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles and so on. Not only do they live abroad, but they know that that young woman lost her life in a violent way.

The seat of Hornsey and Wood Green has been held by women since 1992. Many Members here will remember Lynne Featherstone, who is now in the other House and continues her campaigning for women. Barbara Roche, who I am sure Mr Deputy Speaker remembers, represented my constituency from 1992 until 2005. She won the seat from a Tory Member, Hugh Rossi, and is therefore very famous in Hornsey and Wood Green. She is a barrister and a great advocate for newly arrived communities. When chair of Metropolitan, the housing association, she was a great advocate of affordable housing, and that goes to the heart of the housing crisis, which has worsened since her time as a Member.

It is of course fantastic to be giving this speech with the lovely plaque that the House put up for Jo Cox MP just behind me, and we must not forget our dear friend on a day like today. She would have been hopping up and making an important speech, and we would all have been listening because she was extremely eloquent.

Not wanting to make this a counsel of despair—I have certainly talked about many sad things in the past couple of minutes—I want to note that it has been 100 years since the vote was given to certain women, and suffrage for women was so beautifully depicted in the film directed by Sarah Gavron, whose family is

famous in Hornsey and Wood Green. Nicky Gavron is a former deputy Mayor of London and is still on the London Assembly, and she and her daughter are both great feminists.

I want to refer to the recent work in the creative arts sector following the terrible Weinstein scandal and the lurid tales that have emerged since the extent of the sexual abuse within that industry was uncovered. I am wearing a badge that was given to me by my great-aunt, who ran the Italia Conti Academy in London for many years and passed away at the age 101 two years ago. She knew some suffragettes in her time, and the badge has "AFL" on it, which stands for the Actresses' Franchise League. At drama schools in those days, many talented youngsters—this is not just about women, but young people as well—were put on the stage, but their welfare was not particularly considered and they were not particularly well looked after. Young children who loved dancing, acting and so on would often end up on stage in the west end, and my great-aunt noted that they needed much better welfare and protection. Italia Conti and others introduced several positive schemes for the welfare of children in the arts, and I wonder whether we should have stuck a little closer to some of the schemes that forward-thinking women introduced around 1900 to 1930, and even on into the '60s and '70s. The creative industries seem to have lost their way slightly, and that needs to be looked at again in the light of the Weinstein tragedies.

The wonderful thing about speaking at the end of the debate is that one can enjoy listening to others. I was so pleased to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) talk about her experience, and how Bangladesh was born out of conflict. She managed to get across the feelings of all of us in the House about the terrible sexual violence in the Rohingya community, and the importance of highlighting subjects that it is difficult to discuss in this House.

Similarly, my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) talked about the women in Yarl's Wood. I am very aware of the issue, having spoken with Baroness Corston in the other House about the experience of women who are not subject to immigration detention, but are detained in our prisons, which are often not up to scratch; they face very difficult conditions. On International Women's Day, it is fitting that we remember those women and what they go through.

Before I came to the House this morning, I was at Woodside High School, which has given me badges to pass on to the Speaker's Office. The school is run by two fantastic women, who job-share the post of headteacher. It is a miracle school; it was, once upon a time, famous for not being so great, and now it is one of those fantastic schools. I will give the badges to you shortly, Mr Deputy Speaker. My favourite one says: "I run like a girl—try to keep up". I thought you might like that one. It was fantastic to see so many young women asking about politics, being interested and wanting to get involved.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) talked about the trade union culture. When I was a council leader, it was always easier to protect the rights of the bin men than to promote the rights of our dinner ladies and others who worked in traditionally female roles. I could not get away with not mentioning Mary Turner, whose memorial

service was held in no less a place than St Paul's cathedral. She broke every single glass ceiling, and she was a huge inspiration to many of us here. Her first battle in the workplace was to get Marigold gloves, so that women did not have to do the washing up without them. She said that that was one of the hardest battles; after that, she became quite battle-hardened. She went on to be president of a union and to play an extremely important role in promoting equality in the trade union movement, and of course in Parliament; that is one of the fantastic ways in which people come into Parliament.

Mr Dhesi: It is so important for young women to have inspirational role models, particularly women from ethnic minority backgrounds—people such as Sophia Duleep Singh, one of the original suffragettes and, in my Slough constituency, Lydia Simmons, who was the first ever lady mayor of African-Caribbean origin. It is important that we in Parliament celebrate those individuals, so that they can continue to inspire others. Would my hon. Friend agree?

Catherine West: I would indeed. I should also like to mention the important contribution that so many women from all over the Commonwealth in particular have made to our NHS over the years. Even now, we see the importance of that workplace. One of the debates that we are having about Brexit is, of course, about the workforce. I was in the Whittington hospital this morning, talking to staff there about their important roles, not just as obstetricians or specialists, but even at the level of our cleaning staff. The NHS does such a fantastic job of promoting women and bringing them through; it is a truly equal workplace where many women from different backgrounds manage to get to the top.

I will conclude, as time is short and people are keen to get back to their constituencies. We heard about equality in sport. It was a fantastic occasion when the Arsenal ladies won and were given the freedom of the borough back in 2008. That was a favourite speech that I got to make at borough level. I will hand those badges over to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, so that the girls at Woodside High School know that you have those for the Speaker's Office; you can pass them around.

This has been a fantastic debate. There has been nobody sat at the back moaning. On previous occasions, we have had to make the case for a debate—on, for example, the Istanbul convention. It is lovely that this time, it has been in Government time, and that we have got to an accepted level of equality.

4 pm

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): I am delighted and proud to be making my debut at this Dispatch Box to close this debate on behalf of Her Majesty's Opposition. We have heard today about how we have record female employment in this country, but, as the Secretary of State rightly said, this is not just about getting in—it is about getting on. I could not agree more, which is why I am so pleased to see Labour's announcement that we will ask business to take a more proactive approach. Under a Labour Government, the onus would be on employers to close the gender pay gap, and provide action plans or face fines. We have heard agreement from Members from across the House that while we all celebrate the centenary of women gaining the vote,

[Rosie Duffield]

there remains plenty more to be done. It is reassuring to hear the Secretary of State's pledges to tackle the gender pay gap and to make sure that funding for women's refuges is protected.

The first Back-Bench speaker, the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), who chairs the Women and Equalities Committee, is a determined, passionate advocate for equality. She has worked extremely hard to open doors and discuss issues that have never been tackled head on. I was inspired by her as a member of that Committee and continue to follow its work closely. The right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening) said that gender inequality represents the biggest waste of talent. She also mentioned the sustainable development goals—as did my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali)—and our need to help stop FGM and health inequality, reminding us of the "International" in International Women's Day. We have to help our sisters across the globe, while continuing to ask ourselves difficult questions about our own gender balance in this place.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) spoke powerfully and moved the House with her list of murdered women. Every one of those women should be here today and it is our absolute duty to make sure they are never forgotten. The hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow talked of the horrors of war, and women facing rape or being trafficked and sold as sex slaves. The first female Member for Coventry, my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher), told us that although we now have 208 women in Parliament, that is still only 32% of the House. It was also lovely to hear about her mother, who inspired her to enter politics.

Other Members spoke about the girl guide movement. We heard further great contributions from the hon. Members for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), for Erewash (Maggie Throup) and for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), and from my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire). My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) talked about maternity leave, and we all owe a huge debt of gratitude to the Mother of the House, who has tirelessly battled for our rights in this area for decades.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi)—my good friend—spoke about the new all-party group on single parent families, which a few of us have set up. I am a proud founder member. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) told us of those amazing working women who helped to forge the union movement and the Labour party. We also heard further contributions from the hon. Members for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) and for Cheadle (Mary Robinson), and my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) who spoke of the dangers of restricted abortion laws leading to serious and life-threatening harm to women.

My hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) called International Women's Day "feminist Christmas", but called for "deeds" not "words". She said that the course of progress is agonisingly slow. She also mentioned period poverty, a cause on which we are

fighting on this side of the House. We finished by hearing from my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), who were calling for us to commemorate those women who gave so much to our fight for equality.

What a year it has been for women! We have seen the #MeToo movement, the fabulous Megan Markle, the inspiring Jacinda Ardern and more recently—last week—Maisie Sly showing us that being deaf does not stop someone winning an Oscar. As we know from even those few examples, women young and old continue to push boundaries, challenge expectations and work hard, not because they are women, but simply because they are brilliant.

As my friend, the shadow Minister mentioned earlier, the International Women's Day flag is now flying proudly as the sun begins to set over Westminster. However, events celebrating the day are continuing, and this evening I will be speaking at an event with the incredible Frances Scott, championing her campaign to get a 50:50 Parliament: equality in representation on these very Benches.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I commend the hon. Lady on her first outing at the Dispatch Box, and I will be joining her to speak at that event. Will she say a word about the importance of campaigns such as the 50:50 Parliament and, in particular, its #AskHerToStand campaign, which I understand is partly what led us to having the hon. Lady in this place? It is a brilliant campaign, and everyone in this House and outside it can do this, in order to improve the representation of women. When they see women who are doing a brilliant job in the community and who would be amazing elected representatives, they should ask them to stand.

Rosie Duffield: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I know that she is also an ambassador for that campaign. I would not be in this place without the encouragement of Frances and the #AskHerToStand campaign, which encourages women from all walks of life to stand for local politics and positions of leadership in all sorts of areas. We know that there is just not enough representation, as she said. Every time I retweet a 50:50 tweet, at least one or two men—I am afraid to say—always ask why we need equal representation. The answer is simple: women make up 51% of the country's population, and we need to see that here on these Benches. It is that simple as far as I am concerned. I will be attending that event later on, and I am an ambassador for that campaign.

We need women in the home and in the house—this House. We need to stand up and say, "I am proud of my gender, I am proud of my mother, I am proud of my daughter, I am proud." With that, I will say a very simple happy International Women's Day to men and women.

4.5 pm

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): It is a genuine pleasure to be here for today's debate, and may I follow in the excellent footsteps of my shadow number by wishing everybody a very happy International Women's Day? If I may say so, that was a very good speech from the Dispatch Box, and I am now worried that she is my shadow—that's all I'm saying! I would like to thank everyone who has attended the debate and contributed.

We are fortunate to have so many great advocates for gender equality in the Chamber. They have all done so much, in their own ways, to improve the lives of women and girls.

This debate has, of course, had its serious—indeed, its heartbreaking—moments, and I will address those in due course, but before I do let us reflect on the reasons to celebrate. Many Members highlighted the notable women and women's charities in their constituencies both today and in history. The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) gave a fascinating and detailed speech on the history of women protesting to improve working conditions and mentioned Lily Bilocca as someone who had been named only once before in this House—well, I have now named her at the Dispatch Box, which I hope goes some way to addressing that inequality.

This year being the centenary of women's suffrage, many Members focused on the women in the House before them and on other political role models. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) told us that her political hero was Mo Mowlam because of the valuable work that great lady did to bring Protestants and Catholics together in the cause of peace. The hon. Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) told us about her mother, who swept to power on Coventry Council in 1979. Then we had a little competition. The hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) told us that her constituency had been represented by women for 21 years, but I am sorry to say that my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) was able to boast that her constituency had been represented by women for 26 years. The more of these competitions that go on, the better.

We have also heard from many Members about the role that the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) has played in inspiring so many women to stand for Parliament. In her role as the Mother of the House, she will this year be celebrating many moments in the history of women's suffrage. It will be a joy to celebrate those with her.

I would also like to add to the list, however, because I am not the first female Member of Parliament for Louth and Horncastle. I was preceded by a lady called Margaret Wintringham, who was elected in 1921. She was the second-ever female Member of Parliament and the first-ever female MP born in this country. I feel privileged to follow her, albeit many, many decades later. In 1921, she was talking about equal pay, and of course, depressingly, several decades later we are still talking about equal pay. There is, though, one way in which we have moved forward since Mrs Wintringham campaigned to become a Member of Parliament, and that is in the way we conduct general election campaigns: apparently, Mrs Wintringham did not utter a word on the election trail in 1921. I must say that I have taken a very different approach to running my campaigns.

I have been really impressed by the determination in all parts of the House of Commons to encourage women to stand for Parliament and in local council elections. My hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) highlighted the fact that only 17% of council leaders are female. We must improve that figure, because we know how valuable female councillors can be throughout the country.

The hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) used a phrase that very much caught my attention when she talked about “having the audacity to stand”. We should all be more audacious in that regard.

This morning, I was asked by a journalist about challenges I have faced in politics. I had to tell him about one occasion in 2015 when I was canvassing on the doorstep. I knocked on the door and said to the lady, “May I count on your support?”, and she said, “No.” I said, “Why's that?”, and she said, “Because you're a woman.” I did not really know what I could do to change that, so quickly moved on.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lewes set out her ambitions for the next 100 years; they are ambitions to which I am sure we can all subscribe.

Of course, no discussion of a determination to improve equality in this place could pass without my mentioning the contribution of my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller). Not only as a Member of Parliament, but as a Cabinet Minister and now as Chairman of the Women and Equalities Committee, she has done an incredible amount to ensure equality, and not just for women but for same-sex couples, too. I hope I am correct in paraphrasing her speech as, “Being a Member of Parliament is the best job in the world.” I hope that this year we will all encourage women to think about standing for Parliament.

The award for avoiding mansplaining must go to the only man who made a speech in this debate, as opposed to intervening: my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman). I must say, echoing the comments made by others from all parties, that we are lucky to have male colleagues like him in the House, supporting our cause.

Let me turn to the serious aspects of the debate. Of course, I must start with the contribution of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), who, as she has in years past, read out the names of women who have been killed since last year's International Women's Day. I join others in wishing fervently that we will be able to have a day of celebrating women when the hon. Lady does not have to read out that list.

Home should of course be a place of love, support and safety. No one should have to suffer violence or abuse, which is why we have today launched the consultation on domestic abuse. We are seeking to transform the country's approach to domestic abuse. We are widening the definition so that we understand that abuse is not confined to physical violence, but can include psychological violence and economic abuse. We are addressing at every stage, where we can, the fact that we need to intervene earlier, to support the women and children who are victims of this terrible abuse and, where possible, to break the cycle of violence with the offender. In short, we want the question to change from, “Why doesn't she leave him?” to “Why doesn't he stop?”

I very much hope that Members from all parties will contribute to the consultation and use their networks to encourage others to contribute, too, so that we can ensure that the Bill that follows, and all the non-legislative measures, are as ambitious and brave as we can make them.

We have heard much discussion about women in work. The stand-out statistic for me today was the one put forward by my right hon. Friend the Member for

[Victoria Atkins]

Putney (Justine Greening) who, with all her considerable experience in the Cabinet, has done so much to further the cause of equality, not least as the preceding Minister for Women and Equalities. The fact is that, if we were to encourage gender equality and achieve it across the world, it would add £28 trillion to our global GDP, which is a startling fact.

We, the United Kingdom, are doing our bit, because we have the highest rate of employment of women ever, and we are working hard to support women in work so that they can fulfil their potential and achieve their ambition. We are taking strong action in this area. I hope that 4 April is ingrained in every chief executive's mind, because that is the deadline when every large employer will have to tell us their gender pay gap. Contrary to the suggestions that may have been made, we are doing that not just because we like collecting figures, but because we want to establish where there are pay gaps and then work towards closing them down.

We have also heard about flexible working, and we are very much working towards normalising that practice. Indeed, 97% of UK workplaces now offer flexible working, but of course there is more to do. We know that there are schemes for shared parental leave and for encouraging people who have taken time out for caring to return to work. In fact, we are investing a great deal of money to increase opportunities and support for those who are returning to work, but we cannot do this alone. We need employers to take bold action to ensure that women are just as able as men to fulfil their potential and use their talents and skills. This country cannot succeed fully if one half of its population is held back.

Flowing from work is, of course, education. Several colleagues have emphasised the importance that education plays in setting up girls to flourish in the workplace and to having equal access with their male counterparts to more productive and higher paying sectors. We have invested in programmes to encourage take-up in STEM-related subjects and courses, including maths and computer science. We are also raising awareness of the range of careers that STEM qualifications offer, through initiatives such as STEM ambassadors, and we continue to deliver high-quality apprenticeships, which provide choice for young women and men as they consider their future careers. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) about Ada Lovelace, which was absolutely fascinating. We even heard about the scientist behind Mr Whippy ice cream—a certain Margaret Thatcher. I have to say that I have learned something new today.

We must of course reflect on the fact that this is not national women's day, but International Women's Day. Several Members spoke about that, mentioning the Rohingya and Bangladesh in particular. It is not only at home where this Government have made real progress to improve the lives of women and girls. We are respected globally for our world-leading legislation and policy, and we continue to play a key role on the international stage to press for change. We are committed to ensuring that all women have the same opportunities and choices, no matter where they live.

UK aid has a huge impact on the lives of millions. It has supported more than 6,000 communities across 16 countries and made public commitments to end

female genital mutilation. That represents 18 million people—more than twice the population of London—and it has enabled 8.5 million women to access modern methods of family planning over five years, empowering women to make choices about their own bodies.

We want to build on those achievements. As we have heard, the Secretary of State for International Development launched her strategic vision for gender equality yesterday. This recognises that gender equality cannot be treated as an isolated issue, but must be embedded in everything that we do. It sets out how we plan to continue our global leadership role. I am proud of this Government's ambition to improve the rights of women and girls globally; we need to be ambitious if we are to continue making progress in areas such as education, economic empowerment and violence, and if we are to create a world in which all women and girls can have equal rights, opportunities and freedoms, as described by the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire).

In conclusion, today's debate has highlighted what we all already knew: that we have achieved some things, but there is still a way to go. There is much more to be done before we achieve gender equality in the UK and around the world. I want to end the debate on a positive note, because this is the one day of the year on which we get to celebrate women. I want to highlight brilliant women and the social, economic, political and cultural contributions that they make.

We have heard from the Home Secretary that the United Kingdom has its second female Prime Minister—that is particularly apt given that we are celebrating the centenary of suffrage—and that we sit in the most diverse Parliament that we have ever had. In the past year, we have seen women breaking barriers in public life and industry. Last year, Cressida Dick became the first ever female Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, and Dany Cotton became the first ever female commissioner of the London fire brigade. Already this year, Sarah Clarke has made history as the first female Black Rod, and the Royal Mint has appointed Anne Jessopp, who is its first female chief executive in its more than 1,000 years of existence. I have no doubt that the first female President of the Supreme Court, Baroness Hale, will be doing all she can to improve equality in the judiciary.

We must not forget that three of the four medals that team GB took home from the winter Olympics were won by women. Lizzy Yarnold became Britain's most decorated winter Olympian, taking a second gold in the women's skeleton. Anyone who hurtles down ice chutes at 80 miles an hour on what I can only describe as a tea tray deserves all our respect.

We want the celebration to continue beyond International Women's Day. This year, we are celebrating our history, but I hope that we also see this year as the start of the century of women. I urge every Member of this House to take part in any way they can, whether it is by supporting women's organisations, speaking at events, going into schools to speak, or asking women whether they will stand. We will have a whole package of celebrations during the year, and they will be revealed as the year goes on. One example of how we are going to celebrate is with the holding of EqualTeas in June and July across the country, to share, debate and celebrate our right to vote over a cup of tea and a slice of cake. They

are often the answer to many problems in life, and I am delighted that we are celebrating our suffrage in that way.

When my grandmother was born, no woman had the right to vote. Fast forward two generations, and I am here at the Dispatch Box and a female Prime Minister is leading the celebrations. I leave the House with this question: what more can we achieve in another two generations? That is our challenge.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Vote 100 and International Women's Day.

Business without Debate

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That at the sitting on Tuesday 13 March, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 16 (Proceedings under an Act or on European Union documents) and Standing Order No. 17 (Delegated legislation (negative procedure)), debate on the Motions in the name of Jeremy Corbyn relating to Universal Credit (S.I., 2018, No. 65), Children and Young Persons (S.I., 2018, No. 148), Children and Young Persons (S.I., 2018, No. 146) and Social Security (S.I., 2018, No. 120), may continue for three hours, after which the Speaker shall put forthwith the Questions necessary to dispose of each such Motion; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(*Andrew Stephenson.*)

Rivers Authorities

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Andrew Stephenson.*)

4.23 pm

David Warburton (Somerton and Frome) (Con): We have very long memories in the west country, so I want to take Members back in time. It was said that some 400 years ago, in 1607,

“huge and mighty hills of water”

poured across the county, moving at a speed

“faster than a greyhound can run”.

Water covered the Somerset levels and moors, and it devastated the land—but not, I am afraid, for the last time. Members will remember that the winter of 2013-14 was the wettest in Somerset for 250 years, and 150 sq km of land was completely submerged for weeks. The Environment Agency said that 100 million cubic metres of water covered Somerset's fertile soil. By my reckoning, that means that we were up to our necks in 40,000 Olympic swimming pools-worth of water. One hundred and sixty-five homes were flooded, 7,000 businesses were affected, and 81 roads were closed. I will never forget making visits to the village of Muchelney not by road, but by boat. I stood in people's homes that were not only destroyed by waist-deep water but had been flooded only 12 months before. Livelihoods were driven to the brink, and people were understandably driven to despair. The cost to Somerset was estimated at £147 million.

As those waters receded, more than just the bare earth revealed itself. We saw also that perhaps one or two things had been neglected. Local people rightly argued, fairly strongly, that not enough contingency planning had taken place. “By definition”, they cried, “we've been living with insufficient flood management schemes, catchment planning and so on.” We felt like Deucalion, the son of Prometheus, who, as we all know, saw after the great mythical Greek flood the extent of the destruction and felt grief so great that tears kept pouring from his eyes. His wish was to create a new form of humanity. Our wish was to create the Somerset Rivers Authority.

The people of Somerset are no strangers to local action, so local people tipped out their wellies, gathered themselves up and summoned various flood risk authorities: Somerset County Council, our five noble district councils, the Environment Agency, Natural England, the Wessex Regional Flood and Coastal Committee, and our inland drainage boards. Then, with £1.9 million stumped up by the Government, they coagulated all these into a new body—the Somerset Rivers Authority. This body sprang from the 20-year flood action plan that had been put together following the floods at the very sensible request of my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), who was then Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I well remember wading through water to meet him to discuss the need to keep a lid on the severity, duration, frequency and impact of flooding. I have also talked to him about that more recently.

I must point out that the SRA was not, and is not, a usurper. It does not diminish the roles of the other flood management partners or, indeed, of landowners; it acts to improve the joint working of all those bodies.

[David Warburton]

In essence, it gives us an extra level of flood protection and resilience. It raises extra money, does extra work, and provides extra information and co-ordination. Without wanting to go into the minutiae of its daily grind, it oversees the flood action plan across five areas: dredging, river management, land management, infrastructure, and building local resilience.

The SRA has overseen some 90 projects, with 22 more planned for 2018-19. Some of them have dozens of different elements, so hundreds of areas have benefited. This year the SRA is maintenance dredging 4 km of the River Parrett; it is monitoring silt in the Parrett and Tone rivers for a future dredging programme; it is designing and implementing a variety of flood management capital works to hold water in the upper catchment and reduce peak flows; it is rolling up its sleeves and undertaking pumping station repairs and improvements; and it is carrying out a highway flood risk reduction scheme, with desilting of structures and gully jetting.

Fiendishly clever schemes have been developed, such as injection drilling, which is now used on the Parrett and Tone rivers and can achieve in one week what used to take four months, and at a small fraction of the cost. Such things are qualitatively better for farmers, residents and our splendid Somerset environment. I could go on all day about soil management, cropping techniques, channel clearances, housing planning analysis, drain enhancements, the tidal barrier—that is a big one—and the endless flood management schemes, but I am sure that people get the picture. For the SRA, its cup runneth over, essentially so that our cup does not run over. Such river authorities are obviously essential to the continued enjoyment of life in low-lying areas, but they face a problem. As is so often the case, it comes down to money, although this time it is more of a structural issue.

The SRA has ploughed on, silently and deftly managing our waterways to keep our feet dry. So far, we have paid for that by coughing up a small shadow precept on our council tax bills, plus a bit of money from drainage boards and spot of growth deal funding. I should explain that the term “shadow precept” refers to the extra flexibility that was granted to Somerset councils in 2016 as part of the local government finance settlement. Many in Somerset, myself included, would like to see the shadow precept put on a permanent statutory footing. Understandably, the SRA itself has also been calling for legislation to put its finances on the same stable long-term footing as a precepting body.

At the moment, because the SRA receives annual funding on a voluntary basis from local authorities, it has a hand-to-mouth existence. It is unable to coherently plan ahead, which means it is not in a position to enter into longer-term contracts or undertake longer-term financial planning. A stable funding arrangement, in the form of a local precept, would allow such river authorities to plan more effectively and efficiently, locking in improved protection for the good people of Somerset in the future.

The original 20-year flood action plan included the aspiration to allow Somerset’s rivers authority to become a statutory body, but we always knew that that would involve legislation. We knew that we would need to create a power for the Secretary of State to create

statutory rivers authorities and to add them to the precepting authorities listed in the Local Government Finance Act 1992.

I hope we can achieve that, but before I come on to that, I must talk briefly about internal drainage boards. That may not be a phrase you want to hear every day, Mr Deputy Speaker, but internal drainage boards are a vital part of the landscape of flood risk management. In Somerset, our three IDBs beaver away for us, almost literally, maintaining the watercourses, draining the land and reducing flood risk. I am very much aware that one or two areas of England are not fortunate enough to be in Somerset. Many of those less favoured parts of the country do not have the benefit of an IDB, and technical problems with the legislation on these bodies prevent them from being established. In essence, that is down to an anomaly in the valuation of land under legislation that is getting a bit long in the tooth.

That is very much the case in Cumbria, for example, where the local flood action plan drawn up by the community after the 2015 floods calls for the establishment of a new IDB, but they are stuck and cannot do it. We in this place should address that as soon as possible, so that all parts of England and Wales that desire an IDB can have one. Who would not want to reap the benefits that my constituency enjoys? Quite frankly, who would not want to be in my constituency?

It would be remiss of me at this point not to commend the Government for the action they continue to take to reduce flood risk and the significant new investment that has been provided. In fact, between 2016 and 2021, the Government are putting £2.6 billion into flood defences and building 1,500 new flood schemes that will better protect almost a third of a million homes. Those kinds of initiatives continue to improve the protection of people right across the country. There is also a need for local action to reduce flood risk. As I have set out, in Somerset we have the rivers authority and three internal drainage boards, but we need to understand their future.

In January 2017, the Government’s response to the report by the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on future flood prevention made clear the intention to introduce precepting legislation as soon as parliamentary time became available. I would like to draw the House’s attention to the Rivers Authorities and Land Drainage Bill, which I introduced this week and which would enable the Government to deliver on that commitment. I am delighted to say that the Government are fully supporting the Bill, as are many Members of the House, including the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish).

I very much look forward to the thoughts and remarks of my hon. Friend the Minister. As she is aware, not only would my Bill allow the Secretary of State to establish the Somerset Rivers Authority as a statutory and precepting body, thus placing its feet—and ours—on safe, dry land, but it would remove the hurdle faced by other parts of the country in setting up or expanding inland drainage boards. Lastly, I put on the record my sincere thanks to my hon. Friend for her and the Government’s support in this process. I think I speak for much of Somerset when I say that we all hope this will soon mean that nothing can leak over the tops of our wellies for some years to come.

4.35 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is a pleasure to respond to this debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton) on securing it. He spoke powerfully about, and eloquently described, the devastation caused by flooding.

As all hon. Members are aware, flooding can have a devastating effect on people's lives, not only due to the immediate pressures they face at the time, but because of some of the mental health problems caused, particularly when heavy rain pours down again and they worry about possible future flooding. Indeed, I have supported my own constituents in Suffolk Coastal following flooding in recent years, so I have experienced this at first hand. The Government continue to invest in better protecting communities from flooding, and I know that you are very keen for us to invest in Lancashire, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is also important, however, that we empower those communities to take further action. I am very pleased to say that my hon. Friend is correct that the Government support his private Member's Bill on rivers authorities and land drainage. That modest Bill could, if successful, deliver real change.

As my hon. Friend will be all too aware, the Somerset levels and moors are a complex environment of highly managed lowlands that are often susceptible to flooding. The flooding in 2013 and 2014 was some of the worst experienced in living memory, especially for the people of the Somerset levels and moors. Many homes, businesses and farmlands were affected, with whole communities cut off as the main roads and railways became impassable. Alongside that, there was significant flooding over the Curry and Hay moors, a site of special scientific interest. This unique area is susceptible to flooding from rivers, because of the artificial raised banks they flow along, and from the coast and the Bristol channel's tidal range, which is the second highest in the world. Not only does that cause tidal flooding, but it holds back floodwater and makes river flooding worse. Added to that, the low lying land acts as a reservoir holding back the floodwater.

As my hon. Friend pointed out, following those floods, there was a strong political desire for co-ordination across the county to devise a bespoke new initiative. That was why, in January 2014, my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), the then Secretary of State, asked Somerset County Council and the Environment Agency to work with the local community to come up with a flood action plan considering the various options for how flood risk could be managed on the Somerset levels and moors over the next 20 years.

That flood action plan led to the concept of a new body—a rivers authority—and recommended the creation of such a body in Somerset. This was done with the aim of creating a way for the different bodies that have a responsibility or interest in flood risk management to work together better. The Somerset Rivers Authority was formally established in January 2015. It is a partnership between 11 of Somerset's existing flood risk management authorities: Somerset County Council, the five district councils, the Axe Brue and Parrett Internal Drainage Boards, the Environment Agency, Natural England, and the Wessex Regional Flood and Coastal Committee.

I understand how important this issue is to the people of Somerset. Like my hon. Friend, I support the work of the Somerset Rivers Authority, which I had the opportunity to see for myself when I visited Somerset last year. The SRA's role is to co-ordinate the local flood risk management authorities, utilising the expertise of individual partners. It also supports additional flood risk management works that may not otherwise have been possible, such as enhanced river maintenance, including on ordinary watercourses. It does not seek to replace existing flood risk management authorities or their funding mechanisms.

As my hon. Friend said, the Government supported the Somerset Rivers Authority in the beginning with £1.9 million of start-up funding, and a review into the long-term funding options was commissioned. The review recommended giving the Somerset Rivers Authority precepting powers to raise funds for additional flood risk management. To secure the SRA's future, we would need new legislation to give the Secretary of State power to create rivers authorities and add them to the category of major precepting authorities under the Local Government Finance Act 1992. I am pleased that that is provided for in clause 1 of my hon. Friend's Bill.

Not only do the Government want to bring forward these measures, but they are what the local community in Somerset has been calling for. I therefore hope that the Bill will make progress through Parliament. However, such a decision is not made lightly. The Government recognise that any precept will be funded by taxpayers, but that is already the case under the interim arrangements. The existing funding arrangements for the SRA are far from ideal and a permanent solution is required. Making the SRA an autonomous precepting authority would make it more transparent and ensure that money is ring-fenced solely for its important work. Adding the SRA to the category of major precepting authorities will also mean it is covered by the safeguards set out in the 1992 Act, including the requirement for a referendum if the precept exceeds a set amount.

The Bill also sets out how, through regulations that Parliament will have the opportunity to scrutinise further, the governance of a rivers authority should be established. Although my hon. Friend is right to say that a new category of major precepting authorities will be created, the situation in Somerset is unique, because the complex interplay of water means that such matters are self-contained within the county. Were the Bill to be enacted, the Government would implement the necessary regulations promptly.

My hon. Friend mentioned internal drainage boards. As he pointed out, three of those are included in the Somerset Rivers Authority: Axe Brue, North Somerset Levels, and Parrett. He will recognise how effective they have been in their ongoing work with the authority. IDBs are among the oldest forms of democratic decision-making structures in the UK, with their history going back to the 13th century. Their main focus then was the drainage of agricultural land in low lying areas, but they have since evolved to play a much wider role, and they remain to this day a key partner in local flood risk management. That includes playing a major role in the identification and delivery of capital projects in local communities.

That model has worked well around the country, including in Suffolk Coastal with the East Suffolk IDB. However, as my hon. Friend said, not everywhere has

[Dr Thérèse Coffey]

such a body, and many of those that already exist would like to expand their boundaries. One place without an IDB that has suffered devastating flooding in recent years is Cumbria. It has requested new IDBs, in particular for Lyth Valley and Waver Wampool. As with the SRA, those requests have arisen from a flood action plan that was devised after significant flooding. However, a combination of issues is stopping the creation of those bodies. There are missing or incomplete valuation lists from 1990, and existing legislation does not allow for any other valuation lists to be used. That prevents IDBs from being able to value the land and determine the special levy they charge. That applies to the creation of new IDBs and the expansion of existing ones, so a change in legislation is required.

My hon. Friend has been generous in the Bill that he presented to the House for First Reading on Monday. He has ensured that such a change will be achievable through three additional clauses that will help to create new internal drainage boards where there is local consensus. The measures will also enable existing boards to expand, again where there is local consensus. In short, the Bill will enable the Secretary of State to establish an alternative methodology for calculating the value of other land in an IDB, and it will enable the Valuation Office Agency to share the most up-to-date information. Finally, it will enable the Secretary of State to establish an alternative methodology for the calculation of the value of chargeable property, agricultural land and buildings in an internal drainage district. All three clauses include regulation-making powers that will be subject to the affirmative procedure, thus providing Parliament with the opportunity to scrutinise them further. I restate that such changes will go ahead only if local communities want them.

The Government support my hon. Friend's Bill and what it is trying to achieve, and I am aware, Mr Deputy Speaker, that there is appetite for the creation of an internal drainage board in Lancashire. The SRA and IDBs play an important role across the country, and in particular they play a crucial role in local flood risk management. I hope that the debate has demonstrated that to the House.

The unique challenges of the Somerset levels and moors make it necessary and appropriate to create the Somerset Rivers Authority, and to put it on a secure footing to allow it to co-ordinate and manage flood risk into the future. This important body could do even more with secure funding each year. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for using this debate as a way to discuss his Bill. I am confident that this good debate will continue and that hon. Members will want to debate the Bill further in Committee once it receives, as we hope, its Second Reading a week on Friday.

On International Women's Day, I want to place on record my thanks to the permanent secretary in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Clare Moriarty. She still in a minority across the civil service as a permanent secretary, but she shows great leadership in our Department. I also want to point out not that I have not found time to buy a card for Mother's day, but that for many people in this House, their woman of the year will always be their mum. I want to wish my mother the best for this Sunday. I promise, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I shall go out and buy a card straight away after this important debate.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Make sure you do.

Question put and agreed to.

4.45 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 8 March 2018

[MR CHARLES WALKER *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Energy Efficiency and the Clean Growth Strategy

1.30 pm

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): I thank colleagues for being here today. There are some terrible weather conditions across the country, which I think will suppress attendance at this debate. Some colleagues had to get back to their constituencies before they got cut off, or the rail links got cut off. I call Antoinette Sandbach to move the motion.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered energy efficiency and the clean growth strategy.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I am grateful to the many of my colleagues from both sides of the House who helped me to secure this debate, not least to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe).

This is an important debate, and I hope that it will spur Members to action, not just today but in the future. This is the first debate of its kind in several years, and it is important to ensure that we keep energy efficiency at the top of the political agenda. This week the energy price cap Bill, the Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariff Cap) Bill, received its Second Reading. The Bill is a vital step to protect consumers while we reform the market in the short to medium term.

I want to propose a long-term solution for energy efficiency improvements and suggest how to make best use of the time we will have bought with the energy price cap Bill to address energy efficiency. In my remarks, I will outline how far we have come and discuss the challenges we face, before proposing a couple of solutions to return us to a better low-carbon path. I plan to talk generally about the state of energy efficiency, but where I am more specific I shall be addressing domestic energy efficiency. Other Members, I am sure, will focus on other areas, but I shall leave that contribution to them.

It is important to outline how far we have come in building a low-carbon economy and in improving energy efficiency over the long term. That is testament to the commitment of successive Governments, and I am proud to say that we are now a world leader in the green economy. Since 1990 we have cut emissions by 42%, faster than any other G7 nation. We have outperformed the first carbon budget, of 2008 to 2012, by 1%, and we are on course to outperform the second and third carbon budgets by 5% and 4%, respectively.

All that achievement has not come at the cost of economic growth. Emissions dropped by 42%, but the economy grew by 67%. In 2016, 47% of electricity came from low-carbon sources, which was twice the rate

of 2010. Household energy consumption has fallen by 17% since 1990, despite a rise in the number of home appliances. More than 430,000 people work in low-carbon businesses and the supply chain. All that work has resulted in bills being roughly £490 lower than they would have been without the energy efficiency improvements made since 2004.

Clearly, significant progress has been made over the past three decades. I applaud Ministers and Members of all parties for their commitment to tackling climate. What is more, we have taken those steps without damaging our economy, the idea of which was originally dismissed by some as simply not possible.

Despite such progress, there is still more to do. Progress on energy efficiency has slowed. Between 2012 and 2015 the annual investment in energy efficiency fell by 53%; and in the same period there was an 80% reduction in improvement measures, with the Committee on Climate Change warning us that that will decline even further by 2020. Fuel poverty remains a stubborn problem that we must continue to address. It is all very well giving assistance with bills, but a long-term solution—insulating houses—is surely the way forward.

As of 2014, 2.3 million households in England were in fuel poverty and 41% of the households in the lowest income decile were fuel poor; 56% of fuel-poor households lived in properties built before 1944. To my mind, those issues make it an urgent requirement of the Government to do a housing survey in England: 60% of fuel-poor households lived in inefficient properties with an E, F or G energy performance certificate rating, and 14% of households in rural areas were in fuel poverty, which is higher than the national average. Those rural households cannot access the efficiencies of dual fuel billing, and that is important, because many are off grid. Many cannot access the warm home scheme measures, which often involve whole streets. The low-hanging fruit has been picked, but the more challenging households, in particular in rural communities, have not been addressed.

The clean growth strategy is a welcome addition to the debate. I support its proposals to combat fuel poverty and to promote energy efficiency, but I hope that the Minister can be more specific about the Government's plans today than they were six months ago. The Committee on Climate Change assessment of the clean growth strategy found that three actions were expected to deliver, six actions had delivery risks, or were rated amber, and seven proposals were without firm plans, or rated red.

It has never been more important to tackle climate change and to decarbonise the economy. However, the potential rewards have never been so great. A building energy performance programme could save households £270 a year on bills. Over the long term that would save even more than the current proposed cap on energy bills, and it would also make a large contribution to hitting our climate change goals. Bringing every household up to an EPC band C by 2035 would save 25% of the energy used by the UK, which is the equivalent of six nuclear power stations the size of Hinkley Point C. The net economic benefit of such a programme would be between £7.5 billion and £8.7 billion, according to macro-economic analysis by the UK Energy Research Centre, and that figure does not include the wider secondary benefits in growth, jobs or health. With cold homes in England costing the NHS an estimated £1.36 billion, such a programme would have a considerable impact on health budgets, as well as on the wider economy.

[*Antoinette Sandbach*]

The economic and social case for increased energy efficiency measures seems unarguable. We must focus on how to deliver them. Throughout recent history, we have seen that the fight against climate change is most effective when Government and private industry work together. The Government can lead the charge, but we need to harness the innovation and energy of the private sector to truly succeed. That is why I want to suggest one way in which the private sector can step up. It is one way for the Government to make a change that can expedite energy efficiency improvements. Mortgage providers should give people more incentives to purchase energy efficient homes.

In essence, if people make savings on their energy bills they will have more money to service a larger mortgage, and that should be taken into consideration when banks make their lending decisions. We know that in 2014, 51% of fuel-poor households were owner-occupiers, with only 33% in the private rented sector. Were the EPC rating of a house to be included in a lender's affordability calculation, people could borrow up to £4,000 more in many cases. Under such a system, an EPC A rating would allow people to borrow £11,500 more than an EPC G-rated house. I recommend to hon. Members who are interested in this proposal a report by the Lenders group, which said that energy bills were a sizeable part of borrowers' essential expenditure, and were therefore a component of the affordability calculation that warranted being made more sophisticated.

James Heapey (Wells) (Con): My hon. Friend is making such a good point about how we can challenge mortgage lenders to revisit affordability, based on how much it costs to live in a house. Crucially, it demonstrates to developers who have pushed back against higher energy efficiency building standards on the basis of affordability that lenders understand that reduced operation costs are a good thing, because borrowers can borrow more to pay more for a house that costs less to live in. It slays the developers' argument against more stringent building regulations.

Antoinette Sandbach: I completely agree, and those houses would be more easily resold, too. The energy efficiency measures that had been introduced in a property would have a market value, and that would be taken into account in the ability to resell—particularly the increased borrowing capability. Furthermore, it would give real value when looking at the EPC rating for the future. It is a simple step that could be taken with relatively little Government interference—a simple statutory instrument so that energy efficiency could be considered as part of the mortgage affordability criteria would be very persuasive, particularly for those companies specialising in green finance.

Despite that, I also agree with my hon. Friend that we have to look at the criteria that we impose on house builders. It is simply not acceptable that in this day and age we are building houses that are likely to need retrofitting in future. By increasing the build standard, people would learn how an energy efficient home can have an impact on their life. I sat and shivered in my own home in London during the freeze last week; I found myself sitting in my sitting room in my coat because the house was so cold and inefficient. I now realise

that I have a relatively fuel efficient home where I live in Cheshire, which makes a difference mentally, to comfort levels and to bills. Merely including the energy efficiency measures in affordability calculations would be enough to drive people towards more energy-efficient homes even if buyers do not borrow extra money, because they would be attracted by the perception of value implied by the higher borrowing limits.

My second suggestion is one that the Minister may be able to assist with more directly. When Members talk about infrastructure spending, one is put in mind of boys with their toys: big trains, roads, railways and power stations. However, I suggest that the Minister designate energy efficiency measures as infrastructure spending, bringing it under the purview of the National Infrastructure Commission. The rationale for that is simple: energy efficiency spending is a one-off cost, so it is closer to capital than revenue expenditure. By reducing energy consumption, those investments free up energy sector capacity. That reduces, or at least delays, the need for new capacity to come online. That new capacity—in the form of generation plants, networks and energy storage—would be considered infrastructure spending by the Government, and potentially would involve a large amount of Government expenditure.

Why invest in the big plant if we can roll out energy efficiency measures across the country, as part of an infrastructure project? Energy efficiency measures provide a public service: they insulate consumers—literally—against the volatility of energy markets. Likewise, they provide health and wellbeing benefits, by enabling consumers to heat buildings more effectively, and they have the knock-on consequences of reducing our carbon emissions and contributing towards our overall aim of clean, green growth.

Research by Frontier Economics found that a building energy performance programme would meet the Treasury's criteria for determining the top 40 infrastructure priorities. The National Infrastructure Commission has said that it will consider

“an ambitious programme of energy efficiency improvements”

and that it

“is examining ways to make the UK's building stock fit for the future.”

I hope that Ministers will pave the way by committing £1.1 billion to a programme of energy efficiency improvements, under the auspices of the National Infrastructure Commission. It is estimated that that would leverage £3.9 billion of private investment by 2035. That additional capital spending, alongside the £0.6 billion already spent, would dramatically improve energy efficiency, bringing all the benefits I have outlined.

With the £1.3 billion of savings that have been highlighted in the health budget, these measures would effectively fund themselves out of savings to other parts of the Government's expenditure. The starting step is to recognise that this is capital spending on infrastructure—not revenue spending. Members might like to look at the Energy Efficiency Infrastructure Group report, “Affordable Warmth, Clean Growth”, where they will see a detailed plan to take forward this suggestion.

I look forward to hearing suggestions from other hon. Members of how to renew our energy efficiency drive. The case for pushing forward seems indisputable: it would make significant inroads into fuel poverty and carbon emissions, as well as create jobs and secure clean, green growth for the future. Mine are just two

suggestions of how to approach that, but I hope that the Minister and her Department will take them on board. I am also keen to hear the suggestions that the Minister has brought with her; there is a lot of potential in the clean growth strategy, and I know that she is as keen as I am to see that potential realised.

1.47 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach)—I call her my friend because we serve on the same Committee and I have the utmost respect for her and her work. She gave a very impressive speech and I thank her for introducing today's debate.

I want to focus my comments on the clean growth strategy—I am sure that other colleagues will do a far better job than me in talking about energy efficiency. I welcome the clean growth strategy; it sets out strong commitments to cut our carbon emissions in the UK and to improve energy efficiency. I thank the Minister for her recent visit to Teesside and I am grateful that she recognises the opportunities that we have there as one of the most energy-intensive areas in the country, as well as the huge potential to do something quite transformative.

The Committee on Climate Change has cautioned that there are policy areas where the Government need to flesh out the detail of how they will deliver on those aims of cutting our carbon emissions. We all know that there is no path to meeting our carbon emission target that does not involve the decarbonisation of industry. I want to focus on that in particular.

In 2016, industrial emissions fell, but largely due to the closure of the SSI steelworks in Redcar. Actually, energy prices played a huge role in the 2015 steel crisis. In the UK, our steel companies were paying 80% above the EU median cost for energy—that is a huge factor in one of the challenges that our steel industry faces—but we know that we cannot meet our emissions targets without looking at industry. No one wishes to see a repeat of the 2015 closure of the SSI steelworks in Redcar, which ended 175 years of a major industry that built the world by providing the steel that forged everything from the Sydney harbour bridge to the new Wembley stadium. The loss of 3,000 jobs had a devastating impact on an area with a proud heritage and a proud history of driving the industrial revolution through steel production and its many other energy-intensive industries. We do not want to reduce our emissions through that kind of crisis. Industrial decarbonisation, done in a properly sustained, managed and strategic way, is the way forward, and it is a clear priority in the Government's strategy.

We already have good energy efficiency action plans for several sectors, including cement, ceramics, oil and chemicals. That is a really positive start, but we need to go much further to meet the challenge. One of the easiest and most cost-effective solutions is carbon capture and storage. As the Minister knows, Teesside is hugely ambitious about becoming one of Europe's first clean industrial zones and using CCS to drive that. The Teesside Collective in my constituency is ready and waiting to start decarbonising UK industry.

Teesside is home to nearly 60% of the UK's major energy users in the process and chemicals sectors. To keep those industries thriving and to retain jobs, investment

and growth in our area in a low-carbon world, we need to be serious about cleaning up their emissions. The internationally renowned North East of England Process Industry Cluster represents chemicals-based industries across the region, but it is concentrated in Teesside. The sector generates £26 billion of sales and £12 billion of exports annually, and is the north-east's largest industrial sector.

The chemicals sector is up against strong international competition. NEPIC estimates that CCS could create and safeguard almost 250,000 jobs in the next 30 to 40 years. The Committee on Climate Change has shown that CCS could virtually halve the cost to the UK of meeting emissions targets. The UK is especially well placed to be a leader in the industry, not least because of the storage space in depleted oilfields just off our coast. The Library estimates that CCS could sustain up to 60,000 jobs and deliver a £160 billion economic boost by 2050 if it were delivered along the east coast.

The Government have promised a CCS demonstration project, which I really welcome. Of course, I sincerely hope that it will be in Teesside, but wherever in the UK it is based, the most important thing is that it comes to fruition. We cannot lose another opportunity. The new £100 million commitment is a significant downgrade from the £1 billion of funding that the Government pulled from CCS in 2015. It is a cautious investment in a crucial technology, but I welcome it as an important step forward.

On Teesside, we are taking a couple of other approaches to improving energy efficiency and decarbonising. District heating has huge potential. I welcome the Government's recognition of the role that it can play in reducing bills for both homes and businesses, and we are keen to deliver it on Teesside. We want to use our vast renewable energy resources, which the wind turbines off our coast make very visible, to support our energy intensive industries, and we want to continue to innovate, as we have done for more than 200 years. We want to use the carbon dioxide that is produced for useful projects, such as replacing oil with bio-resource. We have a huge number of plans afoot in Teesside. We are looking to work positively and constructively with the Government, and we welcome all the positive signals we have had from them so far.

The former SSI site in my constituency will be the focus of much of that work. Ben Houchen, the Tees Valley Mayor, issued a press release this week previewing an upcoming Government energy announcement about the site. We do not know any more than the details that appeared in the media, but they sound positive, and I welcome and support this. As the Minister knows, the former SSI site has huge potential for that kind of investment to help to fulfil our ambition of being a world leading clean industrial zone, and I do not hesitate to back it.

However, I am slightly concerned that we are racing ahead to make an announcement without necessarily having the means to follow it through. I would welcome more detail about that from the Minister. As she knows, the former SSI site is still in the hands of the Thai banks, and I am concerned that a premature announcement on what will happen on the site might push up its value and make it harder for us to negotiate with the banks and get the site out of their hands to enable us to carry out all our wonderful plans and projects. Any further information from the Minister would be gratefully received.

[Anna Turley]

Finally, let me say something about our potential. Energy efficiency and clean growth are not only priorities for tackling climate change and poverty, but offer huge economic potential in jobs and investment in the UK. In areas such as mine, which lost 3,000 jobs overnight, every job is critical. We desperately need investment and growth. The UK energy efficiency sector already turns over £20.3 billion, employs 144,000 people and sells exports worth more than £1 billion. We are in a prime position, particularly in Teesside, further to increase the market and to export our skills and technology to the world. This is a chance to future-proof our industries, protect our jobs and create new ones, and ensure that areas such as Teesside can play as big a role in the industry of this country and the world in the future as they did in the past.

1.55 pm

James Heapey (Wells) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), who has become the leading champion in this place for energy efficiency. She is at risk of being overtaken by the Minister, who is celebrated in all quarters of the energy industry. That is very welcome indeed.

This is a very important debate. I chuckled to myself at my hon. Friend's reference to infrastructure projects being like boys with their toys. It is tempting when talking about energy policy to start with the wind turbines the size of the Eiffel tower in the North sea, the big nuclear power plants we are building or the transmission system. It is much less glamorous but no less important to talk about the other end of the system, where we can make huge differences in the amount of energy we use.

I happen to believe that six networks drive productivity in this country: road, rail, air, broadband, mobile and the energy system. The first five are discussed all the time in this place, but the energy system is talked about very rarely indeed. Energy got a rare outing this week, but in a consumer-focused debate about capping bills rather than in a debate about the wider energy system and potential productivity advantages.

A more energy-efficient system is important to our energy security. It was grimly predictable that, when National Grid released its warning about a squeeze on the gas supply last week, the headlines would scream stuff like, "Blackout Britain!", and that the proposed solution would be more thermal generation from coal and gas. I argue that the solution is actually a more efficient energy system that allows demand to be shifted when those sorts of times come.

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry):

Let me clarify for the record what happened last week. I was extremely concerned that consumers might be alarmed and worry about whether to cook their tea or turn their heating on. What happened was an entirely normal signalling: "Can anyone who is consuming lots of gas sell it back? We've got a spike, because we've got the coldest weather for a decade." That system worked. Sufficient gas was provided. That is a tribute to our very flexible energy system.

At no point was domestic supply under threat. I have worked closely with National Grid to ensure that, should that ever happen again, those messages are put

out much more quickly, because I do not want people to be worried about making those choices in their homes.

James Heapey: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and she knows that she has my full, enthusiastic support on that point. The answer to what happened last week is not that we need more gas: actually, the system worked and demonstrated that there is flexibility. That more efficient, more flexible system brings with it energy security, and we should make that point robustly.

We should also be clear that a more efficient energy system brings with it reduced costs for consumers. Transmission and distribution costs are a not insignificant part of energy bills, so designing a more efficient system should be a priority. I will come back to that point shortly. It is not just price capping that can bring down bills for consumers: we could also find pretty significant savings in the costs of operating the energy system.

The other reason why we need a more efficient system is that, over the next 15 years or so, we will increase by an order of magnitude the demand we place on our electricity system. As we decarbonise heat and electricity, we will find ourselves significantly increasing the load, and the answer to that increased load cannot exclusively be more generation. We must seize the opportunity to create a more efficient energy system to meet that increased demand. For that, we must recognise that all of the clean tech coming along that allows for decentralised generation allows us to generate locally and use locally.

Rather than conceiving the national energy system as we see it at the National Grid control room in Wokingham, with its big map of the UK and its worrying about getting power from Hinkley Point to someone's toaster, we should start to see it in terms of: what the net energy use is in someone's home and whether they are putting energy back into the system or drawing down; and whether a community can service its energy needs and whether it is drawing from or exporting to the system.

The system would constantly balance upwards and, crucially, the distribution network operators would become distribution system operators, balancing the flows within their region. The national grid—if we need one in the future—would be left simply to balance the net flows of energy between the regions. If energy is generated and consumed locally, that must bring a significant reduction in distribution and transmission costs.

Of course, I recognise there will always be a requirement to socialise among all consumers the underpinning energy security that comes from a system that backs up when local systems fail. Such a system would bring huge reductions in bills and huge reductions in carbon—and frankly it would be an embracing of progress, given that all of this clean technology is coming down the tracks.

There is another area in which we could make the energy system more efficient: we should recognise that we waste a huge amount of energy in the form of heat. Remarkably few organisations that produce huge amounts of heat as a waste by-product yet understand their ability to monetise that heat. There are some brilliant pilot schemes that should inspire. London Underground has huge amounts of heat moving around its tunnel system underneath our capital city, and there are examples of it trying to get that heat out of the system and into heat networks on the surface. That is great, but such examples are relatively few and far between.

There are examples from heavy industry, where waste heat is being put into a heat network. Also, and this is a shameless plug: the shadow Minister and I—I will also demonstrate the non-partisan nature of the debate by referring to him as my hon. Friend—are both vice-presidents of the Association for Decentralised Energy, which told me the other week about a sugar factory in East Anglia, where waste heat and carbon is taken from the factory to greenhouses, where a prodigious amount of tomatoes are grown. That understanding of the value of the waste product and making energy usage more efficient should be an inspiration to companies all over the place.

There is also the electricity system itself. I understand from some of the distribution networks that the waste heat from the transformers when energy comes from the national grid into a distribution system is huge, and at the moment it goes out into the ether. Surely there is an opportunity to look at how that could be connected into heat systems.

At the Conservative party conference in Birmingham last year, a number of us were invited to go down to a combined heat and power plant beneath the library in Birmingham city centre. What is amazing in Birmingham is there is a network of CHPs—one underneath the library, one under New Street station and a couple of others in the city centre—that generate heat that is sold commercially to the hotels concentrated around the city centre at a cheaper rate than the hotels could get for themselves. The hotels therefore get a good deal and Birmingham business gets a good deal. However, Birmingham City Council, which put the network in place, also gets to sell cheap heat into the social housing immediately beyond the city centre. What I love is that the system is not just more efficient and therefore bringing down costs for business, but allowing for social justice by delivering far cheaper heating into the homes of those who can least afford to heat themselves.

That brings me to the domestic energy efficiency market, and first to those who are fuel-poor and unable to pay. Clearly, when it comes to our intervention, we must look at two types of energy efficiency to support those who are fuel-poor: barrier technology to avoid waste, putting stuff into windows, walls and roofs so that less electricity is required; and putting clean tech into homes, so that they have more efficient boilers and smart appliances, which also use less power. This is a completely non-partisan debate, but I adore the scheme in Scotland—and not just because it is called HEEPS, which was my school nickname. All power to the Scottish Government, who have one of the world's leading domestic energy efficiency mechanisms—the home energy efficiency programmes for Scotland—in place. I hope we can be inspired by learning about what has been done north of the border.

There are opportunities to intervene. Yes, we can make the point that it is socially just to do so, but I hope the Treasury realises that it is financially sound, too. In the eight weeks of 2018 thus far, the Treasury has shelled out £56,282,500—roughly—in cold weather payments to those who live in fuel poverty. If we were to intervene aggressively to make those in fuel poverty live in better insulated, more energy-efficient homes, arguably that 56 million quid could have been reduced significantly. As my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury said, there are huge savings to be passed across to the NHS system and adult social care by ensuring that those who are fuel-poor, those most vulnerable and those living on the lowest incomes are in homes that are comfortable.

There are productivity gains to be had, too. If people live somewhere they can heat and they do not have to choose between heating and eating, they will be much more able to go out and get work, be motivated to be productive and get promotion, which will stop them being in a position where they are fuel-poor.

I have three more suggestions. The first is about the winter fuel allowance. I am aware that it is probably a bad idea to talk in the House of Commons about a universal benefit to pensioners, especially when as a result of this suggestion there is a chance that some will not get a payment any more. However, we might start to look at whether to set aside those who we class as being fuel-poor—those who have qualified for cold weather payments in the past couple of weeks, for example—and make sure they still get a winter fuel payment.

For the remainder, however, instead of giving cash to be used against an energy bill, could we start to give vouchers for that value with which they can improve their homes with energy efficiency measures? They would get the same amount, and I would argue passionately that over time they would be delivered a saving from their energy bills far in excess of what they currently get with the extra cash of the winter fuel allowance. More importantly still, whereas that allowance is given, spent and gone, with vouchers we would upgrade the housing stock of all the houses currently lived in by pensioners that, at some point in the future, will be lived in by people who are not pensioners. We would make an intervention using the existing universal benefit in an ever-so-slightly different way, which would stimulate economic activity—all these people would move into the supply chain to deliver those energy efficiency measures—and upgrade our housing stock permanently. We should consider that.

We also need to look at how we do EPCs and the standards we set for new homes. In hindsight, I think we on the Government side made a mistake in reducing the carbon standards for new built homes. However, even if we leave the standards as they are for the moment, please let us ensure that developers are building houses at the EPC level they say they are. There is too much discussion in this place of charities worrying about energy efficiency—they say that developers can say, “Everything we build that is ‘The James’ is an EPC band C. Therefore, wherever we build it, it is an EPC band C, even if we cannot guarantee those properties were built to the exact same standards as the type tested.”

We need to ensure that all of the hundreds of thousands of homes that the Government are commendably committed to building are built to the very highest standards—at the very least, to the standard it says they are built to in the brochure the developer provides at the point of sale.

Instead of EPCs simply being a mechanism for judging how efficient a property is in terms of its barrier technologies, or how well insulated the walls, windows, doors and roofs are, I wonder whether the Government might also consider how we might start to value the clean tech that might also have been put into the home. Clearly, some clean tech is removable; smart appliances may well be moved with the owner when they move house. But we have asked the energy companies to commit to having offered every consumer in the UK a smart meter by the early part of next decade, and by 2025, I think, we want all properties to be at band C. I wonder whether a requirement for reaching band C by

[James Heapey]

2025 should be that a band C house has a smart meter within it. That would catalyse the uptake of smart meters quite quickly.

My hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury has already mentioned the importance of getting energy efficiency, and therefore operation costs, factored into the affordability studies done by mortgage companies. Nothing will bring the value of energy efficiency to the attention of homeowners more. I declare an interest here, inasmuch as I am on the phone to my mortgage broker quite often at the moment and spend a lot of time scouring Rightmove, but nothing motivates homeowners more than when they are going through the affordability study and the mortgage company or broker is asking about the bills.

There is a hugely frustrating moment when the mortgage broker asks, “And what do you spend on your household utilities at the moment?” and the homeowner says, “Probably about £200 a month, but within the house I am building there are solar panels on the roof, or solar PV on the roof, or I want to put those things on to the roof or to put in a heat pump,” and the mortgage broker just moves on to the next question and shows no interest whatever in what they have just been told.

Antoinette Sandbach: I have been converted, having installed an air source heat pump in a very old property in north Wales, with 75 mm of internal insulation. I can virtually heat the house on a candle—it is not quite that efficient, but it is close. What is more, I get money back in renewable heat incentive payments, which means that my total energy cost has gone from approximately £1,200 a year to about £600 a year. It is extraordinary. It is comfortable to live in; I know that if I walk through the door, it will be warm. It is incredibly efficient. There is a gas boiler that gives hot water on demand with no wastage and no heating up water unnecessarily. It makes a huge difference.

James Heapey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I suspect that we need collectively to convince our colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government that we can value energy efficiency and clean tech within buildings in a much better way. We must shift them away from an analysis that says that the affordability of a property is exclusively about what that property costs to own or rent. It is not; it is what that property costs to own, rent and then live in during the month that follows. With energy efficiency measures, we can significantly bring down what it costs to live in a house, and therefore make it more affordable, by more than the smaller savings we might have got from cutting a few corners with energy efficiency when the place was constructed in the first place.

I have now unloaded all my bright ideas into *Hansard*. I believe that we must embrace this agenda and see that the renewal of our energy system is about not just building big zero-carbon generation, but making an energy system that is more efficient, that sees the value in waste heat and looks at how we use that more efficiently, and that is re-gearred so that it is localised and decentralised and we are balancing upward rather than downward.

We must see domestic energy efficiency as an opportunity to save consumers money in a far more meaningful, lasting and organic way than the price cap intervention,

which we necessarily had to make this week, but which must only be short term. If we do all those things, we create economic activity and save money for both the Exchequer and, crucially, bill payers too.

2.14 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I congratulate the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) on her efforts to secure the debate. I find myself in agreement with many things that she and the hon. Member for Wells (James Heapey) have said.

We can hardly claim that our country has been a model of consistency in its approach to energy policy and energy efficiency over recent years. Changes from one Government to the next, and even significant changes within Governments, have come thick and fast, all of which has led to a rather unsettling period in our approach to the subject. I recall a series of parliamentary questions that I tabled only to try to ascertain when and how the Government would publish and then respond to the Bonfield review. It was as if I was trying to get blood out of a stone.

The review was finally published in December 2016. While I acknowledge that this Government seem set to embark on a particular course of action on energy efficiency and clean growth, there has been a lot of time lost and it is still not clear to me how the Government will achieve some of their ambitions. To the best of my knowledge, there has not yet been any real opportunity properly to scrutinise the proposals set out in the clean growth strategy. That is one reason today's debate is so welcome.

The recent report by the independent climate change think tank E3G has highlighted the fact that public investment in energy-efficient homes in England has fallen; I think the figure I saw was that it had fallen by about 58% since 2012. That seems to flow from the coalition Government's decision to end the Labour Government's Warm Front scheme, which offered support to poorer households for better insulation and things such as boiler upgrades. Of course, we also experienced what I can safely call the disaster that was the green deal. According to E3G, Wales now spends twice as much as England per person on insulation, Northern Ireland three times as much and Scotland four times as much.

In my own region of the west midlands, fuel poverty is particularly acute. We have the highest level of fuel poverty in England, with about 13.7% of households—roughly 315,000 homes—classified as fuel-poor. The newly appointed Metro Mayor for the West Midlands combined authority has recognised the importance of carbon emission reductions and clean growth in his aims and objectives for the area. I am interested to see what he will do, when he comes forward with his plans, to translate those into tangible results.

My understanding—I am grateful to the Sustainable Housing Action Partnership for a very helpful briefing—is that there are a number of encouraging activities, especially at local authority level, attempting to build on previous initiatives in the west midlands, with the aim of achieving a breakthrough in demand for wholesale investment in high energy-efficient housing stock and other energy improvement and retrofitting schemes. I think the hon. Member for Wells referred to some of the things he had

seen in Birmingham on his recent visit. However, SHAP is clear that, for real progress to be made in this area, there needs to be a strong promotion of housing as infrastructure, which is the very point that the hon. Member for Eddisbury made in her fine speech.

Indeed, SHAP actually looks favourably on some of the things that the hon. Member for Wells said he had seen in Scotland that had impressed him. It points out that that is exactly what they do in Scotland: energy efficiency is considered as infrastructure. A long-term commitment to energy efficiency schemes there seems to be leading to improved, high-quality planning, design and delivery schemes. There are things around that we could learn from, but they require some obvious courses of action: clear messages from the Government, access to investment, a long-term commitment and the seeing of these projects as infrastructure projects.

Energy efficiency is obviously a key part of the Government's wider decarbonisation plans, as well as being one of the better ways to tackle fuel poverty. I hate to think what will happen when fuel bills land after the recent cold snap, and I wonder what we will learn in the coming months about the people who suffered during that period because of their fears over fuel poverty. I was grateful to the Minister for her clarification on the gas scare story, but one thing it exposed is how reliant we in this country have become on gas and how much of a need there is for greater diversity in our energy supply.

Other hon. Members and I are pleased to see the Government reaffirm their support for the EPC band C target for fuel-poor homes, and indeed their proposals to extend that to all rented homes. It is also good to know that the energy company obligation—ECO—will continue until 2028. However, we would all be helped immensely if the Minister put a little more meat on the bones. Is there an implementation plan to ensure that the band C target for all homes by 2035 will actually be achieved? What particular steps will the Minister take to achieve the band C target for social housing and private rented homes? What are her thoughts on phasing out high-carbon heating systems in homes? I would also like to know what is to be done to incentivise able-to-pay homeowners to make the necessary energy efficiency improvements to their homes; other Members have mentioned that issue.

James Heapey: I did not talk about the able-to-pay market, but I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman has heard about companies that are starting to look at providing heat as a service? The consumer defines comfort, and the company then delivers that comfort, but the company takes responsibility for delivering energy efficiency into the consumer's home because that is how it makes its margin when providing heat as a service.

Steve McCabe: I have heard about a scheme of that nature, but I have to confess that I do not know very much about it; I would be interested to learn a bit more. We definitely need to think about how we both improve energy efficiency and make it affordable for people who can afford it on paper, but who we know in practice can often find it difficult.

Antoinette Sandbach: One of the big problems is that many of those measures need to go in when back-to-the-brick restoration or work is done in the home, because

putting in solid wall insulation internally requires re-wiring, re-plastering and many other things. There is therefore a need to incentivise homeowners who are making changes to their home to do so at the right time. I am not certain that I see that being incentivised by the Government at the moment.

Steve McCabe: I certainly agree. A lot of the low-hanging fruit has been picked and we are moving to a different level of problem, which I think gives us all the more reason to come up with practical, realistic incentives for that purpose.

As I say, it is good that ECO will continue until 2028. However, it is estimated that, to meet the 2030 fuel poverty target, the scheme requires funding of about £1.2 billion per year, as opposed to the current proposal to keep funding at about £640 million per year. I am curious to know how the Minister thinks she can meet that target with a projected funding shortfall of roughly 50%.

A further concern about ECO is that it is essentially a regressive funding mechanism. It pays for installing efficiency measures in fuel-poor homes by increasing energy bills across the board, which negatively impacts low-income customers who do not themselves benefit from the scheme. It seems analogous to the arguments about the cost of the smart meter programme, in that the cost of that is spread across all bills but without all people gaining the same benefits. That is something I have been looking at with some interest for a while now.

The hon. Member for Wells was looking for a way to vary the funding, and he talked about what might be done with the winter fuel allowance. I agree with the UK Energy Research Centre, whose recent report recommended that the environmental and social levies, including ECO, should be funded through general taxation rather than increased energy bills, which they claim would save the poorest 10% of households £102 per year while the vast majority of people would see no change to the amount they pay for environmental and social levies.

Claire Perry: This is a very interesting question, and I intervene to address things that I am not sure I will have time to come to at the end. This point has come up a couple of times, and I say two things to the hon. Gentleman. First, bill payers and taxpayers are generally the same people; we pay out of our pockets for both. Secondly, the problem we all have, as he will know, is that, regardless of which party is in power, it is difficult to hypothecate taxes for particular measures.

Some might argue—I mean no disrespect to our wonderful civil servants—that the Government are not the most efficient deliverer of such schemes. I will talk in closing about the reforms to ECO that we want to bring forward. However, getting energy companies, which know who the customers are, to target that money effectively and to commission and deliver what are often very valuable energy-saving measures for our poorest and most fuel-poor people seems to me a far more efficient way of delivering what we all want, which is people not living in fuel poverty.

Steve McCabe: I will certainly not argue with the Minister that the Government might not be the most efficient deliverer of schemes. I obviously concur with her on that.

[*Steve McCabe*]

My point to the Minister is that general taxation is usually graduated to some extent, whereas a figure applied to bills across the board is effectively a flat-rate tax. In that way, it has a regressive impact, which is the point I was making. I am certainly open to other ways of looking at this, and I hope we will hear from the Minister—I hope there will be plenty of time to hear it—that there are other ways that this can be looked at, and that the Government are open to them.

In its response to the clean growth strategy, the UK's Committee on Climate Change said that an ambitious energy efficiency action plan for able-to-pay households is urgently needed, as well as a robust policy framework including incentives and firm commitments. It also recommends that we need some concrete proposals in place by 2019 if we are going to make real progress. I will be interested to hear the Minister's response to those points.

I want to mention a couple of other things. The committee also says that action is needed in the private rented sector and that stronger regulations are needed. As the hon. Member for Eddisbury says, we need to find ways to incentivise homeowners to improve the energy efficiency of their homes. Fiscal incentives could include council tax rebates, cutting VAT on energy efficiency measures or a stamp duty rebate. As early as 2005, the Energy Saving Trust published research on the use of fiscal incentives involving council tax and stamp duty, and since then many other organisations have developed thinking on how fiscal incentives for energy efficiency could work, so there is not exactly a shortage of potential levers. I agree with the Minister that the process is not straightforward, but quite a lot of things could be considered and it would be good to hear where the thinking is going.

I would recommend that, alongside the fiscal incentives, the Government start to encourage other schemes. We should look again at the idea of zero or certainly reduced-rate loans, taxpayer-funded grants and mortgage-linked cashback schemes, to which I think the hon. Member for Eddisbury referred.

Something in which I am interested and that requires exploration is equity release schemes. They might be a promising vehicle for energy efficiency, because they would allow homeowners to withdraw some capital from their home for improvements that they would need to pay for only when or if they sold their home. Those schemes are considered suitable in particular for older, equity-rich homeowners—perhaps the kind of people the hon. Lady had in mind when talking about the scale of work that would be done.

Those people own quite a significant proportion of the country's housing stock. Of course, they do not necessarily have money readily available for improvements, but they do have considerable equity. The Government should build on the work being done in Scotland. I would like to see an attempt at least to pilot an equity release scheme in England, and I would be interested to know whether the Minister is thinking about that.

The private rented sector has some of the worst properties for energy efficiency in the UK. Despite targets being introduced seven years ago to bring all rented properties up to EPC band E by 2020, 6% of private rented homes are estimated still to be in bands F

or G. That equates to about 280,000 residences, which are often occupied by the poorest families—people who are forced into choosing between eating and heating. Shockingly, cold homes were found to be a bigger killer across the UK in 2015 than road accidents, alcohol or drugs.

The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is introducing new minimum standards—from April, I think—stating that no home can be rented out if it is below EPC band E. However, the regulation includes a “no cost to the landlord” principle, meaning that if the landlord says that they cannot afford to make improvements or that they cannot get access to the energy company obligation scheme, they do not have to do that. I do not understand the rationale for that loophole. I ask the Minister to reconsider the matter, especially in the light of the questions about the availability of the ECO scheme.

As well as setting targets, the Government need to provide effective legislation and regulation, ensure that the financial frameworks are in place to incentivise able-to-pay households and ensure that private landlords are obliged to invest in their properties. It seems to me that there is a degree of agreement across the House on these matters. If we saw some progress on them, we could have much greater confidence that the Government would achieve their ambitions, and the twin aims of decarbonisation and energy efficiency, with the knock-on effect on the fuel-poor, would be things on which we could realistically expect to see significant progress.

2.34 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I, too, commend my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) for securing the debate. Many contributions have focused on domestic energy efficiency, and I will touch on that, but I also want to broaden the debate and talk about energy efficiency in the commercial and industrial market, which is crucial if we are to meet our emissions targets.

The clean growth strategy was introduced last year by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy with the express intention of accelerating the pace of clean growth, allowing the UK to meet its greenhouse gas emissions targets while ensuring that we maintain the strong economic growth that has been a key success of the Conservative Government during the past eight years. It is worth noting that the clean growth strategy has been introduced not to address an issue, but to improve, accelerate and maximise an already successful set of Government policies.

Since 1990, the UK's GDP has increased by 67%, while emissions have gone down by 42%. In comparison, the G7's GDP has increased by 61%, but its emissions have gone down by only 3%. That shows that the UK has led the way in growing the economy without jeopardising the environment. To put that another way, protecting our environment need not undermine our economy.

The argument that environmental protection is incompatible with a thriving economy holds little water. Our success in creating more jobs while reducing emissions shows that we need not choose between economic growth and environmental measures. The UK is therefore clearly right to seek to maximise the economic benefits of our transition to a low-carbon economy.

With regard to Scotland, energy efficiency was of course devolved in 2016, but energy policy is still a reserved matter. Particularly important for Scotland is the recognition of the importance of carbon capture and storage to decarbonising UK heat, industry and power. That has been mentioned by Opposition Members. For Scotland, CCS is a vital tool to reduce emissions, and the Minister should be commended for putting it firmly back on the Government's agenda.

In the UK, we have world-leading oil and gas skills and infrastructure—predominantly based in the north-east of Scotland—which could be perfectly suited to CCS. However, the opportunity to repurpose many of those assets before decommissioning is diminishing. That is why putting the clean growth strategy into action now is vital for the UK as a whole. The economic benefits of CCS to Scotland and the east coast of England combined have recently been estimated at more than £163 billion during the next 60 years, making it imperative that we maximise this opportunity.

It is therefore worth considering the Caledonia Clean Energy Project, which could be well placed to kick-start the UK CCS industry. The Caledonia Clean Energy Project would see the development in Scotland of crucial low-carbon infrastructure that not only provided clean, reliable power to up to 1.3 million homes, but facilitated the decarbonisation of Scotland's major industrial hub, Grangemouth. If that were not enough, the project could also produce enough clean hydrogen every day to power about 500 hydrogen-fuelled buses.

There is not a strict definition of energy efficiency at industrial level, but surely a helpful one would be the sort of energy efficiency that not only helped the UK to lower its emissions and meet emissions targets, but put the UK at the forefront of economic innovation in the energy market.

It is clear that Scotland specifically has the exciting potential to be a major part of the clean growth strategy, but if there is one criticism that can be levelled at the strategy, it is that it does not provide the sufficiently clear policy signal that investors in CCS need to justify what could be multiple billions of pounds of inward investment in the UK and Scotland. It is important to remember that although energy efficiency is devolved—we have heard here today examples of best practice in England and in Scotland—energy policy is still a reserved matter. That is why having a joined-up strategy that goes across the UK is so important—to ensure that we can pool our resources.

Where we have large energy assets such as nuclear, wind—we have world-leading wind farms in the North sea—and oil and gas, we can pool our resources, but we can also leverage some of the research and innovation that the UK is so famous for to promote micro energy efficiency and energy generation schemes and decentralised projects across the UK. The clean growth strategy seeks to promote that and it is a UK-wide strategy, which I very much welcome.

I would like the Minister to comment on how the clean growth strategy could deliver commercial-scale carbon capture to Scotland and other parts of the UK, before the oil and gas infrastructure is decommissioned and our best offshore engineers move abroad to work in other markets. Will she meet me and other Scottish Conservative colleagues to discuss the matter further?

As was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey), we should be looking at a number of different energy measures. As a strategy, it is right that we look at both the top level and the micro level. I will not repeat some of the points so articulately put by my hon. Friend when talking about decentralised energy schemes and micro energy schemes, but I will just add some of the geothermal schemes. Certainly in my constituency, in Clackmannanshire, we have been looking at former mines and whether it is possible to use them as sources of geothermal heat.

Claire Perry: As a matter of principle, it would be a pleasure to meet with anybody. As everyone knows, my door is open. Secondly, the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) and I had that conversation only this week. I suspect that many people know about this whole geothermal mine water thing. I am really interested in this technology. If there are groups out there that are interested in promoting this and suggesting what can be done in a cost-effective way, bring it on. Let us look at what we have actually done—we have already dug the holes—and see whether we can get some more benefit for those communities.

Luke Graham: I thank the Minister for her intervention. Fortuitously, Clackmannanshire is up for a city deal, so there would never be a better time for her to come and get involved in these energy projects. I will definitely be following up with her on that as soon as we leave Westminster Hall.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): As we are all getting on this afternoon, I should like to invite the hon. Gentleman to come and see me in Southampton, to look at its geothermal energy scheme, which has been going since 1984. Unfortunately, it is still the only one in the country, but I trust that, with the Minister's good offices, the geothermal schemes that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned could shortly get under way to join Southampton in its geothermal pioneering position. I really do commend what he is thinking about for geothermal. I think a lot of development is possible in terms of both mines and aquifers. I hope he will continue on his path of supporting that.

Luke Graham: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and will gladly take up his invitation.

Antoinette Sandbach: Given the new Thornton campus in Cheshire, which is specialising in geothermal, may I suggest that on the way to Southampton from Scotland my hon. Friend call in to see some of the leading research that is being done at the University of Chester on the opportunities for geothermal and how we can roll that out much further across the country?

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Mr Graham is now going to make some progress.

Luke Graham: I thank my hon. Friend for her kind intervention and, again, invitation. I would certainly be keen to visit both places, as my constituency arrangements allow.

Scotland has been at the forefront of every major industrial development in the UK, from the industrial revolution in the 18th and 19th centuries, to oil and gas

[*Luke Graham*]

in the 20th and 21st, so it has undoubtedly contributed to the UK's emissions over the years, but it has fantastic potential, through infrastructure and existing expertise, to be the leader on the clean growth strategy in the UK, and to drive the UK as a global leader in economic growth through emissions reductions. I urge the Minister to put the entire UK at the centre of the Government's clean growth strategy in the months and years ahead.

2.43 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. We should all be friends in this Chamber today. I warmly welcome the fact that the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) has initiated this important and overdue debate. It is something of a scandal that the subject has not been debated for so many years. In this warm debate, I will give the Minister only a couple of bits of heat, which have actually been generated by the contributions of others, while I try to go through the constructive discussion we have had.

First, the hon. Member for Eddisbury rightly raised the issue of fuel poverty. She talked about the fact that this is an issue for many people, particularly in rural areas where lower incomes are more common and costs are higher. The weather is often less favourable and less warm. That is especially true for off-grid customers. In the highlands and islands, distribution charges mean 4p per unit more for customers than other parts of the UK, which is a particular additional problem. I call on the UK Government, as we have called on Ofgem and energy companies, to end this inequality without—importantly—increasing the cost for others: it can and should be done.

The hon. Lady also mentioned energy efficiency and the massive strides that need to be taken towards climate change goals. I was interested in her proposition about mortgage providers providing an incentive. That merits investigation, but I would insert a word of caution there. The measures used would have to be carefully thought out, because we do not want to see the unintended consequence that people who are trying to get on the housing ladder and get their first home are effectively priced out of the market by measures that may not be appropriate for their area and its housing stock. It is worth investigating, but I urge some caution.

The hon. Lady was quite right in saying that the onus should be on new developments to provide more efficient properties. Developers should take that up. I was caught by her comment that she was shivering in her home in London. I think it is quite unusual for people in London to find themselves shivering in their houses. When I was down in my flat last week, although we benefit from a district heating scheme, the insulation is so bad that it was actually very cold in the flat, because the heat was flying out of the windows. That is a good example of what happens. Is it not also the case, however, that that gives us an insight into what people in fuel poverty have to put up with throughout pretty much the whole of the winter? It is a good lesson for us to take away: we should be aware of the genuine suffering that people face through cold.

The hon. Lady, in her very good speech, said that energy efficiency measures should be thought of as infrastructure. I think that is a good idea, which is

overdue for consideration. The Minister should take that into account, particularly in the light of the great heat challenge that we will have in the coming decades. It is an important suggestion, which should be taken forward. Of course, investment in energy efficiency creates jobs. That is a great thing to do not only socially and morally but for the economy. I think that is an important point to make.

The hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) talked about not being able to meet emissions targets without taking on the industrial effects, and she was absolutely correct. Industrial decarbonisation has to be accelerated. The whole strategy needs to be given a lot more—if Members will pardon the pun—energy, and the attention that it needs.

The hon. Lady quite rightly talked about carbon capture and storage, and about the Teesside Collective and the investment that is required. She should be commended for fighting for her constituency in that way, particularly given the issues over steel. Happily, in Scotland we were able to save the steel industry, with the Scottish Government working with Liberty Steel to take over the plants in Lanarkshire. It dramatically affects the wellbeing of industrial neighbourhoods if they lose that significant number of jobs, and they should be prioritised for reinvestment. However, we should be wary—this is one of the points of contention with the Minister—of promises of investment in carbon capture, because in Peterhead the Chancellor said that we would invest £1 billion in carbon capture and storage, but the rug was pulled away from underneath that project and it was left without that funding. It will be interesting to see the Minister not only make those commitments but follow through on commitments for the different projects. I will return to that point when I respond to the comments made by the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham).

The hon. Member for Redcar talked about district heating, which has to come through far more importantly and strongly to support communities. There are great benefits to district heating schemes if they are got right. She and the hon. Member for Wells (James Heapey) also talked about renewable energy, which is very important in both industrial and domestic energy in taking the challenge forward.

Another bone of contention that I have with the Minister—perhaps she will tell us what she will do about it—is the shabby treatment of the solar industry. Energy efficiency in commercial and industrial properties could have been greatly enhanced by supporting the solar industry, yet Government policy has withdrawn that support. Investments in new solar projects have dramatically declined—they have fallen off the scale—so I hope that the Minister will have an answer on how it can be supported.

Heeps—sorry, the hon. Member for Wells—said that big infrastructure was “toys for boys”. On International Women's Day, it is worth pausing to reflect on that and say to the Minister, as I and others have before, that we need to encourage more girls and young women into the energy industry so that, large, small or however the infrastructure is designed, it is no longer “toys for boys” but “toys for boys and girls”. It is important we continue to challenge the language that we use, although I know that was meant in the best possible way.

The hon. Gentleman also discussed whether the domestic supply was near to crisis. I know the Minister answered that point; but I will pose the slight warning that, owing

to capacity, people in off-grid areas came perilously close to running out. Some in my constituency of Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey actually did run out of liquefied petroleum gas during that period. It was not job done. I appreciate what the Minister said, but there needs to be more focus on off-grid gas customers to ensure that we support them. I would welcome a comment on that either now or later.

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman and I, and I suspect others in the Chamber, share exactly the same off-grid problem. It is a problem of effective supply. At the moment, heating oil is relatively cheap, but a couple of years ago the price was going through the roof, so we end up with unmanageable spikes in demand, although we have many collective buying schemes. He knows that one of the ambitions of the clean growth strategy is to phase out fossil fuel heating for new build in off-grid areas—it is simply ridiculous that we continue to put oil boilers in—and to look at how we create a cost-effective technological pathway. My hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) has installed a heat pump, which, as she mentioned, can require a lot of reworking of a home, which may not be cost-effective. We are all collectively determined to solve this problem. To me, the answer lies in investment, innovation and creating some good routes to market.

Drew Hendry: I thank the Minister for that intervention. I understand that she wants to create solutions, but the proof will be in the pudding. I look forward to seeing what tangible measures come forward.

The hon. Member for Wells also talked about comfortable homes improving productivity. It is absolutely true. Studies have shown that in cold homes, children's educational attainment is held back. He is right to point out that people are more productive when they have reasonable places to live in, and we give our children the best possible start in life when we give them warm homes to live in and have their education in.

The hon. Gentleman made very salient points, which I was delighted to hear. The voucher scheme for fuel-poor households is a really good thing to follow up—it is another idea that has merit and deserves further investigation. If something could be produced on that level, it could help a number of people and, as he said, improve housing stock. A measure that could improve things right away is the rapid acceleration of the programme to put the latest generation of smart meters into homes. A lot more needs to be put in to ensure that that happens much more quickly.

James Heapey: The key to getting smart meters into people's homes is not only that the technology will allow all sorts of smart solutions that will bring down energy bills for people who are using less, but that the new tariffs being brought forward by the insurgent energy companies and based around half-hourly settlement will allow people to access cheaper bills because they will be in a better market. The more that we can all, on both sides of the House, encourage smart meter deployment, the better job we will be doing for our constituents.

Drew Hendry: The hon. Gentleman makes a very salient point. It is important that we encourage these measures, especially for people living in poor households,

because they are less likely to take this up off their own backs. A focused programme and looking at how we incentivise this rapid uptake for poor households is very important.

Steve McCabe: I agree with the hon. Gentleman and others about the potential of the smart meter programme. Does he concede that at the moment the problem is that it costs households? They do not know how much it is costing them, because the Government will not release those figures, and we do not know how much the Data Communications Company is costing. At the moment, while the potential is there, we have a programme that looks as though it is not on track and could lead to an inflation of energy bills, rather than savings for people.

Drew Hendry: That is something to be aware of. I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that point and look forward to the Minister's response.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned home insulation, which must be taken forward much more rapidly—I know I am using that word a lot today, but it is important because this is somewhere where we can make a real difference very quickly. In Scotland, as he pointed out, there is four times the progress on insulation. I make that point because it is important to thank the people, in particular in organisations such as Warmer Homes Scotland, who have been on the ground, working with consumers and making the breakthroughs by talking to people and persuading them to take on the new measures. If any hon. Member in the Chamber or anyone else wants to look at that, they will see the fantastic work being done.

Luke Graham: The Warmer Homes scheme was a fantastic initiative. I know that some of the terms changed in 2017 because a number of constituency cases were brought to me, with people sometimes being disadvantaged. Will the hon. Gentleman join me in working on addressing some of those issues to ensure we are still reaching as many people as we can?

Drew Hendry: I will come in a moment or two to what the Scottish Government are doing.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) talked about energy efficiency schemes, and in Scotland some of those are changing the housing landscape. I want to point out one of the commercial companies, a private developer from the north of Scotland: Springfield Properties. It is not only looking at more energy efficiency measures in its buildings, but in Perthshire, where it has a new development of thousands of homes, it is putting in electric vehicle charging points for every single house. That is a very innovative thing for a private developer to be doing, adding to the fact that Scotland is leading the way in electric charging for vehicles.

James Heapey: The hon. Gentleman is making another important point. At the moment, when new houses are built in England, I think they are being built with 2 kV or 3 kV fuse boards, but an EV requires an 11 kV fuse board. I do not understand why we are building hundreds of thousands of houses with electrical connectivity that is insufficient to charge at full flow cars that are very likely to dominate the market in future. I hope that our friends at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government will amend that part of housing policy quickly.

Drew Hendry: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, and I share his hope that people are listening to the need to adjust those things. To achieve the outcome of improving homes, making them ready for the future through energy efficiency and tackling the clean growth challenge, it is important to take a holistic view.

I agree with the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak about introducing grants, loans and measures to help people to gain energy efficiency but, again, it is always good to look at those kinds of ideas with real caution. His talk about an equity release scheme should give us pause for thought about its unintended consequences. It is a good idea that merits investigation, but we need to reflect on whether it is a position that only people with assets could access and whether we would be forcing people to release those assets, instead of promoting it as a core policy across the board.

I hoped that I would not have any heat from the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire, as is usual in exchanges between near-neighbours in Scotland, but he bravely brought up the carbon capture and storage challenge. I will not repeat my words to the Minister earlier, but in a positive sense, I ask her whether she will support the Scottish Government's commitment to developing carbon capture in St Fergus. What will she do to put real weight behind that Acorn project?

My cheeky word of caution, which is in fact not cheeky but factual, is that in the vast majority of city deals in Scotland, the UK Government have failed to match the Scottish Government's funding. If a city deal comes forward, I hope the hon. Gentleman's constituency gets its fair share, unlike Aberdeen and Inverness.

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman and I debate Acorn and St Fergus frequently. I will double-check the numbers, but my understanding is that the UK Government have put in £1.6 million and the Scottish Government have committed a welcome £100,000. We are absolutely keen to support those projects and we continue to be a major investor in all sorts of levels of carbon capture and storage; I will address CCS and its future in my closing remarks. I will double-check those numbers and write to him, but I am confident that we have already committed several multiples of what the Scottish Government have to that project—and quite rightly.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): We are all looking forward to the Minister's closing remarks.

Drew Hendry: I have not even got to the bulk of my speech, but I will try to speed up. I was getting to the end of my responses to hon. Members' comments, which I was certain we had time for.

I will finish on a positive remark about the comments made by the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire. I am pleased to say that geothermal investigation has been embraced around the Chamber. I am sure that he will support the delivery of the Scottish Government's ambition for accelerated clean growth in Scotland.

To aid the debate, I will cast aside some of my notes. As we have heard in this debate, much more needs to be done on energy efficiency. In my meetings with energy companies and climate change activists, they all agree on one principle: not enough is done for energy efficiency in our homes and businesses across the nations of the UK. Old housing stock is part of that huge challenge.

On new housing stock, I was struck by the comments in an intervention about new heating systems and new ways of looking after buildings that can reduce costs for people. When I was the leader of the Highland Council, I was pleased to be involved in a Highland housing fair, which adopted a housing development model from Finland. Some houses on that scheme were so innovative that it was reckoned that they would have average energy costs of about £2 per year, so it can be done with the right will. They have been sold now, so someone who wanted to see them would probably have to knock on the householder's door. It was a good project, and the Minister might want to consider more innovation like that.

I will skip a page of my notes. We welcome the industrial energy efficiency accelerator, but we look for more detail from the Minister. We want to see how that will move forward.

My conclusion will not be too lengthy, but I will touch on some things that are happening in Scotland. Energy efficiency has been mentioned several times; it is fundamental to Scotland's meeting its ambitious climate change targets. The Scottish energy efficiency programme route map—I am sorry to tell the hon. Member for Wells that its name is now SEEP rather than HEEPS—will be published in May 2018.

Last December, the Scottish Government published their energy strategy, which will strengthen the development of local energy projects, empower customers and support Scotland's climate change ambitions, while tackling poor energy provision. Our ambition to improve the energy efficiency of Scotland's buildings is central to our efforts to tackle fuel poverty.

On 28 February, the Scottish Government's Cabinet Secretary for the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform published the "Climate Change Plan, Third Report on Proposals and Policies 2018-2032", which details how the Scottish Government will meet their emissions target of 80% by 2032. With the Climate Change Bill, Scotland is sending a message that it is the place to do low-carbon business, which seems to be endorsed around the Chamber.

Energy efficiency is fundamental to Scotland. Heating and cooling Scotland's homes and businesses costs £2.6 billion a year, and accounts for just under half the country's greenhouse gas emissions. In June 2015, the Scottish Government announced that they would take long-term action to reduce the energy demand of residential services and industrial sectors by designating energy efficiency as a national infrastructure priority. Again, something that has been called for in the debate has already been done in Scotland. That was subsequently confirmed in the Scottish Government's "Infrastructure Investment Plan 2015".

Would you believe, Mr Walker, that I am going to cut my remarks considerably short? I wanted to go into a lot more detail about what is happening in Scotland, but given the response in the Chamber today, there is plenty of incentive for the Minister to look at that in detail.

As the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey, it would be remiss of me not to mention a wonderful development: the Scottish Government's dualling of the A9 between Perth and Inverness. The A9 is set to become the world's—well, Scotland's—electric highway because of the Scottish Government's investment in

ensuring that it has rapid charging points all the way along. It will be a real boon for the electric vehicle proposition in Scotland, and it is just the start of much more work that will be done there.

The debate has been very constructive, and I thank the hon. Member for Eddisbury for introducing it. There is still an awful lot of work to be done, but hopefully the debate has given the Minister a bag full of ideas to take forward and develop in future.

3.8 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): We have had an excellent debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) on securing it and on her excellent contribution, which was a superb setting-out of the imperatives of securing energy efficiency in homes and what flows from that.

What happens to fuel poverty, if we systematically insulate our homes to an acceptable standard? What happens to bills in the future, and what happens, as the hon. Member for Eddisbury pointed out, to the amount of fuel that we are consuming in our homes? She estimated that a 25% or so reduction in gas as a result of insulating our homes to an acceptable standard has all sorts of knock-on effects for the wider climate change debate. As she also said, that is reflected in the clean growth strategy ambition and targets that ideally we should be aiming for as far as insulation in all homes is concerned, and in the earlier target of insulation up to band C for homes in fuel poverty.

I very much commend the target in the clean growth plan, but how do we get to that target? That was also a part of the hon. Lady's and other hon. Members' contributions this afternoon. We ought to dwell on that as something that we can all sign up to and aspire to. There is a long gap between that aspiration, where we are now and what has happened in recent times with energy efficiency and what we now have to do to close that gap. Among other things, we must make sure that we fulfil our climate budget obligations and make sure that what comes into those climate budgets from the energy efficiency contribution is as good as it can be.

Having congratulated the hon. Member for Eddisbury on her contribution, I want to add a slight note of sadness. Perhaps we should have all sat on one side of the Chamber this afternoon and addressed our comments to all the rest out there who did not turn up to the debate and who quite often do not engage with this issue. We might have collectively addressed the importance of energy efficiency not only in domestic buildings but in commercial and industrial buildings. It is important to work together to address climate change, fuel poverty and all those other targets to make sure we sort them out. Today's debate has reflected the collective and consensual activity that we ought to organise among all of us, provided all those other people along the road support the Minister in what she is doing for energy efficiency. The Opposition party must have the very best policies so that when our turn comes to govern, we have a clear understanding of where we need to get to, what we have to do and how we support and fund it. That is a job of work for all of us in this Chamber to get ourselves involved in.

The elision of energy efficiency and the clean growth plan in this debate highlights one of the central issues that will make or break our approach to making sure

that our obligations under the fourth and fifth carbon budget can be met. I have said on various occasions that the really good news about the clean growth strategy is that it encompasses all of those things. The bad news is that the clean growth plan itself does not get us to where we need to go in terms of our obligations under the fifth carbon budget. I think the Minister accepts and understands that and has, I hope, substantial plans to add to the measures in the clean growth plan to get us to the fifth carbon budget target. However, I do not think we need to come up with a lot of brand new ideas to do that. We need to make sure that what is in the clean growth plan is funded and sorted out at the earliest possible stage and on the widest possible canvas so that when we come to put the sums together we will see that they add up as we go down the line.

I cannot emphasise strongly enough, along with other hon. Members this afternoon, what we need to do to meet the target for energy efficiency in homes. The hon. Members for Eddisbury and for Wells (James Heapey) and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) all emphasised the components of the action that we need to undertake with regard to energy efficiency. The hon. Member for Eddisbury emphasised how clear-eyed we need to be about what it will cost us and how it will be financed, but, once that cost has been met, there will be benefits in the end. We need to understand that that is a pretty good cost-benefit analysis over the long term.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak reminded us not only about how the cost will be borne, but by what parts of Government it will be borne. He drew attention to how matters stand under the clean growth plan of action. I believe that there is shortly to be a Government publication on the plan for the next phase of ECO and how that will have its impact on energy efficiency. We have to be clear that even if ECO is extended out to 2028, at its present level of funding that will get us nowhere near to the numbers that we need to be energy efficient. There are still 7 million homes out there—the non-cavity wall and hard-to-treat homes—that have a far higher unit cost of treatment than what we might call the lower-hanging fruit of loft and wall insulations, a lot of which have already been done around the country.

Since some of the measures taken by the previous Labour Government on area-based schemes, including the enveloping of some hard-to-treat homes, there has been a 58% drop in treatments related to energy efficiency. I do not blame the present Minister for that drop. I know that she is committed to turning that around and getting a far greater number of treatments undertaken, but we have to face the fact that that is what has happened in recent years. We are starting our road back towards energy efficiency from a fairly low and, in some senses, rather dispiriting base.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak reminded us that when it comes to funding the changes it is extremely unlikely that we will be able to do it by heaping obligation on obligation in customers' energy bills. I want to go further and remind hon. Members that we are assuming at the moment that action will be taken in a range of areas by means of obligations on companies, which will be passed on to customers in their bills. As my hon. Friend mentioned, we assume that the cost of the smart meter roll-out will go on customers' bills, because the obligation on energy

[*Dr Alan Whitehead*]

companies to fund them will be passed on. The capacity market for procuring standby energy supply and new forms of conventional energy supply is, effectively, an obligation that is passed on to customers in their bills. The contracts for difference that we have already are also based on such an obligation—the renewables obligation—and the additional £557 million that is in the budget for further offshore wind. The warm home discount is in the same boat. If, as I understand the present plan to be, the energy company obligation is extended to 2028, that will also be based on a continuing obligation—it is in the name—that will go on to customers' bills. Recently what was effectively a grant from Government to energy-intensive industries was converted to an exemption, which is to be funded by a levy on customer bills. There is a raft of such levies, and the number is increasing.

The hon. Member for Eddisbury set out some recent figures from, I think, Frontier Economics, and said that they were the likely real annual cost of getting us to an acceptable level, close to the target in the clean growth strategy. Her figure was £1.1 billion. From recollection, although I do not have the Frontier Economics report before me, that figure is a net one, arrived at after taking into account other contributions, including local authority and, as other hon. Members have mentioned, landlord contributions. The hon. Member for Wells—perhaps in future we can refer to him as the hon. Member for HEEPS—mentioned, and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak emphasised, the fact that landlords may make a contribution, but if they say they cannot afford it or get into ECO, they will effectively be given a free pass.

There should be a minimum merchantable standard for property for rent. Although it is true in theory that at the moment the landlord should not be able to let property below that standard, which would be band E in this instance, the remedy is enforcement at local authority level. We know what the situation is as to enforcement at the moment, given local authority resources.

Landlords do not necessarily have to stick at band E if they have spent, I think, £2,500. If they cannot get on ECO, they get a free pass. I do not think that that should be regarded as acceptable in the next 10 to 20 years. The landlord contribution should be doubled—and, indeed, the Frontier Economics report suggests a landlord contribution of £5,000 being factored in to the figures mentioned by the hon. Member for Eddisbury.

However, the issue is not only about that. If someone said, "I am letting out this hotel room, which has no glass in the windows, has cockroaches all over the place and has no sheets on the bed, but is quite cheap," trading standards and various other people would be all over it. We need to get into the idea that a house being let in the rented sector with poor energy efficiency is a non-merchantable product and should be seen as such. A key part of a drive to make firm progress on energy efficiency is making sure that rentals in that sector are made on the basis of merchantable properties with good energy efficiency.

The figure that the hon. Member for Eddisbury mentioned can be upped a little in view of all the contributions. It comes to a round total of, I think, £1.8 billion. That is certainly what our party would commit

to as the sort of expenditure needed to get to the level in question. I cannot see that that can be found by increasing obligations on bill payers over the next period. It must come from central taxation.

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman is a sensible, intelligent man, but what he is saying presupposes that the prices never change. However, the reason we no longer have to invest so much of the £557 million in offshore wind is that prices tumbled precipitously, giving us more bang for our buck and enabling us perhaps to buy technologies that are further in the market.

Part of the clean growth strategy is trying to take that investment spend—the innovation spend that the Government are setting out—so that we can drop the prices of technologies significantly, and so that they no longer require a burden on the bill payer or the taxpayer, because they are sufficiently cheap. The benefits in reduced energy costs that my hon. Friends described mean they pay for themselves. Please would the hon. Gentleman get out of the world of equating the amount of money that the Government spend with the result that we need? It is actually a matter of how we deliver the most homes, well insulated and cheap to run, most affordably.

Dr Whitehead: The Minister is right, in that, obviously, area-based efficiency measures that uprate an entire area lead to economies of scale. Far more houses can be treated in that way than by cherry-picking individual houses in different places and dealing with them one by one.

Claire Perry: That is true, but surely the hon. Gentleman agrees that other people's money will be better used if the underlying price per installation has fallen because of a completely different approach to cavity wall insulation or investment in solar-reflective paint, which is a technology being rolled out in other parts of the world—in other words, if we are looking at more cost-effective and innovative ways of doing things, so that the same amount of money buys far more installations on a per-unit basis.

Dr Whitehead: I surely do. On the basis of what the Committee on Climate Change says, the current ECO commitment falls way short of the levels of treatment we need if we are to get anywhere near our 2035 targets. Even the £1.8 billion figure that has been cited will not cover a complete series of treatments for houses in the UK. I suggest that making our treatments much more efficient—by doing them on an area basis, for example—would allow us to get much closer to our target for the same money. We can probably agree that £1.8 billion will be the sort of money that will get us there, but an efficient approach could get us so much further, which I would completely support.

As the hon. Members for Eddisbury and for Wells and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak emphasised, enveloping energy-efficient homes area by area needs to be funded from the infrastructure budget. It may not look like big boys' toys, but it is absolutely an infrastructure project and ought to be treated as such by the Government. That would have a number of advantages for costs of capital, borrowing and all the rest of it; as the Minister says, we could make even more houses efficient for the same investment.

I appreciate that I have gone on rather longer than I intended, but let me briefly say a few words about the speeches of my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) and the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham). They both drew attention to the role that CCS can play, as did the hon. Member for Wells—or rather for HEEPS. I thoroughly endorse that line of thinking on CCS, but I must point out that as far as the clean growth strategy is concerned, £100 million will not get us anywhere near our CCS target, just as our ECO commitment will not get us anywhere near our energy efficiency target.

I congratulate Teesside on its comprehensive approach, in which my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar has been centrally involved. Teesside could be an absolute exemplar for the rest of the country in its combination of intensive industry with CCS and its by-products. That is very important for realisation of the clean growth strategy and we need to incorporate it in all our future clean growth plans.

I congratulate all hon. Members on their contributions to the debate. They all faced in exactly the same direction, acknowledging the importance of energy efficiency in homes, for a variety of reasons including climate change and fuel poverty, and the prominence that we need to give it in our policy debates. If this afternoon's debate has hastened that process, we will have done a very good job between us.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): I have let speeches go on longer than is conventional because we have had plenty of time. We have had two mammoth speeches from the SNP and Labour Front Benches. I know the Minister could speak for 55 minutes if she wanted to, but if she felt that she could just match them at 25 minutes, I am sure we would all appreciate it.

3.34 pm

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. You tempt me, but I will say what I had planned to about this excellent debate.

May I wish everyone a happy International Women's Day? [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] I am so proud to represent my constituents on this marvellous day—a great day for discussing boys' and girls' infrastructure investment preferences. It is a bit like blue and pink jobs, but we all need better roads, railways and power generation as well as warm and well-insulated homes. That is certainly my focus.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) on securing this fantastically important debate and on her characteristically thoughtful, knowledgeable, well-balanced and well-researched speech. She is an extremely important member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, which has done such good work on the matter. It is striking that this is our second debate this week—after the Second Reading of the Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariff Cap) Bill on Monday—in which there has been an outbreak of consensus. Long may it last.

Hon. Members across parties understand the vital need for action and the potential difficulties. A lot of sensible suggestions have been made about prioritisation, but ultimately we all share the ambition to secure clean growth for the UK at the right level and the right cost;

maximise productivity under our clean growth strategy and our industrial strategy; and create a secure, diverse energy supply at low cost for our consumers. This has been a really thoughtful debate and many good ideas have been suggested.

Let me recap where we are. Based on 2017 data, the last time emissions in the UK were this low was in the year the Forth bridge was opened and "The Picture of Dorian Gray" was published, which was the year before penalties were introduced in football. I hope hon. Members from north of the border will already have got it, but in case not, it was the year 1890. When we consider the scale of the challenge, we should take a moment to think about just how far we have come: in a couple of decades, we have dropped our emissions to a level last seen in Victorian times. That has been achieved through cross-Government support for the Climate Change Act 2008, impressive work done by successive Governments on decarbonising parts of the economy, sustained investment and getting the costs of intervention to a market level, as we have seen so recently in offshore wind.

To be slightly partisan for a moment, I am very struck that it was Margaret Thatcher who made the first speech to the United Nations on the impact of human activity on the climate. She referred to sulphur emissions and acid rain, but since then we have realised the impact of chlorofluorocarbons, started talking about carbon and methane, and become far more informed. Only two countries in the world are considered to be doing enough to meet a 2° target: China and the United Kingdom. I would be the first to acknowledge the scale of the challenge ahead, but we should feel reasonably good about getting there and about speaking to colleagues and constituents about what we have done.

Before I plunge into my attempt to answer the many questions asked in the debate, let me refer to a couple of speeches. My hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury opened the debate and the next speech was made by the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley). It has always been a pleasure to work with her and it is so wonderful to see her back in her place, standing up very ably for the concerns of her constituents. The opportunity to create a new industrial cluster on the SSI site that sequesters rather than emits carbon is incredibly exciting. Unfortunately, the hon. Lady was not there when I visited, but I was pleased to go up to see the site, work with some of her colleagues and celebrate a really good interaction between national Government and local government—having a Mayor for the combined authority is making a huge difference—and some incredibly effective cross-party working. That is a really important model for how we should be going forward.

Let me briefly address carbon capture, utilisation and storage, which is not the topic of this debate but is important none the less. We have a triple test for spending taxpayers' money on technology. First, can we get the carbon down? Secondly, can we get the cost down? Thirdly, can we create a competitive innovation that we can then export around the world to improve productivity? I was not in my current post when the decision was taken on the council. I can say that the money that was not spent was recycled into the research and development budget, which has allowed us to have £2.6 billion to spend on energy innovation that is bearing fruit all over the place.

[*Claire Perry*]

By the way, there are only 21 at-scale CCS plants working in the world today, 16 of which rely on capturing the carbon and using it for enhanced oil recovery. This is not a cost-effective technology that other countries are embracing with gusto. Even our friends in Norway, who are a little further along than us in building up the infrastructure, are struggling with precisely this point, which is, how much do we burden taxpayers or consumers to fund these projects? That is a real challenge. However, we are not going to bow down before it; we are going to embrace it.

That is why I have set up the carbon capture, usage and storage council—literally the best minds on this problem in the UK, and indeed around the world—to consider how we build strategically the case to carry out CCS in a more cost-effective way. We have also set up the CCUS cost reduction taskforce, emulating what was done in offshore wind, to drive prices down, not only in terms of the technology, but in terms of the financing, risk analysis and risk-sharing, which was one of the problems we had in the last project structure.

As the hon. Member for Redcar mentioned, I have set aside £100 million for CCUS innovation. That is not a subsidy and it is not putting money into a contract for difference; it is trying to create the innovation that we need. There are enormous opportunities to work with the hydrogen economy and with heating systems, to try to bring this work together. I accept that that news was a disappointment, but I would like colleagues to be reassured that we understand completely the need to decarbonise these industrial pools and to decarbonise further our heating system. Without CCS and CCUS, I do not believe that we can do that, which is why they are such vital technologies.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey) displayed his characteristic vision and knowledge of this sector. He said that we have been too focused on inputs, not outputs, when we talk about energy and efficiency. He also talked about the distributed energy future, which is absolutely what is happening both in our minds and the minds of the commercial world.

Of course, we already have solar. We do not often see a lot of solar generation on the very helpful national grid app, because it tends to sit behind the distributors and make its contribution there. However, we also know that we need to keep investing in this industry, which is why the smart systems plan has tried to set out the framework for doing that.

My hon. Friend also alluded to Birmingham combined heat and power, demonstrating that there are some fantastic examples out there, whereby not-for-profit or community-owned entities have already been set up. Robin Hood Energy in Nottingham also comes to mind, as does the White Rose Energy project. In those projects, there is real innovation and local leadership, which we welcome. We have been supporting those things. I have just put another £7 million into working with UK100 to try to build capacity at a local level.

For me, most of this activity works when it is delivered in a particular place. It is very easy to sit in Whitehall and push out suggestions, but if they can be pulled through by a local authority, a local council or a local company, we can start to think about transport. How does transport plug in? And how do we deal with heat? That was an excellent set of suggestions.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) also spoke. I will try to reassure him that these things are not just warm words; they are actions. I think we are all apprised of the need to deliver and to continue to maintain the UK's leadership position in this area, which is genuine. Now, when we go around the world and talk to other countries about what we are doing, people listen. There were 70 people at the event on this issue in Germany yesterday, according to my officials, who said people are really hungry to learn. That is because the strategy is not just a piece of lovely paper; it is trying to set out a cross-Government set of actions that we have to take. They are not optional, if we want to meet our targets, which we must do by 2032 and beyond to decarbonise.

The hon. Gentleman and I share the aspiration around energy company obligation and fuel poverty. As the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) mentioned, shortly I will publish some of the ECO consultation and consider how we pivot ECO to focus on fuel poverty, while also making it a conduit for more innovation, so that we can reduce the costs and target it better. That is because I get invitations to join ECO through my front door. Why? Because I live off the gas grid, so I clearly fall into some category that says there will be some fruitful mining out there. I do not want to respond to those invitations; I want ECO to be targeted at the people who need it most. They may not be the ones who are currently in the frame; they may not be known. We know that local authorities know where they are, so we want to target the ECO system much more at those who need it. I will return to mortgages when I wind up.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) again made a powerful case for CCS and its importance. I think he also referred to the “win-win” of clean growth. We are not looking forward, as some campaigners might want to look forward, to a kind of deep green “lights off” future, because we all know that recessions are the greatest thing for cutting carbon emissions. We want the economy to grow. As he said, we already have 400,000 people working in this sector, which is delivering jobs from Aberdeen to Aberystwyth to Cornwall, and to many places in between. People have only to go to the Humber area to see what is happening with the support and the manufacturing of the offshore wind turbines for the wind industry, which is hugely transformational.

Of course, I also enjoyed receiving my hon. Friend's invitation to all; we have had many invitations. Perhaps a Select Committee would like to produce a report on this subject, because its members could then travel around and take advantage of all these great opportunities.

The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry)—I normally never get a chance to say the full name of his constituency—gave a typically well-informed speech. We exchanged views on off-gas grid. I think that in both his constituency and mine, 15% of households live off the centralised grid, and we have to find cost-effective ways to provide them with more heating solutions in particular. Of course, all those people will benefit from the Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariff Cap) Bill. Again, we exchanged views on CCS.

The hon. Gentleman also made a strong point about the Scottish Government's plan. We should all be willing to learn from each other. There are so many good

people out there who are coming up with good ideas, whether that is at a local level or a national level, and we will be stronger if we pool all those ideas. Then we would not replicate what we are trying to do and spend.

The hon. Member for Southampton, Test again talked about clean growth being a strategy, which is important. It is not a plan; it is a longer-term strategy, deliberately for that reason. He also emphasised that there is strong cross-party support for these measures and, frankly, we will need that support. If we are asking for this issue to be a spending priority or a national priority, we will need as many voices as possible from all parties to make these points on behalf of our constituents.

Have I covered everyone? I think I have.

I now turn briefly, Mr Walker, to some of the plans that we have to implement this agenda. I was very interested—indeed, excited—to hear the conversation about whether this issue should be a national infrastructure priority. I know that the National Infrastructure Commission will report shortly. I will follow that closely and I undertake to meet the commission, because the case that was made for demand-side as well as supply-side infrastructure investments is powerful. However, I caution colleagues that that does not automatically turn on a new funding tap. There is no packet of money under the Chancellor's desk marked "Infrastructure", so this all has to be put through a similar hopper.

Nevertheless, the point about energy efficiency is excellent; energy efficiency is not only a strategic imperative, but an economic imperative. If we improve energy efficiency, we reduce people's bills, create value, and create opportunities and investment for new forms of technology. We lead the world in many of these spaces, but we have never provided a really good route to market. I am interested, for example, in the Government's commitment to new home building, which is absolutely vital. We should try to make those homes as affordable to run as they are to buy, using that as a route to market for so much of this technology.

I have talked a bit about what we have done, and of course we have seen household energy consumption fall by 17% since 1990 and the energy efficiency of non-domestic buildings has also improved substantially. Actually, the Government's minimum energy standards, which we have put in place for appliances and for boilers, have had a measurable effect.

I would like to reassure right hon. and hon. Members in the Chamber on one point. People have asked, "Does coming out of the EU mean any weakening of these efficiency targets?" Absolutely not. Of course these targets have a meaningful impact on energy efficiency and they reduce bills. As a result of more energy-efficient products being used, the average annual bill for dual fuel households in 2020 will be £100 lower than it might otherwise have been, and the Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariff Cap) Bill, which we introduced this week—I was pleased that it received cross-party support—will also help to cut bills, as will the record low capacity cost of the energy that we are now buying in the market, as indeed will Ofgem's announcement yesterday of further investigations into network company returns. We have to find a way to reduce the cost of energy right across the board.

This work does not just stop in the home or in the business environment. In the public sector, enormous efforts have been made, using the Salix programme, which has been highly successful in lending money for

these energy efficiency measures. We anticipate a saving of about £1.5 billion for us all—for taxpayers—between 2018 and 2020.

So, we are moving in the right direction, but we have to go a lot further and faster. I completely accept that, which is why I set out the band C objective for 2035. That is the first time we have done that, saying, "That's what we think 'good' looks like in housing stock."

There will always be homes that are cost-inefficient to treat. There will also be homeowners who do not want that and will deny access. We cannot forcibly upgrade someone's home if they do not want it.

Dr Whitehead: Can I tempt the Minister to have a look at a particular private Member's Bill that is going through the House at the moment promoted by one of her colleagues, the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron)? The Bill suggests that the 2025 aspiration should be made a statutory target. Does she have any thoughts on that?

Claire Perry: Indeed. I have met my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) and some of those who support the Bill. I think it is an extremely interesting suggestion. I was able to reassure my hon. Friend that, given the work we are doing on ECO—I will come to that—and other measures, we will get there without legislation. That is always the preferred route, although having the overarching legislation of the Climate Change Act 2008 has meant that we have to deliver on these promises right across the economy.

I started to have the conversation with my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire about it ultimately being a win-win to upgrade people's homes or buildings because it saves money. Someone upgrades their home and they save money on their bill. There is a commercial proposition there. I served on the Energy Bill Committee—the Bill provided for the green deal—and I had great hopes for it, but it did not deliver. There is an economic value to doing those upgrades, however. Some of it may flow straight to the homeowner. Some may flow to a landlord, in which case there is the opportunity to rent the flat at a higher rate or to have a different sort of tenant who has a bit more money. There are opportunities there.

We talked a little about the co-benefits of better health for the country from warmer homes. We do not cost those things, and we cannot necessarily capture the money in the silo of BEIS, but we all know that they intrinsically make sense. As well as supporting what is already happening through spending, which I will talk about, we are focused on trying to build a better market for long-term delivery of much better solutions. That is absolutely where we want to go.

James Heapey: I know that my right hon. Friend the Minister will certainly not make such a commitment immediately today, but may I check whether she will take away the suggestion I made about smart meters becoming a requirement for band C and above EPC ratings? Perhaps she and I and colleagues might discuss that as an option at a later date.

Claire Perry: It was an excellent suggestion, and I have already clocked it as one to take away. Indeed, I will be attempting to turbocharge the smart meters roll-out later this year, because we have done some excellent work that needs to be continued.

[*Claire Perry*]

I reassure colleagues that the money we are spending on ECO, where we aim to improve more than 1 million homes, the money we are spending on the warm home discount and the money that we are already putting into the problem of fuel poverty will be spent in a way that tries to drive more effective solutions. One of the things I want to do with the ECO project is targeted at fuel poverty, which is a hugely important aspiration for all of us. I also want to try to have much more of it targeted at research and development and innovation. Technologies qualify in a very formulaic way, and I think we could do a lot more on that.

To reassure colleagues who have said the clean growth strategy is just warm words—I know they have far better things to do—on pages 132 and 133 of the document I have clearly set out the next series of things that we will do. People say that just bringing consultation forward is not action. I want to make decisions that stick over the long term because they have been widely thought through and bottomed out analytically. On pages 132 and 133 is a long list of things we have already done, are doing or are planning to do this year—so I am not getting away with a long target—to drive forward the ambitions on the band C rating.

We are also working hard with business and industry. While we have a real challenge in our homes, the biggest pool of emissions in the UK come from—it fluctuates a little bit between them—industry and transport. We have always found it difficult to decarbonise businesses. Part of that is process decarbonisation—as the hon. Member for Redcar knows, that is difficult to do without fundamentally changing the feedstock or heat source for a particular manufacturing sector—but a lot is just business premises. All the same issues we have in the homes sector absolutely apply to business premises.

Antoinette Sandbach: If energy efficiency measures have been rolled out in the home, surely common sense dictates that those people who have experienced them go into work and see how similar measures could affect their work environment. Does my right hon. Friend the Minister agree that tackling the home energy efficiency market would inevitably assist with the business market?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend is absolutely on the money, but I would like to do both. I do not want it to be sequential. I cannot remember which of my hon. Friends talked about energy as a service. I thought it was my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire, but as I say that, I think it might have been HEEPS—my hon. Friend the Member for Wells. He is never going to live that down.

If someone running a small business is trying to do payroll and deal with potential changes in the regulatory structure for export, are they really going to sit down and think about energy efficiency? They might—I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury that if someone has installed an energy efficiency measure in their home and has seen a material change, they might do that—but they might not. What incentives can we create and what market structures are already there that can help those businesses to focus on their energy efficiency? Many of the challenges in the rented sector that apply in the homes market also apply in an even greater way

in the energy market. It is a real challenge that many firms occupy premises where energy is just part of the service bundle they receive, so it is not within their control to install such measures.

We are consulting later this year on a package of measures to help businesses improve how productively they use energy. We are focused on trying to do things that work, and that work locally.

Many Members referenced green mortgages and finding a way to finance such initiatives. There has been some excellent work, such as the “Levering economics for new drivers to energy reduction and sustainability” project. My hon. Friend the Member for Wells talked about being asked about utility bills. Actually, the way the market works now is that, whether someone is in a home rated A or G, they input the same number, which is crazy.

Work is already under way on mortgage lenders who might pick up on the fact that someone could save £700 on their energy bills by having a better energy performance certificate. The green finance taskforce that I set up with the Treasury last year will be reporting shortly. One of its strands of work is how we get green mortgages to be a proper retail offering. Some lenders have taken steps to support energy efficiency improvements. Last November, Barclays launched the first green bond from a UK bank, on the back of the work that the taskforce was doing. That is being used to fund domestic assets, which it plans to use to refinance mortgages for the most energy-efficient properties. That is a testament to the data available and the bank’s desire. It is common sense to reward that sort of behaviour.

I have talked a little about the savings and what we are doing. Now I will mention briefly the most vulnerable households, which have come up often, especially given the recent cold snap. As my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury said, it was really cold in many homes. Turning up the heating was an option for many of us, but we might not have realised that others who do so feel extremely worried about what their bills will look like.

I want to reassure colleagues that the warm home discount programme—£140 a household—continues to operate. Winter fuel payments are being paid, and the cold weather payment was triggered by the cold snap. It is absolutely right for the Government to continue to support the most vulnerable and to help them make improvements to their homes. Such people do not necessarily have financial choice. I was therefore pleased that we committed £3.6 billion to ECO. Going forward, that will upgrade more than 1 million homes. We will extend that out to 2028 with funding at least at current ECO levels.

I take the point about the landlord challenge. The problem, frankly, is that 95% of landlords have four properties or fewer—they are us. We asked them to sign up to something that at the time we had underpinned with a green finance offer, but now they are potentially required to raise capital to do it. We have to do things that are fair and proportionate if we want the country to come with us. The measure is still incredibly important. We do not want people living in the least fuel-efficient homes and we are determined to do something about that. In fact, compared with 2010, there are 835,000 fewer homes rated E, F or G in the UK, so we are making progress at the least efficient end of the market.

I hope that I am not trying your patience, Mr Walker, but I have two more quick points to make. The first is on smart meters. I think we are on the cusp of something really exciting with smart meters. We are absolutely in the world's vanguard by offering every household a smart meter by 2020. I accept the concerns about technology. People say, "Why would I install one of these when I'm going to get a better one?" The point is that if someone installs one now, they get all the benefits immediately of understanding what their energy consumption looks like, and can work out ways to cut their bills. Furthermore, they will automatically be upgraded through the technology that we are putting in place to the next generation, so when they switch suppliers they will not lose any of that functionality. That is a vital step forward.

More needs to be done to work on the consumer proposition. I am desperate to put in a smart meter, but not to take a morning off work to do so. It is really difficult to find the time, which is a problem that many people face. We will be working with industry and the organisation rolling the meters out to see how we can make them more consumer flexible, and how we provide incentives, because plenty of money is being spent on advertising them. We are on the cusp of something very exciting.

I also wanted to mention fundamentally changing the way in which we build and think about homes in the construction process. It is astonishing that the way in which we build homes has not changed much since the 1890s: we build the foundations, and then get the trades in. We can build really high-quality modular homes—homes that are built off-site and installed—in a far more effective and resource-efficient way. We are working closely with the construction sector to see what we can do to turbocharge that.

We can also do retrofits in a modular way. Nottingham City Council and Melius Homes are taking a prefabricated approach to retrofit homes to 2050 standards, and improve their energy performance. A lot of innovation is happening in this area that I am extremely keen to support. That is how we create a new market for what needs to happen, while rightly focusing on building regulations. All colleagues will be aware of the challenge in the post-Grenfell world of ensuring that there are no unintended consequences to what we do with building regulations. We are working very closely with our colleagues in the relevant Department, and have reconstituted the inter-ministerial clean growth group, because so many of these challenges span across Government.

There is a huge amount more to do. We have heard lots of sensible ideas today, many of which are extremely attractive and that we want to take away. All of us want

to get the costs and consumption of energy down, reduce carbon emissions, make our homes warmer, and make the transition to low-carbon energy less risky. This is not an either/or question; in order to meet our carbon targets, and to create a housing stock that is fit for the future, we absolutely need to do this. That is why the clean growth strategy is so important, and why the industrial strategy has clean growth as one of its four major pillars: things that we know that we can lead the world in, and that have to be done.

It has been a pleasure in today's debate, as in so many others in this area, to work with colleagues across the House who are so committed to this agenda, and have so much knowledge and interest in it. It will really help us to accelerate the work going forward, so I thank hon. Members for the opportunity to respond this afternoon.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): I think colleagues were almost heading for the door, but we have up to two minutes for the proposer of this great debate to wind up.

4.3 pm

Antoinette Sandbach: I thank colleagues from across the House for participating in the debate. We have now had three Front-Bench speeches that have referred to colleagues' contributions, so I will not go over them again. I reiterate that there has been agreement across the Chamber: if the Government invest in this area now, that will lead to huge savings—£1.3 billion in the health sector alone, as well as productivity gains. In addition, it would generate a huge amount of jobs, and save consumers £290 on their bills every year.

I urge my right hon. Friend the Minister to go to the National Infrastructure Commission, as she has promised. It is due to make its decision in April, which is why I asked for this afternoon's debate to take place today. Given the cross-party consensus, I suspect that there may well be a cross-party letter winging its way elsewhere to Government, encouraging them to take up the infrastructure challenge and the opportunities that innovation in this area offers the UK economy. I thank again all hon. Members who have contributed today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered energy efficiency and the clean growth strategy.

4.4 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 8 March 2018

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

General Affairs Council

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): I represented the UK at the General Affairs Council in Brussels on Tuesday 27 February. The items on the agenda were: presentation of the priorities of the Bulgarian presidency; annotated draft agenda for the European Council on 22 and 23 March 2018; and rule of law in Poland I article 7(1) treaty on European Union (TEU) reasoned proposal.

A provisional report of the meeting and the conclusions adopted can be found on the Council of the European Union's website at:

<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/gac/2018/02/27/>.

Presentation of the priorities of the Bulgarian presidency

The presidency set out the four priorities for its tenure: the future of Europe and young people; security and stability; the western Balkans; and the digital economy.

Annotated draft agenda for the European Council on 22 and 23 March 2018

The presidency presented the annotated draft agenda for March European Council, which includes: jobs, growth and competitiveness (and possibly trade); and the western Balkans. Leaders would also discuss migration and digital taxation.

On the jobs, growth and competitiveness agenda item, the Council welcomed a discussion on the single market, digital single market and social issues. I intervened to call for any tax discussion to focus on digital taxation, reflecting progress at international level. I also highlighted the UK's publication of a position paper on corporate tax and the digital economy last autumn.

Under the western Balkans agenda item, Ministers welcomed the adoption of procedural conclusions on the EU-Western Balkans summit in May. I intervened to welcome the focus on the western Balkans region. I highlighted the UK's close co-operation with the presidency and the Commission ahead of the Berlin Process Western Balkans summit in London in July, which will seek to deliver on regional priorities identified at the May summit.

On migration, the Commission highlighted the need to reach agreement on internal asylum reform.

Rule of law in Poland/article 7(1) TEU reasoned proposal

The Commission presented its reasoned proposal under article 7(1) TEU, concerning the rule of law in Poland. The Commission referred to the improved levels of dialogue with Poland but emphasised that it wanted to see action taken to address its concerns. Poland acknowledged the improved dialogue and stated that its forthcoming paper on this issue would place its judicial reforms into their wider systemic context.

I intervened to emphasise the importance the UK places on the rule of law and judicial independence, and that the UK expects its partners to respect international norms. I affirmed the UK's view that responsibility for constitutional issues lies primarily with national Governments and welcomed the improved dialogue between the Commission and Poland. I highlighted that a solution is most likely to be found in this dialogue leading to a common understanding on how to resolve the issue in a way which aligns with international norms.

[HCWS522]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Domestic Abuse

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for Justice and I are today launching a consultation which seeks to address domestic abuse at every stage from prevention through to rehabilitation.

Domestic abuse is an inexcusable and devastating form of abuse that can have a lifelong impact on its victims and their families. There are approximately two million reported victims every year, and domestic abuse accounts for over 10% of all police recorded crime and nearly 20% of all police charges.

This Government have taken strong action to tackle domestic abuse. We are the first country to criminalise coercive and controlling behaviour, and we have introduced domestic violence protection orders and the domestic violence disclosure scheme. We have made legislative changes to legal aid to make it more accessible. Last year we also amended electoral law to make it easier for survivors of domestic abuse to register to vote, while keeping their name and address private.

In addition this year we have introduced a Secure Tenancies (Victims of Domestic Abuse) Bill that will maintain the status of survivors living in social housing with an existing lifetime tenancy when they move to a new social property. We have provided £20 million for accommodation-based services such as refuges, which is already providing 2,200 additional beds in refuges and safe accommodation benefiting 19,000 victims. The best available data shows bed spaces have increased by 10% since 2010 and we are committed to supporting refuges and providing stable funding in the future.

We are reviewing the way in which refuges and supported housing are delivered and have heard the concerns about how our proposals will work in practice. We are working with all the charities and organisations working on the frontline, asking them to come forward with their ideas on how best to deliver this. That process is ongoing—and we have been clear no options are off the table as we work with them to ensure women requiring support in their time of need are not let down.

However we know there is more to do and that is why this Government are committed to transforming how we think about and tackle domestic abuse. We want victims to feel supported so that they can seek help and to rebuild their lives, safe in the knowledge that their perpetrator will be pursued and prosecuted.

The consultation seeks views under the four main themes set out below with the central aim of prevention running through each.

Promote awareness—proposals to help put domestic abuse at the top of everyone's agenda, and raise public and professionals' awareness.

Protect and support—proposals to enhance the safety of victims and the support that they receive.

Pursue and deter—proposals to ensure an effective response to perpetrators from initial police response through to conviction and management of offenders (including rehabilitation).

Improve performance—proposals to drive consistency and better performance in the response to domestic abuse across all local areas and agencies/sectors.

The Government welcome responses from victims and survivors, charities, specialist organisations, experts and professionals across policing, criminal justice, health, welfare, education, social services, employment and local authorities who deal with these issues on a daily basis.

We are seeking a combination of legislative and non-legislative solutions for delivering the proposals set out in the consultation. Where primary legislation is required, the responses to the consultation will inform the content of the draft Domestic Abuse Bill announced in the Queen's speech.

The consultation will run for 12 weeks to 31 May.

A copy of the consultation paper will be placed in the Library of the House and will be available online at www.gov.uk.

[HCWS525]

National Crime Agency Remuneration Review Body

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The National Crime Agency (NCA) Remuneration Review Body has made recommendations on pay and allowances for NCA officers designated with operational powers, and observations on the NCA's proposals to reform pay arrangements. I would like to thank the chair and members of the review body for their careful consideration of the evidence from the NCA, the Home Office, HMT and the trade unions.

The Government are committed to the delivery of world-class public services, and ensuring that public sector workers are fairly remunerated for the vitally important work that they do. That is why we ended the across-the-board 1% pay award policy for public sector workforces in September 2017. We recognised that some flexibility would be required in certain areas.

Each workforce is different and pay awards should therefore reflect the particular circumstances faced by those public workers and their recruitment and retention levels. It is also vital that our world-class public services continue modernising to maximise the contribution of our public servants, so they can continue to do their incredible work, improving our lives and keeping us safe.

Previous review body reports highlighted the need for reform to NCA pay arrangements and I welcome the review body's support for the NCA's proposed changes as an important step in that direction. There are two main elements to the pay reform: officers in two grades performing intelligence and investigator roles can opt into a new spot rate pay structure; and for the remaining

workforce existing pay bands are being compressed. These changes are highly targeted, focusing on roles where there is evidence that pay has fallen significantly behind the market rate, and critical to the agency's ability to improve productivity and transform to meet the rapidly evolving threat from serious and organised crime. This targeted pay reform will support the NCA's ability to recruit and retain highly skilled staff to continue to fulfil their vital role.

To support implementation of these changes, the 2017-18 award will be backdated to 1 August 2017 and the 2018-19 award implemented on 1 August 2018. The award is as follows:

A varied award for staff in two targeted operational grades choosing to opt into the new pay structure and move onto new terms and conditions, including an increase in contracted hours;

A minimum 1% award for all officers not eligible for the new pay structure and not already receiving the pay range maximum for their grade;

A 1% award made up of consolidated and non-consolidated elements for officers not eligible for the new pay structure and already in receipt of the maximum for their grade or reaching it;

A 1% increase to the London weighting payment in 2017-18. 2018-19 will be determined following a formal review of the allowance.

These awards will be fully funded within the NCA's existing budget. The small number of officers electing to remain on the terms and conditions of pre-cursor organisations will remain on their 2016-17 pay rates.

Copies of the NCA Remuneration Review Body's report are available in the Vote Office and at gov.uk.

[HCWS526]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Finances

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): During the course of the past 13 months, in the absence of an Executive and Assembly in Northern Ireland, the UK Government have worked tirelessly to facilitate the restoration of devolved Government. It had been my firm hope that a new Executive would be in place to set a budget. That will now not be possible in time for plans to be put in place for the forthcoming financial year.

Yet there are acute pressures across public services to be addressed in 2018-19, and clarity is required now to enable planning to proceed for the year ahead. It is now imperative, therefore, that the UK Government provide clarity and certainty around Northern Ireland finances for 2018-19.

2018-19 Budget allocations

I set out below the resource and capital allocations which I consider to be the most balanced and appropriate settlement for Northern Ireland Departments. It would be open to a restored Executive, of course, to consider and revise the position I have set out.

In deciding on these allocations I have engaged intensively with the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) to understand the needs of Departments as they continue

to work to deliver the draft programme for Government. I have reflected too on the response to the budget briefing published by the NICS before Christmas, and discussed the budget situation with the main parties in Northern Ireland.

In the absence of local Ministers, and given the proximity of the next financial year, it would not be appropriate for the UK Government to seek to take fundamental decisions about service delivery and transformation at this time. Yet we must act to secure public services and enable NI departments to meet urgent pressures in health and education. That is what this budget settlement will do, by protecting and preserving public services within challenging fiscal constraints.

On the resource side, it delivers real-terms increases for health and education from their 2017-18 opening baseline. It also delivers cash terms increases for the Departments of Justice; Infrastructure; and Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. Elsewhere, Departments would either be cash-flat or see small decreases, with notable reductions only for the two central Departments (Finance and the Executive Office). For capital, it provides a strong basis for investment and enables key flagship projects to progress.

Confidence and Supply funding

This settlement also delivers £410 million in financial support arising from the financial annex to the confidence and supply agreement between the Conservative Party and the Democratic Unionist Party.

This includes £80 million in support for immediate health and education pressures; £30 million to support programmes to address issues of mental health and severe deprivation; £100 million for ongoing work to transform the health service in line with the broad-based consensus fostered by the Bengoa report; and a £200 million boost in capital spending for key infrastructure projects. Furthermore, in recognition of the lack of opportunity for more fundamental service reconfiguration over the last 12 months, this Budget position allows for £100 million in flexibility to enable existing capital funding to be used to address public services resource pressures in 2018-19. This additional funding will be transferred in due course only with Parliament's full authorisation, in line with the long-established estimates process.

Transformation

But, as the NICS budget briefing made clear, transformation is needed in a number of areas to make services sustainable in the long term. The urgent work to prepare for this must proceed. To that end, the budget includes a £4 million fund to prepare the ground for transformation, alongside the £100 million set out for health transformation above. I also recognise that this budget only allocates resources for 2018-19 and the NI Departments will need urgently to plan for future years. In that context, it is right that the NICS should continue to take forward preparatory work which could assist with balancing the budget in 2019-20. This will ensure that options are kept open for a restored Executive to consider as part of future budget processes.

Regional rate

As part of setting a budget, it is essential that the UK Government provide clarity on the regional rate. This budget position has been constructed on the basis of an increase in the domestic regional rate of 4.5%. I consider

that this is a necessary and important step to continue to support public services, particularly in health and education. The non-domestic rates would rise only at 1.5%, in line with inflation. Conscious of the interest of many stakeholders in the scheme, I can also confirm that this budget settlement would provide the basis for the small business rate relief to continue.

Implementing decisions within the overall allocations

This statement outlines overall allocations, based on my assessment of the options currently available to the NI Departments. To the extent possible, the consequent prioritisation of resources within NI Departments will need to be undertaken by permanent secretaries, as has been the case during the past year. The position will be monitored throughout the year and, where possible, resources reallocated to the highest priority areas in the normal way.

Permanent secretaries cannot, of course, take the full range of decisions that would be available to Ministers. In that context, the UK Government shall continue to support the Northern Ireland Administration, and to do whatever is necessary to meet our responsibilities to the people of Northern Ireland.

Annex of tables can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2018-03-08/HCWS527/>.

[HCWS527]

TRANSPORT

Wheelchair Spaces on Buses

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The Government believe that where people live, shop, go out, or park their car should not be determined by their disability and recognise the importance of accessible transport networks in supporting disabled people to live independent lives and fulfil their potential.

In January 2017 the Supreme Court handed down its judgment in the case of *Paulley v. FirstGroup plc*, concerning the “reasonable adjustments” which must be provided by bus operators to enable wheelchair users to access the on-board wheelchair space.

The Supreme Court judgment states that FirstGroup's policy with regard to use of the wheelchair space was insufficient to meet the requirements of the Equality Act 2010, and that bus drivers should be required to do more than simply request that a person vacates the wheelchair space, including suspending the journey if needed. The judgment did not provide clarity on precisely what action a service provider should require its drivers to take or how the needs of both passengers in wheelchairs and other bus users, disabled or otherwise, should be taken into account.

In order to understand the implications of the judgment for disabled people, the bus industry and other passengers, and to identify actions for Government and others to take to ensure that required adjustments can be provided on buses we established a stakeholder “task and finish group on the use of wheelchair spaces on buses” (the group).

The group's report to Ministers stated that:

"Our view is that drivers need to play an active role in ensuring that the wheelchair space is made available for passengers in wheelchairs, which includes requiring other passengers to move where necessary, but that drivers also need more powers than they have currently to enable them to do this effectively".

The group agreed that while wheelchair users should be granted access to the on-board wheelchair space they may not be the only passengers who rely on using it, but that where other passengers do not have such a need they should be expected to vacate the space in order that it can be occupied by a wheelchair user.

The group made four specific recommendations:

That the Public Service Vehicles (Conduct of Drivers, Inspectors, Conductors and Passengers) Regulations 1990 (the Conduct Regulations) are amended to enable drivers to remove passengers from the bus who unreasonably refuse to move when requested from the wheelchair space;

The associated guidance is amended to better reflect the behaviours expected from drivers and passengers with respect to use of the wheelchair space;

Further work is conducted to consider how best to raise public awareness of the behaviours expected from passengers with respect to the wheelchair space, for example a public awareness campaign, or improved signage on buses; and

That conditions of carriage and disability awareness training best practice guidance are updated to reflect the fact that passengers will be required to move from the wheelchair space should it be required by a passenger in a wheelchair.

I am grateful to the group for their careful consideration of this complex issue.

Government agree with the group that the wheelchair space should be available to those who need it and that the balance of measures proposed, supporting bus drivers to facilitate access to the wheelchair space, and creating an environment where the needs of disabled passengers are recognised and respected should help to overcome the barriers still faced by some disabled people when using bus services.

In accepting the group's recommendations in principle we will begin a process of further engagement to understand the specific experiences of a range of stakeholders affected by the wheelchair space issue, including wheelchair users, parents travelling with young children, and bus drivers—with a view to bringing forward a package of measures in 2018, informed by the group's recommendations and our further consideration, to support access to the wheelchair space.

Disabled people make 10 times as many journeys by bus as by rail, and it is essential that the services they rely upon to access education, employment, social and leisure activities are accessible to them. We hope that in supporting access to the wheelchair space for those who need it we will help many more disabled people to travel with confidence.

Copies of the task and finish group's report to Ministers and accompanying letter have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Attachments can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2018-03-08/HCWS523/>.

[HCWS523]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Universal Credit

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): On 8 February 2018, the Work and Pensions Select Committee, published a report into the universal credit project assessment reviews. From this publication, the House will be aware that my Department has been involved in a request under the Freedom of Information Act, for the release of the project assessment reviews conducted between March 2012 and October 2015 on the universal credit programme.

Project assessment reviews are an assurance tool used to assess major projects and programmes. The reviews are conducted by project professionals and subject matter experts drawn from across the public and private sector. The effectiveness of the reviews relies on confidentiality: information within the reports is non-attributable to encourage candour and a frank exchange of views. The reports act as advice to the senior responsible owner on the delivery aspects of their programme—they are not advice to Ministers. They are intended to give the senior responsible owner a project delivery perspective on their programme, independent of the programme management function. They represent perspectives for the senior responsible owner to consider and not absolute truths. The senior responsible owner, not the review team, is accountable to Parliament.

It should be noted that the reviews I will place in the Library are historical, conducted between March 2012 and October 2015. Come 2018, the universal credit programme is in a very different place since those reports were written. Universal credit is in every jobcentre and we are rolling it out safely and securely to all categories of claimant. We are focusing on the continued safe delivery of universal credit, so people continue to be helped to improve their lives.

In recognition of the confidential nature of these reports, the Work and Pensions Select Committee viewed the full set of project assessment reviews up to 2017 and published a report on 8 February 2018. The Work and Pensions Select Committee agrees that the historical issues have now been addressed and "substantial achievements" have been delivered since 2013. In the Committee's report, they commended the Department for running the universal credit programme "more professionally and efficiently with a collective sense of purpose".

The universal credit programme does not lack scrutiny as the ongoing Work and Pension's Select Committee inquiries demonstrate. Given the Select Committee has seen the reports subject to the freedom of information challenge, and commented upon them publically I can see no point in continuing to argue that case. Accordingly my officials will be writing to the Information Commissioner and to the first-tier tribunal to advise them of my decision to release copies of the requested project assessment review reports to the requestor.

With regard to future reports, I emphasise that the steps I have decided to take today, to disclose the material subject to proceedings, are exceptional. I remain of the view that it is critical to the effectiveness of the Infrastructure and Projects Authority assurance framework for participants to be confident that their comments will be non-attributable and that review reports will be treated as confidential.

I accept that this House and the wider public have significant interest in major Government projects. I support the principle of transparency, and the universal credit programme regularly publishes independent research and analysis into the effectiveness of universal credit. I believe that there are better ways of addressing this concern, rather than undermining the mechanism that provides senior responsible owners with an independent external perspective on the programmes they are responsible to Parliament for.

Universal credit is a flexible benefit, which has simplified the welfare system and ensures that people are always better off in work. We know that the legacy system

trapped people in benefit dependency. We needed a new approach to reflect the 21st-century work environment. The evidence shows universal credit is working, with people getting into work faster and staying in work longer than under the old system.

I am sure this House joins me in recognising the great progress we have made since 2010, with 3 million more people in work and unemployment at a near record low. Universal credit builds on this success, delivering welfare reform that works for everyone.

[HCWS524]

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